

IN THIS ISSUE

April 2017 crane census ...1

Are Namibian Blue Cranes genetically different to South African Blue Cranes? ...3

More crane news and views ...4

Crane sightings throughout the 2016-2017 breeding season and start of the 2017-2018 season ...6

APRIL 2017 CRANE CENSUS

Our last annual wet-season crane census at Etosha National Park took place from 3-8 April 2017, with a final count of 13 adults/subadults. This is slightly lower than the previous year's count of 16. However, this year eight chicks were counted, of which six have fledged – a result that is encouraging, compared to only two chicks last year. This is probably a reflection of the relatively wetter conditions during the preceding summer.

Hanjo Böhme kindly assisted with a supplementary count the week before the main census. Gabriel Shatumbu and Sethi Guim of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) were able to ring one of the chicks, surviving from a very late second clutch of two at Twee Palms (NEF; first recorded on 2 May 2017), on 14 June 2017; the other earlier chicks were unfortunately all at the fledging stage and could not be captured. This is the second year running that a second clutch has been recorded for Blue Cranes at Etosha, with two second clutches being recorded in 2016. For the first time, breeding was recorded in the north at Andoni waterhole, although the nest became flooded.

As we now know, our wet season counts are usually lower than those during the dry season, once the birds return to the Park (2016's maximum during the dry season remained at 23 birds, the same as for 2015). For this reason, we again did not carry out a dedicated summer aerial survey but continued to count opportunistically throughout the year. (PTO)

Exciting news is that a record number of 32 cranes was counted at Andoni on 25/9/17 by Thomas Kornelius and reported by Gabriel Shatumbu, both of the MET. A further good count of 26 at Andoni was obtained by Toni Hart on 2/10/17. We are very keen to see if these numbers will be sustained.



Family group of Blue Cranes with chick at Charitsaub waterhole in the Etosha NP (photo Ann Scott)



First breeding attempt recorded at Andoni waterhole in the north of Etosha (photo Angus Middleton)



(L to R) Mike Scott, Sethi Guim and Gabriel Shatumbu during the 2017 summer crane census at Etosha National Park (photo Ann Scott)

In order to help us address this need, Absalom Vilho at the MET's Namutoni Environmental Education Centre at Etosha (see photos on previous page and below) is presently doing a sterling job with promoting awareness about the conservation of cranes and their habitats amongst the local communities.



PHOTOGRAPHS ABOVE (Absalom Vilho)
Above: Pupils from the JF Cam Primary School in the south (Hardap Region) investigate our Crane Activity Book under the guidance of Absalom Vilho at the Namutoni Environmental Education Centre (NEEC) at Etosha.
Below: A teacher and pupils from the Ondjora Combined School in the north, at the NEEC.



The Namibia Crane Action Plan is supported by the Namibia Nature Foundation. We would like to thank the *Hessische Gesellschaft für Ornithologie und Naturschutz e.V.* (HGON) and their associates in

Germany, Mathias Stein and Barbara Hudoc, for their continued interest and invaluable financial support over the years.

The results of the above 2016-2017 wet season count at Etosha have also been published as follows:

"Results of the Annual Wet Season Crane Count at Etosha National Park, Namibia." African Cranes, Wetlands and Communities newsletter, Vol 17 Sept. 2017 pp 6-7 (available on request from Osiman

Namibia Crane News No 56, December 2017

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ARE NAMIBIAN BLUE CRANES GENETICALLY DIFFERENT TO SOUTH AFRICAN BLUE CRANES?

At last we have some answers to this very pertinent question! The results of recent Blue Crane genetic studies by the University of Pretoria have been published recently (2017). The latest study builds on earlier work and is entitled, Landscape Genetics of the Blue Crane (*Anthropoides paradiseus*), and was carried out by Claire M. Lenahan, Arrie W. Klopper, and Paulette Bloomer as part of the Molecular Ecology and Evolution Programme of the Department of Genetics, Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, University of Pretoria, South Africa (report and poster downloadable from www.the-eis.com). The conclusions reached in the latest study are as follows: "... this study determined a lack of genetic differentiation and sex-biased gene flow between the two geographically separate populations in South Africa and Namibia, as well as within the large South African population. No significant spatial clustering of related individuals was found within the South African population. The represented Namibian population was also shown to have a significantly lower level of molecular genetic variation than the South African population and possesses only one private allele. These results suggest that the two populations can currently be managed together for conservation purposes, and that the Namibian and South African individuals are genetically similar enough that, should it be necessary (as potentially indicated by the significant loss of genetic diversity in Namibia), the Namibian population could be supplemented with South African individuals from either of the two represented strongholds." (Ed: Note that the studies are based on five Namibian samples; hopefully, additional samples can be sourced in due course.)

So, in summary, the conclusions are:

- There is a lack of genetic differentiation and sex-biased gene flow between the two populations (i.e. South Africa and Namibia), as well as within the South African population;
- Indications of subtle population structure were revealed;
- The Namibian population has a significantly lower level of molecular genetic variation; and
- Relevance of the study: the two populations can currently be managed together for conservation purposes.

