

SOUTHERN DRAKENSBERG CONSERVATION PROGRAM



Photo: Manfred Suter

SOUTHERN DRAKENSBERG CONSERVATION PROGRAM

SOUTHERN DRAKENSBERG, SOUTH AFRICA

The Southern Drakensberg Conservation Program is Wildlife ACT's dedicated high-altitude Vulture conservation initiative, focused on the long-term protection and recovery of threatened Vulture species within the Maloti–Drakensberg landscape of KwaZulu-Natal. This mountainous region is one of the most important remaining strongholds for cliff-nesting Vultures in southern Africa.

The Southern Drakensberg Conservation Program centres on the monitoring and protection of the Regionally Critically Endangered Bearded Vulture and the Vulnerable Cape Vulture, both of which rely on the rugged cliffs and open mountain grasslands of the Southern Drakensberg for breeding and foraging. With fewer than 50 known breeding pairs of Bearded Vultures remaining in the region, this landscape is critical to the species' survival.

Fieldwork includes intensive nest monitoring during the breeding season, management and monitoring of supplementary feeding sites to support safe and reliable food availability, and the deployment and maintenance of camera traps to assess site use and identify potential threats. The team also contributes to poisoning prevention efforts, lead exposure mitigation, and broader threat monitoring across the landscape.

In addition to species-specific work, The Southern Drakensberg Conservation Program supports wider landscape conservation efforts, recognising that effective Vulture conservation extends beyond protected area boundaries. Monitoring data collected in the field informs conservation planning and adaptive management decisions aimed at stabilising and strengthening regional populations.

Volunteers are fully integrated into this operational conservation model. Working alongside Wildlife ACT's Vulture conservation team, participants assist with nest observations, camera trap checks, data collection, carcass preparation for feeding sites, and general field logistics. All activities are guided by real conservation priorities and seasonal requirements.



LOCATION

The **Maloti-Drakensberg Park** is a **World Heritage Site** in KwaZulu-Natal and is one of the five largest protected areas in South Africa – providing one of the last strongholds for several threatened and endangered species.

The Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site is renowned for its spectacular natural landscape, importance as a haven for many threatened and endemic species, and for its wealth of rock paintings made by the San people over a period of 4,000 years.

The region experiences cool winters, warm summers, and rapidly changing mountain weather, creating a dynamic field environment throughout the year. Its remoteness and rugged terrain make it one of the most important and least disturbed Vulture strongholds in the country, providing critical nesting cliffs and expansive foraging areas for both Bearded Vultures and Cape Vultures.

The Heritage Site covers an area of 249,313 ha making it the largest Protected Area complex along the Great Escarpment of Southern Africa. Extending along most of KwaZulu-Natal's south-western border with Lesotho, the property provides a vital refuge for more than 250 endemic plant species and their associated fauna.

It also holds almost all of the remaining subalpine and alpine vegetation in the KwaZulu-Natal province, including extensive high altitude wetlands. The uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park has been identified as an Important Bird Area, and forms a critical part of the Lesotho Highlands Endemic Bird Area.



PROGRAM DETAILS

The Southern Drakensberg Conservation Program is a collaborative conservation initiative led by Wildlife ACT, working alongside the Drakensberg Conservation Initiative and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. The program strengthens wildlife conservation efforts across the Southern Drakensberg landscape, with a primary focus on Vulture conservation, priority species monitoring, and protected area boundary support.

The work includes the monitoring of active and historic nesting sites within the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site and surrounding areas, as well as the management and maintenance of safe supplementary Vulture feeding sites in designated buffer zones. The program also conducts a long-term remote camera trap survey within the World Heritage Site to better understand species presence, landscape use, and potential threats.

Working closely with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, The Southern Drakensberg Conservation Program contributes valuable field data to inform conservation management, research, and policy decisions within the World Heritage Site and the broader mountain landscape.

Additional conservation activities include alien plant control, habitat management support, and emergency response to incidents affecting Vultures and other priority species. Through consistent, field-based monitoring and adaptive management, the program plays a critical role in strengthening the long-term protection of this unique and ecologically significant region.

ACTIVITIES

At the Southern Drakensberg Conservation Program, volunteers can expect to get involved with on-the-ground conservation work for endangered species in the area. Due to the nature of the project, activities can be quite physical with many hiking opportunities into beautiful and scenic mountainous areas. Primary responsibilities include:

VULTURE NEST MONITORING

Volunteers will be required to monitor the various nest sites in the area, which often means hiking into mountainous areas, and often involves long hours identifying and monitoring activity at the nesting sites. This only takes place during the active breeding months, from May to November.

