



# AFRICAN CRANES, WETLANDS and COMMUNITIES

NEWSLETTER 11



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In  
partnership  
with



It is encouraging to note that there are numerous crane and wetland conservation projects being implemented in various African countries. In this 11th edition of the African Cranes, Wetlands and Communities Newsletter, we have a mix of stories from the field covering three geographical regions – East Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa. The articles reflect the diverse issues that have to be addressed to ensure the long-term survival of African cranes. They also highlight the multiple project goals, implementation methodologies, levels of stakeholder engagement and organizational priorities – evidence of remarkable innovativeness among conservationists.

Ann and Mike Scott present results of recent crane surveys and explain trends in the Blue Crane population noted over the past 20 years in Namibia. They also give an overview of their research and monitoring work aimed at getting a better understanding of the cranes' movement patterns in Namibia and the neighbouring countries. Language barriers should not hinder knowledge and experience sharing among conservationists. In this regard, an article by Charlotte Houpline focusing on how law enforcement is being mainstreamed into wildlife conservation programmes in Guinea, is presented in French for the benefit of our readers from Francophone Africa. Cobus describes the emotional aspects of conservation based on his personal experiences in Wattled Crane monitoring in the Southern Drakensberg, South Africa. He reminds us of the fact that humans continue to “creep” into the cranes' environment by fragmenting their habitats. Genevieve stresses the importance of cross-national collaboration in conservation and the need for standard data collection protocols in the quest to track crane population trends. Individuals and organisations interested in participating in a new and exciting crane data collection programme she is coordinating can contact her directly.

Samson reports on his trip to China where he attended the Grey Crowned Crane Festival. Apart from highlighting his personal experiences, his article stresses the importance of reaching out to a wide of stakeholders – even if it means flying across seas and oceans. BirdLife Zimbabwe staff members have every reason to celebrate as one of the key sites for both Grey Crowned and Wattled Cranes was declared a Ramsar Site earlier this year. Togarasei tells the story of how policy and advocacy work by BirdLife Zimbabwe contributed to this declaration and how their approach is slowly yielding positive results which will have far-reaching implications on crane and wetland conservation in Zimbabwe. In response to escalating threats to the Black Crowned Crane, Wetlands International (Africa Office) and BirdLife International launched a new project to mitigate key threats to the species in West Africa. Tim Dodman gives a brief overview of the goals, activities and expected outcomes of the initiative. The Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group continues to make great strides in reaching out to communities in the western region of Kenya. The founder of the group, Maurice Wanjala demonstrates that conservationists should persevere and be patient as the road to conservation success is riddled with challenges. My article is aimed at reminding conservationists of the crane populations at sites located outside our project focal areas. Before we rush to point out the multiple reasons why we are not covering all crane areas, I believe individuals and organisations should start developing strategies to ensure that we do not lose these populations.

Those that missed the news about a decision taken by CITES to suspend trade in Black Crowned Cranes from Guinea, Sudan and South Sudan and trade in Grey Crowned Cranes from Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania can see the details contained in the press release. For more information on this, please follow the link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1D2-Joq1vKI&feature=youtu.be>

Evidently the articles are not just a presentation of newsworthy developments but contain key messages and insights on how to tackle real conservation challenges. As you read, remember that ideas you get through this newsletter could translate into projects and then big breakthroughs.

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# PRESS RELEASE

*The Endangered Wildlife Trust and the International Crane Foundation welcome CITES' decisive conclusion on trade of Grey and Black Crowned Cranes*

*4th March 2013*

An announcement, detailing the suspension of Trade in Black Crowned Cranes from Guinea, Sudan and South Sudan and trade in Grey Crowned Cranes from Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania, has just come out of the CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP) 16 currently underway in Bangkok, Thailand.

Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Guinea, Nigeria, Sudan and South Sudan all underwent a full review, conducted by the CITES Significant Trade Review Process, of their wild caught Black and Grey Crowned Crane trade in order to determine the impact of this trade on their wild crane populations. This CITES suspension is in place until the country in question can prove that export will not be detrimental to the wild population and that they are able to successfully monitor export permits granted and actual exports, with the goal of limiting exports in order to maintain the species.

Nigeria was included in the final review, and has been removed from the CITES Significant Trade Review process as the Management Authority of Nigeria has not issued an export permit for commercial trade of the species since 2005. The reason for this course of action is due to the fact that there is no reliable population data for the Nigerian species. Furthermore, the Management Authority has not, to date, registered or recognized any captive-breeding facility for any wild animal species. Therefore, until further notice, any permit originating from Nigeria for captive-bred species of wild animals is illegal and should not be accepted.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and the International Crane Foundation (ICF) were instrumental throughout Trade Review Process as they supplied CITES with crucial data about the state of trade in cranes on the African continent.

