



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

Lapalala Wilderness becomes a Vulture Safe Zone

On 4 September 2021, International Vulture Awareness Day, Lapalala Wilderness will become the first Vulture Safe Zone in South Africa's Waterberg region

South Africa's vulture populations are facing an uncertain future. Three of South Africa's nine vulture species, including the once-numerous White-backed Vulture, have declined to such an extent that they are now regarded as "Critically Endangered" by BirdLife International and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This is one step away from extinction in the wild.

By feeding on the carcasses of dead animals, vultures perform one of nature's most important tasks. Without the ecosystem services that vultures provide, carcasses would be left to decay, attracting less specialised scavengers, such as jackals, feral dogs and rats. This can then create the ideal conditions for the spread of diseases, such as rabies and canine distemper.

As consumers of carrion, vultures are susceptible to poisons, falling victim not only to unscrupulous poachers who target them deliberately, but also to livestock farmers who kill them inadvertently when targeting mammalian predators. Gut piles and carcasses, put out for scavengers to consume, may contain fragments of lead and veterinary drugs, which may be lethal to vultures. Collisions with, and electrocutions on, powerlines also play a major role in vulture declines, which in the case of Lapalala Wilderness is no longer a challenge as all power lines have been removed. Direct persecution and inadvertent disturbance of breeding vultures at their nest sites also has a significant impact on vulture survival. Unfortunately, vultures are now at risk of disappearing from the African landscape.

To stem the tide of losses, landscape-level conservation initiatives are needed, not only in our nature reserves and national parks but also on privately-owned land that supports vulture populations. First conceptualised and applied in Asia, where vulture numbers were decimated by the veterinary drug sodium diclofenac, Vulture Safe Zones cover vast stretches of privately-owned land that are managed in ways that are conducive to vulture survival. The Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures (Vulture MsAP) has now brought this initiative to Africa, where it is being adapted to address the unique and multi-faceted challenges facing the continent's vultures. The MsAP recommends various actions that can be used to address the threats to vultures and adapted to the area under consideration. These include modifying powerlines and attaching marking devices to prevent electrocutions and collisions, sending select members of staff for poison response training, not using certain non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for veterinary purposes, only using lead-free ammunition for hunting or culling, ensuring that carcasses that are put out at vulture restaurants pose no hazard to scavenging birds, ensuring that poisons are not used to manage mammalian predators, and committing to safeguarding and monitoring any vulture nests that occur on the property.

Situated near the town of Vaalwater in South Africa's Limpopo Province, the 48,000 ha Lapalala Wilderness encompasses some of the most pristine habitat in the Waterberg region. Its proximity to Marakele National Park and several important Cape Vulture breeding colonies make its establishment as a Vulture Safe Zone of special significance. The reserve's vision emphasises the interconnectedness of man and nature, supporting sustainable conservation practices. By providing safe habitat for vultures, and securing the invaluable ecosystem services they provide, the establishment of the reserve as a Vulture Safe zone supports this ethos.

Despite its emphasis on the conservation of vultures, the management practices promoted by the Vulture Safe Zone initiative will benefit not only vultures but also other raptors and large terrestrial birds. This has been demonstrated at Lapalala, when it was discovered that the Black Stork, listed as "Vulnerable" by the IUCN, is breeding on the spectacular cliffs of the Palala River, which bisects the reserve. Breeding Black Storks have become increasingly difficult to find, as this threatened, shy and elusive species has retreated more and more into the remotest and most inaccessible parts of our country. BirdLife South Africa was pleased to discover evidence of Black Stork breeding on the reserve, which was confirmed this year when an active nest was discovered by reserve management. Reserve management is committed to ensuring that this stork continues to flourish on the reserve.

The establishment of Lapalala Wilderness as a Vulture Safe Zone is a further demonstration of the reserves commitment in achieving its vision of “an exceptional conservation legacy”. This declaration will set the standard for the expansion of this important vulture conservation initiative in the Waterberg region and will go a long way towards minimizing those threats to vultures that are perfectly preventable. BirdLife South Africa would like to thank the landowners and reserve managers who are committed to ensuring that vultures (and the elusive Black Stork) remain an enduring part of the South African landscape.

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Statement from Gianni Ravazzotti and Duncan Parker, Patrons of Lapalala Wilderness:

“We are grateful for the efforts of BirdLife South Africa around vulture conservation and in recognising Lapalala Wilderness as a potential Vulture Safe Zone.

Our hope is that the work that has been done at Lapalala to qualify as a Vulture Safe Zone and the increased predator activity will attract these critically endangered birds and serve to protect them.”

Gianni Ravazzotti and Duncan Parker
Lapalala Wilderness Foundation NPC

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BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife International partners operate in 113 countries worldwide. BirdLife South Africa relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.

BirdLife South Africa's Landscape Conservation Programme

BirdLife South Africa's Landscape Conservation Programme aims to see critical sites and ecosystems, and their associated ecological services, sustainably managed and protected to promote the preservation of diverse and healthy bird populations, other biodiversity, and people. Our mission is To prevent and/or reverse negative trends in terrestrial bird populations by identifying, protecting and managing a network of sites that are important for the persistence of birds, their habitats and other biodiversity, through scientifically-based projects and the improvement of the conservation status of important sites, that support the sustainable management and equitable use of natural resources, and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature.

Vulture Safe Zones

An appropriately sized geographic area in which targeted conservation measures are undertaken to address the key threats relevant to the vulture species present. VSZs are developed in southern Africa as an approach to complement national and international efforts to reduce the impact of existing and emerging threats to stabilise and promote recovery of existing vulture populations.

More information on vultures and poaching

Soaring flight gives vultures the ability to detect carcasses quickly and to cover vast distances in short periods. With poaching of Africa's large herbivores reaching unprecedented levels in recent decades, vultures' unique adaptations have bestowed on them the unexpected role of sentinels. A kettle of vultures circling over a carcass allow rangers to uncover poaching incidents quickly. Unfortunately, unscrupulous poachers have caught on to this useful practice, and are now killing vultures in large numbers by poisoning poached carcasses. The scale of these losses is unsustainable and its continuance could see the extinction of species such as the White-backed Vulture within our lifetimes.