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HAS THERE BEEN A FURTHER DECLINE IN NAMIBIA'S BLUE CRANES?

This update is based on a progress report up to December 2008, published in Roan News, April 2009, pp 38-40: "Namibia's Blue Cranes continue to mystify", by Ann Scott, Chris Brown, Holger Kolberg, John Mendelsohn, Mike Scott, Rob Simmons and Wilferd Versfeld. This report is downloadable (583 KB) from our website.

Two and a half years after a research project was initiated on Namibia's isolated population of Blue Cranes, our team continues to be puzzled about the seasonal movements of these charismatic yet elusive birds. The good rain season during summer 2006 and flood conditions in 2008 have further complicated our efforts at arriving at any conclusive findings.

Numbers

In 1992, the Namibian population of Blue Cranes was estimated at 80 (Brown 1992), but at only 60 in 1994

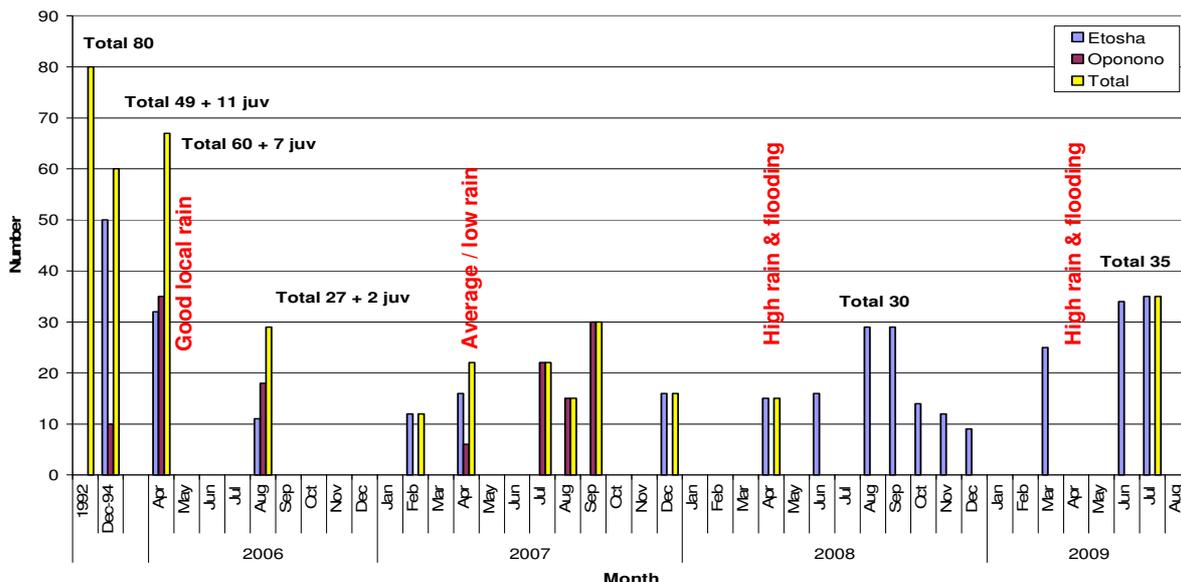
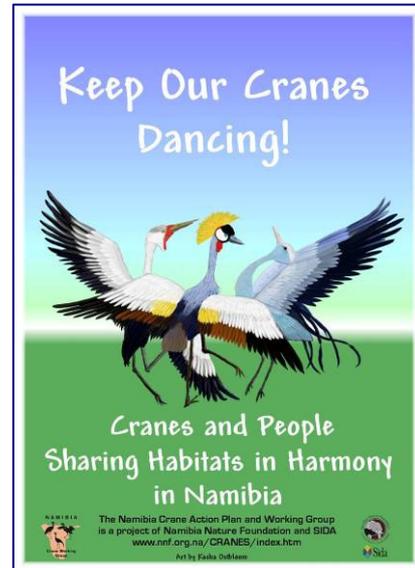


Fig. 1. Counts of Blue Cranes at Etosha National Park and Lake Oponono, 1992 - August 2009



