NAMIBIA
Crane Working Group

Namibia Crane News 51

incorporating cranes and other wetland birds

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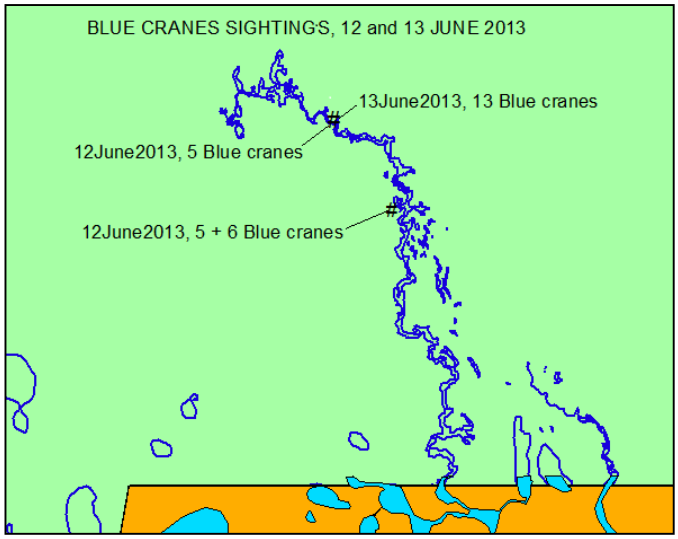
DRY SEASON 2013 CRANE NUMBERS

Lake Oponono (north of the Etosha NP)

Wilferd Versfeld reports that at least 16 Blue Cranes were recorded at Lake Oponoo in June 2013.
This ties in with the total of 15 adults and one fledgling counted during the census in April 2013 (see newsletter No. 50, April 2013).
On 12/6/13 he found two groups of 5 and a group of 6 = 16 cranes in total, in the Oponono area (see Figure 1). They were literally in the middle of nowhere, with lots of cattle and not too many people.
One group of 5 had 2 younger ones which were smaller and could have been the Salvadora pair and young; this group was also tamer than the rest, but still not tame enough to see if they had rings; the rest were very skittish.
On 13/6/13 he saw two groups of 6 and 7 = 13 cranes in the same area. They later split up, two flew away and the rest made two groups of 6 and 6. The group of 5 was the same as the previous day: 3 adults and 2 juveniles, and he could also get a bit closer.
He also saw one Wattled Crane.

Andoni (Etosha NP)

Wilferd reported 21 Blue Cranes at Andoni on 15/8/13 – 5 more than we had thought. They were too far away to read and count the rings as they were waiting in line for water with the other animals. He had received a report of 15 cranes with 5 colour rings at Andoni on 7/8/13, but it seems they had already arrived by 5/8/13.
Numbers of Blue Cranes recorded during the dry season (August to November 2013) at Andoni have remained consistently at 15-23. After a very dry winter, Wilferd reports that Lake Oponono is now practically dry, and no



Top (Fig 1). Counts of Blue Cranes in the Lake Oponono area, north of Etosha NP, in June 2013 (*Wilferd Versveld*)

Centre: Blue Cranes at Lake Oponono in June 2013 (*photo Wilferd Versfeld*)

Bottom: The cranes join the queue for water at Andoni in August 2013 (*photo Ann Scott*)

