



**CONSERVATION
OUTCOMES**



Working with landowners to conserve Blue Swallows and their habitat amidst a pandemic

Mistbelt grasslands and forests in southern KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) have been systematically destroyed and fragmented over the last hundred years. These grasslands and forests are amongst the least protected biomes in South Africa, with less than 2% of Mistbelt Grassland and 18% of Eastern Mistbelt Forest conserved within formal Protected Areas. Both vegetation types are classified as “Endangered”. The area of natural grassland is decreasing due to land transformation for agriculture, timber plantations, infrastructure, and housing development. There has been a 23% decrease in grassland area since 2008 - we are losing our natural grasslands at 6% annually.

With the vast majority of Mistbelt grassland and forest in private or communal ownership, commitment from landowners is fundamental for ensuring that critical sites and habitats are conserved in the long term. It is essential that the remaining fragments of Mistbelt grassland and forest are protected and well managed to ensure the survival of the Blue Swallow and other threatened species. Very importantly, these areas are also critical water catchment areas and hence contribute to the well-being of society.

The global Coronavirus pandemic has resulted in significantly reduced ability and resources to implement critical conservation work. This, together with the undeniable economic pressures that face private and communal landowners as a consequence, has resulted in an “emergency” scenario where without significant and meaningful support, conservation work would be severely hamstrung.

Thanks to support from IUCN Save Our Species, co-funded by the European Union, the dynamic Conservation NGO duo of BirdLife South Africa and Conservation Outcomes is working with landowners to secure important Mistbelt grassland through the Biodiversity Stewardship mechanism. Biodiversity Stewardship is all about working with the people on the land and supporting them to conserve their natural areas. Biodiversity stewardship recognises landowners as custodians of their land, including the biodiversity and natural resources. It is a mechanism that promotes and supports the wise use and management of natural resources

and biodiversity, and the ecosystem services they provide, through the form of voluntary legal agreements with private and communal landowners.

In just over two years, we have facilitated the declaration and management support of three new Mistbelt grassland and forest Nature Reserves in the KZN Midlands. Trewirgie Nature Reserve, Tillietudlem Nature Reserve and the very recently declared Roelton Nature Reserve contribute significantly (over 10%) to the achievement of KZN's conservation targets for endangered Mistbelt grassland, and the conservation of the Critically Endangered Blue Swallow.

Trewirgie Nature Reserve (682 hectares) contains some of the most pristine Mistbelt grassland and Eastern Mistbelt forest in KZN. Along with the Blue Swallow, the reserve is home to several threatened species, including the Cape Parrot, Southern Ground Hornbill, Samango Monkey and Oribi. The reserve also has populations of at least six Endangered and 16 Endemic (i.e., found nowhere else in the world) plant species. Tillietudlem Nature Reserve (1,487 hectares) contains the source of the Elands River, which is a major tributary of the Umkomaas River. This reserve has a high diversity of important Endemic and Endangered grassland associated animals, such as all three Crane species, Southern Ground Hornbill, Secretary Bird, Oribi and Midlands Dwarf Chameleon, to name a few.

Roelton Nature Reserve (120 hectares) is a small but important piece of Mistbelt grassland in the Ixopo area of southern KZN. The Ixopo district is a Blue Swallow stronghold and Roelton has historically been an important area for these rare birds. It's a critical "stepping stone" for Blue Swallows moving between the fragmented remaining areas of Mistbelt grassland in the area. Other avian species occurring at Roelton include Blue Crane, Denham's Bustard and Black-winged Lapwing. Roelton Nature Reserve also contains other threatened species such as the Endangered Mistbelt Chirping Frog.

These three new Nature Reserves are part of the KZN Mistbelt Grassland Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA).

There are an additional four potential new protected areas in various stages of the declaration process, and these will add approximately 2000 hectares of Mistbelt Grassland and Blue Swallow habitat to South Africa's

Protected Area estate. This is particularly noteworthy in the light of the dire economic consequences of ongoing Covid-19 pandemic government regulations, where many landowners are under considerable pressure to transform natural areas into crop lands or other forms of agriculture to remain economically viable.

But securing new protected areas is where the work only starts. With IUCN Save Our Species and European Union support, the BirdLife SA – Conservation Outcomes partnership is assisting landowners with post declaration support to help ensure these critical areas are also well managed. The partnership is currently assisting four privately owned, declared Nature Reserves, which have breeding Blue Swallows, with management support. Support includes assistance with alien invasive plant management, fire and grazing management and compliance with national environmental legislation. As new Protected Areas are declared, the partnership will also extend this support to them. This, of course, requires resources, dedication, and knowhow!

The BirdLife SA – Conservation Outcomes partnership is also coordinating Blue Swallow population and breeding success monitoring in KZN. With support enabled by IUCN Save Our Species' SOS African Wildlife initiative and despite the pandemic, we were able to enhance the monitoring efforts in early 2021. We recorded a 38% increase in the number of Blue Swallow chicks fledged (47) over the same period in early 2020 (34). There are between 35 and 40 pairs of Blue Swallows left in South Africa and these new protected areas contribute significantly to conserving what remains of their habitat.

Despite these challenging times, the Conservation Outcomes – BirdLife South Africa partnership in KZN will continue to work towards securing and supporting further Mistbelt grassland and forest areas and thereby support the local conservation agency (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife) in its endeavours to meet its conservation targets. We have just begun. This dynamic partnership has combined skills and resources to maximize 'bang for your conservation buck'. A challenging, although exciting future lies ahead.

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Photo: Blue Swallow adult male and female in flight (S. McKean)



Photo: KZN Mistbelt grassland and forest (S. McKean)



Photo: KZN Mistbelt grassland (S. McKean)

To find out more about:

Conservation Outcomes: www.conservation-outcomes.org

BirdLife South Africa: www.birdlife.org.za

IUCN Save Our Species: www.iucnsos.org

European Union (EU) International Partnerships: <https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/>