

## *Extraordinary flamingo movements amaze scientists. 20 June 2016.*



On the 10th of June 2016 the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) recorded some extraordinary movements by a Lesser Flamingo (*Phoeniconaias minor*) recently fitted with a GPS/GSM satellite transmitter. This individual covered a staggering distance of 1,069 km in one single flight over 16 hours, crossing the Indian Ocean from Mozambique to Madagascar.

Flamingo no. 27 (a small female) had been satellite tagged at Delareyville in the North West Province as part of the Eskom / EWT partnership's efforts to track flamingo movements to develop measures to protect them from collisions with power lines. When Flamingo no. 27 crossed the border into Mozambique, she didn't stop there and instead she proceeded at 7pm on Saturday the 10th of June to cross the Mozambique coast at Maxixe. She finally reached the western shores of Madagascar near Morombe at noon the following day.



*photograph by Andre Botha.*

The recording of these extraordinary movements by Flamingo no. 27 is a breakthrough for the project and flamingo science in Africa, as to our knowledge, this is the first time that a Lesser Flamingo has been tracked flying between mainland Africa and Madagascar. All of the long range movements (>100 km) recorded by each of the six tagged flamingos have been at night, specifically between 6pm and 2am, confirming the theory that they are night fliers and thus susceptible to nocturnal powerline collisions.



photograph supplied by Constant Hoogstad.

Over the past 20 years the Eskom/EWT partnership has been collecting information on avian mortalities relating to electrical infrastructure. The Lesser Flamingo has been one of the major species of concern due to collisions with overhead power lines. One of the methods used to reduce these mortalities is to mark powerlines with bird flight diverters, or 'flappers': devices that can be spotted by birds to prevent collisions. However, a number of flamingo powerline mortalities are still being reported, even in areas where the lines have been clearly marked.

“We hypothesised that recurring mortalities under marked sections of powerlines might be as a result of their nocturnal behaviour, as conventional flappers would be rendered invisible to birds flying at night. In order to prevent mortalities, we may therefore have to mark lines with nocturnal bird flight diverters, devices that illuminate the position of overhead powerlines in the dark” said Matt Pretorius, Senior field officer at the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

Between March and June 2016, the Eskom/Endangered Wildlife Trust strategic partnership conducted two successful captures of Lesser Flamingo at Delareyville in the North West Province of South Africa. Six individuals were fitted with GPS/GSM satellite transmitters to investigate and map the extent of their nocturnal activity/movements. The Eskom/EWT partnership, in conjunction with Pre-formed Line Products, has also designed and tested the world first nocturnal bird flight diverter called the “OWL” device, a solar-powered device equipped with LED lights. Satellite tracking information will assist the partnership to identify powerlines to mark with the OWL nocturnal bird flight diverters to improve the visibility of powerlines for birds flying at night.



photograph by Andre Botha.

“This initiative will not only assist us to prevent powerline related mortalities in Lesser Flamingos, but will also provide valuable information on the movements, habits and breeding behaviour of these birds” said Constant Hoogstad, Manager of the Endangered Wildlife Trust’s Wildlife and Energy Programme. A previous study has shown that Lesser Flamingos undergo long range movements within southern Africa, between their non-breeding range and breeding sites in Namibia and Botswana. A link between the East African Rift Valley lakes and the southern African population has also been suggested based on anecdotal evidence. However their migratory routes are yet to be mapped using satellite telemetry. A recent genetic study also suggested a possible link between Lesser Flamingos in Africa and India.

The project is supported by Eskom Research, Testing and Development.

To continue to assist in decreasing the number of bird mortalities on powerline infrastructure, the EWT would like to encourage members of the public to report any wildlife and powerlines incidents to [wep@ewt.org.za](mailto:wep@ewt.org.za) **011 372 3600** or Toll free **0860 111 535**.

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