Said Kerryn Morrison, Manager of the ICF/EWT Partnership's African Crane Conservation Programme: "We welcome the decision from CITES as these species of cranes are under very real threat from live trade, partly because they are in high demand – they are unique looking, iconic of Africa, and tolerate being displayed in groups and with other species – but also because there are fewer effective controls in many of their countries of origin. In addition, many of the players involved in the demand and supply sides of this trade still believe that these species are plentiful. Without urgent attention, this trade could lead to loss of these birds from much of Africa."

The cranes are removed illegally from the wild, usually as chicks, for the captive trade market. In some cases, this involves domestication where cranes are kept in private gardens, around homesteads and in hotel gardens. There is however, a big demand for the species in captive facilities around the world where they are either placed in private breeding facilities or in mixed exhibits in captive facilities open to the public where they add value to savanna exhibits. In South Africa, legal pairs of cranes are often used to legitimise chicks taken illegally from the wild. However, parentage testing of chicks is now available in the country and can be used to halt such illegal activity.

In response to the plight of the Grey Crowned Crane and in support of CITES, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and the International Crane Foundation (ICF) are proud to announce the release of a new online video entitled: Grey Crowned Cranes Need Our Help!

The video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1D2-Joq1vKI&feature=youtu.be>

This four minute video represents an important tool for raising awareness of the severe threat that trade poses to the species' survival, and will enable zoos, researchers, and concerned citizen conservationists to help address one of the greatest needs: alerting captive facilities, wildlife authorities and the public about actions they can take to safeguard this charismatic species.

"Nowhere in the world are captive crane populations managed sustainably at this time. The African Crane Trade Project is, however, working with formalised zoo associations in Africa, North America, China and Europe to create managed programmes that aim to develop and manage sustainable populations of Grey Crowned Cranes, thus alleviating the need for wild caught cranes to supplement captive stock. Note though, that only 1 200 zoos of the 12 000 estimated captive facilities around the world belong to these formalised zoo associations. Therefore, it is clear that more urgent attention must be paid to communicating to, and educating a far wider stakeholder group involved in the captive trade," commented Morrison.

The African Association of Zoos and Aquaria (PAAZAB) is working with the African Crane Trade Project through its members to reduce the threat, but very few captive facilities in Africa belong to PAAZAB. Through the establishment of sustainable and well managed captive crane populations within PAAZAB, the need for wild caught cranes will no longer be necessary.

"The irony is that South Africa, whose rhino population is being poached to satisfy Asian demand, is itself guilty of decimating the wild populations of Black Crowned Cranes in Guinea and Sudan as we continue to allow wild caught cranes from these regions into

our country. But you can make a difference! Please report all incidences of trade to the EWT at [kerrynm@ewt.org.za](mailto:kerrynm@ewt.org.za) so that we can obtain as much information on the trade as possible, and can pass the information on to the relevant authorities for follow up," concluded Morrison.

The African Trade Project is sponsored by Abilene Zoo, Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, Dohmen Family Foundation, Miami Zoo and Weltvogelpark Walsrode. For further information about the African Crane Trade Project and the EWT's African Crane Conservation Programme please contact Kerryn on [kerrynm@ewt.org.za](mailto:kerrynm@ewt.org.za). Learn more about the African Crane Trade project and download our How Zoos Can Help fact sheet to learn how zoos can become involved.

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# Latest crane census results are sobering

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Environmental Investment Fund (EIF) Namibia: [eifnamibia.com](http://eifnamibia.com)

Blue Crane numbers continue to decline in Namibia. The latest annual combined aerial/ground crane census for the wet season at Etosha National Park (ENP) and northwards (8 to 11 April 2013) yielded a maximum total of only 13-15 adult Blue Cranes and one young fledgling (all within the Park). This shows a further decrease in adult numbers for the wet season from 32 in April 2010, 24 in April 2011 and 18 in March 2012. Overall, numbers have declined steadily since the totals of 60 (54 adults and six chicks/fledglings) in April 2006 and 1994 (49 adults and eleven chicks/fledglings), and 80 in 1992. Only four pairs of Blue Cranes were recorded breeding this year, producing at least six chicks although only one (17%) survived to fledging.

On the positive side, the April 2013 census provided a total count of 19 Wattled Cranes, including two within Etosha at Andoni, the first record of this species within the Park. This development could be associated with the planned burn that took place at Andoni in July 2012; but climate change may also be playing a factor. The remaining Wattled Cranes were recorded in the Lake Oponono area, together with four Crowned Cranes.

One of the contributing factors to the present low numbers of Blue Cranes could be that the rainfall was lower this year (around 200 mm at Okaukuejo, compared to the long term average of 380 mm) than during the preceding years, and also early. There was very little water in the Pan, while Lake Oponono was also drier. The cranes breed in the ENP during the summer wet-season months. Once the chicks have been reared and are able to fly, the birds leave the confines of the Park and head northwards. They have been recorded in the Lake Oponono (Omadhiya Lakes) area at such times, where they feed on "uintjies" (Cyperaceae) found in the well-grazed grasslands. However, based on the count data, it has become clear that not all the cranes are present in the Park during the wet season. During some years they have not been counted at Lake Oponono during either the wet or dry season, and it is not known where they go at such times.

