



## **BirdLife South Africa**

### **Position statement on the flushing of wetland birds**

BirdLife South Africa recognises that South Africa's wetlands are one of the most threatened ecosystems and that many of the birds which are specifically adapted to living within these dynamic systems, such as the "Critically Endangered" White-winged Flufftail (*Sarothrura ayresii*) are under threat. The structure of wetland vegetation can limit the visibility of wetland fauna for observers when attempting to view and/or count birds or other animals which live within the wetland. A number of techniques have been developed that aim to provide observers with visuals of elusive wetland fauna. Some of the techniques specific to wetland bird observations are listed and discussed below.

#### **1. Point counts**

Point counts are noted as a reliable and non-invasive method of surveying a wide variety of avian habitats, particularly dense habitats in which visibility is obscured (Wilson et al. 2000). Point counts are generally conducted at sunrise when birds are most vocal. This is particularly prevalent in summer months when numerous species exhibit breeding displays (both visual and vocal cues). In addition to moving along the fringe of dense habitats listening for calls or searching for displays, call-backs are also used occasionally to elicit response calls. BirdLife South Africa recommends avoiding/limiting the use of call-backs, particularly during the breeding season and, if it is utilised, recommends the ethical use thereof (please refer to the Birder's Code of Ethics position statement for more info regarding the use of call-back). Point counts are well suited to general birding as it removes most invasive survey elements to both the target bird species and habitats in which they occur, while still providing the opportunity to record numerous species.

#### **2. Flushing**

Flushing involves a team of observers walking through an area, often dragging a large rope between each team member, with the aim of disturbing birds and causing them to flush upwards above the vegetation, thereby providing a visual opportunity for the observers to see the birds hidden below the vegetation layer (Bibby 2000). Flushing has been used in numerous studies of wetland birds and is an accepted method of monitoring species that are difficult to locate within the dense vegetation and often difficult-to-access wetlands (Hockey et al. 1988; Smith 2009; Davies et al. 2014). However, if flushing is required for use as a research tool, this should be guided by the approval of a relevant ethics committee and provincial authority, particularly if the researcher's intention is to wilfully disturb a protected species irrespective of its occurrence within or outside a protected area. A conservation permit will be required if the flushing is to take place inside a protected area.

Ethical and landowner permission will be required if a study is conducted in a private or ecologically sensitive area.

### **Potential impacts and concerns relating to the flushing of wetland birds**

The flushing of birds has impacts, including:

- The temporary displacement of flushed birds from their territories or nest sites, which could potentially expose them to predation
- The risk of trampling of nest sites and/or delicate vegetation in the wetland (Fletcher et al. 2000)
- Flushing does not allow for targeted disturbance of a specific species and is likely to disturb all animals within the area
- The potential for increased intra- and inter-species competition between displaced birds, which will need to reoccupy their breeding and/or foraging territories.
- The formation of extensive braided trails by observers walking through the wetland could provide predators with additional access points while foraging.

BirdLife South Africa is concerned that the continual or repeated flushing of birds within the same area over a short period (i.e. within the same season) will likely increase the impacts mentioned above, to the detriment of both the birds and the wetland ecosystem as a whole. BirdLife South Africa therefore strongly discourages the repeated flushing of an area by the same or different individuals or groups of people. BirdLife South Africa, however, recognises that the public would enjoy the opportunity to see these elusive wetland species and therefore recommends and supports the notion of organising 'public viewings' via controlled flushing events.

Controlled flushes enable the public (< 150 people) to stand in a designated area outside the wetland and observe a small team of flushers (< 10 people and/or dogs) who will walk through the wetland with the aim of flushing the desired species for all to see. The public are not permitted into the sensitive wetland habitat. The impacts of the flushing team are similar to that of a herd of cattle or indigenous game passing through the wetland. By organising controlled flushes, the frequency at which they occur is also controlled and can be limited to every second or preferably third season. Controlled flushes also provide an important opportunity for conservation organisations to raise awareness about and funds towards conserving the wetland habitats and the birds that live in them by charging members of the public who wish to take part a small fee. The 'public viewings' organised by Middelpunt Wetland Trust (MWT) near Dullstroom, Mpumalanga, South Africa, have shown the benefit of limited controlled flushes in a sensitive wetland habitat being used to generate funds for conservation and research at Berga Wetland in Ethiopia: the only known breeding site of the White-winged Flufftail. Approximately R165 000, raised from these 'viewings' has been donated to the local community for the building of a school and for community support. In return, the community patrols the wetland in the breeding season to prevent disturbance of nesting flufftails.

### 3. Camera Trap Surveys

In order to minimise the time spent by observers within a wetland, as well as decrease their disturbance on the resident biodiversity in a wetland, researchers have recently achieved success with camera trap surveys (Colyn et al. 2016) over other more invasive techniques. Camera traps have sensors that are triggered to capture an image or video when motion is detected. These cameras are placed in the field for extended periods without the need for a person to be present, and have provided researchers with a feasible, accurate, reliable and completely non-invasive alternative for the monitoring of sensitive wetland fauna.

#### South Africa's Threatened Wetland Birds

South Africa's wetlands host one of the world's Critically Endangered bird species, the White-winged Flufftail, as well as the Wattled Crane (*Bugeranus carunculatus*) which is listed as Critically Endangered for the southern African region (IUCN Red List 2016). Other wetland species under threat include the Blue Crane (*Anthropoides paradiseus*), Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*), Maccoa Duck (*Oxyura maccoa*), as well as Greater and Lesser Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus* and *P. minor*) (IUCN Red List 2016).

BirdLife South Africa recommends that point count or camera trap surveys should be considered as a preferable monitoring technique over that of rope-dragging or direct flushing of birds in sensitive habitats such as wetlands.

#### References

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