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IN SEARCH OF BLUE CRANES IN SOUTH-CENTRAL ANGOLA

Searching for the as yet unknown wintering grounds of our elusive Blue Cranes has never been far from our minds as the project progresses. We have been speculating that they may be following the seasonal movements of large ungulates, formerly wildebeest before such migration patterns were changed by the erection of Park fences, and now the movements of cattle. A further speculation is that these patterns could be linked to the crane food supply and its increased availability due to the trampling effects of these large hoofed animals.

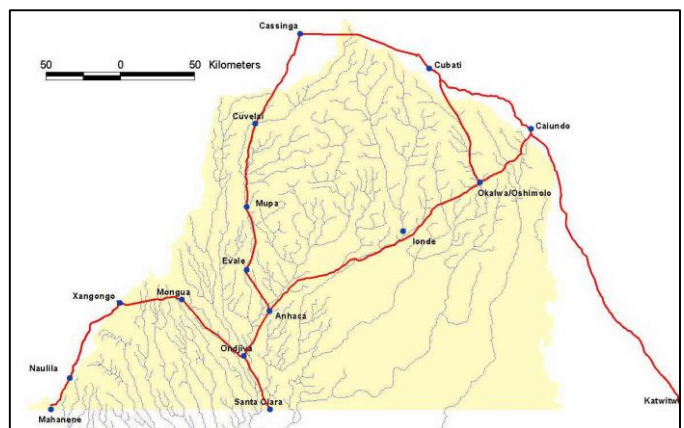
Our thoughts have been turning to closer investigations in southern Angola, where records of Wattled Cranes have been coming to the fore. Blue Cranes sometimes share the same wetland/grassland habitats as Wattled Cranes.

Our dream was finally realised when our friend John Mendelsohn kindly invited us to join him and his group on an exploratory adventure to south-central Angola from 2-10 August 2014. John is a well-known geographer, author and bird expert with a passion for Angola, and one could not wish for a better guide on this introductory visit.

Our group of 17 included persons with diverse and special interests and abilities that together enhanced our understanding and enjoyment of the trip, including geography and geomorphology, botany, fish biology, birds, history and military operations, natural resource economics, social science, human resources management, education, medicine, agriculture, motor mechanics, tourism, website marketing and cooking. Among us were three Angolans, and several Namibians who could speak Portuguese. We called in at each local administrative office to introduce ourselves; visits to several schools, missions and battle fields and numerous discussions with local residents added to the experience.



Our group of 17 "Cuvelains" on a wrecked tank in Angola.



The areas we visited in south-central Angola, shown on a Google earth map (centre) and map supplied by John Mendelsohn (bottom).



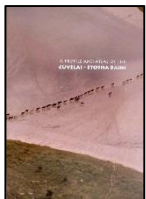
John Mendelsohn sets the scene in his own inimitable style.

Route

Our trip started at Ruacana/Mahanene, from where we travelled in a north-easterly direction along the Kunene River and then to the largest town on the trip, Ondjiva (see maps p1). From here we went northwards via Mupa to Cassinga, then down the Kavango River from Cubati to Calundo; and south-westwards back again to Ondjiva, to leave the country at Santa Clara/Oshikango. We set up camp in self-sufficient style for each of the eight nights.

The Cuvelai

The Cuvelai is a fascinating catchment that lies between the Kunene River in the west and the Okavango River in the east. It spans Angola and Namibia, with a slightly larger area in Namibia stretching southwards from the border and encircling the Etosha Pan, into which the waters from the upper catchment in Angola drain. As the Cuvelai was central to our explorations, the name "Cuvelains" for the participants was a natural progression.

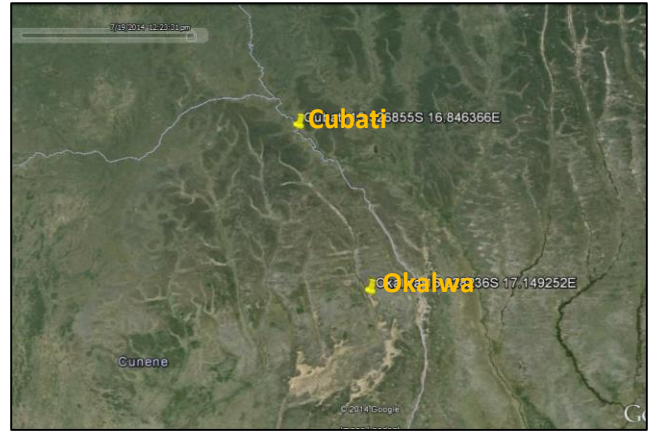


You can read more about this intriguing system in the comprehensive book, "A profile and atlas of the Cuvelai-Etosha Basin" by John Mendelsohn, Alice Jarvis & Tony Robertson (Raison & Gondwana Collection 2013).

