



Urban Raptor Conservation Project

## **Little Falls Wildlife Reserve** (City of Johannesburg)

A Joint Venture Proposal

by the

Black Eagle Project Roodekrans & Urban **Raptor** Conservation Project  
in Association with the  
**Birds of Prey** Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust

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## **Introduction**

In a joint venture between the non-governmental and non-profit organizations, the Black Eagle Project Roodekrans and the Urban Raptor Conservation Project in association with the Birds of Prey Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, we are committed to the conservation of the Roodekrans Verreaux's (Black) Eagle (*Aquila verreauxii*) pair, as well as all urban and peri-urban birds of prey species. Central to this objective is the protection of the natural ecosystems on which these birds of prey and other wildlife species depend for their continued survival.

This document outlines a proposal for the establishment of a fenced sanctuary - the *Little Falls Wildlife Reserve* (LFWR) - along the Roodekrans Ridge at Little Falls, incorporating a number of private and municipal owned properties.

A possible second phase of this initiative will further expand this area through the creation of a *Conservancy*, which will allow the LFWR to link up with other protected areas, namely the Kloofendal Nature Reserve in Roodepoort and the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden (WSNBG).

The 'bigger picture' is for the LFWR to ultimately form part of much larger envisaged sanctuary, namely the *Sisulu Urban Wildlife Reserve* - a separate proposal initiated in 2005 by the Sisulu Reserve Working Group. The Gauteng Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Environment (GDACE), The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI: authority for the WSNBG) and the Mogale City Local Municipality, under their *National Grasslands Programme*, are already mandated to establish an *Urban Wildlife Reserve* (UWR) in the area. With the WSNBG at its core, the UWR would link Kloofendal and Little Falls - via a conservation corridor - to the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site.

The primary aim of the LFWR however, is to conserve and rehabilitate the undeveloped ridge areas immediately adjacent to Little Falls, as a vital hunting range for the Verreaux's eagles that have nested within the WSNBG since the early 1940's.

World-renowned and a major attraction to visitors of the WSNBG, the well-being of the eagle pair is precarious and the progressive loss of natural hunting habitat to urban development is placing ever-increasing stress upon the eagles and prevailing wildlife populations. To ensure their continued survival, it is of paramount importance that the ridge system should remain protected from further destruction and linked to other conservation areas to ensure habitat connectivity and facilitate the movement and dispersal of wildlife, including their prey species. The creation of the LFWR is essential to meeting this urgent need.

### **The Little Falls Wildlife Reserve**

The envisaged approximately 215 hectare fenced LFWR, will allow for the effective management of this sensitive, biologically rich open space area. Its development as such will transform the area from being a haven for criminals and a liability to surrounding communities, to that of being a recreational and educational asset to the citizens of Johannesburg and indeed the whole of South Africa.

Hadeco, being the largest private property owner at Little Falls, in association with the Little Falls Development Company (Pty) Ltd, (owners of the proposed Little Falls extension 16 (LFx16) – Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) currently being reviewed by authorities), as well as local communities and conservation bodies are, without exception, highly supportive of the reserve concept.

The specialist studies forming part of the LFx16 EIA process highlighted the importance of the majority of the proposed site on the western side of the Wilgespruit due to its high conservation potential. Given the size of this portion of land, and its large common boundary area with the existing Little Falls Pleasure Resort, discussions were held with the various stakeholders. The conclusion reached, which was underwritten in the recommendations of the EIA, was that as a minimum a conservancy should be established. Preferably though, a formal reserve should be established as this would maximise the conservation of this critical piece of remaining open space. A significant offshoot from the public participation process was that all stakeholders are now acquainted and thus ongoing initiatives such as this one at hand can be investigated in detail.

Excellent potential also exists for a partnership between various private sector entities and the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) for the sustainable development and management of the LFWR. Indeed, local businesses or even 'big business' could contribute funds, time, staffing and/or management skills in return for positive marketing opportunities, potential financial returns on investment, possible tax and rates rebates as well as rebates in terms of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act.

The reintroduction of a wide diversity of wildlife species such as zebra, klipspringer and Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis* (principal prey item for the eagles), will also serve to enhance the LFWR's aesthetic and tourism potential. Its establishment ahead of the 2010 Soccer World Cup will help to showcase Western Johannesburg as an interesting destination in its own right for visitors from abroad.

The CoJ, as the largest landowner, is obviously a crucial stakeholder and its involvement and support will be essential to the success of the proposed initiative.

It is envisaged that this proposal will serve as a starting point for further discussions, with a view to reaching an agreement in principle for the inclusion of the four identified CoJ properties into the LFWR, subject to a detailed feasibility study and stakeholder consultation process.