In 2006, due to a concern about the apparent decline in numbers of Blue Cranes, the Namibia Crane Working Group initiated a conservation action plan for the species. Numbers, breeding success and distribution have been monitored on a regular basis since then. Twenty-four chicks have been fitted with large green plastic rings each with a unique alpha-numerical code and, together with radio telemetry, have been invaluable for tracking movements between Etosha and Lake Oponono, and determining survival rates. Of the breeding birds this year, five (63%) were ringed and aged 4-7 years old.

However, additional measures are required to track crane movements on a wider scale. Generous funding has been provided by the Environmental Investment Fund (EIF) of Namibia to fit a Blue Crane with a sophisticated solar leg-mounted GPS satellite transmitter (PTT), and the Namibia Crane Working Group is planning a capture at the first opportunity.

A satellite transmitter has already been fitted a large, just-fledging juvenile east of Salvadora on 7 April 2011, but unfortunately no further signals were received after 2 May 2011. Until recently, the fate of the bird was not known as the transmitter had not then been recovered. On 29 October 2012 the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) collected a (live) Blue Crane fitted with a transmitter about 120km west of Rundu, at Kahenge. According to the number of the bird's metal ring, this turned out to be the above juvenile. Although the bird did not survive, its discovery on the northern border of Namibia represents a milestone in efforts to map the areas used by the cranes. Blue Cranes have also been reported in Caprivi (e.g. in September 2007).

Recent records of Wattled Cranes in south-eastern Angola by Dr John Mendelsohn show a possible overlap with some of these cranes and the above Blue Crane. The group closest to this bird was recorded some 150 km away on 26 October 2012, only three days earlier, and the next two groups to the north on 24 October 2012 (up to 330 km away and five days earlier). In view of the now documented association between the two species at Andoni this year, it is not impossible that this Blue Crane could have been sharing habitats with these Wattled Cranes north of the border. These developments raise interesting possibilities about further potential areas that the Blue Cranes could be visiting, including in south-eastern Angola.

All three of Namibia's crane species are on the Red List: the Blue Crane is Critically Endangered, the Wattled Crane is Endangered, and the Crowned Crane is Near Threatened; all three species are also Globally Threatened. South Africa is the main stronghold for the Blue Crane, with around 20,000 birds although numbers have declined from at least five times this number in the past. The small, satellite population of this species is regarded as a conservation enigma, with – up to now - its ability to survive in an arid, predator-rich environment. The population is also regarded as genetically separate from the South African one.

The Namibia Crane Working Group will continue with the following priority actions in an attempt to ensure the survival of the remaining Blue Cranes in Namibia:

- Attempt to fit one or more Blue Cranes with satellite telemetry to determine which areas they visit outside the ENP, as a means to identifying and addressing possible threats in these areas;
- Investigate the possibility of searching for Blue Cranes in south-eastern Angola;
- Monitor numbers during both the wet season and the dry season (when the cranes are more concentrated around water points),

to obtain more accurate total population estimates;

- Follow up on the reports of hunting of Blue Cranes in areas outside the Park, with appropriate law enforcement where necessary; and
  - Increase awareness and educational activities to address the illegal hunting of cranes and other birds outside the Park.
- Without the invaluable, ongoing assistance and support of the many partners in this initiative, it would not be possible to implement the above actions.



An exciting new record for Etosha National Park: Wattled Cranes (the pair in the centre) together with Blue Cranes at Andoni waterhole in April 2013. However, the Blue Crane may be facing extinction in Namibia (photo by Ann Scott)



A pair of Blue Cranes with tiny chicks at Charitsaub in Etosha on 17 January 2013 (photo by Wilferd Versfeld)

Blue Cranes are recorded at times (usually in winter, but not every winter) in the Lake Oponono area. This year there are large expanses of water at this site, but the water levels are lower than in previous years due to the current drought conditions (photo by Nad Brain)

# Notes from the Southern Drakensberg, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

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It is time, once again, to prepare for the Wattled Crane nesting season in the Southern Drakensberg and Natal Midlands. Notably, some birds in the Southern Berg have begun to nest and it seems that in the Natal Midlands, chicks are already hatching.

For me, this is a special time of the year as we become really involved in the birds' lives and share their trials and tribulations. I often wish more people could experience visiting the nests for measurement of eggs or monitoring the chicks once they have hatched. On the one hand, one intimately experiences their vulnerability and on the other hand, one has to marvel at their determination. Cranes are awesome!