Artwork: Kasha Ostbloom
(This poster is downloadable from our website)

(49 adults + 11 juveniles; Simmons *et al.* 1996). Regular seasonal aerial/ground surveys were initiated in 2006 (see Kolberg *et al.* 2006), with the following results (Fig. 1):

- Numbers of cranes vary according to season and rainfall. A high aerial/ground count was obtained during the wet season in April 2006 (60 adults + 7 juveniles), but thereafter numbers were lower, reaching a maximum of only 30 in the Lake Oponono area in 2007, and 30 at Etosha in 2008. A slight increase has been shown in 2009, with 35 birds recorded at Andoni (Etosha) on 27/7/09.

An aerial survey over parts of southern Angola in September 2007 yielded no cranes; however, 30+ Blue Cranes were spotted at Lake Oponono (including a radio-tracked individual; see below).

- The cranes appear to make use of the Lake Oponono area during dry periods, mainly in winter but also during dry summers, and this area therefore requires conservation attention.

The questions we are left with are: Have numbers of Blue Cranes at Etosha declined dramatically (by half) since April 2006; or is this change part of a natural fluctuation, related to long term rainfall patterns? Has half the population moved elsewhere and if so, where?

Breeding success and survival

- Despite the low numbers of adult birds, successful breeding is continuing with at least seven chicks produced in 2006; only one in 2007; at least nine in 2008; and eight chicks in 2009 (of which two disappeared soon after hatching).
- Adults with chicks have been recorded only inside the Park, suggesting that conditions outside the Park are unsuitable for breeding.
- Since April 2006, 13 chicks have been marked with a standard metal ring and a large colour ring (green) with unique alphabet code.
- Based on resighting data (Table 1), chick survival for 2006-2008 was estimated at 35%, which is relatively high given the harsh environmental conditions and the high occurrence of predators.
- The first ringed bird to take up a breeding site, NHD (ringed near Halali on 12/4/06) was noted as part of a pair back at the Halali seep on 11/2/09 and 24/3/09; no eggs or chicks were recorded.

Year	No. of chicks recorded	No. of chicks ringed	No. & % of chicks resighted
2006	7	4	3 (43%)
2007	1	1	1 (100%)
2008	9	5	2 (22%)
Total	17	10	6 (35%)

Table 1. Blue Crane ring resightings obtained in September 2008 at Andoni, Etosha NP by Wilferd Versfeld

Telemetry

- A large subadult was captured at Fischer's Pan in April 2007, ringed and fitted with a radio transmitter; signals were received until 11/11/07 and movements of 50-120 km were noted, including to Andoni and Lake Oponono and back.
- An adult was captured west of Fischer's Pan and fitted with a satellite PTT on 8/4/08, which transmitted successfully from 9-26/4/08; the bird was observed at Andoni on 22/9/08, 25/6/09 and 1/7/09 with the antenna correctly in place (although no longer transmitting).
- A third chick was fitted with radio telemetry at Salvadora on 24/3/09; signals were picked up at Salvadora up to 16/4/09, and from 3/6/09 to 27/7/09 at Andoni (nearly 100 km away).



Blue Crane adult and tiny chick (bottom left), taken at Halali seepage in March 2003 (photo Hermann Cloete)

General

Other investigations include collating historical data on Namibian Blue Cranes; recording field observations on a standardized data sheet; ongoing investigations into habitat, diet and behaviour. Awareness/education activities continue as part of the conservation programme.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you for funding and other support to "The Overberg Explorer", Namibia Nature Foundation, Polytechnic of Namibia, Wilderness Safaris and Wilderness Wildlife Trust, Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Ramsar Fund, University of Cape Town, International Crane Foundation/ Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership and to our many other supporters and interested parties.

ETOSHA CRANES MOVE UP TO ANDONI

Orlando Haraseb, email orlandoharaseb@yahoo.com
16/5/09 I went on a birding trip with six American birders. On 16/5/09 between Salvadora water hole and Rietfontein water hole in Etosha National Park we came across 12 Blue Cranes, what a good and lovely sighting it was.

