First Great Rift Valley sites are added to World Heritage list

Title As a result of BirdLife's support to a nomination by the Kenyan Government, the Kenya Lake System in the Great Rift Valley has been added to UNESCO's World Heritage List. The BirdLife International Africa Secretariat, and other stakeholders including Nature Kenya (BirdLife in Kenya), the National Museums of Kenya and the Kenya Wildlife Service worked on a report of the importance of the Kenya Lake System which was used in the Government submission. The new natural World Heritage Site comprises three relatively shallow, interlinked lakes in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya. Lake Bogoria, Lake Nakuru and Lake Elementaita are all individually recognised by BirdLife as Important Bird Areas. The total area covered is 32,034 hectares BirdLife is pressing for the entire African segment of the Great Rift Valley to be recognised as a World Heritage Site. It is based on the proposition that the migration of 5000 million birds from more than 350 bird species through the Great Rift Valley is a phenomenon of outstanding universal value, as defined by UNESCO?s World Heritage Committee. ?The Kenya Rift Lakes is a major inscription for UNESCO and a powerful stepping stone for the conservation of whole of the Great Rift Valley? said Dr Julius Arinaitwe, Director of the BirdLife International African Partnership Secretariat. All three lakes regularly support large foraging populations of Near Threatened Lesser Flamingos (*Phoeniconaias minor)*, sometimes reaching two million at Lake Bogoria, which at times also supports the highest population of Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) in the entire Great Rift Valley chain of alkaline lakes. Lake Elementaita is a key breeding site for the Great White Pelican, with over 8,000 breeding pairs, the largest in Africa. In total, more than 400 species of birds have been recorded on and around the lakes, including over 50 Palaearctic migrant species. While not amounting to formal protection, Natural World Heritage Site status will give the three lakes an international profile, greatly enhancing the prospects that their beauty and biodiversity value will be respected and conserved. BirdLife has prepared an analysis, which makes the case for supporting a ?serial transnational nomination process? for sites in the African Great Rift Valley to be inscribed on the World Heritage list. Twenty-four sites are identified on the basis that they play a major role as (a) stop over points in the Africa GRV as part of the Africa-Eurasian bird migration cycle (b) nesting sites and/or (c) migratory soaring bird bottleneck sites. The 24 identified sites are in ten African countries: Egypt (3 sites); Djibouti (2); Ethiopia (5); Kenya (3); Uganda (3); Tanzania (3); Zambia (1), Mozambique (1), Malawi (1) and Botswana (1), with one transnational site ? Lake Tanganyika- shared by four countries, Burundi, DRC, Tanzania and Zambia. ?The GRV thematic analysis seems to have been very thoroughly prepared, and all involved, particularly the BirdLife Africa Secretariat, should be congratulated?, commented Hazell Shokellu Thompson, BirdLife?s Director of

Network and Capacity. BirdLife has proposed the inclusion of Lake Natron in Tanzania as a potential candidate site to be considered in the second cycle of nominations. Lake Natron is the breeding site of all the Lesser Flamingos in East Africa, and around three-quarters of the entire global population, but is threatened by a bid to exploit its alkaline waters for soda-ash. The nomination of Lake Natron is supported from many quarters, including the IUCN, Africa World Heritage Fund, BirdLife Partners in GRV countries, and AEWA (the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds). Lota Melamari, a member of the World Commission on Protected Areas said: ?The successful inscription of the Kenya Lakes System is a breakthrough and should be celebrated. However, for the effective protection of Lesser Flamingoes, safeguarding Lake Natron in Tanzania is critical?.