LONG-TERM CAMERA TRAP SURVEY:

Volunteers will be required to assist with the management of the long-term camera trap survey we are conducting in the area. This survey involves long days hiking in the remote mountainous areas scouting for, setting up and maintaining camera trap stations.

Management of this survey includes battery and memory card will then be changed, clearing of vegetation around the camera trap to provide a clear image of the animals passing by and prevent false triggers and, back at camp downloading and cataloguing of the camera trap footage.



PROTECTED AREA BOUNDARY SUPPORT:

On occasion, we are required to respond to emergencies, these include vulture and other priority species concerns such as injuries, poisonings and human wildlife conflict.

These situations vary but we provide support by responding rapidly and ultimately helping both the species of concern, and in the case of human wildlife conflict support by providing solutions to the problem.

In some areas alien plants are encroaching into the World Heritage Site and our team works at controlling this problem in specific pre-identified vulnerable spaces.

VULTURE SAFE FEEDING SITES

Volunteers will be required to assist with the transport of carcasses to Vulture safe feeding sites. This can happen at any time and volunteers must be prepared to move at a moment's notice. The site needs to be managed, and old carcasses then need to be moved off to the side when a new carcass is brought to the site.

On occasion, Vulture hide monitoring sessions will be required to monitor activity at the sites. This will happen at the **Mzimkulu Vulture Hide**, which is a fully-equipped hide created by Wildlife ACT and its partners. The camera traps at the feeding sites also need to be maintained, which involves batteries and memory cards being changed. Once back at the house, the camera footage needs to be downloaded with photos of tagged vultures being catalogued for long-term species monitoring.

The camera traps at the feeding sites also need to be maintained, which involves batteries and memory cards being changed. Once back at the house, the camera footage needs to be downloaded with photos of tagged vultures being catalogued for long-term species monitoring.



MZIMKULU VULTURE HIDE



Located just outside Underberg in the heart of the Southern Drakensberg region, the Mzimkulu Vulture Hide allows up to six guests to view endangered Vultures, as well other birds and mammals, while supporting Vulture Conservation through this Vulture Safe Feeding Site. The primary objective of this initiative is to provide the Southern Drakensberg with a sustainable safe feeding site for vultures.

Fitted with one-way glass designed for clear photography and featuring breathtaking mountainous backdrops, the Mzimkulu Vulture Hide is ideal for nature lovers, birders and bird photography enthusiasts. Comfortable seating, darkened windows, WiFi and a few electrical plug points for recharging camera batteries and phones, make for an enjoyable experience. The Hide is also equipped with educational material to ensure visitors leave having learnt more about conservation and wildlife in the region.

Wild visitors to the hide include Cape Vultures, Bearded Vultures, Yellow-billed Kites, various Eagle species, Sacred Ibis, White-necked Ravens, Bokmakieries, Black-backed Jackals and occasionally Large Grey Mongoose. On the track to the hide you can find Ant-eating Chats, Quail Finch, Grey Crowned Crane and the occasional Red-capped Lark, Cape Longclaw and Common Quail. Also look out for Long-tailed Widows and the very busy Yellow-crowned Bishop, Fan-tailed Widow and various Cisticolas species and more.



WHERE YOU WILL STAY

ACCOMMODATION

The Southern Drakensberg Conservation Project team is based in a charming farm farmhouse affectionately known as the 'Gate House'. The house is situated in the buffer-zone surrounding the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site.

This location is perfectly appointed to allow for easy access to the World Heritage Site, vulture-safe feeding sites and allows for swift response to emergency call-outs.

The house is fairly rustic, but homely and equipped with a fireplace for cold weather. It offers twin rooms, an indoor bathroom, a cozy lounge and stocked kitchen, and a lovely outdoors verandah. The volunteers are responsible for preparing their own meals, as well as cleaning and maintaining the research house during their stay.



ACCOMMODATION GALLERY



MEALS AND FOOD

Meal preparation and food is all on a help-yourself basis. There is basic food supplied, however, if you require any "luxury" items, these will be at your own expense. There is a designated trip into town one day per week, thus food needs to last the full week.

Wildlife ACT endeavors to conform with any previously-disclosed dietary requirements, however, please note only dietary requirements for medical reasons will be catered for. We unfortunately cannot cater for specific weight loss or fitness diets unless medically important.

