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## ANNUAL CRANE CENSUS MARCH 2015



Only 17 Blue Cranes were recorded during the latest census, together with one chick (*photo Ute von Ludwiger*)

Our combined ground/aerial census took place from 16-20 March 2015. The team consisted of Wilferd Versfeld, Holger Kolberg, Hanjo Böhme, Seth Guim, Ute von Ludwiger, our pilot Dr Nad Brain and Mike and Ann Scott.

Only three nests were produced this season, namely at Charitsaub, Salvadora and Halali Seepage. Only one chick resulted, from the faithful Charitsaub pair. The other two nests failed and both re-laid (2 eggs) that also failed. Interestingly, this is our first record of second clutches in Namibia (with only four other second clutches on record in Roberts VII). It is speculated that the low breeding success this year is related to the relatively dry summer.

We counted a total of 17 adults + 1 chick. The chick was still too small to ring, but hopefully this will take place before it fledges. The long flight on 19 March 2015 yielded only 2 Blue Cranes + 1 Wattled Crane at Andoni (18 30.83S 16 45.09E) and 3 Wattled Cranes at Oponono (18 20.92S 15 54.31E). The Lake Oponono area was extremely dry, with people and cattle at practically every source of water.



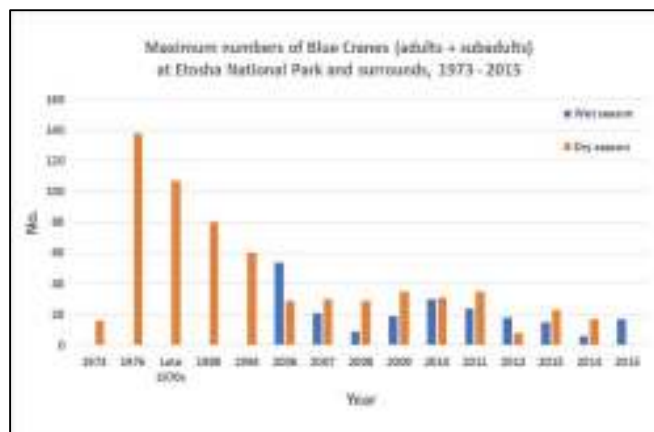
Top: The aerial survey team, L to R: Ann Scott, Seth Guim, Hanjo Böhme, Nad Brain (*pilot & photo*);  
Centre: The single chick that hatched this dry season, seeking the shade (*photo Ute von Ludwiger*); and  
Bottom: Part of the ground survey team with the chick, L to R: Ute von Ludwiger, Seth Guim, Hanjo Böhme, Holger Kolberg & Wilferd Versfeld (*photo Ann Scott*)

We saw large groups of pelicans some distance from the water; and two vulture groups (an unusual sighting here).

Nine ringed birds were recorded this season:

- NHH** (2007) & **NHF** (2006) at Charitsaub
- NHM** (2009) at Salvadora
- NHD** (2006) & **NBN** (2008) at Halali Seepage
- NBZ** (2008) at Chudop (non-breeding pair)
- NCL** (2014) & **NCK** (2014) in Halali/Rietfontein area (non-breeding subadults)
- An adult with **metal ring** only at Andoni

At present the causes for the decline of Blue Cranes in Namibia are still speculation, but believed to be a combination of factors ranging from increased competition and loss of habitat; illegal hunting outside Etosha; and the possible effects of environmental changes. Many thanks to our dedicated team for this ongoing effort! Special thanks to the Ministry of Environment & Tourism for logistical support, and to our pilot Nad Brain for the delicious campfire meals. The generous sponsorship of this combined survey by the Environmental Investment Fund of Namibia for the third consecutive year is acknowledged with sincere appreciation. We would also like to thank all our other donors for their ongoing contributions, in particular Mathias Stein and Barbara Hudec and the Hessische Gesellschaft für Ornithologie und Naturschutz e.V. (HGON) in Germany.



Above: Accolades to our pilot Dr Nad Brain for the many years of safe flying – and countless delicious dinners produced in his trusty "flying potjie";  
 Below: Another crane census comes to an end (photos Ann Scott)

Top to bottom: 1. Maximum numbers of Blue Cranes at Etosha NP and surrounds, 1973 – 2015 (NCWG data);  
 2. Very dry conditions at Oponono (photo Ann Scott)  
 3. Google earth map with position of three Wattled Cranes (left); two Blue Cranes + 1 Wattled Crane (right)  
 4. As for other birds, water is critical for the survival of Blue Cranes in such dry conditions (photo Ute von Ludwiger)



Two failed eggs from the second clutch at Halali Seepage (photo Ann Scott)



Ringed Blue Crane NBZ at Chudop; this pair did not breed this year (photo Ute von Ludwiger)

### CRANE AWARENESS EFFORTS

Promoting awareness amongst local communities about the plight of the Blue Crane has been targetted as a priority in our action plan, in view of the continued decline in numbers.

