

Protecting Grasslands through Endangered Species Conservation

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Internationally, only 1.4% of grasslands are protected, the lowest of any terrestrial vegetation type. Similarly, grasslands are one of South Africa's most threatened ecosystems, with only 2.2% formally conserved and more than 60% already irreversibly transformed.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) Threatened Grassland Species Programme (EWT-TGSP) aims to protect South Africa's precious grasslands through implementing their various endangered species conservation and monitoring projects.



It all started with the EWT's Blue Swallow (BSWG) and Oribi Working Groups (OWG) which implemented conservation action for grasslands, but were based on a single species approach.

Conservation globally has moved away from the single species approach in favour of an ecosystems based approach. In order for the EWT to achieve an ecosystems approach to grassland conservation the intention was to implement conservation action for priority areas within the grasslands and for suites of priority species inhabiting them to be grouped under one programme.

In 2009 the single species working groups, namely the BSWG and OWG and the KwaZulu-Natal Biodiversity Programme became projects of the EWT-Threatened Grassland Species Programme.

Blue Swallows

In the beginning of July 2010, Ian Little was appointed as the new Manager of the TGSP and Samson Phakathi joined Leigh Potter and Enos Zulu as field workers. These changes in staff accompanied a change in the focus of the programme as a whole. While the previous work has continued, with some changes to the focus – a shift from pure monitoring to identification and mitigation of major threats, there has also been the initiation of new projects and thereby, the inevitable growth of the programme into a true grassland biome conservation unit.

These changes have and will also bring us in line with the mission of the EWT-TGSP which is “the conservation of threatened grassland species and their grassland habitat.”

Projects of the “New look” EWT-TGSP

The EWT-TGSP is now looking at a suite of 5 species from different taxonomic groups that together are indicators of healthy grasslands.

Through our “on-the-ground” communications with landowners, we are also able to contribute to the various Stewardship initiatives in the provinces where we work. This is one way to ensure that our grasslands and endangered grassland species are protected.

The EWT has been involved with the monitoring of South Africa’s Blue Swallow (*Hirundo atrocaerulea*) population for a number of years. Unfortunately, the results show a steady decline in the numbers of active nest sites utilised in South Africa, sometimes in spite of a seemingly successful breeding season i.e. high number of fledglings. As expected, the South African population has been assessed as critically endangered.

The EWT continues to monitor the populations in both the KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga provinces (there have not been Blue Swallows seen in Limpopo for many years). It has become apparent that in order to conserve Blue Swallow the EWT-TGSP needs to look beyond the borders of South Africa to the other African countries where Blue Swallows are known to occur, including both the

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It has been said that around 47% of the non-breeding areas are currently not under formal protection, leaving them vulnerable to the threats of mining and development. The EWT-TGSP has taken the first step in Initiating communication amongst the relevant countries with the aim of updating the 2002 International Action Plan for Blue Swallows and developing a new, feasible action plan for the various countries. The EWT-TGSP is currently trying to source funding to host workshops towards the review of the 2002 and development of the 2012 Blue Swallow International Action Plan.

Oribi

Oribi (*Ourebia ourebi*) population monitoring, through landowner consultations and the national survey, will continue. The survey will be conducted on an annual basis, instead of a biennial basis, to ensure that any changes in number or increase in threats can be dealt with swiftly. According to the 2009 survey, there are approximately 1907 Oribi left in South Africa.

The South African population is listed as endangered due to its rapid decline in recent years, caused primarily by habitat destruction and continued persecution by man.



Oribi - Andre Rossouw

Yellow-breasted Pipit

The first new project to roll out will be the Yellow-breasted Pipit (*Anthus chloris*) project. This species is a habitat specialist and is sensitive to any form of habitat disturbance, such as grazing and fire. This highlights the need for conservation attention in the moist highland grasslands.

This project, in collaboration with SANBI and the EWT's Conservation Sniffer Dog Project, will focus on re-assessing the conservation status of this threatened (vulnerable – IUCN) and endemic grassland specialist and in doing so, create a conservation awareness and grassland management plan for land-owners throughout the moist highland grasslands of South Africa.

The Kaapsehoop Cycad

The EWT-TGSP will be, in collaboration with SANBI and DEA, assisting with the development of Biodiversity Management Plans (BMPs) for Critically Endangered cycad species. Currently, the TGSP's focus is on the critically endangered Kaapshoop cycad *Encephalartos laevifolius*.

It is listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN's Red list. It is also listed on CITES (Appendix I).

This species has undergone significant declines and the estimated number of individuals remaining in the wild is between 700 and 820 individuals. The main threats to this species are habitat loss (through increases in invasive alien plants and through afforestation). Illegal collecting for ornamental collections has had a substantial effect on *E. laevifolius* populations. Also, the stems of this species are used in traditional medicines, which could lead to unsustainable harvesting.

The EWT-TGSP will be collating all known information and data on *E. laevifolius* towards the development of the BMP. Biodiversity Management Plans are legally binding and they are gazetted by the government. The EWT-TGSP is currently looking for funding for the various workshops that are necessary for the BMP, to ensure that all relevant parties have been consulted and informed.

Besides the compilation of the BMP, EWT-TGSP staff will be incorporating cycads into their fieldwork schedules to assist local authorities with the monitoring of these threatened plants.

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The Giant Girdled Lizard / Sungazer

The EWT-TGSP has recently initiated an MSc research project on Sungazers in collaboration with Graeme Alexander (WITS), Ray Jansen (TUT) and Michael Cunningham (UFS). The MSc student, Shivan Parusnath's project will contribute significantly to the conservation and monitoring of this species.

The Giant Girdled Lizard (Sungazer) *Smaug giganteus* lives in colonies and digs burrows in silty soil. They are endemic to the *Themeda* grasslands of the North-eastern Free State, South-western Mpumalanga and North-western KwaZulu-Natal provinces in South Africa.

The species is currently recognized by the IUCN red list authority as vulnerable, although this assessment was conducted in 1996. The recorded decline in numbers is a result of habitat destruction (conversion of grasslands to farmland) and illegal collecting for the pet trade. Ploughing is known to be fatal to Giant Girdled Lizards and formerly ploughed lands can no longer support populations of this species.

While the species is listed on CITES Appendix II it is believed that illegal collection from the wild poses a further, currently unquantifiable threat to the population. Hopefully, with the information provided by this research, their status will soon be updated and mitigation measures can be initiated to minimise the threats to this species, thus ensuring their survival.

These projects highlight the expanded focus of the EWT-TGSP, but are by no means the limit to the programme. The EWT-TGSP hopes to continue to initiate new and exciting projects to highlight the importance of South Africa's grasslands in an effort to ensure the conservation.

