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NAMIBIA BLUE CRANE PROJECT: ASSESSMENT & PLANNING WORKSHOP Action plan for Blue Cranes in Namibia

The Namibia Blue Crane Project was initiated in March 2006, as part of the Namibia Crane Action Plan (May 2004; see website and box below). After a relatively good count of 60 individuals in April 2006, numbers appear to have declined steadily to an all-time low of 31 in August 2010. With this 50% decline in terms of recent numbers, despite ongoing conservation actions by the Namibia Crane Working Group, the species could be facing extinction in Namibia – unless some of the cranes have moved elsewhere.

A small, focussed assessment/planning workshop was therefore organized on 15/11/10 in order to review progress on the Namibia Blue Crane Project to date, and to decide on the way ahead. The full workshop proceedings are available on our website (see below).

Namibia's six-point CRANE ACTION PLAN was developed in May 2004, with the following objectives: to

1. Co-ordinate conservation effort and promote networking
2. Obtain information and data
3. Conserve crane habitats
4. Promote conservation awareness/ education
5. Build capacity
6. Develop area-based crane management strategies

**Namibia Crane News No. 1,
www.nnf.org.na/CRANES/index.htm**



The Blue Crane is *Critically Endangered* in Namibia, and also *Globally Threatened*. Recent declines in numbers at Etosha and surrounds are cause for concern. The cranes breed in Etosha during the summer and move northwards into the Lake Oponono area during the dry months. Where and how is this decline taking place? (photo at Springbokfontein, Etosha: Ann Scott)

Workshop aims and objectives

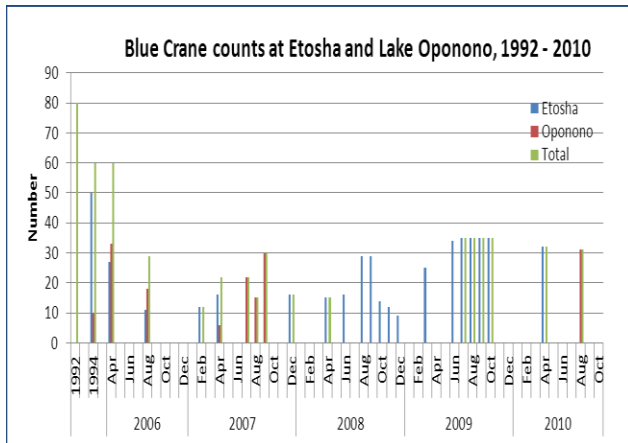
The primary aim of the workshop was to review progress on the Namibia Blue Crane Project to date, and to decide on the way ahead.

The objectives were to:

- Review what conservation actions have been undertaken for the Blue Crane in Namibia over the past decade
- Review the results of these actions
- Discuss the main threats facing Blue Cranes in Namibia
- Identify the main actions required to promote its conservation in Namibia
- Identify the lead / key role players, their roles and time frames
- Assess funding and resources
- Consolidate the Blue Crane Action Plan for Namibia

Workshop participants

Chris Brown (workshop facilitator), Nad Brain, Holger Kolberg, John Mendelsohn, Ann Scott, Mike Scott, Wilferd Versfeld; inputs were also made by Hanjo Böhme.



Why have numbers of Blue Cranes declined to only 31 in August 2010?

Workshop programme

Power point presentation (available as a PDF file on our website):

- What conservation actions have been undertaken for Blue Cranes in Namibia over the past decade?
 - Namibia Crane Action Plan
 - Namibia Blue Crane Project
- What are the results in terms of:
 - numbers
 - breeding success
 - distribution and habitat use
 - satellite tracking
 - radio tracking
 - ringing
 - awareness
 - other

Discussion

The discussion centred around the following points:

- Count data
- Effects of rainfall on cranes
- Reasons why cranes move to Oponono
- Nesting sites, breeding and survival
- Annual movement patterns
- Habitat use
- Other possible sites the cranes could be
- The decline in crane numbers
- Pressures on cranes
- Natural mortality
- Unnatural mortality
- Human disturbance
- Habitat changes
- The cause of bottlenecks

Summary of threats to Blue Crane in Namibia

- Loss of habitat
- Increased mortality
- Lack of awareness
- Critical minimum population size