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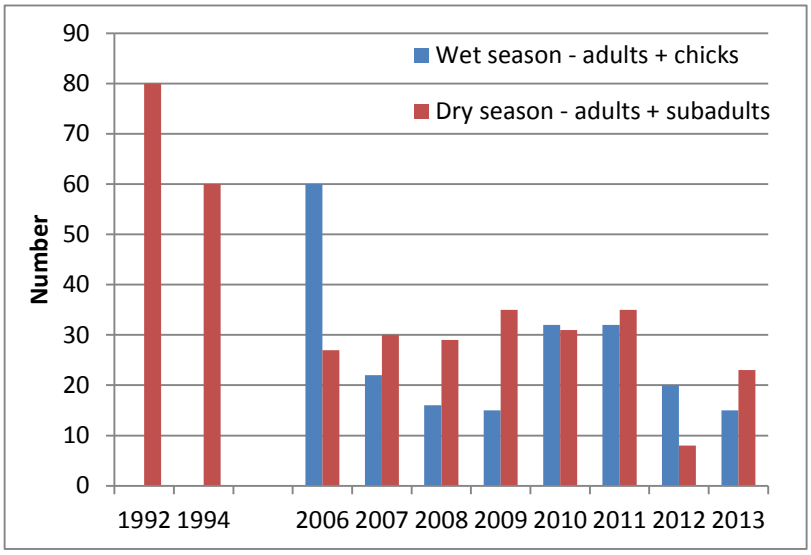


Figure 2. Maximum counts of Blue Cranes during the wet and dry season in Etosha and surrounds, 1992, 1994, 2006-2013.

further records of cranes have been obtained there during the past months.

The latest figures confirm our findings that not all the cranes are always present during the wet-season census (Figure 2), although their whereabouts at that time still remains unknown. Where were the other birds during the dry season of 2012?

However, there is still an overall decline from the maximum numbers of 35 in November 2011; and 60 (54 adults and six chicks/fledglings) in April 2006, 60 in 1994 in (49 adults and 11 chicks/fledglings), and 80 in 1992 (Figure 3).

The water situation at Andoni has changed: a concrete drinking trough has been built, replacing the former (larger) mud hole. The cranes have to share this source of water with zebras, springbok, oryx, blue wildebeest and ostrich, and as a result there is more competition for water. As with other wildlife, water is critically important to the cranes in such an arid climate, and also for roosting if large enough areas of water are available.

We visited Etosha in November 2013 and, fortunately, our visit coincided with the first good rains (around 20 mm at Namutoni on 14-15/11/13), and literally overnight the number of cranes at Andoni dropped from 21 to 13 as more water in the form of rain puddles became available. On 27/11/13, Wilferd found 12 cranes at Mushara (south-east of Andoni), sharing the water with elephants (see p3).

We noticed that (as always) the cranes were feeding busily, pecking away with vigour at the ground, now softened by the rain. Could they be searching for their favoured food, "uintjies" (*Cyperus* species)? Are they feeding on anything else?

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the MET, especially Wilferd Versfeld for his ongoing support with recording the essential crane data during the dry season, and for monitoring movements and habitat use. We also wish to thank the Environmental Investment Fund (EIF) of Namibia for generous sponsorship towards the dry season count.

