



10 YEARS OF BIRD CONTROL DOGS AT ACSA AIRPORTS

The International Bird Strike Committee recently issued a report stating that bird strikes are on the increase at an international scale. Estimated damage as a result of these is in excess of US \$1, 5 billion per annum. However, in South Africa, the situation is firmly under control. In 2012, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) celebrates a decade of Bird Control Dogs working at ACSA Airports in order to reduce the frequency of bird strikes at their airports.

“Birds and wildlife have been a potential hazard to aircraft since the very beginnings of air travel. Bird strikes were a minor risk in the early days as the few planes in the sky traveled at relatively low speeds. Damage was, therefore, limited to shattered windshields, dented leading edges and broken propellers. The cost of repairs was small, and aircraft operators and airport authorities accepted bird strikes as an unfortunate but unavoidable flying hazard,” said Derek van der Merwe, Field Officer for the EWT’s Airport Wildlife Programme. “In time, as the speed of aircraft increased and engine noise levels dropped with the development of advanced turbine engines, birds could no longer hear approaching aircraft in time and so were unable to avoid the on-coming planes. Birds and wildlife became a serious threat to aircraft safety as strikes have become more frequent and more serious.”

In response to this, ACSA implemented a Wildlife Management Programme at its airports throughout South Africa in partnership with the EWT in 1999. One of the numerous mitigation measures of the Wildlife Management Programme involves the use of bird control dogs to scare birds away from the airfield. Birds that frequent the airports become used to loud noise and so are not frightened away by the normal sounds of the airfield. Dogs however are perceived as a natural predator therefore birds remain fearful of their presence. Instead of enduring the constant harassment of the dogs on the airfield, the birds seek foraging elsewhere and are unlikely to return to the airport.

“The airfield is an error-free environment where all activities are governed by strict aviation regulations. Understandably, it was not easy to implement a Bird Control Dogs Programme in two of South Africa’s busiest airports. All relevant stakeholders had to be informed and briefed on what the dogs would be doing and that they would be under strict handler control at all times. A meticulous directive and operational procedure had to be developed and approved before the dogs could set foot on the airfield,” continued van der Merwe.

Good communications with air traffic control is a pre-requisite for successfully working with the dogs on the airfield. The Air Traffic Controller is responsible for all movements of aircraft and vehicles on the airport runways and taxiways. The wildlife control officer communicates closely with the air traffic controller at all times in order to gain permission at the correct time to scare birds away. This

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust is a non-profit, public benefit organisation dedicated to conserving species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

NPO Number: 015-502, **PBO number:** 930 001 777, **Member of IUCN** - The International Union for Conservation of Nature
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ensures that birds are not chased into the path of an approaching aircraft. Pilots and air traffic controllers often call upon the wildlife control officer and working dog to scare birds away from the runway before landing and take-off.

“In April 2002, Mac started work at Durban International Airport. He was the first Border Collie to be used as a bird control dog - not only in South Africa but in the southern hemisphere. Mac’s implementation was shortly followed by Tweeny who started work at O.R. Tambo International Airport in July 2002. Both Mac and Tweeny will shortly be semi-retired and will continue to perform light duties at the airport in accordance with veterinary opinion. A new breed was implemented at O.R. Tambo International Airport in January 2012 with the introduction of Chase, a Springer Spaniel. Whilst the Border Collies have been extremely successful in the past, Chase possibly brings a new dimension to the initiative. Lapwings are one of the main problem birds at airports and, being a gundog, Chase’s natural instinct is to sniff out birds and their nests which interrupts the bird breeding process. While Border Collies are effective in line of sight chases, Chase is willing to work in longer grass where birds aren’t readily visible, and flush them out. Our latest canine employee, Buzz, joined the team in March,” concluded van der Merwe.

The EWT-ACSA partnership has been so successful that there are now seven canines based at O.R. Tambo International Airport and King Shaka International Airport. These dogs have tirelessly been keeping birds away from the airfield for ten years, ensuring safe passage to all flying to, and from, these busy airports. We look forward to many more years of this effective, invaluable partnership.

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