



A large group of 25 Wattled Cranes at Nyae Nyae pans on 11/1/07; this is unusual as the cranes normally arrive only in March/April, in small groups (Photo: Dries Alberts)



A pair of Wattled Cranes on the edge of Nyae Nyae Pan with a flock of flamingos in the background as a rain shower passes by on 25/1/07 (Photo: Dries Alberts)

### WATTLED CRANES AT NYAE NYAE PANS KEEP US GUESSING!

**Dries Alberts** MET Parks & Wildlife, Tsumkwe  
Email: mettskwe@iway.na

#### Exciting news!

12/1/07: The first report from Tsumkwe in this new year. Hoping it will be a good one for all of you. In December we had 145 mm of rain and our season total is now at 184 mm. On 11/1/07 I visited the Nyae Nyae and Khebi pan system and discovered the following:

- The Nyae Nyae pan itself has had water in it from December 2005 (it has been full for 13 months now and will remain full probably up to August, depending on this year's rain).
- We still have about 3 000 Flamingo on the pan system with lots and lots of young. They have not left Nyae Nyae for over 10 months now. Have they bred here? If so, it would probably be for the first time in history.
- Saw 46 Wattled Cranes - for the first time ever, so early in the year. They normally start "arriving" around March/April and in small numbers. This is very strange. Also saw the biggest group ever (25 in one group).

Will stay in contact as the rains bless our country - expecting heavy downpours today and into the weekend.

23/1/07

Went down to Nyae Nyae last week Friday (19/1/07) - found the pan almost dry! Approximately 10% left in Nyae Nyae itself with another pan about 10% full too.

We received 8 mm rain yesterday and it is looking good to rain today as well.

26/1/07

We have been blessed this week as we had not seen the sun once - during the whole week! We have had 65 mm rain from Monday to Thursday, and it is looking very promising today. Khaudum camp just reported over the radio that they had received 50 mm just this morning! They are about 140 km north of us, so hopefully it will come this way.

Yesterday I went down to the pans. Took a photo of 2 Wattled Cranes (see above) with the rain and flamingos in the background - I like it!

All cranes counted on 25/1/07 were between 14:00 (group of 32) and 17:00 (on my return journey, found the same numbers as in the beginning of the inspection). So, their numbers correlated exactly - at least between 14:00 and 17:00.

I did not visit all the pans in the area as the place is starting to become very muddy. You will see on the photo Nyae Nyae is not full, but the rest of the area has lots and lots of water (floodplains).

#### Wattled Crane counts at Nyae Nyae January 2007

Date	Total	Group sizes
11/1/07	47	25, 11, 3, 3, 3, 2
12/1/07	59	35, 8, 3, 3, 3, 3, 2, 2
19/1/07	63	3, 5 (1 juv), 52, 3
25/1/07	57	2, 32, 3 (1 juv), 9, 5 (1 juv), 3 (1 juv), 3 (1 juv)



### Additional crane sightings at Nyae Nyae

**Dave Ward** (email [dward@iway.na](mailto:dward@iway.na))

While I was doing field work in Nyae Nyae Conservancy I recorded the following:

- 20/01/2007 - 14 Wattled Cranes (3 sub-adults) feeding in open grassland on the southern side of Nyae Nyae pan (S17 43.221 E23 21.552).
- 21/01/2007 - 16 Wattled Cranes (3 sub-adults; mostly the same group as the day before) feeding in open grassland on the southern side of Nyae Nyae pan (S19 46.253 E20 28.548).
- 21/01/2007 - 3 Wattled Cranes (2 adults and 1 sub-adult) feeding on open grassland west of Nyae Nyae pan (S19 44.428 E20 28.823).
- 21/01/2007 - 22 Wattled Cranes (16 [3 juv.], 5 & 22) flying over western side of Nyae Nyae pan in late evening. Poor light made it impossible to note age structure (S19 43.935 E20 29.068).

### More on flamingos

**Dries Alberts** (email above)

18/1/07: Did a patrol to the north and found about 200 flamingo on the Klein Dobe pans (which was a bit strange for me).

Dave Ward also said about 50% of all the flamingos at Nyae Nyae are young and that the Lesser Flamingo numbers are quite low in comparison to the Greater.

### Discussion - cranes

**Dr Chris Brown** (email [cb@nnf.org.na](mailto:cb@nnf.org.na))

Fascinating to hear about the good rains, wetland condition and particularly about the responses of flamingos and cranes. Do the cranes seem to be in groupings of 3, ie two adults and a young? I realize that there are some big flocks, but within these it may be possible to see sub-groupings. It would be interesting to age the birds. I had always assumed that the birds at Nyae-Nyae were post breeding, and moved off their breeding grounds fairly soon after their young were able to fly properly. Perhaps this is not the case. Perhaps they move to Nyae-Nyae for a few months just prior to moving back to the breeding grounds? Your observations make it even more important to try and get some satellite transmitters on a few birds to help us understand what is happening – where they come from, go to etc.

**Ann Scott** (email [ecoserve@iway.na](mailto:ecoserve@iway.na))

Do you have any idea when the first Wattled Cranes arrived? I wonder if this was triggered by the good rains in December, or by conditions elsewhere?

During our last census at Nyae Nyae on 31/5/06 (see newsletter No. 22, October 2006) we counted a total of 76 cranes, already with 3 groups of 2 birds and 3x3 birds in the morning count, and 6x2 birds and 2x3 birds in the afternoon count. This was after good rains in January-March 2006 (newsletter No. 19, June 2006). According to Veronica Shivute's study (newsletter No. 12, August 2005), numbers at Nyae Nyae reached their maximum in April and May 2004, with the highest rainfall in January; and a maximum in February and March 2005, with the highest rainfall in March. It will be interesting to see how this year's pattern unfolds!

