



The Nuwejaars Wetland System

To the north of Agulhas National Park and partially within, lies the Nuwejaars Wetland system – an area of immense diversity and conservation value. It consists of rare and endemic natural fynbos and wetlands, which are all interlinked by the streams and rivers of the Nuwejaars Wetland ecosystem. This system drains the Southern Agulhas Plain forming a number of annual and permanent water bodies or *vleis*, the most notable of which are Zoetendalsvlei and Voëlvlei. The area is inhabited by a large variety of avian and aquatic species, some of which are extremely rare and endangered and others endemic to the area. The conservation value of the system is further enhanced as it ultimately feeds into the Heuningnes River. The mouth of the Heuningnes River, the De Mond Estuary, is listed as a Ramsar Wetland Site of International Importance.

The headwaters of the Nuwejaars River are on the south-facing slopes of the Bredasdorp Mountains, the Koue Mountains to the west, the hills to the south of Elim, and the north-facing slopes of the Soetany Mountains. The five tributaries of the Nuwejaars River are the Koue, Wolwegatskloof, Jan Swartskraal, Boskloof and Uintjieskuil. The Nuwejaars River measures 55km from its westernmost source, through Soetendalsvlei to the confluence of the vlei's overflow channel with the Kars River. From this confluence it flows as the Heuningnes River for 15 km to its estuary at De Mond.

This wetland system makes Agulhas National Park and its neighbours a significant part of three Important Bird Areas: De Hoop (SA 119), Heuningnes River and Estuary (SA 121), and Overberg Wheatbelt (SA 115) (Barnes 1998). These areas hold the largest populations of Blue Cranes (*Anthropoides paradiseus*) in the world, and significant numbers of Denham's Bustard (*Neotis denhami*), White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*), Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*) and Black Harrier (*Circus maurus*). Over 270 bird species have been documented in the Agulhas region. The Agulhas Long-billed Lark is endemic to the Plain and near threatened. Genetic and vocal analyses also confirm that a second species, the Agulhas Clapper Lark, is endemic to the Plain. The project area is home to the endangered Cape Vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*) and significant populations of the Red listed Striped Flufftail (*Sarothrura affinis*). De Hoop vlei is the only locality where Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) have successfully bred in South Africa. The coastline supports a rich marine and intertidal life, with breeding sites of endangered and rare bird species, such as the African Black Oystercatcher (*Heamatopus moquini*) and the Damara Tern (*Sterna balaenarum*). (G. Cleaver (2005), M. D'Alton (2007).