In August last year, snow, up to 70 cm in places, engulfed nests in the Kokstad area and then a cold period followed. On one of the farms, a breeding pair failed to produce a chick because conditions at the nesting site became unfavourable. When I collected the egg, which was well past its due date, I found it to be rotten. Thereafter, the birds left the nest and were not seen for quite some time. Later on in November, some two months later, the birds were seen again, this time with a chick. It appears they had found a new nesting site in the wetland and nested for a second time that season. Not even the farmer knew of their second attempt. This goes to show that experienced adult birds can have very successful breeding strategies if the conditions in wetlands are conducive. The problem is, however, that there has been a dramatic loss of wetlands which meet their breeding requirements. The slow creep by humans into their world has precipitated the ultimate battle, that of survival. While so many people care about the plight of the cranes we are slow to admit that it is our very activities and behaviour that triggers this loss of habitat. Ironically, even people who have been brought up with cranes on their land, fail or refuse to make this connection as they continue to transform their lands and wetlands to make space for producing the agricultural products all of us want.



A Wattled Crane pair with a chick in the Southern Drakensberg (Photo by Cobus Theron)

In Underberg in the Southern Drakensberg, a pair of Wattled Cranes regularly nests in a wetland very close to town. While they have largely been unsuccessful in raising chicks, they return to nest year after year. The wetland is, by no means, ideal because it is small and there are power lines running overhead. It is surrounded by agricultural lands and, by all accounts, it is a busy farm with a lot of activities taking place most of the time. Yet the birds nest here, even though it is very different from most other nesting sites in the region. As a relative newcomer to the field of crane biology, I find this intriguing. Are the conditions here really suitable for the birds, despite my concerns about the integrity of this wetland? Or could it be that all the more suitable sites

are already occupied by other cranes? Perhaps there are factors beyond science which also play a role of which we are unaware.

In my project area, Wattled Cranes are experiencing radical and rapid change. Their world will never be the same and their habitat is slowly being consumed. While our project in this area is an intervention to stem loss of habitat, it will remain to be seen how effective our intervention will be in the long run.

By the time you read this article, we will have taken to the sky, as we have been doing every year, for the past twenty years, to assess the crane population and inspect nest sites from the discomfort of a small aeroplane. I will never miss this opportunity to see so many of the cranes in my area in one day. While this exercise gives us the best and most accurate data on Wattled Crane numbers, we still find juveniles from time to time that we cannot account for in the aerial survey. This gives me great hope because it tells me that there are still some places where the cranes nest that we have not yet found. Let us hope it stays this

# Crowned cranes confiscated from traffickers in Guinea to be released into the wild!

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The objective of the GALF Project (Guinée Application de la Loi Faunique), launched by Wara Conservation through transfer of experience of NGO LAGA (Last Great Ape Organization), is to protect endangered species against wildlife traffickers in the Republic of Guinea by strengthening the enforcement of the Wildlife Law.

The goal is to identify and prosecute individuals involved in the trafficking of live apes, ivory, skins, birds, shark fins and other wildlife products. On January 29, 2013 in Conakry, a joint operation of INTERPOL, the Ministry of Environment, Justice and the GALF Project resulted in the arrest of two bird dealers and seizure of more than 150 birds including turaco, ostriches, parrots, raptors and crowned cranes. Offenders were taken to the Court of First Instance Dixinn and judgment is yet to be delivered. With the support of World Parrots Trust, GALF rehabilitated birds with the intention of releasing them into the wild. Ninety-five percent of the confiscated animals have already been released.



The two Black Crowned Cranes confiscated from illegal wildlife traders (Photo supplied by Charlotte Houpline)



An enclosure constructed to house the cranes during their rehabilitation (Photo supplied by Charlotte Houpline)

GALF Project staff decided to transfer two Black Crowned Cranes to the Marine Protected Area (MPA) of Delta Capatchez, the only place in Guinea with a population of crowned cranes. After two-day journey using a 4x4 vehicle and a boat, the mission arrived in Yongolsal where the base of the MPA is located. When the confiscation took place, one crane already had a good flight capacity while the second needed time to be able to fly again. Following the technical advice of International Crane Foundation, GALF built a large enclosure where the cranes are being rehabilitated. After several months of rehabilitation, they are now able to fly well and are ready to be released into the wild.

A crane sub-population exists in the plains of Coussin, two hours by boat from Yongolsal. It is at this location that the cranes will be released, like so many other endangered species. The actions of the GALF Project, the only organization that fights against wildlife crime in Guinea, have led to the arrest of 43 traffickers, the conviction and imprisonment for some of them and the confiscation of hundreds of kilograms of ivory, lion and leopard skins and several hundreds of live animals including birds, chimpanzees, crocodiles and turtles. Guinea has been identified as a hub for illegal wildlife trade internationally. Following serious violations of the provisions of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Guinea, on March 2, 2013, heavy sanctions were imposed on the country; suspension of trade effectively blocking import and export of 35,000 species listed by CITES.

# Des grues couronnées issus du trafic confisqués en Guinée et bientôt relâché dans la nature !

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L'objectif du projet GALF (Guinée- Application de la Loi Faunique), lancé par Wara Conservation grâce au transfert d'expérience de l'ong LAGA (Last Great Ape Organisation), est de protéger les espèces menacées de la République de Guinée contre la criminalité faunique en renforçant la mise en œuvre de la loi sur la faune.

