POSITION STATEMENT
Flushing of Wetland Birds

PROBLEM STATEMENT

South Africa's wetlands are one of the most threatened ecosystems and contain fauna and flora specifically adapted to living within these dynamic habitats. The structure of wetland vegetation can limit the visibility of wetland fauna for observers when attempting to view and/or count birds or animals. Destructive and/or disruptive flushing techniques used to see elusive fauna, may have long-term negative impacts on these ecosystems.

BIRDLIFE SOUTH AFRICA POSITION STATEMENT

BirdLife South Africa opposes the use of destructive and/or disruptive techniques that attempt to produce visuals of wetland birds for the purposes of bird counts or casual viewing. These techniques include active flushing with or without rope dragging and loud 'bangs' used to scare birds and cause them to take flight. BirdLife South Africa notes that flushing is indiscriminate and does not allow for the targeting of specific species, thus disturbing all wetland fauna. BirdLife South Africa recognises the following potential impacts flushing, and especially repeated/continued flushing attempts, may cause:

- Trampling of vegetation and potentially nests of small, elusive rallids;
- Higher risk of predation as a result of the displacement of flushed birds (paths left by flushers may open up previously inaccessible habitat to predators such as jackals and mongooses that are unable to move through dense vegetation);
- Potential exposure to competition from neighbours as a result of the displacement of flushed birds.

For the purposes of research into wetland bird populations, BirdLife South Africa strongly recommends the following:

- The use of the *BirdLife South Africa Rallid Camera Survey Technique* (Colyn et al. 2017). A non-invasive method minimising time spent by observers and their physical disturbance within a wetland;
- The use of non-invasive point counts to assess the presence of birds in inaccessible vegetation based on their vocalisations (point counts are well suited to general birding and remove most invasive survey elements, whilst providing the opportunity to record numerous species);
- Avoiding/limiting the use of call-backs, particularly during the breeding season and, if utilised, recommends the ethical use thereof (refer to BirdLife South Africa's Birding Code of Ethics Position Statement).

BirdLife South Africa recognises that the public enjoys the opportunity to view elusive wetland species and, supports the notion of ethically approved 'public viewings'[1] via controlled flushing events in exceptional circumstances only. Controlled flushes should only occur outside of the breeding season of any threatened species present within a wetland and should obtain approval from the BirdLife South Africa Ethics Committee.

BirdLife South Africa recognises the importance of conserving South Africa's wetlands which host a number of globally and regionally threatened wetlands birds, such as White-winged Flufftail *Sarothrura ayersi*, Wattled Crane *Bugeranus carunculatus*, African Marsh Harrier *Circus ranivorus*, Blue Crane *Anthropoides paradiseus*, Grey Crowned Crane *Balearica regulorum*, Maccoa Duck *Oxyura maccoa* and Greater and Lesser flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* and *P. minor*.

[1]Controlled flushes enable the public (< 150 people) to observe, from the wetland periphery, a small team (< 10 people) walking through the wetland with the aim of flushing the desired species for all to see. The public is not permitted into the sensitive wetland habitat. This provides an important opportunity for conservation organisations to raise awareness about and funds towards conserving wetland birds and their habitats.

BirdLife SOUTH AFRICA
Giving Conservation Wings