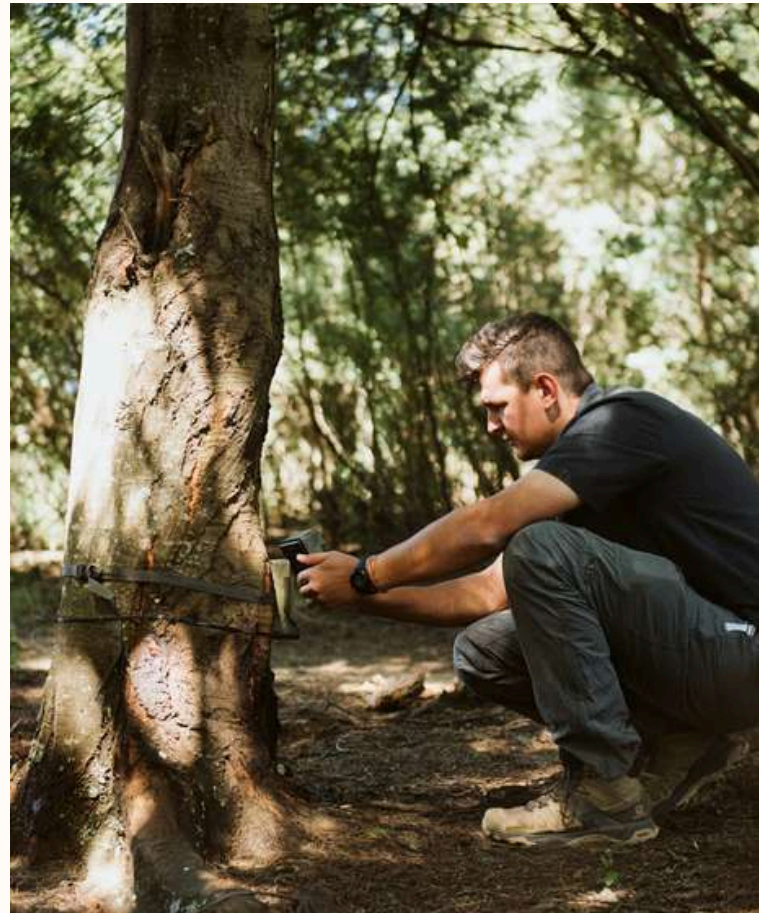
STARTING DATES:

2026 STARTING DATES:

- 05 January 2026
- 02 February 2026
- 02 March 2026
- 30 March 2026
- 11 May 2026
- 08 June 2026
- 06 July 2026
- 03 August 2026
- 31 August 2026
- 28 September 2026
- 26 October 2026
- 23 November 2026.

2027 STARTING DATES:

- 04 January 2027
- 01 February 2027
- 01 or 29 March 2027
- 10 May 2027
- 07 June 2027
- 05 July 2027
- 02 or 30 August 2027
- 27 September 2027
- 25 October 2027
- 22 November 2027



PACKING LIST AND PREPARATION

The list below is intended as a practical guide to help participants prepare for both classroom learning and field-based activities in a protected area setting. Please note that access to shops is limited once inside the Park.

Essential Clothing and Equipment

- Hiking or trail boots suitable for daily field use.
- Lightweight long-sleeved cotton tops and long trousers (to protect legs while hiking and to keep mosquitoes off).
- Sandals or flip-flops for relaxing back at camp.
- Long trousers and long-sleeved shirts for sun and insect protection
- Hat/peak cap.
- Warm clothing. The Southern Drakensberg region can be cold and may even experience snow during winter months. Please be sure to bring a thick weather-proof jacket, warm clothes for layering, thick socks, gloves, a beanie and a scarf.
- Waterproof or windproof jacket or poncho.
- Reusable water bottle with a recommended capacity of 1.5 to 2 litres
- Head torch or flashlight.
- Daypack or rucksack for daily field use.
- If you are joining us in Winter, please bring warm sleeping attire (long sleeved pyjamas and comfortable thick socks to sleep in). A microwaveable wheat or flaxseed bag may be very useful, as there is no central heating, and nights can be cold.
- A bandanna or cotton buff/scarf can also be surprisingly versatile!

Sun and Eye Protection

- High-SPF sunblock, recommended SPF 50. and a lip balm with SPF.
- Sunglasses with 100 percent UV protection. Safety glasses or plastic lenses are also suitable for protection from dust, insects, and branches

Medical and Health Essentials

- Personal medication for the full duration of your time with us and back up contact lenses if needed.
- Small personal medical kit, which may include: Plasters, wound dressings, and bandages; Antihistamine cream or tablets; Antifungal foot powder or cream; Antiseptic cream or solution; Rehydration sachets; Mild pain relief such as paracetamol; Tweezers and scissors; Anti-nausea or anti-diarrhoeal tablets.
- Mosquito and tick repellent.
- Lotion to soothe mosquito and insect bites.
- Your own bath towel.