Action plan

1. Collate, map, analyse and write up existing data

1.1 Collate past information

Numbers & areas sighted, nest sites

Records, nest record cards, reports, Bird Club, Scientific Society, NEWS

1.2 Map all data to help identify trends

Years, activity

1.3 Investigate seasonality of Blue Crane distribution in Etosha

SABAP: data up to 1984 – 17 years

1.4 Write up report on existing data

Incorporate historical records (1.1)

2. Determine where the cranes are and how they use the landscape

2.1 Aerial/ground surveys

- Continue with April & August aerial/ground surveys
- Carry out an aerial nest count during the breeding season*

Check seasonality of nest record cards

Seasonal movements

Habitat selection

2.2 Telemetry

- Select and acquire more equipment: investigate cellphone transmitters (solar powered)



Blue Cranes move from Etosha into the Lake Oponono area during the dry winter months. Is this pattern triggered by a need to obtain food such as "uintjies" (*Cyperus* sp.), which become more available in heavily grazed habitats? Was this movement originally related to wildebeest migrations, now prevented by fences? (photos Ann Scott)

- Try to fit more (breeding) adults with telemetry: determine capture sites from breeding survey (February 2011)
- Try to recover PTT No. 1
- Investigate student project for field work & quick follow-up of telemetry data

2.3 Breeding records, feeding & habitat use

- Continue to record breeding activity & success, microhabitat selection
- Continue to record feeding behaviour & food
- Continue to gather baseline data on crane/ungulate associations

2.4 Ringing

- Continue with ringing

3. Investigate possible habitat changes

3.1 Investigate habitat changes on maps/photographs

- Site selection (maps)
- Compare old & newer aerial photographs (Etosha & Oponono)
- Also look at ground photographs; fixed point photographs

Speak to old herders re habitat changes

3.2 Investigate changes in wildlife migration patterns in terms of fences

Link to data analysis

3.3 Investigate fire history & potential impacts

Compare 1970s, 1990s

15 years, satellite imagery

Burning programme stopped at Etosha in 1997 (thesis Hu Berry)

4. Investigate human impacts

4.1 Conduct a survey on human activity in the Lake Oponono area

Cattle herders

Fishermen

Settlements

Power lines

Other developments e.g. forestry, military, water provision

4.2 Continue with outreach, environmental education & awareness

- Conduct a survey amongst stakeholders & leaders, design an awareness programme based on results

Talk to (old) herders

Strong "recommended future actions" section

- Continue to create crane awareness in the Oponono region & investigate increasing MET presence to dissuade disturbance/hunting of cranes



Community involvement in the conservation of our cranes is critically important (*photo Ann Scott*)

4.3 Investigate the possibility that cranes are being used for muthi in Namibia

- Survey of traditional healers/other cultural uses of cranes

4.4 Investigate potential crane mortality on power lines

- Surveys beneath power lines in and around Etosha

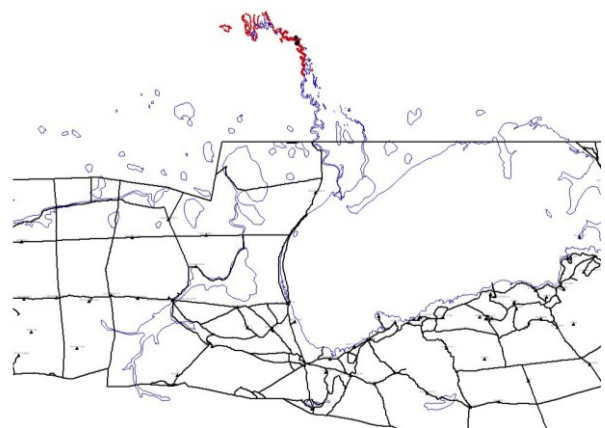
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to:

- All our enthusiastic participants – the Namibia Crane Working Group! Also to Peter Cunningham for helpful comments on the plan, and for ongoing support.
- Dr Chris Brown for facilitating the workshop and coordinating the action plan.
- A special thank you for funding and other support to: Namibia Nature Foundation, The Overberg Explorer, Polytechnic of Namibia, ICF / EWT Partnership, Wilderness Wildlife Trust, Ramsar Small Grants Fund, University of Cape Town, MET (aerial censuses + support in kind), SPAN Park Innovation Grants; and many other supporters and interested parties.

