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Reg No: 001 - 298 NPO  
PBO Exemption No: 930004518

## MEDIA RELEASE

**Embargo: Immediate**

### MINING THREATENS IMPORTANT NATURAL AREAS

The mining threat to BirdLife South Africa's Important Bird Areas (IBAs) continues to mount. These IBAs represent key biodiversity areas as well, but applications keep getting made for prospecting and mining in and around them. Invitations are issued practically daily for people to register as Interested and Affected Parties for applications to be processed in terms of the law. And surprisingly, says Carolyn Ah Shene-Verdoorn, Policy & Advocacy Manager at BirdLife South Africa, a significant number of these mining and prospecting applications are coming from the state-owned African Exploration & Mining Finance Corporation (AEMFC). Its applications include highly sensitive areas like Chrissiesmeer in Mpumalanga, important wetlands in the North West, and the Nylsvley Floodplain in Limpopo.

It was the same AEMFC that submitted a prospecting application in the Winelands region in the Western Cape, which it had to abandon under public pressure. The company has since moved its attention to other ecologically-sensitive areas around the country. It is selecting areas without any apparent concern for the short-, medium- and long-term impacts on the environment and the water security of the country. This is distressing, as one would expect the state's own mining company to act within the letter and spirit of our country's conservation laws and strategies.

AEMFC's coal prospecting application in the Nylsvley Floodplain is referred to as the Grootvalley Prospecting Application and falls within the Nyl River Floodplain Important Bird Area. This IBA incorporates the Nylsvley Nature Reserve which was declared a Ramsar site in 1997. It has a list of 426 bird species (more than half of the bird species found in South Africa) and can host up to 80 000 birds during high rainfall years. It has become a very important area for the "Critically Endangered" Eurasian Bittern and hosts one of its largest and most stable breeding populations in the country.

The Friends of Nylsvley group has been supporting management of the Nylsvley Nature Reserve for many years and has dedicated much time and effort to protect the ecological integrity of this conservation area. Unfortunately, control over the external factors and activities beyond the borders of the Ramsar site are practically impossible, and these unsustainable activities inevitably impact on the Ramsar site and the rest of the floodplain.

The proposed prospecting targets an area outside the reserve, but it still forms part of the Nyl River Floodplain and will undoubtedly affect the site.

The Chrissiesmeer site forms part of the 'Chrissie Pans' IBA, with more than 320 lakes and pans on mainly privately-owned land. It is an important habitat for birds like the Lesser Flamingo, Greater Flamingo, Grey Crowned Crane and Chestnut-banded Plover, all of which are classified as "Vulnerable" and "Near-Threatened"

in *The Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*. Open-cast mining will destroy the pans and the habitats on which these species depend for their survival.

The Belfast area forms part of the 'Steenkampsberg' IBA and contains many important wetlands. It is one of the few sites in the world where the "Critically Endangered" White-winged Flufftail has been recorded.

Another area earmarked for prospecting includes the Kgomo-Kgomo floodplain in the North West Province's Brits district. Thousands of waterbirds congregate there at times, and it is a habitat as well for species about which there is concern, such as the Black-winged Pratincole, Greater Painted-Snipe, Black Stork, African Marsh-Harrier and Pallid Harrier. According to Ernst Retief of BirdLife South Africa, any prospecting or mining activity will have a devastating impact on the more than 350 bird species that frequent the area.

Mining companies are becoming more and more frantic in their race for land. BirdLife South Africa is not against mining and recognises the important role it plays in our economy. But it remains an essentially unsustainable industry with destructive effects on the environment. We cannot just look on as the scales get tipped against the environment and the livelihoods that depend on it. As conservationists, we ask for mining to be excluded from environmentally-sensitive areas, stated Mark Anderson, Executive Director of BirdLife South Africa.

The Draft National Strategy on Sustainable Development and Action Plan 2010-2014 stresses that "there is an urgent need for a sustainable development strategy that will provide an enabling tool for South Africa to meet the country's socio-economic objectives without compromising the environment". These are promising words. The test, however, lies in their application, and that depends on the political will of our public representatives and government ministries. It is BirdLife South Africa's fervent wish that we can all act together to secure these precious remaining parts of our natural environment for posterity.

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#### **Notes for the editor:**

The following background information is available on request from BirdLife South Africa:

- Information on Important Bird Areas of BirdLife South Africa is available from [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za) or on request.

The IBA programme operates internationally. In South Africa it monitors and aims to protect 122 sites which are vital to the long term viability of bird populations. The areas are objectively determined by a network of local organisations and individuals using established and globally accepted criteria. Action plans are implemented to safeguard them.

The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.

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