Le but est d'identifier, d'inculper et de faire condamner les trafiquants majeurs de grands singes vivants, d'ivoire, de peaux de félins, d'oiseaux, d'ailerons de requins et autres produits fauniques illicites. Le 29 janvier 2013 à Conakry, une opération mixte d'INTERPOL, du Ministère de l'Environnement, de la Justice et du Projet GALF a abouti à l'arrestation de deux trafiquants d'oiseaux et saisi plus de 150 oiseaux dont des Touraco, autruches, perroquets, rapaces et grues couronnées. Les délinquants ont été déférés au Tribunal de Première Instance de Dixinn et leur jugement est actuellement en cours. Avec l'appui de World Parrots Trust, GALF a réhabilité les oiseaux afin de les relâcher dans la nature. 95% d'entre eux ont déjà été relâchés.



Les deux grues couronnées noires confisqués à des commerçants illicites d'espèces sauvages (Photo fournie par Charlotte Houpline)

Une enceinte construite pour abriter les grues pendant leur réadaptation (Photo fournie par Charlotte Houpline)

GALF a transféré les 2 grues couronnées noires dans l'aire marine protégée (AMP) du Delta du Capatchez, le seul endroit en Guinée qui abrite une population de grues couronnées. Après deux jours de trajet en 4x4 et en pirogue avec les grues, la mission est arrivée à Yongolsa où se trouve la base de l'AMP. Quand la confiscation a eu lieu, une des grues avait déjà une bonne capacité de vol alors que la deuxième avait besoin de temps pour pouvoir voler de nouveau. En suivant les conseils techniques d'International Cranes Foundation, GALF a construit un grand enclos où les grues ont été soignées. Après plusieurs mois de réhabilitation, elles sont aujourd'hui capables de voler parfaitement et sont prêtes à être relâchées dans la nature.

Une population de grues se trouve dans les plaines de Coussin à deux heures de navigation de Yongolsa, c'est là que dans les prochains jours devrait être relâché ces deux grues victimes du trafic, comme tant d'autres espèces en voie d'extinction. Les actions du projet GALF, seule organisation qui lutte contre la criminalité faunique en Guinée, ont permis d'obtenir l'arrestation de 43 trafiquants, la condamnation à la prison ferme pour certains d'entre eux et la confiscation de plusieurs centaines de kilos d'ivoire, de peaux de lion et panthère et de plusieurs centaines d'animaux vivants dont des oiseaux, chimpanzés, crocodiles et tortues. La Guinée est identifiée comme une plaque tournante du commerce illégal des espèces à l'échelle internationale. Suite à de graves violations dans la gestion de la Convention CITES en Guinée (Convention sur le commerce internationale des espèces de faune et de flore menacées d'extinction), le 2 mars 2013 les Etats Parties ont infligé à la Guinée une lourde sanction : une suspension de commerce qui bloque désormais l'importation et l'exportation des 35.000 espèces listées par la CITES.

## Putting African cranes on the same page

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In all African countries, conservationists, researchers and caring folk are worried about the state of crane populations and acting fast to conserve them.

The Endangered Grey Crowned Crane is found across 13 countries in southern and eastern Africa (Botswana, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe). The distributions of Black Crowned Cranes and Wattled Cranes also transcend boundaries of many countries. As crane guardians separated by distance and borders, we need to avoid inventing the wheel over and over again when it comes to monitoring the species and deciding on effective conservation activities. We can also speed up the conservation process by sharing ideas, learning from each other and working together. As a member of the African Crane Conservation Programme, I have the exciting role of bringing together ideas on crane monitoring and then disseminating our united ideas to those who want to partake with collecting consistent crane data in Africa.

Conservation requires knowledge. For conservation of cranes we need to know population numbers of the cranes, where they are, how long they live, how many young they produce and much more. To thoroughly understand the crane population trends we need to collect good quality data from sub populations in different countries. Importantly, the data need to be comparable so it is a good idea to collect data using the same methods across countries whenever possible. Researchers have been working on cranes all over the world, as well as in Africa, for decades. Their knowledge gives us a baseline from which we can develop research on African cranes. We reviewed tried and tested methods used by experienced crane researchers to develop data collection protocols, protocols that can now be used by all crane researchers in Africa. As a companion to these protocols, I created field datasheets and data capturing templates for field observers wanting to record the cranes and breeding behaviours.

The more people who use these datasheets, the better for our cranes. Not only will it assist with consistent data collection continent wide but, I hope that folk using these tools will add new ideas to improve the methods and datasheet design. Anybody wishing to use the field data sheets is welcome to send me an email.

Ultimately all our data may be amalgamated to form an Africa wide crane database. Such a database will go a long way to helping us understand the crane biology, population trends and threats faced by African cranes, information that is crucial for deciding on effective conservation activities of these elegant feathered creatures.

