



## MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

### Celebrate our Migratory Birds!

***BirdLife South Africa supports World Migratory Bird Day – 14-15 May 2011***

**Johannesburg, 12 May 2011** – World Migratory Bird Day (WMDB) will be celebrated throughout the world on 14 and 15 May. The purpose of the day is to celebrate the world's migratory birds, and to promote their conservation.

This annual event is organised by the secretariats of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) – two international wildlife treaties administered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) which have a growing number of contracting parties, of which the South African government is one.

The focus of the campaign this year is "*Land use changes from a bird's-eye view*". Changing land use and the general deterioration of the natural environment is having a negative effect on migratory birds and the habitats upon which they depend.

Migratory birds are different from resident birds as they are dependent on intact environments at their summer and winter grounds, and also on stop-over sites which they use while on migration to replenish their reserves, says BirdLife South Africa's Ernst Retief.

All over Africa, the natural habitats of migratory birds are being reduced through land use changes, including urbanization, intensive agriculture, deforestation and mining. Wetland loss threatens the habitat of migratory waterbirds and wetlands in South Africa are also under threat. Marievale on the Blesbokspruit in Gauteng is a shadow of its former glory, and there has been a reduction in the number of waterbirds which use this site. The Orange River estuary, an important stepping stone for migratory waterbirds as they move along the West Coast of Africa, has seen an entire saltmarsh being reduced to barren wasteland.

More than 100 migratory bird species have been recorded in South Africa, including intra-African migrants and species that migrate longer distances between our country and northern Europe and Asia (the Palearctic).

According to Carolyn Ah Shene-Verdoorn, Policy & Advocacy Manager at BirdLife South Africa, one of the most important environmental threats in South Africa is prospecting and mining for minerals, and especially coal. "The South African government is however starting to work towards a sustainable development goal, but it will take a while before we get there as the transition needs to be supported by all governments departments and needs to include the buy-in of industry. Many of the current mining and prospecting applications fall within ecologically

sensitive areas that are important habitat for birds, including migratory species.”

The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), with support of CER’s various NGO partners such as BirdLife South Africa, made a formal request to the Minister of Mineral Resources for a prohibition on prospecting and mining in certain key areas of critical biodiversity and hydrological value and sensitivity. “BirdLife South Africa has been involved in the development of this list of sensitive sites, and ultimately this will provide more protection for our country’s Important Bird Areas by prohibiting or restricting commercial prospecting and mining at sites that are important for threatened and endemic birds”, says Daniel Marnewick, Important Bird Areas Programme Manager at BirdLife South Africa.

One of the important tools that BirdLife South Africa is using to contribute to the conservation of migratory birds is the Important Bird Areas (IBA) Programme, says Retief. The IBA Programme endeavours to protect the habitat of our country’s birds, including migrants. The Mount Moreland Barn Swallow roost near Durban, for example, is an IBA and this site protects one of the largest swallow roosts in South Africa.

According to Dr Hanneline Smit, BirdLife South Africa’s Conservation Manager, at least 15 of the migratory bird species in South Africa are of conservation concern (i.e. listed as regionally threatened in *The Eskom Red Data Book of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland* [Barnes 2000]) and of these one migrant, the Blue Swallow, is listed as *Critically Endangered*, the highest conservation status and one which is assigned to a species which is literally on the path to extinction.

In order to protect the Blue Swallow’s habitat, the Blue Swallow Natural Heritage Site, KwaZulu-Natal Mistbelt Grasslands and other areas have been declared as IBAs to protect the remnant populations of this attractive swallow.

Other migratory species which receive a level of protection through the IBA Programme include the Corn Crake, Lesser Kestrel and Black-winged Pratincole. Many of our seabirds are also threatened and BirdLife South Africa’s Seabird Division is actively implementing conservation action to conserve seabirds. Mitigation measures have for example been implemented to reduce the mortalities of albatrosses and petrels during long-line and trawl fishing operations, with mortalities down by about 80%. Migratory seabirds will also benefit from the marine IBA Programme, and BirdLife South Africa is currently using the location of seabird breeding and feeding sites to determine the location of key marine IBAs.

Although IBAs are created to protect threatened bird species, other more common migratory species also occur in these areas. The IBA status which is conferred on a site does not offer formal protection, as a national park does, but does highlight the importance of the site. BirdLife South Africa is focusing its attention, through conservation programmes, farmer extension, and environmental education, in and around IBAs. Management plans are also being developed for key sites to ensure the future survival of its migratory and other bird species.

One migratory bird, the Barn Swallow, is South Africa’s Bird of the Year in 2011. The Airports Company of South Africa (ACSA) has kindly sponsored the Bird of the Year and posters, lesson plans and other materials have been developed and widely distributed by BirdLife South Africa. This publicity will help highlight the plight of the Barn Swallow, other migratory birds and their habitats in South Africa.

**Ends**

**For further information, please contact:** Contact Ernst Retief at [conservation.gauteng@birdlife.org.za](mailto:conservation.gauteng@birdlife.org.za) (072 223 2160), Dr Hanneline Smit at [conservation@birdlife.org.za](mailto:conservation@birdlife.org.za) (011 789 1122) or Carolyn Ah Shene-Verdoorn at [advocacy@birdlife.org.za](mailto:advocacy@birdlife.org.za) (011 789 1122).

Also see the World Migratory Bird website: [www.worldmigratorybirdday.org](http://www.worldmigratorybirdday.org)

**Notes for the Editor:**

1. The Mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.
2. For more information about the Important Bird Areas Programme, see [http://www.birdlife.org.za/page/30/important\\_bird\\_areas](http://www.birdlife.org.za/page/30/important_bird_areas)
3. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-789 1122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, or send an e-mail to [info@birdlife.org.za](mailto:info@birdlife.org.za).