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Airport and birds can share air

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As the massive swallow population near the new international airport at La Mercy Airport begin to migrate north for the European summer, plans are under way to permanently monitor their movements on their return.

The 1,3-million odd barn swallows will start returning to the reedbeds at their South African summer home north of Durban in November and it is envisaged that a special bird detection radar system will be operational by then.

The radar, which can also detect bats at night, will be the first to be in full-time use at a South African airport.

It will provide real time information on hazardous bird movements, and be integrated into the operational procedures of the airport.

The new airport is due to become operational in about April in 2010, ahead of the Fifa soccer World Cup tournament.

As the "procurement process is under way", details of the radar system (including the cost), and exactly where it will be positioned in relation to the airport control tower, are secret, said Albert Froneman, a specialist ornithological advisor to the project and vice chairman of the International Bird Strike Committee.

The swallows return from Europe and Russia to the same roost in Lake Victoria Conservancy at Mount Moreland, 2,5km-3km from the runway at the new R7,2-billion airport development, which includes the Dube TradePort, year after year and their reedbed roost site, which is one of the biggest in Africa, is of international significance.

But bird strikes are a safety concern for the international aviation industry and cost the industry more than USD1-billion (about R8-billion) a year.

It is a legal requirement for airports to have a management plan in place to deal with bird hazards.

There were 417 bird strikes at the present Durban International Airport (and some 1 900 at airports countrywide) over a seven year period, although no reported damage.

According to Peter Sullivan, chairperson of BirdLife SA, the swallows "roost spectacularly every night at Mount Moreland. It is one of nature's most amazing sights".

They swirl about and descend to the reed beds in 30 minutes at dusk and take off just before dawn, foraging for insects far and wide.

But the reedbeds are right in the flight path of the jets that will take off and land at La Mercy. While one swallow only weighs just 17,9g, a large number could cause a loss of power if both engines ingested numerous birds.

When the official go ahead was given for construction to begin, it was announced that "flight schedules must be planned around the flight times of the swallows".

Yet studies found that the chance of a bird collision would not be as high as originally expected and thus the effect of birds would be low.

Research conducted during the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) phase, which led to the official nod, concluded that "only very occasionally" (less than 5 percent of the time in fact), swallows swarm at heights where they are potentially in the approach path of aircraft.

The density of birds at such high altitude "are also low, which means the risk would be low to moderate if, and when,

the flocks are present".

The specialist study, based on the results of mobile radar equipment, found that it was definitely possible for swallows and the new airport to co-exist.

It also revealed that the birds would not migrate to another area during the construction or the operation of the airport.

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