A nesting Grey Crowned Crane: Monitoring breeding and survival of young gives us information on whether population numbers may increase through addition of young to the population (Photo by Osiman Mabhachi)



# Grey Crowned Crane Festival in China

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I attended the Grey Crowned Crane Festival held at the Shijiazhuang and Beijing Zoos in China as a representative of the International Crane Foundation / Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership. This report summarises activities undertaken during the two-day celebration (15-16 June 2013).

Events at both venues were well-organised. Zoo officials and invited dignitaries delivered speeches in support of the event and conservation during the opening ceremony. After the opening ceremony, The Director of the Shijiazhuang Zoo, two students and I, did a performance on how crane pairs and flocks move when they are displaying. A ceremony was held to honour the Zoo for its contribution in the conservation of the Grey Crowned Crane. I delivered presentations tailor-made for school pupils at Shijiazhuang Zoo. My presentation to Beijing Zoo staff covered broad issues about Grey Crowned Crane conservation in Africa.



A government official delivering a speech during the opening ceremony

We also had an opportunity to engage the audience during the festivities and everything went well. The interactive program and the interpretation for the benefit of school children were facilitated professionally. My presentation to students was well-received by students. They showed keen interest and asked many questions thereafter. Artwork on the Grey Crowned Crane was displayed so as to communicate the universal message of conservation to those that attended the festival.



Students performing on stage



African crane art displays at the Shijiazhuang Zoo

Certificates were awarded to zoos that are affiliated to the Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens. Crane books were also presented to students and VIPs and winners of the crowned crane drawing competition got awards. The response from the audience was encouraging and credit goes to Mr. Kinder JD Shu, Programme Associate with the International Crane Foundation, who did a sterling job as a translator. The zoo management invested a lot of time, material and human resources to make the festival a success. This was such an amazing celebration with lots of aspects which can be duplicated in other countries, particularly in Africa.

After the festival, I had the opportunity to visit the Great Wall of China, Ming Palace and Tombstones, the Summer Palace and the Beijing Olympic Stadium. I observed throughout my stay that Chinese people are very friendly as they would go out of their way as to ensure that I was comfortable. It was a great experience that I will remember for many years to come.

# The Driefontein Grasslands declared a Ramsar Site

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The Driefontein Grasslands is a key breeding and foraging area for two crane species found in Zimbabwe, the Grey Crowned Crane *Balearica regulorum* and the Wattled Crane *Bugeranus carunculatus*. The area is an Important Bird Area (IBA), an area of international importance that supports various bird species and other biodiversity. The greater part of the IBA (more than 80%) is being communally managed, while less than 20% of the total area is privately owned and managed. The Driefontein Grasslands IBA is characterised by a mosaic landscape that consist of open wet grasslands, cultivated lands and small pockets of miombo woodlands scattered throughout the area. The wetlands and wet grasslands, which form the most sensitive ecosystem in this IBA, provide the crucial habitat that supports populations of the globally threatened Wattled Crane and Grey Crowned Crane.



Crane habitat in the Driefontein Grasslands (Photo by Togarasei Fakarayi)

Agricultural land use is the major driver of crane habitat loss in the Driefontein Grasslands. Despite the fact that the conversion of some wetlands to croplands results in the formation of a new foraging crane habitat, loss of natural breeding and foraging habitats of cranes remains an issue of concern. Wetlands, being sensitive habitats are difficult to restore once degraded. It is against this background that we have realised the need to mainstream policy and advocacy component in our conservation programme to help influence wetland conservation in Driefontein Grasslands IBA and at both national and international levels.

Over the years, efforts to save wetlands in the Driefontein Grasslands involved stakeholder engagement. Much of conservation work was mainly focused on awareness raising among resource users, promoting co-existence of cranes and communal farmers in the IBA, species and habitat monitoring and enhancing linkages between human livelihoods and conservation. Over the years not much attention was paid to policy issues, an important pillar that helps to control drivers of habitat change and influence conservation. In recent years, conservation work in Driefontein Grasslands has been broadened to include policy and advocacy approach. This entails wider engagement of decision makers in wetland conservation and management. Decision makers were engaged both at local and national levels to facilitate positive change for wetland conservation in the Driefontein Grasslands and other priority conservation sites in the country. This was crucial in effecting behavioural change for positive conservation outcomes.

Through our efforts in highlighting the importance of Driefontein Grasslands for cranes and people, the area was listed a Ramsar Site in 2012, under the Convention of Wetlands of International Importance (also known as the Ramsar Convention). The Ramsar Convention was signed in 1971 in Iran and seeks to promote national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and associated biodiversity. As a way to enhance protection of wetlands, the Convention maintains a list of Wetlands of International Importance. The wetlands in Driefontein Grasslands are now on this important list, following the ratification of this convention by the Zimbabwean Government in 2011. The Driefontein Grasslands was included on this list of wetlands, first by the Zimbabwean Government after rigorous consideration of the status of the site, and then forwarded to the Ramsar Secretariat. This was backed by our knowledge of the site, previous conservation work, presence of globally threatened

two crane species and the Secretary bird, as part of our continuous policy and advocacy work. As conservation practitioners, we welcome with great pleasure the designation of the Driefontein Grasslands as the Ramsar Site.