Please refer to the attached map, which shows the potential boundary of the LFWR encompassing portions of the Hadeco-owned property and adjacent CoJ-owned properties. Phase 2, as also shown, would aim to establish a conservancy incorporating numerous privately owned properties on the intervening ridge slope between the LFWR and the WSNBG. In parallel with this additional phase, the possibility also exists for incorporating the Kloofendal Nature Reserve and other linked open space areas.

## **Objectives and Anticipated Benefits**

- *To establish a secure and viable hunting habitat for the Verreaux's eagles:*

Believed to be at least the third and fourth generation Verreaux's eagles, the Roodekrans pair is becoming increasingly dependent upon the Little Falls Ridge and grassveld slopes as a hunting habitat – deemed one of the least disturbed sites within a 5km radius of their nesting site.

The ongoing construction activities within the immediate proximity of their nesting site, on the outskirts of the WSNBG, namely the Silverstar Casino, the upper portions of Featherbrooke Estate, the six mega litre Mogale Water Reservoir and Sugar Bush Estate, is a true reflection that the eagle pair have been observed to hunt less frequently within what was previously deemed ideal hunting habitat closest to their nesting site.

The eagles have been observed to be increasingly frequenting the Little Falls environs. Their presence on a more regular basis would be a welcome draw card for the Strubensvalley communities and it could benefit local enterprises in the same way that their presence at the WSNBG has benefited the Ruimsig area.

The number of private and residential estates inclusive of commercial retailers bearing logos and or names with reference to the Verreaux's eagles is testimony to the potentially wide ranging benefits resulting from the presence of wildlife within an urban environment.

- *To protect the naturally occurring indigenous plant and animal diversity:*

The envisaged LFWR encompasses an area identified by GDACE as a highly sensitive "Untransformed Ridge" containing species of high conservation value, including habitat for a number of rare and endangered species. Virtually the entire LFWR area is also zoned as an "Irreplaceable Site" on account of its importance for the maintenance of ecological processes such as hydrology, pollination and wildlife dispersal, thus requiring a strict 'no-go' development policy. The creation of a

protected area is consistent with GDACE's policies and conservation objectives as well as National policies for the protection of South Africa's biodiversity.

- *To rehabilitate the natural habitat of Little Falls towards its optimum ecological condition:*

The widespread presence of vagrants and criminal elements, using the area as a place of refuge, is posing a constant and ever increasing danger to local residents. Uncontrolled access onto the grassveld slopes and ridges can create a noticeable disturbance to naturally occurring wildlife, including the eagles' prey species. Loss of habitat or even just degradation of this habitat can cause a significant decrease in the number of prey species. This obviously has a direct impact on the eagles. Although the focus of this document is related to the birds of prey and their associated ecosystem, this does not detract from the importance of maintaining the open space in order to preserve other known sensitive and/or endangered species – both plant and animal.

The construction of a concrete palisade perimeter fence will allow for the proper control of public access, thus limiting the potential for human-related disturbance. Although initially expensive, this form of boundary will in the long run require less maintenance and will improve security for the greater area whilst controlling the movement of animal species. This will also allow for management intervention aimed at removing alien plant species and snares and allow for the reintroduction of species historically occurring in the area. This is also a necessary precursor to the reintroduction and establishment of viable hyrax populations as a prey-base for the eagles.

- *To provide a unique recreational and educational facility for local communities:*

Safe open space areas are now a rarity in Johannesburg and sadly, there are very few environmental education facilities. The creation of the LFWR will provide city dwellers, many of whom are deprived of any contact with nature, with the opportunity to experience and learn about a functional wildlife ecosystem in an urban environment. The potential also exists for the use of the area as a venue for

skills development and training in the fields of wildlife management, leadership development, tourism and hospitality.

- *To add aesthetic, educational and tourism value through the reintroduction of large wildlife species:*

A detailed scientific study will determine the diversity and number of large wildlife species that can be sustained within the envisaged fenced area. Provisional wildlife carrying capacity calculations have been developed. These follow on from the already substantial scientific studies undertaken as part of the LFX16 EIA process. All these reports are available on request and will be used as 'building blocks' in the collation of information that will be needed to get this initiative up and running. This preliminary study indicates that the area can sustain a viable wildlife population. The presence of species such as zebra, springbok, reedbuck and klipspringer will add significant aesthetic value to the reserve, thus creating further opportunities for environmental education and training.

A diverse wildlife population will help to attract local and international visitors, with positive benefits for local retailers and opportunities for hotel and tourism enterprise development. Future expansion through a second phase, incorporating a conservancy area will allow for an even greater wildlife carrying capacity, thus increasing exposure to this unique conservancy and multiplying the benefits.

Ultimately, the LFWR and Phase 2 conservancy will also help to maintain or even improve the value of properties in the area. Establishing the Little Falls area as a relatively safe and desirable place to invest and live in will help to offset negative property market trends.

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