We have already started working with Kerry Morrison of the ICF/EWT Partnership - African Cranes, Wetlands and Communities (ACWAC) on a funding proposal to fit several PTTs to Wattled Cranes in Namibia, Botswana and Zambia. Looks like this initiative is a priority!

### How do we distinguish juvenile Wattled Cranes?

**Dr George Archibald** (email [george@savingcranes.org](mailto:george@savingcranes.org))

Immatures have totally white heads. Gradually the whole thing turns grey - not from the back to the front but all over in sprinkles. All of the birds in the photographs seem to have grey on top of the head. Now if you can determine light grey from dark grey, the light grey could be immatures changing. How exciting to have such a large and gorgeous flock! Here are some ways to determine whether one of the members of a group of three is a juvenile:

- The inner tertial feathers of juveniles are usually shorter than those of adults.
- There might be a few grey feathers remaining in the "cap".
- Adults continue to occasionally feed the juvenile until the juvenile leaves the family unit.

**Kerry Morrison** (email [kerry@ewt.org.za](mailto:kerry@ewt.org.za))

What a lovely picture. However, REALLY difficult to see adult and juveniles. The white heads vs grey heads are almost impossible to see. The size of the bird would not make a difference at all. At least one is definitely a juvenile – it looks a bit more scraggly.

### Discussion - flamingos

**Dr Chris Brown** (email above)

In the case of the flamingos, have the birds built nests in the pans? If so, this is the first recorded



breeding of flamingos in that system. There is no evidence of old nests, and these clay mounds usually last for decades. If you can find any nests, it would be great to get some photos and for you to write a short note on this occurrence for publication.

**Keith Wearne** (email cetn@iway.na)

The place to look for flamingo nests would be on an island; anything close to the shore would be preyed upon, so not likely to be there. Of course the easiest option would be to fly over the area, even later in the year as these nests apparently last for years.

**Dr Rob Simmons** (email Rob.Simmons@uct.ac.za)

There are many records of birds passing through this pan system and if you look at the big picture you will see it is well placed as a stop-over between Etosha and Sua in Botswana. So we expect lots of birds there from time to time. A similar breeding event was reported from the Orange River in 1959 (based on grey chicks) but no evidence of nests and eggs was ever found and it was later thought that the youngsters had flown there (weakly) from some other location. Grey downy chicks can fly!! Believe me we have tried to round them up and we were a little dismayed to see them take off!!

### WORLD WETLANDS DAY – 2 FEB!

World Wetlands Day is celebrated on 2 February 2007. This annual event marks the signing of the Convention on Wetlands on 2 February 1971 in the Iranian City of Ramsar. The 2007 World Wetlands Day theme is *Fish for Tomorrow?*

This theme draws attention to the intimate link between healthy fish stocks and healthy wetlands. This year the focus is being placed on estuaries and associated wetlands as vital components of the life support systems for fish and other species, many of which have direct value to people. However, increasingly unsustainable development and water use reduces the ability of these systems to continue providing these vital ecosystem services.

### BLUE CRANE NEWS FROM ETOSHA

**Wilferd Versfeld** (email versfeld@mweb.com.na)  
15/12/06: The two blue cranes at Twee Palms have made a nest again.

**Immanuel Kapofi** (email kapofii@mweb.com.na)  
9/1/07: The rain is promising to be good and cranes can be viewed at Andoni water hole. They do not appear to be nesting yet at either Andoni and Twee

Palms but we are still monitoring their habitats and movements. We have received rainfall as follows: Namutoni = 151.9 mm, King Nehale Gate = 179.9 mm, Van Lindequist Gate = 248.9 mm.  
17/1/07: Rainfall 240 mm Namutoni, 224 Van Lindequist gate, 286 mm King Nehale gate.  
25/1/07: We have received over 50mm today and it's still raining.

### BLUE CRANE HABITAT USE

**Kerryn Morrison** (email above)

With regards to Blue Crane habitat use. I do think (my opinion) that Blue Cranes often select for more overgrazed grasslands as they can see further, the chicks can walk easier (and if the grassland have interspersed tufts of long grass, can hide when very young) and also they often find more dung beetles because of animal movement in the area. They are not particularly good indicators of good veld condition! I do not have any reference for cranes eating dung beetles and other insects around dung, but farmers are of the general opinion that that is what is happening and also what I have seen.

**Dr Rob Simmons** (email above)

If cranes do indeed take many dung beetles, this may explain the birds existence in Etosha but we have little data on this! I do agree that more disturbed areas seem to hold more cranes (in the Overberg, Western Cape anyway).

### CRANE SIGHTINGS FROM EAST CAPRIVI, JULY-DECEMBER 2006

**Dave Ward** (email above)

I have just returned from east Caprivi where I was doing the annual audit of conservancies Event Books for 2006. I have already sent you a list of crane sightings for east Caprivi from January to June 2006 (see newsletter No. 20, August 2006). Here are the sightings from the community game guards' Event Books from July to December 2006.

➤ **Malengalenga Conservancy:** 19/09/2006 - 14 adult Wattled Cranes feeding on open grassland (block 48 79).

➤ **Salambala Conservancy:** 25/09/2006 - 1 adult Crowned Crane feeding on open grassland (block 34 37).

No sightings from the following conservancies: Kwando, Sobbe, Mayuni, Mashi, Balyerwa, Wuparo, Mbara, Bamunu, Lusese, Mulisi, Nakabolelwa, Kasika and Impalila.

Thank you to all the conservancies for your interest!