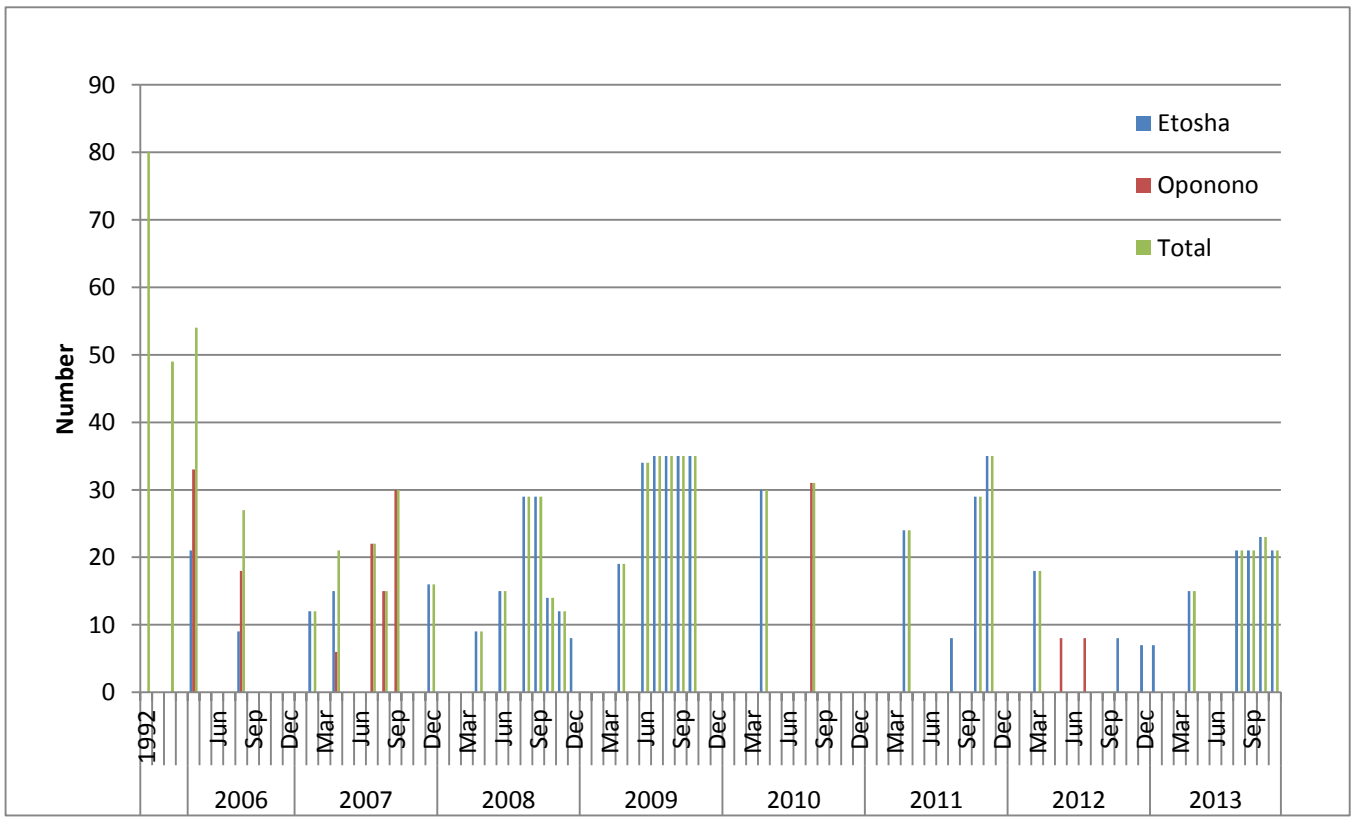


Figure 3. Total counts of Blue Cranes at Etosha and Lake Oponono, 1992, 1994, 2006-2013.

In August 2013, during a very dry winter, the cranes share the Andoni waterhole with many other animals (*photo Ann Scott*)

Left: After some rain in mid-November the situation changes overnight; many of the other animals have moved away, and the cranes use a nearby rain-water pool at Andoni *(photo Ann Scott*)
Right: At Mushara, 12 cranes share the water with the elephants on 27/11/13 (*photo Wilferd Versfeld*)

Ringed birds at Andoni

Hartmut Kolb (email hh@info.na) was fortunate to find 18 cranes at Andoni on 27/9/13 and, with his clients from BirdLife Swiss, was able to obtain the ring combinations of the seven ringed birds.
Steve Braine (email info@batisbirdingsafaris.com) and client Vic Paine found 23 cranes there on 22/10/13, with eight identifiable ringed birds (plus three other ringed birds, unidentifiable).
The above ring resightings are summarised in Table 1.
Wilferd Versfeld reports on 27/11/13 that the cranes have taken up three breeding sites:

09h15 Sueda (NHH & NHF)
14h45 Salvadora (NHH? & unringed)
14h00 Halali seepage (NHD & NBN)