Cranes

As far as cranes were concerned, our target area was the eastern parts of the Upper Cuvelai, closest to areas in south-eastern Angola where recent sightings of Wattled Cranes had already been reported. We collected groups of interested locals wherever we went, and showed them our pictures of all three crane species; without fail, Wattled Cranes were recognised by some of them, but neither Blue nor Crowned Cranes. The key area for Wattled Cranes appears to be Okalwa in the eastern Cunene Province (16 01S 17 09E); this long drainage system (omuramba) runs north/south to the west of the Kavango River. Our informants believed that these cranes could be resident year-round, and possibly breeding.

To the north-east in the Cubati area, our informants had seen the species on the Cubango River (15 19S 16 51E), a name that apparently refers to the whole of the Kavango River in Angola. Follow-up investigations are now being planned in collaboration with the ICF/EWT Partnership.



- 1: Okalwa & Cubati where Wattled Cranes were recognised.
- 2: The Upper Cuvelai is a remote, magical place.
- 3 & 4: Beautiful wetland habitats at Okalwa/Oshimolo, where local residents recognised Wattled Cranes.



Above & below: Chris Shatona questions local residents at Okalwa about sightings of the three crane species; only the Wattled Crane is recognised.



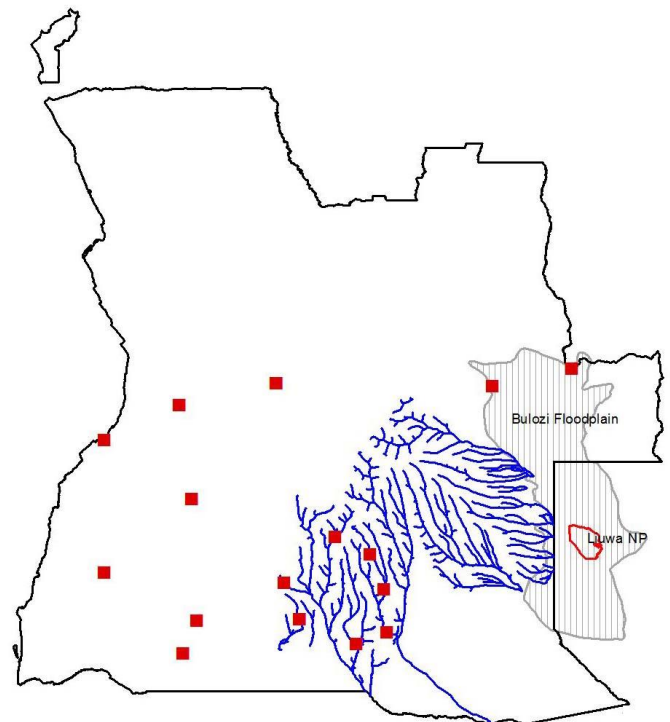
Above: Mary Daly chats to local residents at Cubati about possible sightings of the three crane species.
Below: The scenic Kavango ("Cubango") River near Cubati.

Namibian herdsmen

Of interest is two Namibian herdsmen we encountered at Okalwa, Abraham Malakia (below) and Nghihangwarati ya Dumeni Yaffaufiku, who mentioned the practice of bringing cattle up to this area from the Oponono area, just north of Etosha NP, on a seasonal basis.



Although this now takes place less frequently than in the past, this report serves to confirm the above suggested link between Blue Cranes and the movements of large ungulates, now cattle but possibly wildebeest in the past.



Known localities for Wattled Cranes in Angola (including data of Richard Dean; Lubango Museum study skins via Michael Mills; verbal reports and personal sightings by John Mendelsohn, who compiled the map).

Other impressions about Angola in general?

A beautiful but war-torn country, with much poverty and decaying infrastructure, mainly from the days of the Portuguese rule.

Charming, friendly people who were fascinated by our camping, fishing and other activities.

Beautiful forests and deep rivers, with open omuramba areas (drainage systems). Of these, the Okalwa in the eastern Cunene Province is a gem.

Decorative Nguni cattle, sometimes drawing carts.

Motor bikes everywhere as the ubiquitous mode of transport, including as taxis (sometimes for a family of three and their belongings); sadly, plastic bags are the universal form of litter in many areas.

