



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

South African flufftail on brink of extinction

Johannesburg, 28 November 2013:

The White-winged Flufftail *Sarothrura ayresi* is the latest addition to the growing number of the world's birds which are threatened with extinction. The tiny and secretive flufftail, one of nine flufftail species in Africa, is now listed as Critically Endangered, one step away from extinction. The White-winged Flufftail is only known to occur in South Africa and, nearly 4000 km away, in Ethiopia.

Ornithologists are of the opinion that fewer than 250 adult White-winged Flufftails remain in the wild and that the South African population is estimated to number less than 50 birds. These estimates, combined with the emergent threats of habitat degradation and habitat loss, saw BirdLife South Africa and the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society, two BirdLife International partners at the opposite ends of the continent, motivate for the uplisting of the White-winged Flufftail to globally Critically Endangered. This category represents the highest risk of extinction in the wild. White-winged Flufftail is the second South African bird species to be listed as globally Critically Endangered, with the other being the Tristan Albatross.

According to BirdLife International: "destruction and degradation of its high altitude wet grassland habitat, including wetland drainage, conversion for agriculture, water abstraction, overgrazing by livestock and cutting of marsh vegetation, have driven it to this precarious state. Urgent action is now needed in both Ethiopia and South Africa to better understand the species' ecology and to address these threats and save it from extinction". The preferred high altitude wetland habitat in South Africa, which is mostly limited to Mpumalanga, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal, is threatened by mining, pollution from industrial effluents, domestic and commercial sewage, acid mine drainage, agricultural runoff and litter. The three Ethiopian wetlands where the birds are known to occur and breed are threatened by overgrazing and grass-cutting.

There is growing concern for the future of the White-winged Flufftail. "BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust (MWT) have rolled out a number of research projects during 2012 and 2013 to focus on the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail", according to Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, Conservation Manager at BirdLife South Africa. She added that "it is only with a better

understanding of the connection between South Africa and Ethiopia, the flufftail's movements and its habits, that we can implement correct conservation measures".

A survey of suitable wetland habitat in South Africa is currently underway and will contribute to a better understanding of the extent of its occurrence in our country. Smit-Robinson further explains, "the analyses of blood and feather samples will shed light on whether the birds move between Ethiopia and South Africa or whether the two populations are in fact isolated".

According to Malcolm Drummond, founding trustee of the MWT, solely established for the conservation of the White-winged Flufftail and its habitat, the Trust has long understood the importance of protecting habitat for the species in South Africa and Ethiopia. "As a means of gaining the support of the local community at Berga wetland in Ethiopia, where the flufftail breeds, the MWT has provided financial support over the past ten years for the building of a primary school for 700 pupils". In return, the site support group patrols the wetland during the breeding season to prevent grazing and grass cutting.

The research and conservation work on the White-winged Flufftail is supported by the BirdLife International Preventing Extinctions Programme through funding from Eskom, the BirdLife Species Champion for the White-winged Flufftail.

For further information, please contact:

Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson at conservation@birdlife.org.za (011 789 1122)

Notes to Editors:

- The White-winged Flufftail is BirdLife South Africa's 2013 Bird of the Year. Bird of the Year is one of BirdLife South Africa's annual initiatives for creating awareness about birds and bird habitat conservation. For more information: <http://www.birdlife.org.za/events/bird-of-the-year>
- The aim of a recent trip to Ethiopia, undertaken by BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust, was to obtain blood and feather samples for genetic and isotope analyses. Seven flufftails were caught and released back in the wetlands near Addis Ababa. The only South African samples to be used in the analyses are from two museum specimens.
- In South Africa the White-winged Flufftail has been recorded from no more than 15 wetland sites, and the species is probably only occasionally recorded at these sites.
- Overgrazing of the key wetlands in Ethiopia damages suitable nest-building habitat and hence the species is known to breed at two sites only in the Ethiopian highlands.
- Collaborators include Greg Davies, Ditsong Museum; Prof Craig Symes, University of Witwatersrand; Dr Brett Gardner, Veterinarian at the Johannesburg Zoo; Prof Antoinette Kotze, National Research Foundation, Pretoria; David Allan, Durban Natural History Science Museum; Department of Environmental Affairs as well as the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society.
- Read more on the BirdLife International Preventing Extinctions Programme at <http://www.birdlife.org/extinction/> and <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species>

About Birdlife South Africa

- The vision of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the conservation, research, understanding, observation and enjoyment of natural birds and their habitats.
- Birds are important environmental indicators, the proverbial 'canaries in the coal mine'. By focusing on birds, and the sites and habitats on which they depend, BirdLife South Africa aims to improve the quality of life for birds, for other wildlife and ultimately for people.
- 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