



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**For immediate use**

### **Well known Secretarybird leaves a legacy of valuable data**

**Johannesburg, 20 October 2014:** BLiNG, a Secretarybird tracked with a sophisticated satellite tracking device for almost two years, died on 8 October 2014. Despite the unfortunate circumstances of this Secretarybird's death, valuable data were obtained during his short life. This information will be of immense value to conservationists in their work to conserve the globally threatened Secretarybird.

Ernst Retief, one of BirdLife South Africa's Regional Conservation Managers, reported that during the 21 months that this Secretarybird was tracked, 6 481 location points were downloaded, providing a unique opportunity to determine which habitats the Secretarybird uses.

BLiNG was killed when he flew into a powerline north of Pretoria. Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, Terrestrial Bird Conservation Manager at BirdLife South Africa, stated that "the way BLiNG died provided us with an opportunity to highlight the threat of powerlines to large raptors and other birds".

On 21 January 2013, BLiNG, then an eight week old Secretarybird chick, became a household name in South Africa. On this day BirdLife South Africa fitted a 38 g tracking device to BLiNG. The nest site was at Sondela Nature Reserve near Bela-Bela in the Limpopo Province. The fitting of the device was shown on the 50/50 television programme. BLiNG was given his name by BirdLife Northern Gauteng, the bird club which sponsored the tracking device.

Ernst Retief reported that during the subsequent period BLiNG spent a few months in the vicinity of his nest where he would have learnt to locate food, everything from grasshoppers to small mammals and snakes.

On 26 April 2013 BLiNG astounded ornithologists when left the area of his nest and moved to the Makgadikgadi Pans in Botswana! He settled there for about seven months.

During December 2013 BLiNG flew back to South Africa and for short periods was recorded within 20 to 50 km of his nest site. For a few weeks he moved to an area south-east of Pretoria, before moving back to the Waterberg area. During the middle of 2014 he moved further south and spent time in the Soshanguve area north of Pretoria, a developed area with a large human population.

On 8 October 2014 BLiNG flew east over the N1 highway to an area called Rynoue, not far from Roodeplaat Dam. Ernst Retief, who monitored the movements of BLiNG, saw that from 13h00 on this day all the satellite location points were from one position. This raised concerns that BLiNG was not well. The next day, after four hours of searching, BLiNG was found dead under a powerline. It appeared as if he had collided with the powerline and thereafter his body had been badly burnt during a veld fire. A possible scenario is that he flew into the powerline because smoke from the veld fire reduced visibility

“Powerlines are unfortunately responsible for large numbers of bird mortalities in South Africa, especially of large terrestrial birds, such as Secretarybirds, Blue Cranes and Ludwig’s Bustards”, said Mark Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa. “Eskom is sponsoring the testing of powerline marking devices, but the effectiveness and the cost and practicality of marking thousands of powerlines remains to be determined” he added.

BirdLife South Africa is grateful to BirdLife Northern Gauteng for sponsoring the tracking device. BirdLife South Africa will continue to monitor the movements of the other tracked Secretarybirds. The information will assist BirdLife South Africa with the development of the necessary actions to conserve this threatened species.

**For more information, images or interviews please contact:**

Ernst Retief: [ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za](mailto:ernst.retief@birdlife.org.za); Tel + 27 72 223 2160

Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson: [conservation@birdlife.org.za](mailto:conservation@birdlife.org.za); Tel +27 11 789 1122.

**Notes for Editors**

**BirdLife South Africa** is the local country partner of BirdLife International. BirdLife International is the world’s largest nature conservation Partnership with 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide and growing, with almost 11 million supporters, 7000 local conservation groups and 7400 staff. Find out more at [www.birdlife.org](http://www.birdlife.org) or [www.facebook.com/BirdLifeInternational](https://www.facebook.com/BirdLifeInternational).

The vision of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the conservation, research, understanding, observation and enjoyment of natural birds and their habitats. BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird

conservation organisation in the country, and relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work. For more information, visit [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za).

#### About the Secretarybird project:

In 2011 BirdLife South Africa launched a project to study the Secretarybird. The research project was initiated in the same year that the threatened status of the Secretarybird was changed to globally Vulnerable. In the past three years we have gained a better understanding of the biology and conservation of the Secretarybird, including the vast distances they travel after leaving the nest and the numerous and significant threats they face. The aim of our study is to determine the species' preferred habitat, the dispersal patterns of juveniles, and to identify the threats responsible for the apparent high mortality rate of Secretarybirds.

BirdLife South Africa has fitted tracking devices to nine Secretarybirds and, even though the project is still in the data collection phase, valuable discoveries have already been made.

In addition to the above, BirdLife South Africa has also initiated a project to determine the impact of fences on birds. This was done after a number of records were received of Secretarybirds that died after colliding or after becoming entangled in fences. Information for this project can be submitted to: <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/important-bird-areas/fence-mitigation-project>

How to help? To make a contribution towards the Secretarybird project, please contact Linda van den Heever at [linda.vdheever@birdlife.org.za](mailto:linda.vdheever@birdlife.org.za) or +27 (11) 789 1122.

This work would not be possible without the support of the BirdLife International Preventing Extinctions Programme through funding from the two national Species Champions, Petra Diamonds and Airports Company South Africa. Read more on the BirdLife International Preventing Extinctions Programme at <http://www.birdlife.org/extinction/> and <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species>