We visited some well-run but cash-strapped schools, which give one hope for this country. Gifts of soccer balls from Manni Goldbeck were much appreciated!

Red-and-white land-mine signs warned us not to go off the road in some places, with rusting, bust up tanks/ vehicles a grim reminder to heed this warning even today.

Special thanks to John Mendelsohn and our team (including our very able interpreters) – we can't wait for the next chapter of this exciting saga! Our travelling costs were subsidised by the Environmental Investment Fund. Sadly, one of our group, Jon Barnes, passed away shortly after the trip. Our deepest sympathies to his wife Beth Terry, a fellow Cuvelain. Jon will be sorely missed.



UPDATE ON CRANE NUMBERS IN NAMIBIA

Crane census March-May 2014

Hanjo Böhme (email gmbhanjo@iway.na)

Ground survey

Participants: Holger Kolberg, Hanjo Böhme & Sethi Guim

Due to circumstances beyond the control of the Namibia Crane Working Group, a simultaneous ground and aerial survey for Blue Cranes could not be conducted during March 2014 and thus only the wet season ground survey took place initially, from 24-28/3/14. Mike Scott was ill at the time but has made a good recovery.



Above & below: Hanjo Böhme (green shirt) and Sethi Guim with chick ringed at Halali Seepage (photo Holger Kolberg).

INVALUABLE FUNDING SUPPORT BY THE HGON

Our sincere thanks to the Hessische Gesellschaft für Ornithologie und Naturschutz e.V. (HGON; www.hgon.de) in Germany, facilitated by Dieter Kositschik and Katja Fuhr-Boßdorf, and to Mathias Stein and his wife Barbara Hudec, who between them have made a steady stream of contributions to the work of the Namibia Crane Working Group between October 2011 and now, amounting to a total N\$22,195.25.

Your ongoing support is much appreciated!

The result was a count of only **6 adult Blue Cranes + 3 chicks**, localities as follows:

Charitsaub: 2 adults

Salvadora: 2 adults + 2 chicks

Halali Seepage: 2 adults + 1 chick

As it was known that in the end only two pairs of Blue Cranes were breeding in Etosha during this season it was no surprise that only three Blue Crane chicks hatched during the breeding season (December 2013—February 2014). It was thus the first priority of the trip to catch those three chicks for ringing purposes. This was successfully achieved by 25/3/14, as follows:

- 903935 NCJ at Halali Seep (18 59.314S 16 26.629E)

- 903939 NCK & 903933 NCL at Salvadora (19 2.037S 16 17.012E)

We then shifted our campsite from Halali to Namutoni to conduct a ground survey towards the north-eastern parts of Etosha—an area usually frequented by the Blue Cranes during the rainy season in Namibia. Areas visited included the Andoni plains, Chudob, Doringdraai, Aroe, Twee Palms, Fisher's Pan and the eastern and southern boundary of the Etosha Pan itself. These areas were visited twice during our stay in Namutoni, unfortunately without any sightings of Blue Cranes. This rather depressing result convinced us even more to conduct an aerial survey within a couple of weeks with the aim hopefully to find the core of the Etosha Blue Crane population.

Aerial survey

Participants: Nad Brain (pilot), Hanjo Böhme & Wilferd Versfeld

The aerial survey took place over the weekend of 17-18/5/14. Nad Brain was kind enough to pilot the plane again and early on the Saturday morning he and I (Hanjo Böhme) left Eros Airport for a direct flight to Okaukuejo. After refuelling and picking up Wilferd Versfeld from MET Okaukuejo we were airborne again for a cruelly long five-hour flight, which took us along the western boundary of the Etosha Pan up to the Ekuma River and further north to the Oponono plains. We zig-zagged this area from south to north and from east to west and *vice versa*, but unfortunately couldn't see any Blue Cranes.

It was nevertheless quite interesting to observe from the air groups of Wattled Cranes (21 in total: see below) and Crowned Cranes (5 in total)—figures we hadn't reached in any previous aerial survey in that area. Only two Blue Crane were counted, in Etosha itself.