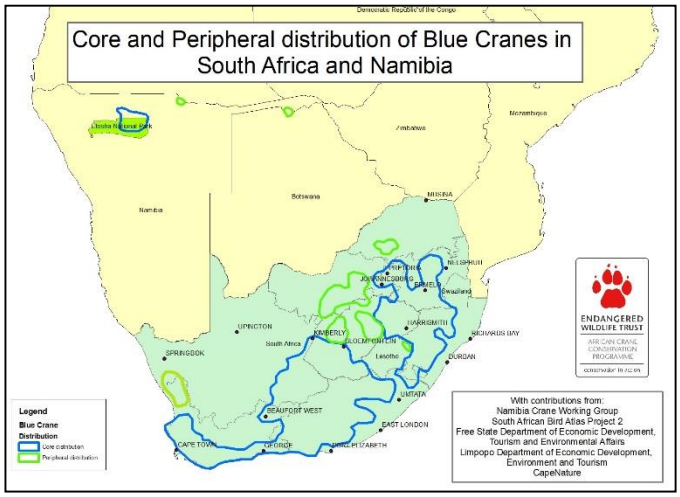
More on breeding in our next issue!

Example of a colour ring with a unique code, with which the Namibian Blue Cranes are marked.

Table 1: Ringed Blue Cranes at Andoni

Rings	Year/ age	Breeding/ ringing site	Breeding & age at first breeding
NHD	2006:7	Halali plains	2010 (4 yrs), 2011, 2013
NHF	2006:7	Chudop	2011 (5 yrs), 2013
NHH	2007:6	Salvadora	2012 (5 yrs), 2013
NBZ	2008:5	Namutoni causeway	2011 (3 yrs), 2012, 2013
NBW	2008:5	Salvadora	2011 (3 yrs)
NBN	2008:5	Salvadora	2013 (5 yrs)
NAC	2011:2	Halali seepage	-
NAO	2012:1	Salvadora	

UPDATE ON GLOBAL DISTRIBUTION OF BLUE CRANES



The Namibia Crane Working Group recently had the opportunity to contribute to a map showing an update on the global distribution of Blue Cranes, as one of all of the world's 15 crane species. This is part of a recent move to update the crane assessments under the Crane Specialist Group of IUCN/Wetlands International. The Blue Crane is the first of the species in Africa.

This initiative is being carried out by Kerryn Morrison, the Manager of the African Crane Conservation Programme of the ICF/EWT Partnership (email kerrynm@ewt.org.za) and Tanya Smith of the Endangered Wildlife Trust of the above ogramme (email tanyas@ewt.org.za), who produced the above map (website: www.ewt.org.za).

As indicated by the map, the majority of the world population of Blue Cranes is found in South Africa, with only a small subpopulation in northern Namibia. The core distribution (breeding birds) is shown by blue polygons, and peripheral distribution by green. Note the more recent extension of range on the West Coast of South Africa.

MORE RECORDS OF WATTLED CRANES IN ADJOINING COUNTRIES

John Mendelsohn/JM (RAISON; email john@raison.com.na) kindly provided some recent records of Wattled Cranes in south-eastern Angola.

John reports, My earlier work in SE Angola when I did not see any cranes was largely from the air. Over the past year, I have done several trips into the massive Bulozi floodplains (in total about 700 x 150 km) that straddle the Angola/ Zambia border and along some of the rivers of the Cuito system, and it is during these trips that I have come across quite a few pairs (see photos on right above).

Doing some very rough estimates, I would imagine that there could easily be several hundred pairs in these areas. For example, if a pair occupied 20 km of linear floodplain grassland along the Cuito and its major tributaries and we imagine these broad, open rivers stretch over 2,000 km, then then they could be home to about 100 pairs.

Above: Wattled Cranes recorded at 11 13 9.35S 22 20 47.2E in Angola; and
Below: Wattled Cranes recorded at 16 16 0.99S 18 49 26.38E in Angola (*photos John Mendelsohn*)

Likewise, if each pair occupied 300 sq km of the Bulozi floodplain grasslands, then there might be another 350 pairs in the Bulozi.

All of this is extremely rough, but the point is that I have seen Wattled Cranes frequently and there is a great deal of suitable habitat. Whether there are any Blue Cranes in the area is hard to guess at.

Rich Beilfuss/RB (International Crane Foundation; email rich@savingcranes.org) responds:

Exciting to see the first-ever photos of Wattled Cranes in Angola.