AUGUST 2011 CRANE SURVEY

Wilferd Versfeld (WV) (email wversfeld@met.na)



The survey area at Lake Oponono (red), August 2010 (*map Wilferd Versfeld*)

The wetland ground bird count was conducted of Lake Oponono from 9-12 August 2010. The normal way is to start on the eastern side and carry on along the edge around the water mass. On the morning of 10 August we spotted a group of cranes in the distance and first of all checked for signals from radio (VHF) transmitters; when the cranes are at Oponono they are very skittish and fly off. Only one transmitter could be heard, the subadult from Salvadora that was fitted with a transmitter during April 2009, "Polly 1" (see dots on map). A good count was made: as we approached they flew off, but only **31 cranes** were counted. This was not the area where they were found previously, as there are people and cattle around. The area where they had always been seen was away from people and cattle. The count was continued and on the way back late on 11 August they were found again in the same area and again only one transmitter signal was picked up. The birds were skittish and the colour rings could not be seen even with the spotting scope as the grass was fairly tall. We camped in the area for the night and there was some activity during the night, as usual just after sunset they fly off, you can hear their calls and also the transmitter signal moved.

No other Blue Cranes were seen during the count although three Crowned Cranes were found.



The habitat used by the Blue Cranes at Oponono in August 2010 (photos Wilferd Versfeld)

On the morning of 13 August, Holger Kolberg and I did an aerial count of Etosha and Oponono and did radio tracking for the other radio transmitters. The group of 31 was found in the same area at Oponono but in the rest of Etosha, including the Andoni area, the gravel pits and Halali, nothing was found and also no signals of the other transmitters were found.

Now the question is: where did the other birds with radio transmitters go to? The Newbrownii bird was an adult. Maybe this was one of the birds seen by Dries Alberts somewhere in the east?

Note: The localities for the cranes were:

10/8/10 at 12h15: -18.20934/15.90198

11/8/11 at 17h30: -18.18751/15.89298

13/8/11 at 07h00: -18.20268/15.89993

OTHER CRANE SIGHTINGS

Robert Thomson (email rob@stripydonkey.com)

27/11/2010 16:10 - Two Blue Cranes approximately 200-300m southeast of -19.04405 / 016.28386.

WV 23/10/11

I got a call on Saturday from Thomas at King Nehale gate to say that five Blue Cranes have just flown over towards Andoni waterhole.

WV 25/11/11

The "ghosts" (cranes) are starting to come back to the breeding areas, have had more reports from various people:

3/11/10: two at Springbokfontein

20/11/10: one at Okashana (north of the Park), with a green ring, seen twice on same day at 08h00 and 18h30

21/11/10: two at Andoni

24/11/10: 7h50 Salvadora bird (VHF 151.191) plus one at Salvadora junction where it was ringed

24/11/10: three 3 birds 2.5 km west of Springbokfontein, two without rings

24/11/10: two birds on east side of Chudop triangle

24/11/10: two 2 birds at Halali seepage (one ringed NHD?)

Blue Cranes in Botswana?

Pete Hancock, BirdLife Botswana (email: birdlifemaun@gmail.com)

25/10/10: I've always been on the lookout for Blue Cranes in Botswana, although they are never seen these days. None were seen during the waterbird counts, and there are none at Lake Ngami nor at Lake Xau which is currently filling.

The place where they used to occur (and apparently there were even chicks recorded) was from the eastern Makgadikgadi, just east of the eastern boundary of the national park. To the best of my knowledge, they've not

been seen there for quite a while. They also have been recorded from the Good Hope area in southern Botswana in the past, near the border with South Africa, but I've not heard of any recent reports.

My conclusion is that your missing birds are not in Botswana. When large numbers of Wattled Cranes from Botswana went "missing" some years ago, we wishfully thought that they were in Angola (it was the most likely place and one for which we had no information) – well, this was really wishful thinking, because speaking to John Mendelsohn and Mike Chase and others who have done quite a bit of work in Angola, there are definitely very few Wattled Cranes there. So we are forced to conclude that the birds are gone, and I'm afraid the same is probably true of your Blue Cranes, regrettably. Let me know if your cranes do turn up – I'm always happy to be proved wrong in cases like these.