Coordinates for aerial census: 17 May 2014:

Wattled Crane (21)

18 17.7654S 15 54.0780E (2)

18 17.7654S 15 54.0780E (2)

18 17.0190S 15 46.4940E (6)

18 16.3674S 15 45.4344E (2)

18 12.6294S 15 46.2084E (3)

18 11.8302S 15 46.2120E (3)

18 16.5084S 15 45.6150E (3)

18 11.7822S 15 46.2384E (2)

Crowned Crane (5)

18 36.6342S 16 01.0746E (2)

18 10.3536S 15 49.1028E (3)

Blue Crane (2 - Twee Palms)

18 13.2432S 15 51.6960E (2)



Pilot Nad Brain prepares for take-off at Okaukuejo on 17 May 2014 (photo Hanjo Böhme)



Nad Brain (left) and Wilferd Versfeld discuss navigation details (photo Hanjo Böhme)

From the Oponono plains we flew south along the Oshigambo River towards the northern boundary of Etosha, then to take an easterly direction towards Andoni. After we had flown over all the known spots where we have usually observed Blue Cranes the route took us direct south via Mushara, Kameeldoring to the eastern boundary of Etosha and to Twee Palms. At this waterhole we found our first (and unfortunately last) pair of Blue Cranes for the day.

From Twee Palms we flew along Fisher's Pan towards Namutoni, Chudob/Doringdraai and then at the southern edge of the Pan further west via Salvadora, Charitsaub and

Sueda, to land again at Okaukuejo in the early afternoon. It is sad to report that the aerial survey didn't reveal any new additional results and it is thus hoped that the next dry season survey will bring us more optimistic figures.

The Namibia Crane Working Group would like to take this opportunity to thank the MET for providing the plane together with the fuel. Nad Brain is thanked for making his excellent flying skills and time available; Wilferd Versfeld for the logistical support and his knowledge of the area; and Holger Kolberg and Sethi Guim for their inputs. This combined effort for a very important task is much appreciated.

Crane sightings

Peter Bridgeford (email pmb@iway.na)

27/1/14: Three weeks ago I was in the National Archives, Windhoek looking for information about the old Nature Conservation and Tourism division. Found this in an Annual Report of 1972 by the ornithologist R A C Jensen:

Two Blue Cranes ringed in Etosha found shortly thereafter near Prieska and Britstown.

There was no other information.

Wilferd Versfeld (email wversfeld@met.na)

28/11/13: Ringed cranes found as follows:

Mushara: NBW, NBZ
Halali Seepage: NHD, NBN
Salvadora: NHH?
Sueda: NHH, NHF

Annabelle Venter (email adventer@iway.na)

December 2013: We were in Etosha between Christmas and New Year and spotted some cranes.

A pair is nesting at Charitsaub waterhole and a second pair is nesting at Salvadora waterhole. One of the Charitsaub pair is ringed and they had two eggs, 27-29 December 2013. We couldn't see the actual nest of the Salvadora pair, but I think one of them also has a ring.

We saw two more adult cranes close to Doringdraai near Namutoni on 28 December 2013 but they did not appear to have rings on.

Wilferd Versfeld, Ann & Mike Scott

12-16/1/14:

Salvadora (nest): NHM radio transmitter & unringed bird
Charitsaub (nest): NHH & NHF (moult?)



Halali Seepage: NBN (partial moulting?) 18.96980S
16.45110E; two birds at Pan edge

No cranes at Aroe, Twee Palms (island flooded), Chudop,
Springbokfontein (water)

Viljo Absalom & Immanuel Kapofi

(email absalomevilho@yahoo.com)

17/1/14: one crane near road at Halali Seepage

Wilferd Versfeld

30/1/14: Seepage: 2 adults + 1 chick

Salvadora: 2 adults + 2 chicks

Charitsaub: 0

Twee Palms: 2 adults

21/2/14: There was a report of a crane at Salvadora with an injured leg. I went out on the 14th with the new vet but could not find it. The Salvadora pair is there with two chicks, the chicks are doing well. Could not find Charitsaub and Seepage birds. On 16/2/14 I found the Charitsaub pair near the main road and bird with ring on right leg NHH was limping. They fly and feed etc. and it walks but limps on left leg. It does not dangle when it flies so it is possibly injured in the hip area.

11/3/14: Salvadora pair & chick

Charitsaub: NHH (leg injury)

Uschi Kirchner (email uschi@safarisuk.ch)

March 2014: At my recent trip to Etosha I took pictures of Blue Cranes showing off their rings, attached - I guess old friends of yours! (NHH top, NHH bottom)



Kina Joubert (email kina@ziyafanaimages.co.za)

6/4/14:

Top: Fischer's Pan: 2 adults (one ringed)

Centre & bottom: Seepage group: NBN (?), NHD & chick NCJ (note chick on bottom right)



Vilho Absalom (email absalomevilho@yahoo.com)

8/4/14: Just so all you know, our two cranes around Okaukuejo are alive, with one having problems with its leg. I was driving from Okaukuejo yesterday and I met this pair 17km after Okaukuejo and just before you get to the turn off to Rhino Drive. They were all looking good except that the one is limping.