The Driefontein Grasslands is among the first seven selected and listed Ramsar Sites in Zimbabwe. Recognition of the importance of wetlands in the area comes at a time when more attention should be focused on wetland habitats for the benefit of the two lovely cranes. The focus now is centred on ensuring full implementation of local policies on wetland conservation in Driefontein Grasslands and beyond to safeguard crane habitats. We hope that commitment shown by the government of Zimbabwe following signing of the Convention will bring concerted effort in promoting wetland conservation in the country.

Finally, we acknowledge that this Convention as well as local policies on wetland conservation can be fulfilled if they are well accepted by the local stakeholders mainly communities living in the Driefontein Grasslands IBA. There is need for more awareness raising on wetland conservation in Driefontein to bring all stakeholders on board, taking into consideration the new obligations under the Ramsar Convention. We have no doubt that this will help strengthen our crane conservation programme and make a difference in this IBA.



Vegetable production: Wetlands in the Driefontein Grasslands provide multiple ecosystem services  
(Photo by Togarasei Fakarayi)

## Conservation of Black Crowned Cranes in West Africa

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The Wetlands International Africa office and the BirdLife International 'Conservation of Migratory Birds' project have launched a new initiative in the coastal zone of West Africa to conserve the Vulnerable Black Crowned Crane *Balearica pavonina*. The project will focus on the Senegal Delta, the Casamance region of Senegal and the rice-fields and floodplains of Guinea-Bissau and western Guinea. This region supports the most significant sub-populations of Black Crowned Cranes in West Africa, where they are otherwise only patchily distributed until another significant sub-population much further east in the Lake Chad basin.

The Black Crowned Crane is in decline across West Africa, largely due to habitat loss, domestication and illegal trade of live birds. The coastal rice-growing zone of the western zone of West Africa remains an important stronghold for the species. The project aims to determine the current distribution and status of the Black Crowned Crane (breeding and non-breeding) in the coastal zone of West Africa; determine the scale of domestication and trade and an understanding of its cultural roots and establish habitat use in both breeding and non-breeding seasons. It then plans to develop specific conservation plans for cranes at key sites; improve

awareness of cranes and of their wetland habitats through community meetings and other awareness activities; and improve protection status of cranes and other species through local site guardians.

The project involves national partners in all participating countries, including national / local NGOs, which will execute activities on the ground. Black Crowned Cranes play an important role in local culture and tradition, so local engagement will be essential for conservation success. The project is supported financially by the North of England Zoological Society (NEZS) / Chester Zoo and the MAVA Foundation, and takes place in 2013 and 2014.



Black Crowned Crane pair and a juvenile at the Plaine de Monchon, Guinea  
(photo by Menno Hornman)

## The winding road to conservation success

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On the 28th of August 2012, the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group celebrated its 20th anniversary. It was an event to tell the world how we have worked hard to persuade communities to conserve wetlands and cranes despite the several challenges we encountered. During the celebrations, we told our story of how our work has come a long way in not only addressing the conservation challenges affecting the wetlands but also the birds, mammals and other wildlife that is found in our area and beyond. We started as a very small project, involving a few individuals but we succeeded in recruiting new members and introduced our conservation activities in other areas. We are now actively involved in conservation activities in the majority of counties where Grey Crowned Cranes are found.

When we started our project in the early 1990s, the fragile wetlands, indigenous aquatic plants and animals were threatened by human activities in the Kipsaina area and areas bordering the Saiwa National Park. Due to human activities, the numbers of species dependent on wetlands were declining, including the number of Grey Crowned Crane breeding pairs in both the protected and unprotected zones. This was attributed to lack of appreciation of the importance of wetlands as most users regarded wetlands as wastelands. We encountered various challenges as we conveyed the conservation message. Our message has been and continues to be that conserving wetlands is enhancing the lives of people and saving species from extinction. One thing we learnt is that change does not take place overnight. It is a long process that calls for patience and persistence.



Grey Crowned Crane foraging at one of the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group's project sites (photo by Osiman Mabhachi)

The message we put across during the celebrations is that we can still do more. Local communities now have high hopes and are determined. The same motto we adopted 20 years, “touch one, touch all”, is still applicable. We are glad that the local community understand the challenges that our three flagship species; the Grey Crowned Crane, Sitatunga and De Brazza’s Monkey, meaning that the conservation message has been disseminated to many parts of our project area. When we carry out our programmes and interact with the communities, we realise that they are appreciating the need to conserve not just the wetlands and cranes but also the other natural resources found in the area. We have gained valuable skills and knowledge through our seminars, workshops, lectures, environmental education, film shows and visits to sites of conservation projects and other nature protection activities.