USE OF PATAGIAL TAGS ON CRANES: Comments received in first round of discussions (August 2010)

Kerryn Morrison (email: kerryn@ewt.org.za)

Background to discussion

An email was sent out to a wide range of people around the world asking for their ideas on the use of patagial tags on cranes. Within the African Crane Conservation Programme (ACCP) (an ICF/EWT Partnership), we currently use colour leg bands or rings to identify individual birds uniquely, and we will most likely stay with that option unless patagial tags are found to be far more beneficial. The reason this discussion has been opened again is due to the many questions that have been asked recently (from several people and countries in Africa) around the use of patagial tags on cranes, often based on the fact that they have supposedly been so successful on vultures. Although cranes and vultures can be compared only to a very limited degree, it has provided the opportunity to relook at this option for cranes.

Below, please find a summary of the input received to date. This will be distributed to everyone who responded so that an open email discussion on the use of patagial tags can be had. A discussion will also be held at the upcoming annual meeting for the ACCP (South African focus) in the Eastern Cape in September 2010. From these further discussions, the ACCP will produce a final summary and position on the use of patagial tags on cranes for future reference.

We greatly appreciate your input and involvement in this discussion!

Use of patagial tags on cranes and other species

Please note that this summary here in no way serves as a literature review of the use of patagial tags (the persons who bought the studies to my attention are noted in brackets). Note too though that there are only a few papers available on the use of patagial tags.

Four reports of patagial tags fitted to cranes were received:

- Patagial tags were fitted to 92 Eurasian Cranes in Iran in January of 1976. Three were spotted in Russia the following spring, but I have not yet been able to find out whether they were resighted after that. (George Archibald)
- Many years ago, patagial tags were fitted on Brolgas in Australia - the longevity of the tags was a few years at best. (George Archibald)
- A Black-necked Crane was attached with a patagial tag in the 1980s at Ladakh (Indian limits) - the bird is seen every year with no apparent problems. (Gopi Sundar)
- The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission used patagial tags on Sandhill Cranes for the first 5 or 6 years of their crane studies (1969 - 1975). They worked well for the first few years (3 or 4), but because of colour fading and wear were often unreliable after that. (Steve Nesbitt)

Information from other species:

- They were and are used successfully on kestrels. They are only 200g and depend on highly accurate wind hovering for hunting. Specific tests in flight chambers showed no adverse effects. It is likely that they will work then on any bird bigger than that. (Richard Pettifor)
- Mortality reports included a pelican found with its bill entangled and a dead eagle hanging from a tag. (Anne Lacy)
- A paper on tags fitted to White Ibis noted that the tags could be fitted with minimal trauma, that no difference was found in mortality of leg bands vs wing tags and that the tags were easier to see. They suggested that tags would be okay for larger birds.



Lappet-faced Vulture chick in the Namib, fitted with a patagial tag (photo Ann Scott)

- Tags have been placed on Great Bustards for 20 years with great success (www.proyectoavutarda.org). Flightless youngsters are tagged and the tags are covered with paper to minimise their visibility during the first weeks after marking – these fall off naturally later. (Dr Juan Alonso)
- Patagial tags have had more resightings on vultures as leg colour rings have never been too visible. (Kevin Shaw)

Resighting input

- Resighting accuracy could be similar between rings and patagial tags, with both depending a lot on the experience of the person recording the resighting.
- The reading of alpha-numerical tags is difficult in the field and often requires the use of high magnification scopes. A wing tagged bird though is quickly spotted when flying, which can then be followed until it sits and the tag read. However, leg banded / ringed cranes are easy to spot in the field. i.e. both are effective, with different strengths...

Negative of tags

- With patagial tags the observer's position to the bird is crucial otherwise one struggles to read the codes, whereas with rings this does not apply.

Positives with tags

- A plus point of tags is that there are many more alpha-numeric codes than there are colour ring combinations.
- On the plus side, a long benefit could be considerably less damage to the crane from the patagial tags than the rings and a better option for wetland birds.