Neil Thomson & Gudrun Middendorff

(email batqs@afol.com.na)

05/05/2014: we saw four Blue Cranes at Fischer's Pan, Etosha National Park. Two birds were to the east of the Namutoni/Andoni road and two to the west of the road. Closest point on the road +/- 18° 47.946'S 16° 55.027'E. We were too far from the birds to see whether any of them were ringed.

Mark Boorman & Hartmut Kolb (email felix@afol.com.na)

16/05/14: we located 12 Blue Cranes together with one Wattled Crane at Lake Oponono (18.180725S 15.863040E, south of 2 [and a bit!] palms). The birds were very skittish, but we noted that at least three had green engraved rings – unfortunately too far off to read even with a telescope.



Christiane Maluche (email christiane@dmh.com.na)

18/6/14: Christiane Maluche & Richard Nidrie saw this pair of Blue Cranes on the plains north of Namutoni.



Hanjo Böhme

13/7/14: I have spoken to Carl-Heinz Möller today and he mentioned that he saw the other day three Blue Cranes at Kameeldoring waterhole. This obviously means that we also should look during our surveys in that direction, including Mushara.



GOOD PROGRESS WITH BLUE CRANE GENETICS STUDY

Our Blue Crane genetics study in collaboration with the International Crane Foundation / Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership and the Biobank is well under way. Prof. Nigel Barker of Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa is conducting a comparison of Namibian and South African Blue Crane genetic samples. Genevieve Jones and Kerryn Morrison have greatly assisted in bringing this important study about.

A total of 21 blood samples from Namibian cranes is included in the analysis – thank you to the MET's Wilferd Versfeld for his dedication over the years in collecting these samples, and Holger Kolberg for facilitating their transfer to South Africa.

Data are being obtained at two levels, namely genetic diversity across the distribution range, and genetic diversity within at least elected sites / populations, including Etosha.

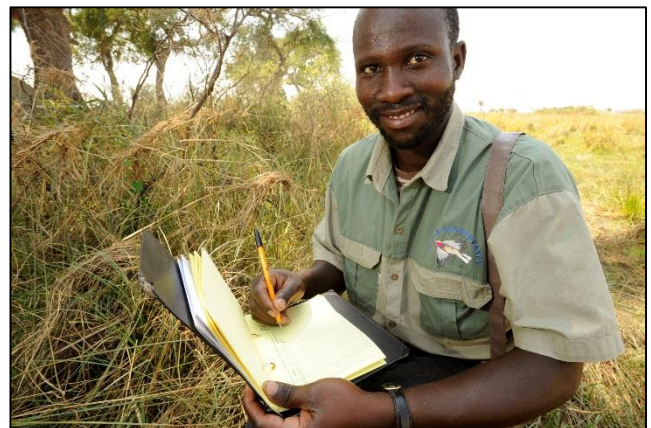
This study will indicate whether the Etosha population differs genetically from the main South African population, and whether it is inbred (now extremely important due to the present low numbers) and thus something of its immediate history (i.e. whether the population has been through a bottleneck or founder effect, which may explain its decline as a consequence of inbreeding depression).

CRANE SIGHTINGS IN EAST CAPRIVI COMMUNAL CONSERVANCIES, 2009-2013

The IUCN / Wetlands International Crane Specialist Group is currently updating the range maps for all of the world's 15 crane species, and we have been asked to submit our Wattled Crane records for Namibia to Tanya Smith of the ICF/EWT Partnership (see issue No. 51 of this newsletter for similar updated map of Blue Crane distribution).

Dave Ward (email dward@iway.na)

Below are all the crane sightings I have for East Caprivi over the past five years. These sightings have been taken from the community game guards' event books. **PTO**



A community game guard making wildlife observations in his event book (photo Helge Denker)

WATTLED CRANE

CONSERVANCY	YEAR	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
WUPARO	2009	5	3	3	5	5		2		2			
DZOTI	2009				5								
BAMUNU	2009	16	9	8	3		7	9			6	8	
LINYANTI	2009				2								
NAKABOELWA	2009									14			
KABULABULA	2009			3	3					17			
KASIKA	2009							2	1	2			
NAKABOELWA	2010							6				2	
MASHI	2010	3				2							
BALYERWA	2010					4							
WUPARO	2010	2							2		2	6	2
BAMUNU	2010	3			4		6						
KASIKA	2010											2	
KABULABULA	2010											8	
WUPARO	2011				2				6				
SALAMBALA	2011			3									
NAKABOELWA	2011									7	12	11	
KABULABULA	2011			3	4						4		
MASHI	2012		37	20		1							2
WUPARO	2012					3	3			4		3	
KASIKA	2012								25				
KABULABULA	2012					3	4						
NAKABOELWA	2013						6						
KABULABULA	2013				4		2	5	4		10		

