

MEDIA RELEASE

Middelpunt Nature Reserve becomes South Africa's 29th Ramsar Site

The White-winged Flufftail (*Sarothrura ayresii*) is listed as globally **Critically Endangered** with an estimated population size of fewer than 250 mature individuals. Ethiopia and, more recently, South Africa are the only two countries where the White-winged Flufftail is known to breed, with only one confirmed site in South Africa: Middelpunt Wetland. Middelpunt Wetland Trust was established in 1994 by a group of concerned citizen scientists who regularly found the bird at the site and sought to improve the condition of the wetland. Dullstroom Trout Farm, the owner of Middelpunt Wetland, has been supportive of BirdLife South Africa's scientific studies at the site to better understand the bird's biology. It is from a monitoring survey that the first breeding record of the White-winged Flufftail was made in the southern hemisphere in the summer of 2018. Dullstroom Trout Farm joined the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment (GLPE) in 2017 to safeguard the extensive high-elevation wetland systems in the area from external threats. Whilst this form of protection limits activities that could threaten biodiversity, it does not prevent them entirely.

South Africa is a contracting party to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA). Under both treaties, the White-winged Flufftail receives the highest level of protection. In 2008, the International Single Species Action Plan (ISSAP) for the White-winged Flufftail was adopted. BirdLife South Africa has been acting as the coordinator of the AEWA White-winged Flufftail International Working Group (WwF IWG) since 2015, and was instrumental in assisting the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) in coordinating the third WwF IWG meeting held in South Africa, 2019. At this meeting, it was decided that more formal protection was needed for Middelpunt Wetland to ensure the long-term protection of this important wetland.

BirdLife South Africa gained the support of the provincial conservation authority, Mpumalanga Tourism and Park Agency, in meeting this objective. BirdLife South Africa also identified the importance of a neighbouring property belonging to Eland's Valley Guest Farm, which supplies Middelpunt Wetland with lateral inputs (seeps). Both Dullstroom Trout Farm (308 ha) and Eland's Valley Guest Farm (200 ha) were supportive of the declaration of the site as a nature reserve and so began the process of applying in early 2021. The two landowner groups formed the management authority, Middelpunt Nature Reserve Landowners Association, and entered into a co-management agreement with BirdLife South Africa and Middelpunt Wetland Trust. Over 300 letters of support for the intent to declare Middelpunt Nature Reserve were submitted by the public, with letters of support also being submitted by AEWA, GLPE Landowners Association and Middelpunt Wetland Trust. With assistance from Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, the private nature reserve was officially declared on the 14 October 2022 (Mpu. Prov. Gazette No. 3449, Notice 211).

Middelpunt Nature Reserve is not only an important site for White-winged Flufftail but provides habitat to a diversity of floral and faunal species. This nearly 10,000-year-old, peat-based wetland also provides ecosystem services to the surrounding farming community through water retention, purification, and flood attenuation. To the global community, the ~2m deep peat-layer is an extensive carbon sink that continues to sequester carbon from the atmosphere. It is for these reasons that the

nature reserve was considered for designation as a Ramsar Site recognising it as a wetland of international importance under the Convention on Wetlands. The Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty established in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar that provides a framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are over 2,000 Ramsar Sites listed by over 160 countries who form the Contracting Parties. South Africa was one of the first contracting parties to join the treaty and has since designated 29 wetlands as Ramsar Sites.

National government (Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment) and provincial government (Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency) led the application process for Middelpunt Nature Reserve to be considered as a Ramsar Site with inputs from BirdLife South Africa. The reserve was officially designated on 15 March 2023 becoming the world's 2,501st and Mpumalanga Province's second Ramsar Site with nearby Verloren Valei Nature Reserve where White-winged Flufftail also reside. Our hope is that Middelpunt Wetland will be a bastion of nature conservation in South Africa and the world for many years to come.

We would like to thank and acknowledge Dullstroom Trout Farm, Eland's Valley Guest Farm, Middelpunt Wetland Trust, Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, South Africa's Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Eskom through the Ingula Partnership, Elandskloof Trout Farm, and the many individuals who have contributed to the research and conservation of Middelpunt Wetland. Middelpunt Nature Reserve is a closed, private reserve dedicated to the conservation of White-winged Flufftail. More information can be found at the following websites:

White-winged Flufftail – <https://www.birdlife.org.za/what-we-do/landscape-conservation/what-we-do/wetlands-grasslands/white-winged-flufftail/>

Middelpunt Nature Reserve – <https://www.birdlife.org.za/what-we-do/landscape-conservation/protecting-ecosystems/>

Middelpunt Nature Reserve Ramsar Site – <https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/2501>

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Photographs are available on request.

Notes for the editor:

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. The Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail faces threats from wetland destruction and degradation by various anthropogenic activities such as mining and agriculture. BirdLife South Africa has been conserving the White-winged Flufftail since 2011 when it was invited to administer the Middelpunt Wetland Trust.



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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Whilst most activities have involved studying the species to better inform management decisions, the White-winged Flufftail Conservation Project moved into a phase of implementing local conservation initiatives in 2020 with the intention of upscaling these for national application following evaluation and refinement.

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