Because the Wattled Cranes tend to be so tightly distributed with *Eleocharis* (spike rush) patches in much of southern Africa, I have always found it difficult to extrapolate observations to local (sub)population estimates, but your direct observations of many pairs is encouraging and I hope you are correct that the pairs are more widely distributed up along the river system.

We did surveys of Liuwa NP and Barotse (in Zambia) back in 2001-2003. Barotse has very little wildlife (of any species) due to such dense human activity there, but Liuwa remains a diverse, high quality wetland complex. The park manager, under African Parks, Griffin Shanungu

(email griffinks@ gmail.com) is a colleague who worked with me at Gorongosa NP in Mozambique when I was based there. For this reason, and due to the importance of Liuwa for Wattled Cranes, Kerryn Morrison and I have discussed getting more involved there.

Our peak count at Liuwa Plains National Park, Zambia (2003) resulted in an estimate of about 700 individuals in the area--many pairs were seen on seasonally flooded pans, often shared with pairs or flocks of Grey Crowned Cranes and Saddle-billed Stork pairs. It was these positive surveys results from Liuwa that lead us to hope that Wattled Cranes were still present in good numbers across the border in Angola, perhaps along the seasonal migratory route of the wildebeest. Likely, they need the wildebeest grazing to keep the grasses down, work up the soil, and enable access to the *Eleocharis* (or other sedge) tubers. I believe they require tuber-producing vegetation, healthy grazing system, and relatively in-tact hydrological fluctuations to flourish--a very demanding species! No wonder they are borderline Endangered.

JM: Your estimate of 700 birds in Liuwa is the best news ever because Liuwa is really just a small part of the massive Bulozi floodplain system. My trivial observations only "connect the dots", suggesting that cranes are at least widely distributed across the Bulozi. Two of the photos sent yesterday were taken in the north close to Lumege and the border of the DRC.

Bulozi is really remarkable in a number of ways, many of which stem from the facts that (a) much of it lies in a "graben" that has been filled with rich alluvial soils and (b) flooding is ephemeral which means that nutrients are recycled frequently to provide for bouts of rich production. And in answer to Kerryn, human numbers and activities are minimal in most areas of Bulozi. That whole floodplain could therefore be home to thousands of cranes. More generally, I suspect that Bulozi will turn out to be one of the most important wetlands in Africa and one that deserves the attention of conservationists.

My field work in the northern areas of Bulozi has been limited to road trips, and there are not too many roads in that area that are accessible or safe. It would be great to do some aerial survey work. In case you ever run across some money to do this, it would be quite easy to organise in Angola, and also not expensive.

RB: I was delighted to see the latest survey report from Liuwa NP: they now (February 2013) estimate about 1,900 Wattled Cranes on the floodplain, substantially higher than previous counts.

I have the full report and distribution maps, which extend right to the Angolan border. I wonder how this population might relate - seasonally or inter-annually? - to your observations at Bulozi.

We are still developing our priorities for surveys and ground action across the region, aimed at how best to maintain a viable population.

UPDATE: FLIGHT PATHS FOR WETLAND FLAGSHIPS PROJECT

Adapted from newsletter No. 12 of the NamPower/NNF Strategic Partnership, October 2013 (www.nnf.org.na/nampowerproject.htm)

Greater Flamingo NFF, fitted with a solar-powered satellite tracker, flying at Mile 4 on 30/5/13 (*photo Katharina Reddig*)

Two Greater Flamingos and one Lesser Flamingo were successfully fitted with GPS satellite tracking devices (platform terminal transmitters or PTTs) at Mile 4 Saltworks, Swakopmund in January 2013 (see previous newsletter, No. 11 March 2013).

Tracking data received from CLS/Argos over the past six months have shown localised nomadic north-south movements (see below), indicating that the trackers have been functioning according to expectations; that the birds normally fly at relatively low altitudes for local movements; and that the flamingos do indeed fly during times of darkness or poor light.