GREY CROWNED CRANE

WUPARO	2009	3											
BALYERWA	2009				2								
KASIKA	2011										1		

UPDATE ON THE FLIGHT PATHS FOR WETLAND FLAGSHIPS PROJECT

Adapted from newsletters No. 12 (October 2013) & 13 (April 2013) of the NamPower/NNF Strategic Partnership (<http://www.nnf.org.na/project/nampowernnf-partnership/13/5/5.html>)

Background

Previous newsletters report on the capture of two Greater Flamingos and one Lesser Flamingo that were successfully fitted with GPS satellite tracking devices (platform terminal transmitters or PTTs) at Mile 4 Saltworks, Swakopmund in January 2013, and the progress made with tracking the local movements of these birds for around six months.

The tracking of flagship Red Data wetland bird species such as flamingos is a ground-breaking initiative of the "Flight paths for wetland flagships" project, funded by the Environmental Investment Fund (EIF), the Nedbank Go Green Fund and the NamPower/NNF Strategic Partnership. It is hoped that the flight paths that emerge will indicate focal areas for addressing potential interactions between flamingos and overhead lines – one of the main concerns of the Partnership. It should be kept in mind, however, that at best, the data obtained will indicate a straight line between two reliable GPS coordinates, and that further investigations will be needed to plot actual flight paths between such points in more detail.

Large-scale movements of flamingos eastwards and inland were anticipated only after good rains inland, and the

project unfortunately hit a relatively dry period, with limited movement inland during the past two summers. Consequently the birds have not shown signs of moving inland.

Unfortunately, after six months, the Lesser Flamingo went off the air at Cape Cross in June 2013, and has not been observed since; the second, a Greater Flamingo, died at Swakopmund in July 2013 and the tracker was recovered by Mark Boorman; and the third, also a Greater Flamingo, died near Walvis Bay in August 2014. This tracker was recovered, thanks to the kind assistance of the Appollis family and the Namibian Police Service of Walvis Bay.

One PTT re-fitted to a Greater Flamingo

The battery-powered PTT was refurbished, with funding provided by the Go Green Fund, and fitted to another Greater Flamingo captured at Mile 4 Saltworks on 1 March 2014 (and ringed NJG). After a short time the bird moved to Walvis Bay Saltworks, and then up to Cape Cross where it remained as of September 2014. It appears that the bird stopped moving in mid-September, although the device is still transmitting, and investigations are under way.

The remaining solar power PTT is being maintained and will be fitted once the birds shown signs of movement inland. A leg-mounted solar PTT for a Blue Crane awaits a successful capture of a large enough individual – hopefully in March-April 2015.

Altitude data and flying times

In the mean time we have been able to extract some of the more reliable altitude data for the Lesser Flamingo at Cape Cross, averaging 3.6 m for local movements at this site (May-June 2013). Much of this activity takes place under conditions of poor light (see figure on bottom right).

Power line mitigation

As a pro-active means of minimising the chances of collisions of flamingos and other birds, NamPower is fitting mitigation to sections of new power lines identified as being sensitive to such species through the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure. Retrofitting of existing lines – although more expensive and difficult – is also receiving attention. Line inspections/monitoring and the reporting of incidents are part of standard procedure.

We would like to thank all our funders and our very efficient capture team, Mark Boorman, Timo Britze and Tony Tebitt; the Klein family for providing access to Mike 4 Saltworks; and Dr John Mendelsohn for his ongoing management of the tracking data

1. Part of the flamingo capture team on 1 March 2014 (L to R): Tony Tebitt, Mark Boorman, Timo Britze & Mike Scott.
2. Localities recorded for a Greater Flamingo at Walvis Bay and 3. At Cape Cross, March – September 2014. (Google maps compiled by Ann Scott [No. 2] & John Mendelsohn [No. 3])
4. Selection of more reliable altitude data at Cape Cross (May-June 2014) for a Lesser Flamingo fitted with a GPS PTT and showing number of readings taken per hour when speed data indicated that the bird was in flight (Ann Scott)