Sonja & Michael Bartlewski & Holger Kolberg

Email sonja.michl@iway.na
24/5/09: These cranes (below) were seen at Andoni on 24 May at 14:11, apparently not ringed.



Wilferd Versfeld

3/6/09 Went to Namutoni. Radio bird (NHM, ringed at Salvadora on 24/3/09) on Andoni plain. They are west of the road towards the pan, cannot get there but the signal is nice and strong. Will go again next week to see if they have moved. No cranes at Halali, 4 at Twee Palms in 2 groups of 2, one ringed NBN (ringed at Salvadora on 11/4/08), and 3 at the gravel on Andoni plain. No grazing animals yet on Andoni to remove the grass which is tall so difficult to see much.

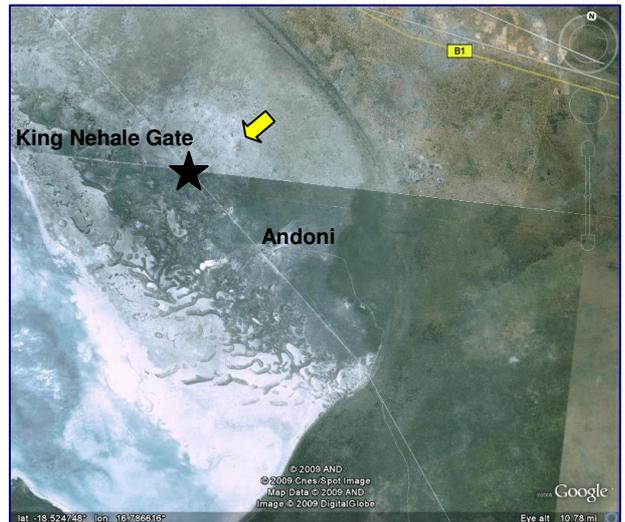
10/6/09 I was up at Namutoni and found no cranes from the road. Radio bird's signal is still in the area west of Andoni gravel pit to the edge of the pan. It is moving around as the signal comes and goes, typical of the transmitter moving. I tried to get closer to them from the northern fence side but the water is still very high and the area is flooded. There are also no grazing animals on Andoni plain yet, so the grass is very tall. I presume then that the cranes are on the water's edge where the grass would be shorter?

25/6/09 The cranes cannot escape any more. Since putting on the VHF transmitter in March I have been able to locate them. Last they were on the edge of the pan west of the Andoni road. Yesterday I found them at a gravel pit outside the park, 2 km north-east of the King Nehale gate at Andoni (see Google image on right); I picked up the signal from the gravel pit. I found 32 to **34** birds in total, which should be about all the cranes. The transmitter bird was in a big group of 26, then to the south two groups of 4 birds were flying around so that should be 34 birds. I could not get a good look at transmitter bird to see how the harness is sitting, as that group must be Oponono birds, you cannot get close and the grass is tall obscuring legs for rings and the birds when they feed. Later I also saw the PTT bird (8/4/08) at the Andoni gravel pit with a mate. The PTT is still well positioned on the back, you can see the ring on the left leg and the antenna on the back with the transmitter covered by the feathers. They are tame and approachable.

3/7/09 There are 27 cranes at Andoni today, again at the gravel pit outside the park. The grass on the park side is much longer than outside, where there are cattle. Still no game on the park side of Andoni. Radio transmitter working fine and can locate them.

27/7/09 There are **35** cranes on Andoni, they are still feeding at the gravel pit outside the park at S18.49267 E16.75809. They spend the day around the gravel pit where the grass has been grazed short by the cattle, and then at night fly back to the park and spend the night west of Andoni water hole on the pan in the shallows. There is still lots of water on the pan. Could not read the rings as grass is too tall and with so many birds they do not allow you to approach closely. They have formed one big group during the day but later they divide up into smaller groups for the night. Radio bird was in a group of 7 for the night as I followed them to the edge of the pan.