The Blue Crane is the subject of a striking display, produced by graphic artist & designer Saar Maritz of "saardesign", as part of a new awareness facility at Okaukuejo. Our taxidermy specimen (funded by the HGON & Partners) forms a focus for the display.

The Namutoni Environmental Education Centre (NEEC) has come to the fore with strong support for reaching these communities to the north of the Etosha Park who can influence the cranes when they visit these areas in winter. Young learners of all ages are the main target group for spreading the message.

Our popular crane activity book, which Kasha Ostbloom illustrated and helped us produce in 2005, has been reprinted. Two thousand copies (in English/Oshiwambo) have been provided to the NEEC to use as a basis for crane educational activities. The sponsorship of the Environmental Investment Fund of Namibia for the printing is acknowledged with gratitude. An article has also been produced for the journal of NEWS, Roan News. Recently the Namibia Bird Club made a generous donation of binoculars and a bird guidebook to Vilho Absalom, an Environmental Educator at the centre, for use in the above educational activities. Many thanks, Gudrun Middendorff and Hanjo Böhme, for arranging these useful gifts! Absalom and his groups can now hopefully spot all the Blue Cranes in their vicinity and provide regular reports. Other wetland birds will be included in these conservation activities (also see p4).



The beautiful new Blue Crane display at the Visitors' Centre at Okaukuejo is much admired (photo Ann Scott)



Hanjo Böhme hands over the generous donation of a bird guidebook and binoculars to Vilho Absalom on behalf of Namibia Bird Club (photo Ute von Ludwiger)

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## Blue Crane activities at Namutoni Environmental Education Centre

**Vilho Absalom** (email [absalomevilho@yahoo.com](mailto:absalomevilho@yahoo.com))

Namutoni Environmental Education Centre has included in their Primary School programme the Blue Crane activities. After receiving 2000 copies of the crane activity booklets,

we had a chance to test out the activities in the booklet with J.R. Cam Primary school, a school from southern Namibia. It turned out to be a very interesting activity for the learners. The pictures below show learners doing activities in the booklets.



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## CRANE SIGHTINGS

**Peter Bridgeford** (email [pmb@iway.na](mailto:pmb@iway.na))

\*This sighting was first recorded in the previous newsletter (No. 52, Sept 2014). Since then we have obtained feedback.

**27/1/14:** Three weeks ago I was in the National Archives, Windhoek looking for information about the old Nature Conservation and Tourism division. Found this in an Annual Report of 1972 by the ornithologist RAC Jensen: *Two Blue Cranes ringed in Etosha found shortly thereafter near Prieska and Britstown.* There was no other information.

**20/10/14 Dieter Oschadleus** (email [doschadleus@gmail.com](mailto:doschadleus@gmail.com))

In principle all ring recoveries have been captured in SAFRING. I have searched our database and cannot find any movements between Namibia and SA for this crane. Possibly the report by Jensen is an error? If there had been such movement, there is a good chance that it would have been published in Bokmakierie or Ostrich, and then listed in Roberts 7, but overlooking records is also possible. But, I have not found any references in an extensive bibliography suggesting any publication on crane movement around 1972. If Jensen had provided ring no., it would have been quick and easy to look up details.

**20/10/14 Les Underhill** (email [les.underhill@uct.ac.za](mailto:les.underhill@uct.ac.za))

My view is that such a report would have made ornithological headlines. In 1972 I was working with Clive Elliott on the computerisation of all ring recoveries. I spent enough time with Clive (we were both doing our PhDs, and I often went with him to mist-net weavers) that I can be pretty sure I would have heard of an event like this. I agree with Dieter; this sounds highly improbable, especially because it is not supported with ring numbers.

**14/10/14 Alrun zur Strassen** (email [alrun@iway.na](mailto:alrun@iway.na)) via Hanjo Böhme (email [gmbhanjo@iway.na](mailto:gmbhanjo@iway.na))

After reading Namibia Crane News No. 52, we report seeing a ringed crane on 22 March 2014.

Ed: (NHH [left]; report translated from German).

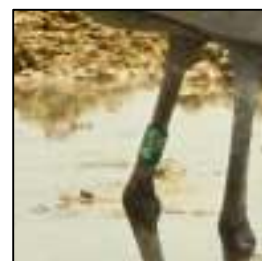


**17/10/14 Wilferd Versfeld** (email [wversfeld@met.na](mailto:wversfeld@met.na))

There are 6 Blue Cranes at Andoni, with lots of other animals. One crane had a ring.

**30/10/14 Hartmut Kolb** (mailto:[hh@info.na](mailto:hh@info.na))

On 24/10/14 I saw a ringed crane, N - M with an unringed mate, at Salvadora.



**31/10/14** Wilferd Versfeld

Yes, the bird NHM and its unringed mate are breeding at Salvadora. NHM was ringed in March 2009 and fitted with a VHF/radio transmitter (see attached photo by Ugo Arbieu which shows the transmitter antennae hanging in the tail feathers). The other two birds at Charitsaub/Sueda are HHN (should be NHH but the ring was put on upside down) and NHF. There were 5 cranes at Halali Seepage near the road, with rings NBN, NHD (breeds at Seepage) and NCJ or L and NCK, this year's chicks.



