



## MEDIA RELEASE

### Expansion of the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment

The Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment (GLPE) was established in 2017 covering an area of 14,305 hectares and comprising 66 properties. These properties cover high-elevation wetlands and near-pristine grasslands on the Steenkampsberg Plateau between eMakhazeni (Belfast) and Dullstroom in northern Mpumalanga Province. This includes Steenkampsberg Montane Grassland, which is categorised as poorly protected within the province, and Dullstroom Plateau Grasslands, an Endangered Ecosystem as listed in the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act of 2004. The Protected Environment safeguards important water resources of the Olifants and Crocodile Catchments, thereby contributing to provincial and national targets for water conservation. The Lakenvlei itself is a vast ancient wetland system, dated at 9 255 – 9 415 years BP (before present), with a peat layer depth of over 2 m; thus protecting water-related and carbon sequestration ecosystem services that benefit local and global communities.

The GLPE is administered by the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment Landowners Association (GLPELA) with committee representatives including local landowners, provincial government and NGOs. Since its declaration, the GLPELA has consistently sought to protect its wetlands from threats including prospecting and mining. The committee also plays an important role in facilitating communication among community members, and sharing information about conservation and wetland rehabilitation initiatives. Such benefits arising from the biodiversity stewardship model have attracted the interests of neighbouring landowners who have wanted to join the GLPE. With the support of the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) the GLPELA began approaching interested landowners in early 2021. BirdLife South Africa and the Endangered Wildlife Trust completed in-field site assessments and landowner interviews for each property to determine if its habitat and management practices were suitable for declaration. As of 1 September 2023, the Protected Environment now spans an additional 7,448 ha from 32 properties (Mpu. Prov. Gazette No. 3569, Notice 344). Included in the expansion is a part of the Mpumalanga-Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area, which are areas that contribute to 50% of South Africa's water production. The public participation process that formed part of the motivation for the expansion elicited 415 letters of support submitted by the public and there were no objections.

The expanded GLPE will encourage the sustainable management of natural habitat and conserve numerous threatened species such as the Critically Endangered White-winged Flufftail (*Sarothrura ayresi*), Vulnerable Blue Crane (*Anthropoides paradiseus*), Endangered Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*), Vulnerable near-endemic Southern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus calvus*), endemic Yellow-breasted Pipit (*Anthus chloris*), Near-Threatened Denham's Bustard (*Neotis denhami*), and Endangered Secretarybird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*).

For BirdLife South Africa, protected environments provide a platform to engage with committed landowners for post-declaration support. Stewardship projects that BirdLife South Africa are developing for the GLPE include the drafting of best practice guidelines for habitat management, establishing financial incentives through ecotourism like the [Steenkampsberg Birding Routes](#), attracting rehabilitation implementing parties, introduction of remote-sensing technology to inform and learn from management practices, mapping of alien invasive plants, and much more.



We would like to thank and acknowledge Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment Landowners Association (particularly chair Bruce Boshoff and secretary Peter Arderne), and the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

**END**

**For further information, please contact:**

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Photographs are available on request.

**Notes for the editor:**

Biodiversity stewardship is an agreement between provincial authorities and private or communal landowners with the aim of encouraging sustainable management for the benefit of nature conservation alongside daily land use activities. Biodiversity stewardship acknowledges landowners as the custodians of nature and creates a platform through which authorities can assist with the management of their natural resources. Biodiversity stewardship is voluntary with a range of agreement types that determine the degree to which conservation is prioritised. An example of a type of biodiversity stewardship agreement is a Protected Environment (as stated by the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act of 2003). The benefits to landowners of formally declaring a property or several properties in the same community as a protected environment are numerous, including coordinated management objectives across multiple landowners and protection from external threats that are not compatible with nature conservation.

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. BirdLife South Africa has been conserving the White-winged Flufftail since 2012 when it was invited to administer the Middelpunt Wetland Trust. 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. One such project has been the expansion of South Africa's protected area network including the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment and the declaration of [Middelpunt Nature Reserve](#).

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