**No cranes found at Oponono during count last week, and no radio signal of the first crane.*



Google image of the Andoni area, Etosha National Park, showing the gravel pit north of the Park boundary (yellow arrow) where Wilferd Versfeld observed the cranes on 25/6/09, 3/7/09 and 27/7/09. The difference in grazing pressure within and outside the Park is clearly visible.

GENERAL CRANE/WETLAND BIRD NEWS

Flamingo breeding at Etosha

Wilferd Versfeld, email versfeld@mweb.com.na

5/6/09: We undertook a flight over the Etosha pan to look for the flamingos. Some flamingos have returned and started breeding. Due to the flooding from southern Angola the pan water level is very high, the major breeding site to the east (Okerfontein) of the pan is still under water. The Lesser Flamingos have bred at the site they used last year (2008) on the southern side of the pan to the north east of the Gonob peninsular. My estimate is about 10 000 Lesser adults with 2 500 chicks already hatched, some more adults were still on the nests, and further east in scattered groups there were about 5 000 Greater Flamingo adults around. The good news is that the flood water is still flowing in slowly from the north via the Ekuma River, so they have a very good chance of raising the chicks.

Grey Crowned Crane uplisted to Vulnerable

Grus Grapevine June 2009, p2

Newsletter of the ICF/EWT Partnership for African Cranes
Website: www.ewt.org.za email: crane@ewt.org.za
blog: <http://cranemania.wildlifedirect.org>

Grey Crowned Cranes (*Balearica regulorum*) were once considered the most abundant of Africa's cranes and were listed on the IUCN Red Data List as Least Concern. Sadly, this trend has come to an abrupt halt. With a decline of between 41 and 53 % across their range in Southern and East Africa over a 20 year period, a proposal to uplist them to Vulnerable has been approved by BirdLife. However, of even more concern, is the fact that following the submission of the proposal to Birdlife, analyses of data from Uganda and Tanzania indicate an 80% and 75% decline

respectively over a 25 – 40 year period. Bearing in mind that crane populations in South Africa have stabilised after around 10 – 15 years of concerted effort from a team of full time staff, one can only wonder whether we will manage to secure the future of the Grey Crowned Crane in Africa.

Status of Globally and Nationally Threatened birds in Botswana

Pete Hancock, email birdlifemaun@botsnet.bw

The BirdLife Botswana report, “The Status of globally and nationally threatened birds in Botswana - 2008” is now available as a pdf file. It is also available off our website www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw. Any comments on the report would be appreciated – please send them to the above email address.

African Cranes, Wetlands & Communities: Newsletter #4

Kerryn Morrison, ICF/EWT Partnership for African Cranes
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This edition of African Cranes, Wetlands and Communities focuses on projects underway or completed in seven countries in Africa under the leadership of ten different organisations or individuals, covering all four of Africa’s resident crane species. Surveys and research are providing vital baseline information required to prioritise action on the continent, whilst projects at both local and international level are contributing significantly to the conservation of Africa’s cranes. Of particular note throughout is the collaborative feel that has developed and is growing around crane conservation – and one realises strongly that it is teamwork and these networks, partnerships and relationships that will make the difference we all strive to make. It is encouraging too to read more about the responsibility that local communities through to international bodies like the IUCN and CITES are taking, to conserve cranes and wetlands.

Linking into this theme has been the establishment of the ICF/EWT Partnership for African Cranes over the past few months, bringing together the EWT’s South African Crane Working Group and the former ICF/EWT Partnership’s projects under one umbrella. With a strong and focused team, we hope that we will be able to extend our support and assistance further, and both share our experiences and learn from others across the continent to the benefit of cranes, their habitats and its people.

Of particular concern at this time is the plight of the Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*) which is declining at an alarming rate. Realising that the South African crane populations stabilised only after around 6 – 10 years of full time conservation efforts on the ground, one does wonder how to reverse the decline now being seen across Africa and in particular, in the Grey Crowned Crane stronghold in East Africa. That said, however, taking one step at a time and involving as many partners and organisations as required, I do believe that we can slowly reverse this trend. Grey Crowned Crane conservation is going to require your support and

assistance – whether at community level or at government or at international level – with a real focus on habitat and trade issues. Unfortunately, climate change too will likely play a role, and its effects on Africa’s cranes are largely unknown at this time. However, by collecting the relevant data and continuing surveys and research across Africa, we will hopefully obtain an improved understanding of their responses to changing environmental conditions.

