Out of Africa ? a round up of stories by Andre Farrar (RSPB ? BirdLife in the UK)

Title **From the high veldt in South Africa** One of the attractions of spending a couple of weeks in South Africa was the chance to escape a bit of the British winter ? so why was I wrapped up, wishing I had brought gloves, walking into a foggy dawn? Altitude. I was visiting the high grasslands near Wakkerstroom home to some rare and very special birds. The fog shrouded a rolling landscape of extensive fields as our party gathered to wait for the mist to clear. It was the prelude to one of those great days, made special by being able to share the experience with friends (if you are interested, you can read about the trip here). Blue korhans (a small species of bustard), including a group with a chick, two blue cranes and eventually, in song-flight as the sun warmed the air, the rare and critically endangered Rudd?s lark. Now Rudd?s lark isn?t one of the species that normally gets to illustrate the amazing heritage of wildlife in South Africa (we did see meekats later in the day) ? but this corner of the world is their only home. I was prompted to recall my wonderful visit to Wakkerstroom the other day when news came in that a 3,600ha privately owned farm has just been declared a Protected Environment. The declaration of the KwaMandlangampisi Protected Environment (pictured), stretching from Wakkerstroom to Luneburg, has been warmly welcomed by South African conservationists as it protects high altitude grasslands, wetlands and mist-belt forests that support a stellar cast of wildlife including South Africa?s three crane species and the rare Oribi. You can read the full story here. The grasslands have been under threat as prospecting rights for coal mining raised the spectre of future development in the area. These have been set aside by the mining company and the declaration of a Protected Environment heralds a brighter future for this area, it?s wildlife and the protection of a critically important water catchment. This is great news and is a major achievement for WWF and Nedbank?s Green Trust supported by campaigns to save the area from the threat of mining by BirdLife South Africa (BirdLife Partner) and the Botanical Society. Crucial to the whole outcome has been the commitment and involvement of local farmers. **Gola Forest ? a National Park in the making** The RSPB has been involved in Sierra Leone?s Gola Forest for many years, so the news that Sierra Leone and Liberia are starting the formal process of designating the forest as a National Park and Protected Area is welcome ? do read more about the announcement here. **New webpages** We?ve been busy updating and adding pages to the Saving Special Places area on the website and here are the links to stories we are following covering threats to some of Africa?s most significant wildlife sites. Firstly, the new pages for the Dakatcha Woodlands and the proposed Serengeti highway and refreshed pages for Lake Natron and the Tana River Delta. The drive to plant energy-crops to provide biofuels is central to the threats faced by the Dakatcha Woodlands and the Tana River Delta ? and colleagues are now telling me of another site threatened by the insatiable thirst for biofuels ? the Kilwa District Coastal Forests in Tanzania. Despite the real progress made on some fronts the scale of the new wave of threats to vital natural resources across Africa highlights the challenges conservationists face. By Andre Farrar (RSPB ? BirdLife in the UK). To read more blogs by Andre, please click here.