



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **NEW SPECIES OR UNNOTICED PLIGHT?**

#### **Newly “discovered” Tuluver revealed to be Endangered Vulture in BirdLife South Africa PR stunt**

**Johannesburg, 2 September 2015** – The beautiful, newly ‘discovered’ bird species, the Tuluver, is a digitally-altered image of a Lappet-faced Vulture. The fictitious bird is part of a campaign to draw attention to the plight of Africa’s vultures on International Vulture Awareness Day, this coming Saturday (September 5).

BirdLife South Africa's carefully planned campaign prompted a social media storm, generating much debate as to the authenticity of the photo. Some soon twigged the image was part of a bold stunt by BirdLife South Africa in aid of International Vulture Awareness Day.

The big reveal was shown in an online video, where viewers could see the reverse transformation of the ‘Tuluver’ into a vulture. (As eagle eyes spotted, Tuluver is an anagram for Vulture.) The video culminated in a simple message: “If we can get this passionate about discovering a new species, why can’t we get as passionate about losing one?”

The stunt, conceptualised in partnership with BirdLife South Africa and its pro bono communications agency Utopia, aims to raise awareness of the often unappreciated and endangered vultures whose plight has gone unnoticed.

“Many people simply don’t know of the ecological value vultures have, and regard them as ‘ugly’,” explains Carl Cardinelli, Creative Partner of Utopia. “Our idea was to test the notion of whether people would notice vultures if they were beautiful or new and exciting. We created a new, fictitious bird, the Tuluver, with all the important characteristics of a vulture, except we made it more traditionally beautiful.”

“We’ve been working with BirdLife South Africa for five years now and we’ve always held one simple premise: Conservation Begins With Conversation. We believe that, so far, the campaign has undoubtedly achieved this,” continues Cardinelli.

“Africa’s vultures are in serious trouble and they need urgent conservation attention and, for this reason, we decided to use a brave approach during our International Vulture Awareness Day awareness efforts,” explains Mark D. Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa.

“We’ve already seen the decimation of three species of Asian Gyps vultures, which were brought to the brink of extinction following the use of a fatal drug called Diclofenac (commonly known as Voltaren). The absence of vultures subsequently led to an increase in feral dogs and, in turn, an increase in rabies, with an estimated cost to human health of approximately US\$ 1.5 billion.”

“Science forms the basis to much of BirdLife South Africa’s work, so we realised that we could open ourselves up to criticism by announcing the discovery of a fictitious bird. We do however know that, in our important bird conservation work, awareness is immensely important, and therefore out-the-box type campaigns are occasionally necessary. We do apologise for any ‘feathers ruffled’, but we must be willing to be bold if we are to help ensure that Africa’s vultures do not follow the same path as their Asian cousins or the California Condor in North America,” says Anderson.

The stunt certainly got vultures noticed in what has been the biggest publicity campaign BirdLife South Africa has ever pulled off. “We were overwhelmed by the response of our initial post and, for example, we reached about 250,000 through our Facebook Page alone during the first 48 hours. Many more were reached through other media,” says Anderson. “In the spirit of International Vulture Awareness Day, we hope people will share the video and help champion the real reason of our campaign.”

BirdLife International is implementing a major conservation plan for vulture conservation in Africa; however the current focus is on creating awareness for Africa’s vultures.

To see the video or find out more, visit [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za)

## **BOILERPLATE**

“More recently, a new contributor to the species’ decline in Africa is poaching. Poachers lace their victim’s remains with poison, providing one fatal last meal for vultures whose overhead circling might signal the poachers’ presence to rangers.”

“Other threats include a declining availability of food, inadvertent poisoning by livestock farmers, electrocution on electricity pylons and drowning in farm reservoirs”. “Sadly some people believe that eating the brains of vultures enables one to predict the outcome of the lottery or a football match”.

“Perhaps not as pretty as a panda or as regal as a rhino, their plight should be equally important,” says Anderson. “Vultures are nature’s ultimate clean-up crew, disposing of carrion and, in turn, preventing the spread of diseases such as rabies, anthrax and botulism. They are vitally important to both the environment and humans alike,” he explains.

“Unfortunately many people do not like vultures and they regard them as ugly and dirty, which is of course not the case.”

"We thank each and every media outlet, journalist and person who has, voluntarily or involuntarily, touched our story and helped champion our cause. Every one of you has helped bring awareness to a group of birds which have had little such publicity before."

BirdLife South Africa is part of the BirdLife International network of more than 120 global partners who work together to conserve the world's birds and their habitats. BirdLife South Africa is the only dedicated bird conservation organisation in South Africa and works tirelessly to conserve our country's birds, from small, dull-coloured larks to majestic albatrosses and of course also our often highly threatened vultures.

"Six of the seven vulture species breeding in South Africa are threatened. The Bearded Vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*, which has been assessed as regionally Critically Endangered, is leading the march of the region's vultures in their headlong decline towards local extinction, but it is closely followed by five regionally Endangered species including the Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres*, Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus*, Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*, White-headed Vulture *Aegypius occipitalis* and White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*. Unlike the Asian vulture crisis, the threats faced by our vultures are varied and will require a wider range of conservation interventions if the situation is to be reversed," explains Martin Taylor of BirdLife South Africa.

For more information or images of vultures, please contact BirdLife South Africa at [info@birdlife.org.za](mailto:info@birdlife.org.za)