

Ingula Partnership spreads its wings

For most birdwatchers and everyone at Ingula (except David Maphisa, the on-site BirdLife SA Project Manager), the White-winged Flufftail is the stuff of legend and myth! It is such a secretive bird, frequenting man-unfriendly wetlands, that it is seldom seen in South Africa. The estimated global population of the bird is less than 750.

However, in a wonderful example of a win-win situation, 580 children in rural Ethiopia are receiving education in their own village, many of whom would not have had the opportunity to go to school. And, the Middelpunt Wetland Trust (MWT) has active, on-the-ground protection of the main breeding site of the critically endangered White-winged Flufftail.

In one particular place in Ethiopia, the village of Berga, the flufftail is well known and greatly respected, for it is a major benefactor. The village lies on the edge of a wetland, in a densely populated rural area, about 90 km west of Addis Ababa. It is the most important known breeding site of the White-winged Flufftail. The breeding season is from the end of July into early September (the northern hemisphere summer), and suitable nesting habitat is an ever-shrinking environment.

Ethiopia is a country of a similar size to South Africa, but with a population that has more than doubled to over 84 million in the past 35 years. The average number of births per woman is 5.4, so population pressures are increasing at a frightening rate. A high percentage of the population lives on the high-rainfall central plateau, eking out a living through subsistence farming. Cattle, goat and horse numbers are increasing equally rapidly, with a resultant growing pressure on available grazing.



Malcolm Drummond holding a White-winged Flufftail

Along most of the course of the Berga River, the knee-high wetland vegetation, potential nesting habitat, is grazed absolutely flat, making it impossible for the flufftail to build nests.

A further threat to the sedges (a coarse, grass-like plant) in the wetland is their use for the traditional coffee ceremony, an important cultural custom in Ethiopia. Grass cutters cut sedges in the wetland for sale in the towns, adding to the destruction of suitable breeding habitat. However, there is a state-owned dairy at Berga that keeps a section of the wetland for making hay and autumn grazing, providing suitable nest-building vegetation during the breeding season.

Middelpunt Wetland Trust (MWT) has been involved in various activities in Ethiopia for the past thirteen years. This has included sending scientists there to research the flufftail's breeding biology and undertaking surveys to find more breeding sites. There are currently only three sites known, with Berga being the largest.



Progress on key projects Underground works

Fresh Air Inlet Shaft: Primary shotcrete and rock support is 60% complete.

Transformer Hall Heading: Excavation of heading has progressed 75m (42% complete).

Bifurcation Access Adit: The access tunnel is now complete and has holed with the main drainage gallery access tunnel.



Tailrace Adit

Turbine Floor Access Tunnel: Three blasts remaining, tunnel will be complete by 9 November 2009.

Machine Hall: Opening of the machine hall heading is progressing well and is 90% complete.

Main Drainage Gallery Access Tunnel: Excavation is 28% complete

Outlet Works: The tailrace adit is complete. Work has started on the underground waterways. Downstream tunnel stands at 137m excavated and upstream at 202m. The surge chamber access tunnel (SCAT) has reached the 659m mark. On the outlet channel base slab 11 974m³ concrete has been poured and on the outlet channel walls 411m³.

Beautiful pink watsonias in bloom at Ingula



White-winged Flufftail goes to school

The MWT works in conjunction with Ethiopia's leading conservation NGO, the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (EWNHS), which is the Ethiopian partner of BirdLife International. Early on, it was recognised that vital conservation work to protect and conserve the Berga wetland had to involve the local community.



Rural Ethiopia - under pressure from a growing population

An ideal opportunity arose in 2003, when MWT was approached to contribute funds towards building a schoolroom, office and storeroom at Berga for the village's youngest children. At that stage, they were walking eight kilometres, each way, to attend school, which few did. In rural Ethiopia, if a village builds a school, the provincial government will provide teachers. The problem for a subsistence farming community is that cash for building supplies is hard to come by.

The White-winged Flufftail School in Ethiopia



The timing was opportune. MWT had just raised R25 000 from donations by birders who had been shown the White-winged Flufftail at Middelpunt Wetland, a marsh near Dullstroom leased by the Trust for the past 16 years. MWT happily donated this money and paid for half of the building. This one schoolroom provided the facility to teach 60 Grade 1 pupils. The school's name? White-winged Flufftail!

In recognition of the value of the bird to

the community, the villagers formed a site support group, whose members patrol the wetland during the breeding season to prevent livestock grazing and sedge cutting.

In 2004, MWT chairman, Deon Coetzee, and Malcolm Drummond visited the school and were delighted to see that the villagers had realised the value of their own school and had nearly completed a further four classrooms, using the traditional materials of wattle and daub. The American Embassy donated money for the corrugated iron roof.

There was only one problem. The school had to be finished by the end of August, otherwise the three promised provincial teachers would be sent to another school. The villagers had carried rocks for two kilometres to build the floor, but they had no money for sand and cement. A further donation of R6 000 enabled them to finish the school. That year, 284 Grades 1 and 2 children were schooled in Berga.

Over the next couple of visits, MWT contributed a further R24 000 for windows and doors for the existing classrooms and helped with the construction of a three more, reinforcing the value of the flufftail to the community.

Eight teachers now provide education for 580 children from Grades 1 to 6 and it is planned to extend to grades 7 and 8 in the next two years.

It is Middelpunt Wetland Trust's intention to continue supporting the Berga schooling initiative as being a positive and meaningful way of encouraging conservation through community benefit and involvement. In fact, right now they are trying to raise R24 000 to buy 60 desks for the new classrooms.



Two additional classrooms constructed with help from the Middelpunt Wetland Trust

Progress on key projects

Lower reservoir: Bramhoek



The overall progress thus far is 55% complete with the construction of the outlet works and intake works near completion, spillway apron slab, crump weir and downstream bridge are in progress, together with consolidation and curtain grouting. The placing of RCC (roller compacted concrete) on both right and left flank is underway with major RCC placing planned for the next 8-9 months.

The volume of excavated soft and hard material to date is 200 203m³, and 17 500m³ of concrete have been placed. The placing of RCC is in progress on both flanks with 21 000m³ placed so far, 4 400 meters of drilling has been done so far resulting into 111 000 litres of grouting placed.

The expected date for impoundment is in April 2010 and completion in October 2010.

Fossil finds still attracting attention



Dr Gideon Groenewald, the geological consultant on-site, was interviewed by two film crews in October regarding the continuing fossil discoveries.



Local troop of baboons enjoying a Spring day