Durability

- Not sure how the durability differs between the rings and tags, but it does seem that rings can fall off, and numbers fade on the patagial tags

Considerations for use of tags on cranes

- The behavioural characteristics of the certain crane species might not be conducive to the tags and one would have to see if they get accustomed to the tags over time, noting too that individual birds would react differently as well. Blue Cranes at times show aggression toward red baling twine – similar behaviour directed at an individual's patagial tag because it is brightly coloured would need to be discounted. If they saw it as part of the bird then there may not be an issue.
- One would need to assess the potential effect of the tags when the cranes go through the various

moult and the influence they have on the feathers as they grow out.

- The patagium needs to be big and strong enough to hold the hard inflexible plastic. It is however, potentially a much safer form of identification than rings, as the patagium is much more forgiving if something goes wrong. There is so much more soft tissue in that area than there is on the leg.
- Would cranes fiddle with them causing the tags to be damaged or removed, and with the cranes, getting themselves stuck or having the patagial marker being pulled out, thereby damaging the tendon that connects the wrist to the humerus.
- Juveniles and often adult cranes will often choose to go through a fence than over it and hence we need to make certain that they could not hook up with the fences and cause more fence entanglements.
- Related to vulnerability, if patagial tags break camouflage, would cranes be at greater risk of predation because the birds are most often on the ground.

A non-negotiable if tags were ever considered

Before any tags were placed on wild birds, they would be tested on a number of captive birds and their behaviour and condition monitored closely.

Comments received from:

Andre Botha (EWT – Bird of Prey Programme); Ann and Mike Scott (Namibia Crane Working Group); Anne Lacy (ICF); Bradley Gibbons (EWT-ACCP); Brent Coverdale (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife); Glenn Ramke (EWT-ACCP); George Archibald (ICF); Gopi Sundar (ICF); Günter Nowald (German Crane Group); Itai Shanni (Israel Ornithological Center); Jeanne Marie Pitman (Johannesburg Zoo); Jeb Barzen (ICF); Dr Juan Carlos Alonso (Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales - working on Great Bustards); Kevin Shaw (Cape Nature); Richard Pettifor (Scientific Advisor to EWT-ACCP); Sara Zimorsky (ICF); Sonja Kruger (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife); Steve Nesbitt (US Fish and Wildlife); Vicki Hudson (Cape Nature); Wilfred Versveld (Namibia Ministry of Environment and Tourism).

NEWSFLASHES

New website features crane news in Namibia

Willie Olivier (email willie@dmh.com.na)

7/6/10: The dedicated tourism website of DMH (publishers of Republikein, Allgemeine Zeitung and Namibian Sun) has gone online (www.tournamibia.net). The site will carry regular Crane News updates under News – Conservation as it is envisaged to make it the most up-to-date resource on information, travel and conservation news on Namibia.

Blue Crane SAFARIS

We spotted this striking logo on a vehicle, and made some inquiries:

Derek Jacobs replied (email: bluecrane@iway.na, www.bluecranesafaris.com.na)

26/7/10: Derek here from Blue Crane. I used to be a guide for some other safari groups in Namibia. I am keen on birds, and did many birding tours. I fell in love with the Blue Crane and I knew it is endangered. About a month ago I saw two in Etosha at Twee Palms but will let you know if one of my guides see them again. I just love the cranes, they are beautiful birds.

New CEO strengthens International Crane Foundation's global reach

Kerryn Morrison (email: kerryn@ewt.org.za; www.ewt.org.za/ www.savingcranes.org)

*The International Crane Foundation partners with the Endangered Wildlife Trust on the African Crane Conservation Programme.



5/8/10: International Crane Foundation's (ICF) Board of Directors recently announced its selection of a new President and CEO, hydrologist and wetland ecologist, Dr Richard Beilfuss.

"From its beginning, ICF has exemplified leadership and excellence in the study and conservation of cranes and Rich brings over twenty year's professional experience with cranes," said Joseph C. Branch, ICF Board Chair from Milwaukee, WI. "His major contribution has been to the emerging field of environmental flows. Beilfuss' work blends science and policy, and considerable people skills, to ensure that our water resources – rivers, lakes and wetlands – continue to nurture cranes, other wildlife and humanity."