On a brighter note, you will read more on the exciting discovery and documentation of Black Crowned Crane nests in Ethiopia, progress being made to supplement the small wild Wattled Crane population in South Africa and the establishment of a group to focus on species in grasslands. Congratulations are extended to the Namibia Crane Working Group who has made considerable headway over the past 5 years in realising their crane action plan, creating extensive awareness and training community members in aspects of bird conservation. I do hope that you enjoy this edition of the newsletter as much as I did when compiling it together with Cynthia Chigangaidze.

The newsletter includes the following reports from Namibia:

- *Report on two Caprivi bird conservation workshops in the Kasika Conservancy*
- *Blue Cranes and water in dry Namibia*
- *Report on Kavango NATH Level III guide training course*
- *The Namibia Crane Action Plan: Five years down the line*

AN INVESTIGATION OF WETLAND BIRDS USING REEDS ALONGSIDE THE OKAVANGO RIVER AND THE IMPACT OF REED HARVESTING ON THESE BIRDS

Student intern report by Josua Ndeliimona
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Project objective

The overall aim of this project was to investigate which wetland birds use reedbeds and how people use and harvest the reeds in the Kavango Region, and to use this information to assess if the removal of these reed habitats for reed harvesting is a threat to these birds.





Study area

The study was conducted in three different areas, each with a different conservation status. The three study sites were: (1) Unprotected area: Kapako floodplain 50 km upstream of Rundu; (2) A Semi-protected area: Nkwazi Lodge 14 km downstream of Rundu; and (3) A Protected conservancy: Joseph Mbambangandu Conservancy 40 km downstream from Rundu.

Results & discussion

The combined results of the field observations, literature and interviews show that the birds observed could be divided into three main groups depending on what they used the reeds for. There were those that used the reedbeds for nesting, another group that used them for feeding and hunting and a third group of large birds that only used reeds for perching, resting and shelter. This year the early flood caused birds to abandon the nests that had been built too low down in the reeds. Nests at Joseph Mbambangandu were high on all visits and I think it was due to the healthy condition of the reeds and low disturbance by humans as it is a conservancy.

Furthermore based on the same results an assessment was made of the value of reeds to wetland birds and the possible impacts of reed harvesting on them. Twenty-two reed harvesters were interviewed; 80% perceived reed harvesting as a threat to birds using reeds, although they all agreed that bird numbers have decreased.

Conclusion & recommendations

Reeds are important to a variety of birds for nesting, feeding and hunting, perching and resting. They shelter several endangered bird species that have ecotourism, bird watching and educational value. It was clear that intense reed harvesting can have negative effects on birds that use reeds. Despite their environmental value, reeds are continually being harvested; destroying bird habitats. Conflicts arise with respect to the conservation of this special habitat because of various economic interests. Based on this research the following recommendations are made:

- Consider protecting some of the reedbeds for the birds in the area.

- Monitor reed harvesting & sustainable use of reeds, to ensure that reeds are managed in an ecologically sustainable way.
- A longer research period covering both wet and dry seasons for several years and looking at the growth rate of reeds, to determine the true magnitude of the effects of reed harvesting.
- Mitigations should be formulated and incorporated with the local use of reeds in any mitigation plan to ensure that environmental impacts of harvesting are within acceptable levels.
- Rotational reed harvestings (time is allowed for re-growth and nesting activities).
- Raised awareness on ecological value, conservation and tourism value of reeds.
- Carefulness to harvest without destroying nests (completed & nests under construction).

This study was funded by the GEF Small Grants Programme, through the Namibia Crane Working Group. We would like to thank Shirley Bethune, Sally Wood and Dorothy Wamunyima, and all the other supporters in Kavango region, for their assistance with the project.