

the following objectives:

1. At each site, map the distribution of endemic, rare, and endangered bird species as given in the list provided by NBCWG, and birds of common interest to be given by the Kavango Bird Club tour guides.
2. Map the distribution of reeds at selected sites, and choose one reedbed at each site for further study.
3. Investigate which species of the wetland birds use the reeds or reedbeds for breeding, perching, hunting, sheltering, and feeding, at regular intervals over the period of three months.
4. Investigate impact of reed harvesting on those birds.

The following outcomes are expected:

1. An annotated list of birds that depend on reeds for breeding, perching, hunting, sheltering and feeding.
2. A distribution map for a list of birds given under the categories in Appendix 1 and for the selected sites.
3. Information on where, when and how reeds are harvested, by whom and their impact on birds.
4. More reed harvesting is expected to be found in the villages than in protected or semi-protected areas.
5. Recommendations on how best to reduce habitat destruction and hopefully possible solutions will be provided.

News from Bushmanland

Dries Alberts, MET Tsumkwe

17/4/09: The water in Nyae Nyae Pans has finally gone and the cranes have left. We had a lot of Wattled Cranes – mostly 60-70, one group of 42; but no Blue Cranes.

White Stork sightings

Marion Klingelhoefter, email namtours@iafrica.com.na

On 1/1/09 we counted 14 White Storks 15 km inside Botswana, after the Ngoma border post, in the area bordering on Chobe. They were right next to the road.

New ICF/EWT Partnership for African Cranes

Debbie Thiart, Grus Grapevine March 2009

Website: www.ewt.org.za email: crane@ewt.org.za,
blog : <http://cranemania.wildlifedirect.org>

From 1 March 2009, the Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) South African Crane Working Group (SACWG) and the International Crane Foundation (ICF) / EWT Partnership's African Cranes, Wetlands and Communities (ACWAC) amalgamated under the "ICF/EWT Partnership for African Cranes". The new structure offers increased opportunities for networking, shared learning and, in general, greater efficiency and involvement in all projects that we support across Africa.

The group will be managed by Kerryn Morrison, assisted by Debbie Thiart and Cynthia Chigangaidze. Osiman Mabhachi will coordinate and support the community based projects that are assisted in Africa. A full-time GIS and Database coordinator position is planned, to assist with projects across Africa. The SA projects based locally in key crane regions will continue in a similar way to now, except with an exciting new strategy in place for each. These projects will operate under the EWT banner in South Africa.

For further details please contact Kerryn on Kerrynm@ewt.org.za or 082 877 5126.

WHITE PELICAN BREEDING AT HARDAP DAM, FEBRUARY 2009

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Pelican breeding at Hardap Dam, February 2009
(photo Holger Kolberg)

Early in February 2009 I had the opportunity to check up on pelican breeding activity at Hardap. There are three islands now because the dam is currently quite low (50%) – the "regular" bird island, then a smaller, rocky one to the dam wall side of that and then a sandbank on the other side of bird island. On the small rocky island about 20 pairs were breeding (we didn't go onto this island). On the main island I guesstimated about 200 nests. There were a few (± 15) small black chicks, the rest all eggs that were just busy hatching so we left the island very quickly but managed to find five colour rings and three metal ones. On the sandbank there are probably another 150 nests, all with eggs still. The problem with this island is that if the water level rises about 50cm then the nests will be flooded, if the water drops much further there will be a shallow connection to the mainland and jackals will have access. So this colony is basically doomed one way or the other. My total pelican count for the dam was 736 plus 9 Pink-backed Pelicans although I'm sure some of the pelicans that I counted as immature White Pelicans may in fact have been Pink-backed ones.

PELICAN AIRLIFT

Dr Hu Berry, email ecoguide@iway.na

(Published in *Flamingo* February 2007; see *Namibia Crane News* No 41, March 2009 p5-6 for Part I of this report)

It was 1971 and the Great White Pelican was determined to breed. Propitious rains fell across many parts of the country, changing the face of Etosha Pan from a desiccated, saline desert into a vast, ephemeral but shallow lagoon. To its north, deluges on the Angolan highlands brought to torrents of water, reverently referred to by the Owambos as *efundja* (meaning flood), coursing through the maze of *oshanas*. These transient water courses converge on Lake Oponono, overflowing into the Ekuma River, which in turn drains into the great Pan. Initially targeting Oponono, about 3 000 pelicans began nesting on islands in June, and before long their eggs dotted the sandbanks. The local fisher folk soon discovered and harvested this rich source of protein, causing the pelicans to abandon their nests. The urge to reproduce remained unsatisfied, sending the pelicans

southwards, towards Etosha Pan. On its southern shore they located a tiny island near Okerfontein waterhole. Commencing their second breeding attempt there in July, hundreds of birds crowded the small island, but it was not long before predators and scavengers were attracted by the promise of abundant food. As the Pan dried, they made their way through the porridgy clay slush, creating havoc among the nesters. For the second time the pelicans watched as their egg clutches were devastated.