Some community members have adopted new ventures such as wood-lot establishment to address fuel wood problem, conservation farming, craft-making to mention a few. This will have conservation impacts in the long run and has helped in generating income thus improving communities’ livelihoods. The youth, both in school and out of school, have been involved as they are the future leaders. With support from our partners and building on our good results, our group has scaled up the activities to cover more counties in the region. Finally, this noble work would not have succeeded without the determination and commitment by all the stakeholders we have engaged to save the three flagship species. Our new motto for crane conservation is: “Take care, we share the wetland”.



Large sections of the Saiwa Swamp have been conserved through the efforts of the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group (photo by Osiman Mabhachi)

# Excluded and doomed? The plight of cranes outside project focal areas

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Despite a wide range of challenges that hinder identification and mapping of all crane sites in Africa, key sites that support nationally significant populations are generally known in almost all crane range states. Environmental organisations involved crane conservation have, over the years, developed criteria for prioritising sites, and hence crane populations, for conservation. This prioritisation is done to ensure that the limited resources available for conservation are used in a cost-effective manner. Apart from taking into consideration the status and distribution of the cranes, other factors are also considered in the prioritisation. They include human capacities, social structures, administrative boundaries, biophysical constraints, political and cultural issues and a lot more other considerations. Prioritisation inherently entails choosing some focal sites and excluding others. Exclusion is unavoidable and is based on many assumptions and implicit trade-offs. It also means little or no action to protect thousands of cranes found in landscapes outside project focal areas across the continent.

Since mid-2012, the International Crane Foundation / Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership has been engaging its partners in Africa with a view to getting data to be used to update the Grey Crowned Crane distribution maps. I have been liaising with partners in Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe in this regard and have had the opportunity to look at some historical records of sightings, maps and publications from the different countries. I have also been doing basic comparisons of historical records and the present situation focusing on crane population sizes as well as distribution and condition of crane sites. This exercise, simple as it is, has helped me gain an insight into changes that have occurred over the past 20-30 years. Sadly, population have declined as large wetlands were transformed into agricultural landscapes and small wetlands fragmented so much that breeding pairs cannot nest there anymore. It is also depressing to note that not much is known about what really happened to the populations that seem to have vanished. This is one of the contentious issues in crane conservation - what really happens to cranes when their habitat is affected and no longer meets their ecological requirements? In the absence of empirical evidence, speculative stories have been told and “theories” developed based on anecdotal information. This highlights the importance maintaining databases of wetlands that support cranes.

As the Grey Crowned Crane becomes the focal crane species in many countries, it is important to alert conservationists about the plight of populations found in areas that are rarely visited, rarely thought about, and, in some cases, not even known. To highlight that there are many of such sites in Africa, I cite five specific examples. First, in his study that covered much of Uganda, William



Grey Crowned Crane breeding site in Baringo County, Kenya (photo by Osiman Mabhachi)

Olupot identified crane sites in 27 of the country's 30 districts – almost every district has cranes! Whilst Nature Uganda's conservation outreach covers the species' main strongholds (the south-western region), there are many other areas that are yet to be covered. In Zimbabwe, birders have, over the years, submitted records of crane sightings from sites located in five provinces. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints, BirdLife Zimbabwe's conservation project currently covers one area, the Driefontein Grasslands. In South Africa, it is known that there are isolated populations of Grey Crowned Cranes in rural landscapes in the Eastern Cape. Not much has been done to establish the status of the population in recent years. On my first visit to Rwanda, I saw one pair foraging in a rice paddy on the outskirts of Kigali. Most wetlands in Rwanda have been degraded a result of agriculture and one wonders how many pairs and flocks depend on wetlands that are devoid of natural vegetation. My colleague from Kenya, Maurice Wanjala, gave me a list of sites where cranes he has observed cranes during his trips from Kitale to Nairobi. His records are based on the counts he did while driving and it is obvious that there are other crane sites that cannot be viewed from the road. These are just but a few examples and there are other populations in countries that we have not explored – Congo and Angola included.

We know they are there – hundreds of them, if not thousands. Since some of them are found at sites located very far from our project areas, nobody takes the initiative to monitor them and act when there is an urgent need for intervention. A significant percentage of them thrive in rural landscapes where they face all sorts of threats – poisons, arrows, stones (projectiles), disturbances, capture, harassment etc. What should be done then? The ideal solution is expand our geographical coverage and engaged more in-country partners. That obviously entails securing more human, financial and material resources. It also involves generating greater interest in crane and wetland conservation among local stakeholders. We know we cannot cover all the sites but there are some emerging and promising conservation approaches, including promotion of local custodianship and use of citizen science approaches to track population trends and changes in habitat conditions. Every crane counts, and as such it is important to develop strategies at national level so that crane populations that we do not focus on, due to circumstances beyond our control, are not doomed.



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