BirdLife South Africa

Position Statement on Tracking of Birds

BirdLife South Africa recognises that data obtained through the fitting of satellite/GSM/VHF tracking devices to birds can answer many research questions that can contribute to their conservation. It similarly can provide us with a better understanding of local movements of individual birds which can help inform placement of wind turbines or other infrastructure which can pose a significant risk to some species of birds.

Handling birds and attaching devices to them can however carry inherent risks to the individual birds, including potentially impacting on their survival and reproduction. These risks must be minimised as far as possible, and must be justified in terms of the science and conservation outcomes expected from the deployment.

BirdLife South-Africa hereby states and confirms the following:

- The capture of birds for the fitment of tracking devices is controlled by provincial legislation in South Africa. All tracking projects should comply with the relevant legislation in this regard; for example research permits must be obtained from the relevant province(s). Requirements may differ between provinces in South Africa and ethical clearance of the project may be required before permit applications are considered.
- Ethical clearance should be obtained for the project from a suitable ethics committee. When projects are linked to academic institutions, ethical clearance can be obtained directly from the ethics committee of the particular academic institution. Should the project not be linked to an academic institution, zoo or museum where ethics approval can be obtained, we recommend that the research proposal is submitted to BirdLife South Africa's Ethics Committee for review.
- Prior to the fitting of any tracking devices, the project must be motivated through the drafting of a peer-reviewed proposal that sets out clear objectives and questions to be answered through the project. The ad hoc fitment of tracking devices where the research questions are unclear is considered unethical and such studies should not be undertaken.
- It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the impact on the bird be kept to a minimum, both during capture, the fitment process and deployment. Handling time should be kept to a minimum as the event can be stressful to the bird while it is being handled. Fitting of

tracking devices should only be undertaken by individuals who are experienced and competent in the capturing and handling of the relevant species as well as the fitting of the tracking device.

- A device should never weigh more than 3% of the body weight of the individual on which it is deployed.
- The type of device used must be of sufficient standard and quality to provide the required data over the full period of the study.
- Before the device is used or made available for use, it must undergo quality tests by a reputable company to minimise the chance of fitting a faulty device to a bird.
- Researchers and specialists using tracking devices are encouraged to share lessons learnt, including with regards to types of devices, fitment methods and harnesses. These lessons should be published and disseminated in an effort to improve tracking methods and techniques, thus minimising impacts on birds by future studies.
- While cost will always be a factor in decision-making, when considering which device to use, careful consideration should also be given to the quality of the product, data requirements and risk the device might pose to birds.
- Where possible, attachment methods (e.g. harnesses) should first be tested on captive birds before a bird in the wild is fitted with a tracking device, especially if the relevant species has not been tracked before or different attachment methods are proposed for use. If the same bird species cannot be found in captivity, a species of similar size and behaviour can be considered.
- The fitment of a tracking device is an exciting event. The media, sponsors and members of public may wish to attend. Although such an event represents an opportunity to get media coverage and promote the project, it is important that the event is well managed and that the attendees are well controlled. Second to the conservation of the species, the welfare of the bird should always come first and handling time must be minimised.
- Any mortalities or injuries, whether attributed to the fitting of the tracking device or not, should be reported to the relevant provincial organisation. BirdLife South Africa would appreciate it if we were informed of such injuries or mortalities, as the reasons for mortalities may assist us in proving future guidance.

New tracking technologies provide opportunities to learn about the biology of birds and the data collected can contribute to the conservation of endangered species. The fitment of a tracking device should however not be done haphazardly. All legal and ethical requirements should be complied with. The data obtained from tracking a bird should contribute to the conservation of the species and lead to the implementation of conservation measures. It could also contribute to knowledge of the biology of the species.

BirdLife South Africa endeavours to lead the way in implementing ethical tracking studies in a way that underpins our mission of protecting wild birds and their habitats.

BirdLife South Africa will compile a list of researchers, with extensive experience in the fitting of tracking devices to specific species, which will be helpful for those planning to initiate studies on the tracking of wild birds.