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MERCURY REPORTER

CONSERVATION efforts by the Endangered Wildlife Trust/International Crane Foundation partnership, Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (EKZNW), other NGOs and farmers and landowners across the Drakensberg, have led to the downlisting of the wattled crane from critically endangered to endangered.

The regional downlisting will be published in the latest edition of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species at the end of May.

Wattled cranes (*Bucconyx carunculatus*) were listed as regionally critically endangered in 2015 with only 267

individuals recorded in the KwaZulu-Natal aerial survey of that year. This survey has been conducted for 32 years in partnership with Eskom and Ezemvelo as the province is the stronghold for the species in South Africa.

"A regional downlisting means that in South Africa, the wattled crane is no longer declining, but the population remains small and vulnerable to threats with an estimate population of only 304 being counted in 2024," the wildlife trust said.

Despite this positive trend in KZN, the global population remains on the decline and urgent conservation attention is required to safeguard populations outside of KwaZulu-Natal, the trust added.

The latest downlisting follows the reclassification of the Cape vulture from endangered to vulnerable in 2021, also due to the success of targeted conservation efforts by several organisations, including the Endangered Wildlife Trust and partners.

The trust began research and conservation action on Africa's crane species in 1994. Efforts to date included monitoring, research to better understand their movement and ecological needs, power line investigations and mitigation in partnership with Eskom, supporting farmers and landowners to protect their breeding sites, conservation of key areas through the promotion of sustainable management practices, extensive education with

landowners and rural communities, as well as understanding the crane trade and inclusion of key crane areas into the Biodiversity Stewardship Programme.

"More recently, with improved technologies such as transmitters that can be placed on the wattled cranes, we are deepening our understanding of the non-breeding species that do not hold territories, to understand their movement patterns and how they use the landscape differently to breeding birds.

"In addition, we are using drone mapping to enhance our grasp of the hydro-geomorphology characteristics of wetlands used by wattled cranes. This information will be vital

to the rehabilitation of wetlands to expand the habitat utilised by these unique birds, which will enable the species to expand outside its current range," the trust said.

Work in Mpumalanga is also expected to reveal critical information on the potential connectivity between populations in the different provinces.

"The downlisting reflects the effort that has been placed on the species over the last 30 years, and highlights the importance of collaborating when protecting a species, and their grasslands and wetlands habitats that we all depend on," said Dr Damian Walters, the South African regional manager for the African Crane Conservation Programme.