Why do flamingos fly under conditions of poor light? According to Dr Tony Williams (former ornithologist for Cape Nature Conservation at Walvis Bay), flamingos either fly at night or, if travelling by day, do so at considerable height – both strategies to avoid predation by raptors.

Large-scale flamingo movements eastwards and inland were anticipated only after good rains inland, and the project unfortunately hit a relatively dry period, with limited movement inland.

Unfortunately, after six months, the Lesser Flamingo went off the air at Cape Cross in June, and has not been observed since; the second, a Greater Flamingo, died at Swakopmund in July and the tracker was recovered by Mark Boorman; and the third, also a Greater Flamingo, died near Walvis Bay in August. This tracker has also been recovered, thanks to the kind assistance of the Appollis family of Walvis Bay, who found the device on the dead bird near the Bird (Guano) Island north of Walvis Bay and took it home for safe-keeping, and then to their place of business in Walvis Bay while they tried to track down its

Localities recorded for three flamingos on 18 June 2013 and suspected flight paths (yellow lines; *based on a Google map compiled by Ann & Mike Scott*)

owner. Meanwhile, we were also searching from our side; and Chief Inspector Gerber of the Namibian Police Service in Walvis Bay and his team were able to locate these precise localities on the basis of the last signals the tracker sent from these sites, supplied by Dr John Mendelsohn! Many thanks to all for this help.

Large numbers of flamingos are being observed on the coast at present: 141,000 were counted here in July 2013 during the national MET wetland bird census. According to MET ornithologist Holger Kolberg, these high numbers are considered to be normal; however, with the unusually high rainfall inland over the past few years, many of the flamingos stayed inland and bred successfully there, rather than return to the coast in winter, and as a result numbers have been lower during this time. These birds have now returned to the coast, and the good breeding is evidenced by the many young birds being seen here now.

Large numbers of dead flamingos are also being observed on the coast. This may be a natural phenomenon, given the large numbers present and the resultant increase in competition for food and space. However, some investigations are being made into possible causes of mortality, in order to try and confirm several speculated reasons.

Once there are good rains inland and the flamingos start moving there again, the next steps being planned are to fit the trackers to two more birds and to carry on with the tracking initiative. In the meantime we are still searching for the third device.

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.

The details of the recorded flamingo movements are indicated below and on the map on the left:

- On 30 April 2013 between 16h13 and 19h13, the Greater Flamingo fitted with a solar-powered PTT (ID no. 122802, plastic ring code NFF) flew south from Mile 4 Saltworks to Walvis Bay – a straight-line distance of about 35 km - and returned to Mile 4 on 5 May between 04h07 and 07h06, possibly due to the strong east wind conditions.
- On 21 May between 15h14 and 21h14, the Lesser Flamingo fitted with a solar-powered PTT (ID no. 122803, plastic ring code NFZ) flew north from Mile 4 Saltworks to Cape Cross Saltworks – a straight-line distance of almost 100 km – where it remained.
- Between 29 May at 14h11 and 30 May at 02h10, the Greater Flamingo fitted with a battery-powered PTT (ID No. 122804, plastic ring code NFX) moved 17 km south to a point south of the Swakop River mouth; its next fix (on 30 May at 14h09) was at Langstrand, further to the south and then it moved down to the Bird Island area.

Since January 2007, 26 incidents involving 59 flamingos on power line structures in Namibia are on record (NamPower/ NNF Strategic Partnership records). These records have been submitted by NamPower and mine personnel, as part of standard line inspection procedures and in collaboration with the Partnership, and by members of the public.

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 also part of standard procedure.

Flamingo resighting from 2002

Hanjo Böhme kindly sent us this photograph of a ringed Lesser Flamingo (NAA), taken by Minister Kalle Schlettwein at Walvis Bay Lagoon on 18/5/13. Rob Simmons reports that the bird (9A15632) was ringed at Sandwich Harbour (2319S 1430E: 45 km south) on 23 April 2002, and is now 11 years old!