Other Items

- Camera and lots of film or a large memory card.
- Binoculars, with a recommended magnification of 8x, 10x, or 12x.
- Spare batteries / power bank.
- Mobile phone if you have one (don't forget your charger!)
- **Plug adaptors/converters** for South Africa. (Electricity here is generally 220/230 volts, 15 amps, and is supplied through either 15-amp three-prong, or 5-amp two-prong plugs, in both cases with round pins).

HEALTH AND SAFETY

**Please note that Wildlife ACT staff are not qualified to give medical advice.*

PHYSICAL FITNESS

The physical aspects of this project can be challenging and a moderate fitness level is required for full participation. Activities include long days hiking in various terrains, much of which is at an incline.

FIELD-BASED SAFETY

All members will be informed of the risks, health and safety procedures for the field base on arrival. It is imperative that everyone both understands and respects them.

PERSONAL SAFETY

Look after your important documents and take a separate photocopy with you. Do not wear excessive jewelry or walk around areas outside camp with valuable items on display e.g. cameras. Do not carry large amounts of cash.

INTERNET & COMMUNICATION

Please be aware that mobile reception in and around the project may be limited. The area generally receives decent cell service but there will be times when you will be out of range.

LOADSHEDDING

South Africa is currently experiencing an energy crisis. Our electricity is largely coal-sourced, and the existing infrastructure is unable to keep up with the demand for electricity, resulting in frequent sessions of rolling blackouts to relieve pressure off the country's power supply grid, which can be very frustrating in terms of communications, cooking, water pumps, etc. Please know that we do share your exasperation when these outages occur, but that they are beyond our control.

If you would like to bring some rechargeable items (lanterns, fans, powerbanks), to donate to our Camps, please have a look on our website, at our "[Wishlists](#)".



WILL I NEED A VISA?

All our participants enter on a normal TOURISM visa – no work visa is required.

In our experience, American, British, Australian and some European citizens are exempt from having to obtain a tourist visa to travel to South Africa, for a stay of 90 days or less. We suggest that you please contact your relevant travel authority or the South African embassy in your country to confirm whether you will require a visa for your visit.

If you are subject to visa requirements, you should apply for your visa at least four weeks before your departure for South Africa and await the outcome of your application before departing. Visas are NOT issued at South African points of entry.

DO I NEED TRAVEL INSURANCE?

Usually you need travel insurance whenever you travel outside your own country; we usually suggest that you make use of any existing personal insurance policies you may have, which can often be extended to include foreign travel. If not, just check with your local travel company and purchase some standard personal travel insurance.

In the unlikely event of accident, the project is insured by "SATIB" - leaders in tourism insurance and risk management services, with over 20 years of dedicated service to the tourism, hospitality and wildlife industries in Africa. SATIB are underwritten by Lloyds of London. The best emergency help is therefore at our disposal if and when we need it. In a serious medical emergency a helicopter can be dispatched to get any of our participants to a hospital within the shortest time.

WILL I NEED SPENDING MONEY?

To avoid delays and inconvenience, you are advised to change your foreign currency to local currency (South African Rand) while you are at the airport in Johannesburg (if you have not done so already in your home country).

If you intend to bring cash, you will need ZAR (South African Rand). No foreign currency will be accepted in Underberg. Most stores do however accept visa card 'swipe payments' and most volunteers are able to use their ATM/debit cards to draw cash from ATM machines if they need to, as well.

DOES THE PROJECTS HAVE A WISHLIST?

We are sometimes asked by volunteers if they can **bring anything along with them** to further support the work our field teams are doing, or to make camp life more efficient. The answer is a definite YES! While our camps are already equipped to operate at full steam ahead, it is often access to the shops that actually stock many of the items below that makes it difficult to replenish our supplies.

BUT we need to stress that **just by volunteering you are making a huge difference** and we do not expect you to bring anything but your enthusiasm and hard work. However if you have room for a few things that get used every day in the field – it will make a big difference. See our wishlists [here](#).

Thank you as always, we feel like we have the best supporters in the world!

WILDLIFE ACT LOOKS FORWARD TO WELCOMING YOU!





Photo: Casey Pratt / Love Africa Marketing



CONTACT:

 info@wildlifeact.com
 +27 (0)87 806 3293
 www.wildlifeact.com

CONNECT:

 @WildlifeACT
 @wildlife_act
 @wildlifeact



Scan to learn more