



## Media Release

For immediate release

Standardized list of isiZulu bird names completed: a first for a South African language other than English and Afrikaans

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“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

– Nelson Mandela

In a first for any South African language other than English and Afrikaans, a full list of South Africa’s birds has been completed in isiZulu. This is the result of a long consultative process involving many stakeholders and dating back to 2012, and the timing is prescient given that 2022 is the first year of the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

What initially began as an exercise by University of KwaZulu-Natal academics to consolidate a list of isiZulu names for the province’s birds has been completed for the entirety of South Africa by BirdLife South Africa’s ‘South African Names for South African Birds’ (SANSAB) project.

This foundational step will create better opportunities for isiZulu speakers to engage in birding, bird conservation, ornithology, environmental education and custodianship, and many other aspects relating to birds and their environment.

“We are indebted to the many stakeholders and roleplayers who have seen this finally completed for South Africa through the South African Names for South African Birds project. It is an historic moment for birds in South Africa and will help to grow interest and engagement from wider demographics”, said Andrew de Blocq, Avitourism Project Manager at BirdLife South Africa and one of the project facilitators.

First phase (2012 – 2018)

The project involved a multi-stage process of consultation and workshops, beginning with the first phase of the project from 2012 to 2018. This phase was led by the UKZN researchers and involved over twenty expert Zulu bird guides trained by BirdLife South Africa over the last two decades. These guides canvassed the communities and tribal leadership across KwaZulu-Natal to establish what names for different bird species existed in the language and to identify gaps where specific names did not exist. This was complemented by an exhaustive search of academic and other literature to find names. The guides were then brought together with linguists, onomasticians, and bird experts to interrogate these names over a series of workshops.

“In African languages, there is often a generic name for a group but no names for individual species within that group. For example, the word ‘ukhozi’ meaning eagle is broadly applied, but one could not differentiate between an African Fish Eagle or a Martial Eagle with specific names. Additionally, the guides and researchers in the first phase of the project identified that the younger generations had waning interest in natural things, including birds, and that we risked losing local bird names and cultural lore without a formal process to capture and preserve these,” said de Blocq.

Where multiple names existed, the workshop groups decided between them which was the most prevalent and should be preferred. Where no names existed, the guides were tasked with creating a new name. New names were decided on by first deciding on a group or a bird’s most salient feature that set it apart, whether that was an element of its appearance, song, behaviour, distribution, or a cultural association. This was then incorporated into an appropriate moniker, guided by the language experts. All decisions on names were taken by the ethnically Zulu members of the workshops and were arrived at by consensus which often required lengthy, robust debate among the group. A blanket decision was made to avoid naming any birds after people and to avoid naming them after places to avoid confusion.

The first phase of the project culminated in several milestone academic and popular publications, including *Amagama Ezinyoni: Zulu Names of Birds* and *Birds of KwaZulu-Natal and Their Zulu Names*, in 2020.

The provision of names for KwaZulu-Natal’s rich birdlife was a monumental achievement and included over 500 species. This covered the core of the isiZulu language range, but left some 350 species that did not occur in the province without a name.

This is what Themba Mthembu, one of the bird guides, had to say, “This project of naming of birds in local languages is something amazing. It’s a first of its kind for the country. Being a part of it has been a real honour and a wonderful opportunity. Taking decisions on behalf of my people was a big responsibility and we did our best. I never anticipated being part of such a project.

These names will assist with conservation as well as the preservation of our culture – we can use them to interest people and teach them about their own culture and environment. Today’s young people are becoming less and less interested in birds, and we as indigenous people risk losing this knowledge without this kind of project. The names will help this generation learn about birds, which is the first step towards community conservation. I hope that we repeat this exercise for other animals and aspects of nature so that we can reconnect people and conserve nature.”

## Second phase (2021 – 2022)

BirdLife South Africa established the South African Names for South African Birds project to build on the work already done for isiZulu and to extend this to other languages without complete lists. A working group was set up involving linguists, onomasticians, birders, ornithologists, and other interested parties. The group decided to pursue isiZulu first in order to build on the work already done in KwaZulu-Natal. This would help to establish the methodology and approach that will be used for other local languages going forward.

Nandi Thobela, BirdLife South Africa's Empowering People Programme Manager and one of the workshop participants, had the following to say: "Before now, a lack of vernacular names was a serious language barrier for isiZulu speakers wanting to get involved in anything related to birds, whether that is casual birdwatching, environmental education, conservation, or academic study. Not having a name for a bird in your mother tongue also creates a degree of separation and 'otherment', which is a hinderance for many people who are already put off by the stigma of birds being largely an elderly, white interest. Birds are important to many African cultures and people, including the AmaZulu, and this foundational step of consolidating a list of names for birds in isiZulu will unlock endless opportunities to bring Zulu people closer to birds".

All bird names that exist in isiZulu had been catalogued in the first phase of this project. Therefore, the remainder of South Africa's birds not dealt with in the first phase were nameless. A group of academics, bird experts, linguists, and bird guides gathered in Pietermaritzburg for three days to undergo the work of giving Zulu names to these 350 or so birds that occur in wider South Africa, including the Prince Edward Islands.

We gathered in Pietermaritzburg at the home of Prof. Noleen Turner, our gracious host, and spent three full days rigorously debating, innovating, and learning from one another. The approach was inclusive and democratic and the final decision left to the consensus of the ethnically Zulu participants. There was a good balance between the guides, bird experts, and linguists in the room, as each group brought certain important skills and expertise to the table. Much of the time was spent fiddling with the word structure, as it can be difficult to distill a phrase or behaviour or description into one coherent name. Many of the nameless birds were seabirds, and the experience of the guides who were sponsored berths on the recent Flock to Marion cruise organized by BirdLife South Africa was invaluable here," said Thobela.

"I run environmental education and awareness projects in several communities within KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, and these names will be so important in getting the message across about the importance of birds and the environment to the children. In fact, in one of the lunch breaks during the workshops I was asked to quickly translate some content for our Bird of the Year, the Cape Gannet, into IsiZulu. Until about an hour before then, the Cape Gannet did not have a name! So, the new names were immediately useful in our work. And they will change the narrative around birds for Zulu speakers forever."

The full list of South Africa's birds in isiZulu can be found on the BirdLife South Africa website at <https://www.birdlife.org.za/media-and-resources/bird-checklists/> and is downloadable here <https://www.birdlife.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Zulu-bird-names-SA-provisional.xlsx>. The

list will be left for a year for public comment and input before being formally adopted by BirdLife South Africa and used in their checklists and work going forward.

BirdLife South Africa would like to acknowledge Swarovski Optik and Newman's Foundation for donations towards the isiZulu workshops, without which this work would not have been possible.

The SANSAB project is now looking forward to repeating this exercise for other South African languages. Work is currently underway for Sepedi and we are looking for interested parties to begin work on isiXhosa in particular. Any persons wanting to contribute to this project, either as a sponsor or participant, can contact Dr Johan Meyer, Chair of SANSAB (contact details below).

For further information, please contact:

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About 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 more than 120 countries worldwide. BirdLife South Africa relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.

About BirdLife South Africa's 'Empowering People Programme'

The Empowering People Programme uses birds to provide development opportunities for people through education, livelihoods, tourism, and conservation. The programme is complementary to the organization's conservation work through ensuring the inclusion and empowerment of local communities in the landscapes in which we work. By empowering local communities, we create a conservation ethos, local benefits, and ensure that people can live harmoniously with birds and their natural environment.