



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

Declaration of the Zululand Vulture Safe Zone

On 5 September 2020, International Vulture Awareness Day, the Zululand Vulture Safe Zone will be established.

South Africa's vulture populations are facing an uncertain future. Three of South Africa's nine vulture species, including the once-numerous White-backed Vulture (*Gyps africanus*), have declined to such an extent that they are now regarded as Critically Endangered by BirdLife International and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This is one step away from extinction in the wild. By feeding on the carcasses of dead animals, vultures perform one of nature's most important tasks. Without the ecosystem services they provide, carcasses would be left to rot, attracting less specialised scavengers, such as jackals, rats and feral dogs. This can then create the ideal circumstances for the spread of diseases, such as rabies and canine distemper.

As consumers of carrion, vultures are vulnerable to poisons, falling victim not only to unscrupulous poachers who target them deliberately, but also to livestock farmers who kill them inadvertently when targeting mammalian predators. Gut piles and carcasses, put out for scavengers to consume, may contain fragments of lead and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which are lethal to vultures. Collisions with, and electrocutions on, powerlines also play a major role in vulture declines, as does direct persecution and inadvertent disturbance of breeding vultures at their colonies. Conservation efforts are often hampered by the ecology of vultures themselves, as they can travel vast distances in search of food, undeterred by country borders. Unfortunately, vultures are now at risk from disappearing from the African landscape.

To stem the tide of losses, landscape-level conservation initiatives are needed, not only in our nature reserves and national parks, but also on privately-owned land that supports vulture

populations. First conceptualised and applied in Asia, where vulture numbers were decimated by the veterinary drug diclofenac, Vulture Safe Zones cover vast stretches of privately-owned land that are managed in ways that are conducive to vulture survival. The Multi-species Action Plan to Conserve African-Eurasian Vultures (Vulture MsAP) has now brought this initiative to Africa, where it is being adapted to address the unique and multi-faceted challenges facing the continent's vultures. The MsAP recommends various actions that can be used to address the threats to vultures and adapted to the area under consideration. These include modifying powerlines and attaching marking devices to prevent electrocutions and collisions, sending select members of staff for poison response training, not using certain non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for veterinary purposes, only using lead-free ammunition for hunting or culling, ensuring that carcasses that are put out at vulture restaurants pose no hazard to the scavenging birds, ensuring that poisons are not used to manage mammalian predators, and committing to safeguarding and monitoring any vulture nests that occur on the property.

South Africa's beautiful Zululand region, situated in northern KwaZulu-Natal, supports five of South Africa's nine vulture species. It is also an important breeding area, particularly for the tree-nesting White-backed Vulture. Driven by Clive Vivier, owner of Leopard Mountain Lodge, landowners in the region have now committed to managing their properties as Vulture Safe Zones.

Covering the length of the Zululand Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, the newly established Zululand Vulture Safe Zone stretches from Pongola Game Reserve in the north to the borders of the Mkuze section of iSimangaliso National Park in the east. Bound by the N2 highway to the east, it encompasses 14 properties, including such gems as Manyoni Private Game Reserve and the Mun-ya-wana Conservancy (Phinda Game Reserve). Some of the landowners provide food for the vultures at supplementary feeding sites. A mobile chat group is used to monitor the whereabouts of the birds, and to manage a coordinated feeding programme in the hopes that a consistent supply of food will minimize the lure of carcasses laced with poison by poachers. In addition, they will now ensure that carcasses and gut piles put out at so-called "vulture restaurants" are lead- and contaminant-free, that water reservoirs are fitted with "escape" ladders to prevent drownings, and that lead-free ammunition is used for hunting and culling. Select members of staff will receive poison response training, powerlines will be monitored, and nesting vultures will be kept free of disturbance.

The establishment of the Zululand Vulture Safe Zone will go a long way towards minimizing those threats to vultures that are perfectly preventable. BirdLife South Africa would like to thank the

landowners and reserve managers who are committed to ensuring that vultures remain an enduring part of the Zululand landscape.

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The following properties will form part of the Zululand Vulture Safe Zone:

1. Pongola Game Reserve
2. Pongola Game Reserve South
3. Harloo Ranch
4. Magudu Game Reserve
5. Somkhanda Community Game Reserve
6. Zimanga Private Game Reserve
7. Mpeti Safaris
8. Tennis Ranch
9. Thanda Game Reserve
10. Phinda Game Reserve (Mun-ya-wana Conservancy)
11. Kube Yini Game Reserve
12. Belvedere Game Ranch
13. Goss Farms
14. Manyoni Private Game Reserve (Zululand Rhino Reserve)

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BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife International partners operate in 113 countries worldwide. BirdLife South Africa relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.

BirdLife South Africa's Landscape Conservation Programme

BirdLife South Africa's Landscape Conservation Programme aims to see critical sites and ecosystems, and their associated ecological services, sustainably managed and protected to promote the preservation of diverse and healthy bird populations, other biodiversity, and people. Our mission is To prevent and/or reverse negative trends in terrestrial bird populations by identifying, protecting and managing a network of sites that are important for the persistence of birds, their habitats and other biodiversity, through

scientifically-based projects and the improvement of the conservation status of important sites, that support the sustainable management and equitable use of natural resources, and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature.

Vulture Safe Zones

An appropriately sized geographic area in which targeted conservation measures are undertaken to address the key threats relevant to the vulture species present. VSZs are developed in southern Africa as an approach to complement national and international efforts to reduce the impact of existing and emerging threats to stabilise and promote recovery of existing vulture populations.

More information on vultures and poaching

Soaring flight gives vultures the ability to detect carcasses quickly and to cover vast distances in short periods of time. With poaching of Africa's large herbivores reaching unprecedented levels in recent decades, vultures' unique adaptations have bestowed on them the unexpected role of sentinels. A kettle of vultures circling over a carcass give rangers the opportunity to uncover poaching incidents quickly. Unfortunately, unscrupulous poachers have caught on to this useful practice, and are now killing vultures in large numbers by poisoning poached carcasses. The scale of these losses is unsustainable and its continuance could see the extinction of species such as the White-backed Vulture within our lifetimes.