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THE STATUS OF CRANES IN NAMIBIA

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Three species of cranes are recorded from Namibia, the Blue Crane *Anthropoides paradisea*, the Crowned Crane *Balearica regulorum* and the Wattled Crane *Grus carunculata*.

BLUE CRANE

Distribution. Blue Cranes are confined to grassy plains surrounding the Etosha Pan (Fig. 1). The area of suitable habitat covers about 1 400 sq km. There is no indication that their range in Namibia was formerly any larger. Vagrant birds have been recorded from Stampriet and the Kavango River (Winterbottom 1971).

Numbers. The Etosha population is estimated at about 80 birds. There is no evidence that this population was ever larger. While there may be some seasonal movement of Blue Cranes between Etosha and Botswana or South Africa, at least a large part of the population is resident. During the non-breeding season cranes form flocks of usually 6-15 birds. The largest flock counted in 1988 was of 30 birds.

Breeding. Nest records (20) show a laying peak in January (7) and February (9), with records also for December (3) and March (1). All clutches examined (n = 8) had two eggs. By contrast, five family groups contained a single young bird and seven groups had two young birds.

Research and Monitoring. All crane species are counted as part of the Etosha aerial surveys. Ground counts of group sizes and age classes and the collection of breeding data are carried out opportunistically by park staff. Young birds are being marked with large, numbered plastic rings.

General. The entire population of the Blue Crane in Namibia is contained within the Etosha National Park. As long as some genetic flow is maintained with populations in Botswana and South Africa, the Namibian population is likely to be secure in the medium to long term.

CROWNED CRANE

Distribution. During the past 10 years this crane has been reliably reported from only the Ekuma River system in southern Owambo and its confluence with the Etosha Pan (Fig. 2). Earlier records are from other regions in Etosha (e.g. Andoni, Fischer's Pan), from central Owambo, the Kavango River west of Rundu, Grootfontein district and the Chobe River (Winterbottom 1964, 1966, 1971). The past 10 years have been

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particularly dry in Namibia and this is thought to be an important factor influencing their present more restricted distribution. In the Kavango Crowned Cranes were said to have formerly been fairly common. In this area, alteration of suitable habitat and persecution have also contributed to their decline (Hines 1987).

Numbers. Little information is available. An aerial survey along the Ekuma River, from the Etosha Pan to Lake Oponono in central Owambo (about 70 km), in March 1988 produced 18 Crowned Cranes. There is considerable seasonal movement; in November 1988 there were no Crowned Cranes along the same route. During dry cycles there are probably fewer than 50 birds in Namibia.

Breeding. Two breeding records give eggs in nests on the Ekuma River in June 1988 and March 1990.

Research and monitoring. No specific project.

General. Population size fluctuates naturally between wet and dry cycles. There is much seasonal movement, probably within the country and the subcontinent. Few birds are protected in conservation areas. The Ekuma River system provides important habitat for Crowned Cranes in Namibia, particularly in dry years. Some conservation status for this area is desirable.

