

## **Celebrating World Migratory Bird Day**

World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) is a global event held in May of each year to highlight the plight of migratory birds and their habitats. This year WMBD will be held on 9-10 May and will commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event. Every year people around the world take action and organize public events such as bird festivals, education programmes, exhibitions and bird-watching excursions to celebrate WMBD. The theme for 2020's event, Birds Connect Our World, focuses on the tracking technologies used to study the migratory routes and how this knowledge is used to inform conservation efforts. World Migratory Bird Day 2020 also aims to raise awareness on the importance of ecological connectivity for migratory birds.

Migrating birds are often regarded as the most mobile animals on earth and these epic migrations undertaken is one of the natural wonders of the world. The Arctic tern, for instance, holds the record for the longest migration of any animal in the world. These little birds annually make the journey from the Arctic Circle to the Antarctic Circle and can travel more than 60 000 km in the process! About 1 in every 5 of the world's bird species migrate while more than 100 migrant species have been recorded in South-Africa. The majority of South African migratory species are insect feeders and migrate in response to changes in insect availability. Two of the more common summer visitors to the Northern Cape is the Greater Striped Swallow and European Bee-Eater. The Striped Swallow is well adapted to living in urban environments and often use buildings as nesting sites where they construct their characteristic mud nests. During late summer-early autumn large flocks of colourful European Bee-Eaters can be seen filling the evening sky as they congregate in preparation for their long journey back to Europe and Asia. The lesser flamingo, an iconic figure of Kimberly, too undertakes regional migrations. Interestingly flamingos only migrate at night and in response to inland thunderstorms and flooding of major pans.



**Illustration of Greater Striped Swallow and European Bee-Eater**

It is also this incredible mobility that often places Migrant birds at greater risk of extinction globally compared to their resident bird counterparts and makes their conservation more difficult. Almost all of Africa's migrant species are continuing to decline in numbers. The survival of migratory birds depends on the availability of connected networks of habitats along their migration routes that are used as stop-over sites. Many bird flyways cross inhospitable terrain, such as deserts, ice capped mountains and open seas that make stop-over sites essential for exhausted birds to rest and refuel. For many species these annual migratory routes can be deadly gauntlets. Habitat transformation, illegal hunting, collisions with infrastructure and climate change are all major treats to migrant birds. It is estimated that annually through illegal hunting alone up to 500 million migratory birds are either trapped or hunted in the Middle-East and North-African countries as they stop over in route to breeding and wintering sites in Africa and Europe. The global switch to green energy, that includes wind energy, also increases the risk of collisions with wind turbines while climate change is also altering important habitats and impacting food resources. In Africa habitat transformation as a result of expanding agriculture is of particular concern.

In an effort to conserve migrant birds and other migratory animals the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), an environmental treaty was established. The CMS brings together countries and the wider international conservation community to achieve coordinated conservation and management of migratory animals. To address the conservation needs of African-Eurasian migrant species the CMS Parties adopted

an African-Eurasian Migratory Land Birds Action Plan and established a working group to that effect. The Action Plan covers 34 globally threatened species with declining global population trends. Locally, the Endangered Wildlife Trust and Birdlife South Africa have long been involved in conservation programs of some of South Africa's migrant bird species. Fortunately, there has already been positive developments in the conservation of migrant birds. In 2013 the trapping of Amur Falcons (an Asia-Africa migrant) was banned in India while a number of Important Bird Areas (areas that enjoy some form of protection status) have been established along pathways of many migratory bird's species. There has also been concerted awareness raising campaigns in countries, particularly Mediterranean countries, where bird hunting is still prominent. With continued conservation efforts and further studies of flyways the needs of migrant birds' future may look a bit brighter and hopefully avoid the bleak prospect of ending up with empty skies.....