

Monitoring of flagship birds as a means of contributing to better management of grasslands in the Umzimvubu Catchment



Final Report



INTRODUCTION

BirdLife South Africa is a member of the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme because the area supports a number of sites which are listed as Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), which are important for the associated threatened and range restricted bird species. BirdLife South Africa is contributing to the long term goal of improving the management of the Umzimvubu catchment by teaching eco-rangers the basic skills necessary to identify and monitor flagship bird species. During the project period BirdLife South Africa has conducted the relevant training with approximately 30 field staff from the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS), Conservation South Africa (CRS) and Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve. The important skills learnt and resources provided will contribute to these field staffs' ability to undertake their daily tasks and contribute important information on the presence of priority species in the region that in many cases seriously lacks comprehensive avian data. In addition, field rangers from the Ongelusknek Nature Reserve have been capacitated to better undertake their field duties through the sponsorship of binoculars. The monitoring and practical training they received is also easily adapted to all aspects of their daily duties. The outcomes of this sponsorship links to the CEPF's strategic directions two and three.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Activity 1 & 2: Training and Mentoring of Eco-rangers

The individuals who were trained come from a variety of different backgrounds and from the outset it was clear each possessed different skills and abilities to understand and apply the training in the field. As such it was not appropriate to take all the participants through the full range of training that was initially envisaged and only those who showed the appropriate skills were chosen. However, representatives from each organisation were exposed to the full range of training offered to ensure in future these skills can be passed on to people in each organisation. An outline of the training can be broken down as follows:

- Introduction to identifying birds.
- Introduction to common birds and priority species from the district.
- Introduction to the BirdLife South Africa Best Practise Guidelines for Birds and why birds are important ecological indicators.
- Using and caring for binoculars.
- Binocular proficiency exercises.

- Bird monitoring and data collection.
- Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) training.
- Introduction to Lynx Bird Ticks as a tool to record and monitor birds.
- Surveys for Rudd's Lark and Yellow-breasted Pipit which doubled as advanced training teaching participants how to identify difficult species and conduct surveys for them.

Learning material was handed out throughout the training and fourteen pairs of binoculars were donated to the various organisations as follows: four pairs to the EWT, four pairs to ERS, four pairs for CSA, two pairs for the Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve. Seven copies each of the Roberts Birds of South Africa and Lynx Bird Ticks apps for Android devices were also provided to better enable field staff to identify birds and easily collect data on birds. These data are then easily exported to Microsoft Excel and emailed to appropriate parties.

During the period from September to March the following training was undertaken (for more details on the training presented during the first project period please refer to previous report):

SABAP2 Training

On the 20th October a day was spent in the Underberg area with four of the EWT's eco-rangers who had progressed well with the basic training courses and shown the most initiative. The training consisted of an introduction to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) and using this method to undertake surveys to collect bird data. SABAP2 is one of the region's most important monitoring projects that rely on citizen scientists to collect avian data. Relevant skills that were taught include mapping skills, basic understanding of GIS and standardised monitoring techniques. Practical time was spent in the field collecting avian data as per the SABAP2 protocol.

Lynx Bird Ticks Training course

Lynx Bird Ticks (Lynx) is an application for Android devices that allows the user to quickly and easily record data on the birds they see. These sightings are automatically tagged with a GPS location and can be submitted directly to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project 2 (SABAP2) at the click of a button. On the 3-4 March a full two day training course was presented at the Sani Lodge outside Himeville and attended by four members of the EWT, and two each from CSA, ERS and Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve. Unfortunately, not all participants were provided with suitable Android devices but nevertheless they received the training and in future if they receive suitable devices they will be able to collect data on birds using this programme.



Photo 1: Members of the EWT, CRS, ERS and Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve engaged in discussing the finer details of identifying birds.



Photo 2: Group photo during Lynx Bird Ticks training.