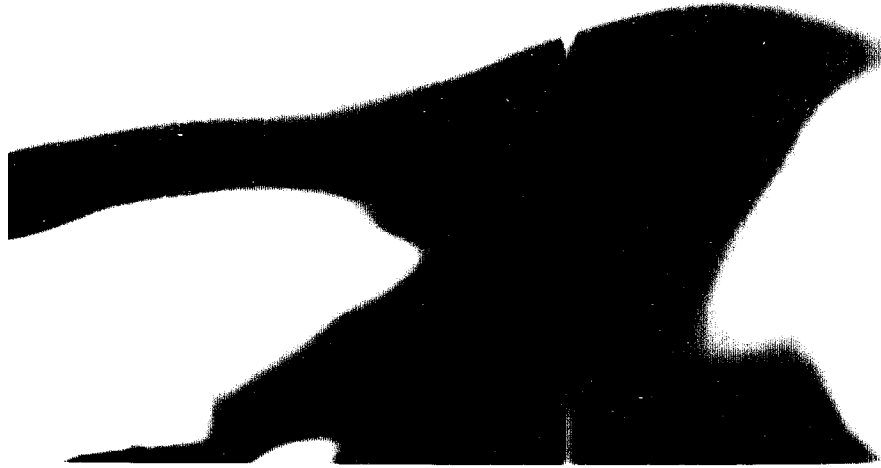
WATTLED CRANE

Distribution. Wattled Cranes are resident in the permanently flooded regions of the Mahango Game Reserve on the Kavango River and on Nkasa-Lupala Islands in the Kwando-Linyanti River system in East Caprivi. They move seasonally onto the floodplains of the Zambezi, Chobe and Kwando-Linyanti Rivers in East Caprivi and to the Panveld area of Bushmanland (Fig. 3). In years of particularly good rainfall, Wattled Cranes have been recorded in the Etosha National Park, Owambo (where they are said to have bred) and the Grootfontein district (Winterbottom 1971; Hines 1989).

Numbers. The normal breeding population is estimated as three pairs in the Mahango Game Reserve and six pairs on Nkasa-Lupala Islands. The number of pairs breeding in Namibia may increase dramatically after exceptional rains. Up to 150 Wattled Cranes are recorded seasonally (December-April) in Bushmanland, consisting mainly of small family groups of two adults and a fledged young (Hines 1989). It is not known where these birds come from, but Bushmanland is obviously an important post-breeding area.

Breeding. Eight breeding records show a peak in egg laying in August (five records); there is one record for July and two for September.

Research and monitoring. No specific project. A co-operative project between Namibia, Botswana and Zambia, looking at movements of birds (both timing and



where they go - in relation to rainfall), would be useful. Population stability and survivorship of young birds needs to be investigated.

General. Although the breeding population of Wattled Cranes in Namibia is small, it forms part of a much larger population in Zambia and the Okavango Delta system. There is clearly considerable movement by birds between these areas. The areas containing breeding populations of Wattled Cranes in Namibia are both within proclaimed conservation areas - Nkasa-Lupala Islands was officially proclaimed in March 1990. Finally, a new initiative is getting underway to establish sound resource management in Bushmanland, which should give a high level of protection to the seasonally flooded Panveld habitat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DISTRIBUTION OF CRANES IN NAMIBIA
 OVER THE PERIOD 1979-1988,
 PLOTTED PER QUARTER DEGREE SQUARE.

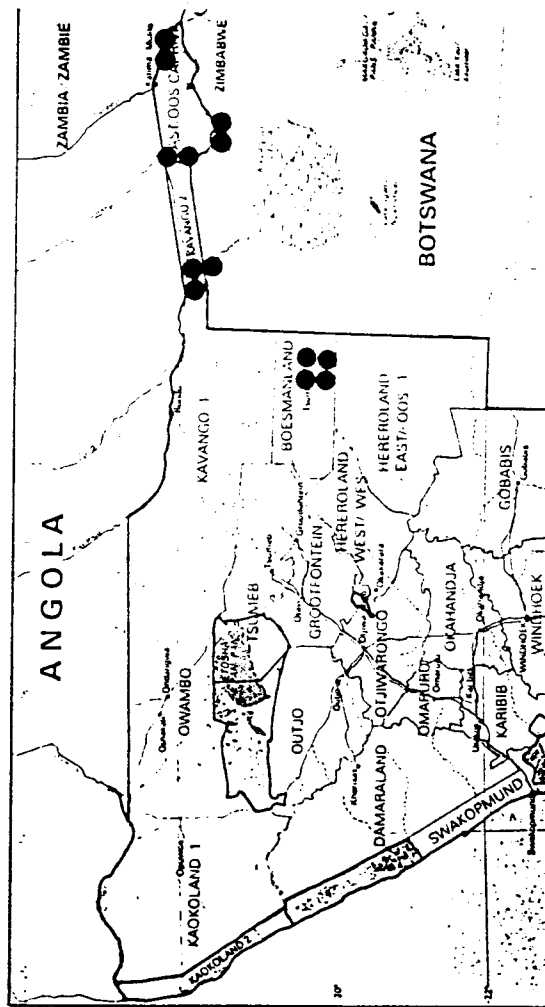


FIGURE 3: Wattled Crane *Grus carunculata*