The third attempt was at a most unlikely place. Jutting 15 kilometres into the northern section of the Pan, Poacher's Point rises steeply above the surrounding bare expanse. It previously afforded poachers an ideal vantage point to look for game. Flamingos nested on the Pan, a few kilometres from its tip, but abandoned the site as the water dried. This is where the desperate pelicans were drawn to, possibly because of the vacated flamingo nests present. From the elevation of Poacher's Point, using a powerful telescope, I watched in amazement as the pelicans descended on the old flamingo nests. By September there were an estimated 2 500 pairs and thousands of charcoal-coloured chicks were evident. Moreover, the water had evaporated and the colony was stranded on an inhospitable, dry pan. Where were the adults finding their fish? Setting up camp, I watched the scene from a respectful distance, because pelicans are notorious for abandoning their brood if they sense that intruders are threatening them. The last chill of winter was still in the October air as the Sun's rays illuminated the incredible scene before me. Out on the glimmering, bleak surface the pelican colony created a circle of thousands of white and black specks as adult birds mingled with their brood. I could not see any sign of water remaining on the distant horizon. As the day warmed, heat waves began to shimmer, making the colony appear to drift above the surface.

Then, a synchronized movement of the adult birds began. Flights of up to 100 birds took off, flapping heavily in the heat as they struggled to become airborne. Flying in long skeins towards Poacher's Point, they resembled big, overloaded aeroplanes. But when they reached the mainland, a magical transformation took place. They encountered rising thermals and suddenly were lifted upwards in a living spiral. Their earlier exertion ceased and the laboured wing-beats were replaced by effortless gliding as they soared into the sky, forming a wheeling vortex of great, white bodies. Following the thermals, the pelicans soon became white dots in the heavens and then disappeared from view. I was uncertain as to which direction they took, but later that afternoon, scanning the sky with binoculars, I sighted pelicans returning from the north. This time they did not spiral down but were set on a straight, raking glide. Although grossly distorted by the heat waves, I could nevertheless see that they were mobbed by chicks when they landed. Obviously they had brought fish back to the ravenous young, but from where? Using a shortwave radio, I contacted Okaukuejo, requesting a spotter plane to be made available. Early the next day we ascended from the rest camp's airfield and headed to Poacher's Point, landing on the Pan and a good distance from the colony. At virtually the same time of day as previously, the thermal-seeking flights began. We were ready and when the pelicans located lifting thermals we taxied and took off, flying in wide circles around their



Top: Male (background) & female (foreground)
White Pelicans in breeding plumage
Below: White Pelicans at nests on Walvis Bay guano platform (photos Hu Berry)

ascending spiral. Approaching 10 000 feet the birds peeled off and set sail, as it were, in a north-westerly direction. We throttled back and followed the flocks, looping around them. Lake Oponono came into view, exactly to where the flight was heading. They settled on the water, joining hundreds of others, which were feeding on the abundance of fish trapped in the shallows. Back at base, we pored over a map. The minimum straight line distance from the breeding colony on the Pan to the lake was 100 kilometres. Consequently, the return trip made by the adults totaled 200 kilometres or more each time they wanted food, which was probably at least every second day. Apart from feeding themselves, the adults were also meeting the voracious appetites of rapidly-growing young.

I resorted to a calculator. The logistics of the pelican's airlift of fish are awesome. It is well established that an adult requires 10% of its body mass in fish daily. Adult pelicans weigh, on average, 10 kilograms and a chick increases up to this weight and even higher before it can fledge. In the process, a pair of adults and their two chicks need about 420 kg of fish. When this is extrapolated by the 2 500 breeding pairs and 5 000 chicks that were present, allowing for the high, but natural mortality of 50% of chicks that perished, the total amount of fish eaten is astounding. During the four months occupying the breeding cycle, from nest-building and egg-laying to fledging, the Etosha pelican colony consumed approximately 1 000 tonnes of fish, air-freighting much of this over a distance of 100 kilometres! This epic event has not since happened on the Etosha Pan in the past 35 years.