Activity 3

Rudd's Lark Survey

One of the outcomes of the funding received was the completion of surveys for Rudd's Lark *Heteromiraфра ruddi*. The area supports an important population of this *Endangered* endemic species with the nearest populations found in the Wakkeestroom area in Mpumalanga. Few data on the species in the Matatiele area was available and we aimed to comprehensively survey the area to determine the status of the species. Other important species such as Yellow-breasted Pipit *Anthus chloris* were also targeted. From the 1-4 December 2015 intensive surveys were undertaken in the Matatiele area. Four of the EWT Eco-rangers and one of the peer learners attended the surveys as well as other experts from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and BirdLife South Africa. During the surveys a number of important species were identified and the importance of the area for Yellow-breasted Pipit was highlighted. Yellow-breasted are currently listed as *Vulnerable* and a sizeable population occurs on the plateaus within the Matatiele Nature Reserve and on privately owned farms to the south. Rudd's Lark was not located but we have managed to eliminate a number of sites that no longer contain suitable habitat. BirdLife South Africa is concerned about the status of this Eastern Cape population of Rudd's Lark which was last confirmed in the Matatiele Nature Reserve in 2011. Nevertheless, the surveys provided an important opportunity for the field staff to gain an understanding of the importance of suitable, well managed grassland habitat for biodiversity and this is also relevant for areas that are suitable for livestock grazing. The surveys also provided an opportunity to focus on other difficult to identify species thus enhancing the trainees' identification skills.



Photo 3: In search of Rudd's Lark. Surveying the grasslands of Matatiele Nature Reserve.

FINANCIALS

During the project period a total of R 97 507.34 was spent on activities to achieve the objectives of the project. BirdLife South Africa would like to request the remaining 5% of the budget (R5 087.50) with the completion of this project. We would like to request the full amount as the remaining funds of R 4242.66 will be used to help ensure continuity by providing further support to field staff (see below). The outstanding amount would be used for travel costs to get to the project sites in Matatiele Underberg and Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve.

Output Summary	Expenditure period 1	Expenditure period 2	total expenditure	Approved Budget	Available Budget	Percentage Spent
Salaries/Benefits	R 24 000.00	R 25 000.00	R 49 000.00	R 49 000.00	R 0.00	100%
Equipment	R 22 957.83	R 3 958.99	R 26 916.82	R 27 500.00	R 583.18	98%
Travel	R 4 120.89	R 8 219.63	R 12 340.52	R 16 000.00	R 3 659.48	77%
Indirect Costs	R 4 625.00	R 4 625.00	R 9 250.00	R 9 250.00	R 0.00	100%
Totals	R 55 703.72	R 41 803.62	R 97 507.34	R 101 750.00	R 4 242.66	95%

CONCLUSIONS

Undertaking the training was a pleasure in terms of the people who were involved and part of the courses. One of the lessons learnt was that many of the people trained were uneducated and it was a challenge to bring many of the concepts across that most of us take for granted in our daily lives. However, many of the beneficiaries excelled and especially those from the EWT who underwent comprehensive training during the course of the year. Our hope is that at the very least people have learnt about the important roles birds play and that for some a passion for birding has been developed which we saw with certain key individuals. In addition it proved tricky to get all the beneficiaries together and the format of hosting the training events proved the most feasible. Post project completion BirdLife South Africa has pledged additional support and we will undertake the following:

- Additional visits with the EWT Eco-rangers to further build their skills. The EWT rangers showed the most promise and they are already collecting data which has been submitted. Their proficiency in bird identification and the use of the monitoring techniques is very good and in future we will register them with SABAP2 so that they can submit data directly to this project which is used by conservation planners nationally.

- A visit to the Motseng Project site. This communal site is the focus of much of the Umzimvubu Catchment Programme's rehabilitation and grazing projects. Some of the grasslands are in a relatively good condition and a visit will be undertaken in the summer to determine what species are present. The species present may present an opportunity to highlight the good management that is undertaken which is benefitting avian diversity in the area.
- A visit to the Ongeluksnek Nature Reserve in the winter months. We have insisted that as part of the use of the binoculars the rangers collect data on vultures that visit the reserve. A vulture feeding area is provisioned on the reserve with both Cape and Bearded Vulture visiting. In addition a Bearded Vulture nest site is present on the reserve and we plan to undertake a trip with the rangers to the site to teach them how to monitor the nest. This data will be submitted to the Bearded Vulture Task Force.