

Three charismatic southern African birds heading for extinction

Title

Three of South Africa's flagship bird species have moved closer to extinction, according to BirdLife on behalf of the 2010 IUCN Red List. The African Penguin's status has changed from Vulnerable in the 2009 category to Endangered, the Ludwig's Bustard from Least Concern to Endangered and the Southern Ground Hornbill from Least Concern to Vulnerable. According to Dr Hanneline Smit, BirdLife South Africa's Conservation Division Manager, "the decrease in numbers and range of these three birds is great cause for concern". All three species are the focus of research and conservation work, but clearly more is needed in order to rescue them from further population declines. Mark Anderson, BirdLife South Africa's Executive Director, confirms that "the populations of all three these species which almost exclusively occur in southern Africa are rapidly declining due to a variety of human impacts". African Penguins are being severely affected by commercial fisheries and shifts in prey populations, the Ludwig's Bustard's most significant threat is mortalities caused by collisions with power lines, and Southern Ground Hornbill populations are threatened by habitat destruction. "It is unfortunate that, during the UN International Year of Biodiversity, some of our most attractive and charismatic bird species move closer to extinction", added Smit. African Penguins are currently the focus of extensive conservation action which is being conducted by a number of organizations in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape, and a concerted effort will be needed to lift this embattled penguin from its precipitous population decline. "BirdLife South Africa's conservation work on the African Penguin is being funded by the Charl van der Merwe Trust and Diemersfontein Wine Estate", said Anderson. "Along the coast of Namibia and South Africa (the only current breeding sites for the species), only seven islands now support 80% of the global population which decreased from 141 000 pairs in 1956-1957 to an estimated 25 262 pairs today, representing a decline of 60.5% over three generations", explained Dr Ross Wanless, the Manager of BirdLife South Africa's Seabird Division. The bulk of the Ludwig's Bustard population is found in southern Africa. "The major threat to this species' survival is collisions with power lines", explained Anderson. Work done by Anderson during the early-2000s showed that every kilometre of transmission power line in the eastern Karoo kills one bustard per year. "The population cannot maintain these mortalities", he added. For the Ludwig's Bustard, global population estimates are outdated (around 20 years old) and in urgent need of revision. Conservation measures proposed by BirdLife South Africa's Bustard Working Group include obtaining an updated population estimate, measure bustard collision rates with power lines across the whole range of Karoo habitats, improve knowledge of how the species visually perceives power lines and monitor annual movements of the species. In

South Africa major threats to the Southern Ground Hornbill include loss of nesting habitat, mainly ascribed to land use or clearing for agriculture or by fire. It is being debated whether habitat destruction by African elephants contribute to the loss of suitable breeding sites. Concerted research effort has been ongoing at two sites in the Limpopo Province during the past ten years, and a reintroduction programme is underway at Mabula. It is essential to investigate the effectiveness of artificial nesting sites and to prevent further habitat loss of the Southern Ground Hornbill, said Smit. With sufficient funds, focused conservation projects could see these species populations increasing, allow their down listing in future Red Lists, and help BirdLife South Africa prevent other bird species from following the same route.