ICF's global reach recognizes the remarkable charisma of cranes in bringing diverse people and new allies together to solve problems vital for us all. The long-term future of cranes depends in large part on the decisions that people make for water and wetlands as human demand soars and variable climates threaten the security of water supplies. ICF has invested heavily in promoting healthy wildlife and wetlands on farmlands, in Wisconsin as well as far eastern Russia and the valleys of Uganda. Crane projects now alleviate

poverty through the sustainable use of water and wetlands in the Mekong Basin of southeast Asia and Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa among other places.

"Cranes will not survive unless we tackle the big issues," explains Rich Beilfuss. "Yet the same measures that safeguard landscapes nurturing cranes are effective at addressing human needs. I learned this first in Vietnam, where we searched for creative solutions to save the vanishing wetlands of the Mekong Delta for threatened Sarus Cranes and the impoverished people there. Later, our work to save vulnerable Wattled Cranes and other wildlife on the enormous floodplains of southern Africa led to a unique partnership with the Zambezi River authorities and dam operators for sustainable water management that will greatly benefit local fishing and farming communities."

Beilfuss recently returned to ICF after serving four years as Director of Scientific Services for the Gorongosa Restoration Project in Mozambique, where he lived with his wife Katie and their two children. From 1992-2005, he served as ICF's Director of Africa Programs, cultivating and supervising conservation efforts in more than a dozen African nations. Beilfuss also has contributed his expertise to ICF's long-term efforts in Vietnam, China, Nepal, and elsewhere.

Beilfuss' academic background and training reflect the breadth of thinking ICF seeks in its leadership—he has a Ph.D. in Land Resources, two Master's degrees (Civil and Environmental Engineering and Water Resources Management), and a Bachelor's degree in International Economics. Beilfuss is also an Adjunct Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he advises graduate students and teaches a course on environmental flows, and was appointed by the Governor of Wisconsin to the Examining Board of Professional Geologists, Hydrologists, and Soil Scientists.



Ed: Richard Beilfuss and Kerryn Morrison were among the participants of the inaugural workshop for the Namibia Crane Action Plan and Working Group at Etosha in May 2004 (see photograph above of some of the participants, at the Ekuma River; Rich is second from the right). We send Richard our congratulations and best wishes for success!

Co-founded by Dr. George Archibald in 1973, ICF works worldwide to protect cranes and the wetlands, grasslands and other ecosystems on which they depend. ICF works on four continents in over 20 countries important for cranes and is best known for its celebrated work to restore a migrating population of the endangered Whooping Crane in the eastern United States. ICF consistently earns high ratings from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent evaluator of charities. ICF's Campaign for 2010-2011 focuses on water – expanding conservation action for cranes and seven rivers on three continents. Our headquarters in Baraboo, Wisconsin, are open annually to the public from April 15 to October 31 and showcase the world's only complete collection of the 15 crane species. Our campus offers visitors a unique opportunity to learn about cranes and their fragile ecosystems through live crane exhibits, an interactive education center, guided and self guided tours, and nature trails winding through a restored Wisconsin landscape. To learn more, visit our website (see above).

New Wildlife and Energy Programme newsletter

Kerryn Morrison (email: kerryn@ewt.org.za)

One of the biggest threats to cranes in South Africa, and increasingly across Africa, is their collision with powerlines. The Endangered Wildlife Trust's Wildlife and Energy Programme (EWT-WEP) has worked on this issue in South Africa for over a decade now and have made significant progress in understanding and mitigating for this the threat. Recently, they have started expanding into wind energy as well.

EWT-WEP has an e-newsletter that they distribute and make available online every four months. It provides important information on progress, research completed and findings made and is a cornerstone of information for anyone working on or interested in the conservation of cranes.

Please note that all past copies of the newsletter can be downloaded at <https://www.ewt.org.za/WHATWEDO/OurProgrammes/WildlifeEnergyProgramme/News.aspx>.

If you would like to be added to the EWT-WEP distribution list to receive these newsletters and notifications thereof, please contact Marianne Golding on marianneg@ewt.org.za. I strongly urge anyone working on cranes to link into this informative resource.



Dora Zarzavatsaki (email gabi.ivan@bluewin.ch) is hoping to photograph Blue Cranes at Etosha in September 2011. She says, "I am sharing with you one of my photos from the European Crane migration of this year".