**22/10/14** Uschi Kirchner (email [uschi@safarisuk.ch](mailto:uschi@safarisuk.ch))

In Etosha I spotted some Blue Cranes: at Charitsaub two Blue Cranes - too far away to see rings; and at Salvadora two more Blue Cranes - one had no ring and the other a green ring.

**27/10/14** Wilferd Versfeld

There were 6 cranes at Andoni and on 22/10/14 there were 5 at Andoni: the only ring number was NBZ. Then I got an SMS from a tour guide that there was a pair at Salvadora and Charitsaub on Wednesday already. On Friday I found only the Charitsaub pair, NHH and NHF. I could not find the Salvadora pair.

**27/10/14** Hanjo Böhme

After a lengthy tour through Germany we are safely back in Namibia. As you can see in other parts of the world there are also Blue Cranes; these photos were taken in a bird sanctuary east of Frankfurt. The curator of this sanctuary visited Namibia twice already and was impressed by the Blue Cranes living freely in Etosha.



**31/10/14** Tim Smith ([timbothezimbo@hotmail.com](mailto:timbothezimbo@hotmail.com)) via Conrad Brain ([ConradB@wilderness.com.na](mailto:ConradB@wilderness.com.na))

I was in Etosha for a few days last week and was lucky enough to see Blue Cranes (my first time). There was a pair at Salvadora and I viewed them on 22 & 23rd October. One had a green tag - WHN or NHM, I am not sure. (Ed: NHM)



**14/11/14** Wilferd Versfeld

Been to Halali this morning, only the two pairs, Salvadora and Charitsaub found. Two cranes reported at Andoni yesterday and 6 along main road at Salvadora but could not find any this morning, could find none at Seepage.

**18/11/14**

I have just returned from the eastern side of the park. There are 2 Blue Cranes at Andoni water hole, no colour rings but one has a metal ring on right leg, and one Wattled Crane.

Namutoni water hole at the fort, 2 Blue Cranes but no colour rings.

Halali Seepage 2 Blue Cranes, NBN AND NHD.

The Salvadora pair were at the Y junction.

Charitsaub 2 Blue Cranes, NHH and NHF. The two were still together at Charitsaub water hole and in the area. There was a report of 2 at Two Palms but could not find them; and another group of 5 or 6 birds.

**27/11/14** Peter Fraser ([peter.fraser@wilkifrase.net](mailto:peter.fraser@wilkifrase.net))

If you are still collating sightings of colour ringed Blue Cranes, this bird was at Salvadora waterhole, Etosha, on 3/11/14. Its either HNN (down) or NNH (up)! White on Green.



**7/12/14** Phil Palmer

(sarah@sarahpalmer.orangehome.co.uk)

Just got home from leading the Bird Holidays 2014 tour (www.BirdHolidays.co.uk) to Namibia & had some great birds. My Blue Crane sightings for this year are as follows: a pair nesting at Salvadora on 1/12/14, one stood up to turn the eggs & we could not see any rings on either bird, but they were a little far & we didn't have a scope then. I have some good photographs of these. We found 3 birds together at Andoni on 4/12/14, with 1 Wattled Crane; 2 of the blue cranes had green rings, but again they were too far away to read.

**11/12/14** Wilferd Versfeld

I went east last week and the pair at Salvadora is starting to sit, saw one on nest at top edge of pool hiding in the sedges that the elephant flattened. Charitsaub pair still deciding. One Wattled Crane still at Andoni. The pair at Halali Seepage must also be sitting as I could not find them.

**2/1/15** Ann & Mike Scott (ecoserve@iway.na)

We recorded the following 13 Blue Cranes from 22-28/12/14:

Charitsaub: 1 on nest and 1 near nest (24/12: 1 bird; 27/12: 2 birds)

Salvadora: 1 on nest (ringed) and 1 near nest (unringed) (24/12 & 27/12)

Halali Seepage: 1 standing - near nest? (24/12 & 27/12)

Twee Palms: 1 on nest (25/12)

Fischer's Pan/Causeway/Fort NE: 2 (too far to see if ringed); also heard calling several times (27/12)

Rietfontein waterhole: 2 adults, 1 ringed on right, 1 unringed; + juv from previous season (ringed left) (27/12) - first time we have seen cranes here; all stripping the seeds from the long grass.

Andoni: 1 Wattled Crane (26/12); there was a report of 5 Blue Cranes at Andoni on 24/12 (W Versfeld)



**7/1/15** Wilferd Versfeld

The above cranes are what I have seen fairly regularly, my total is about 15 at the moment. Will be doing Oponono next week so will see what is there. Two cranes were also reported from Charl Marais Dam, but all I could find was a

Secretarybird and some White Storks so they are definitely moving around looking for water. Will keep an eye out for the hatching and then ten weeks after that is the date for ringing.

**8/1/15** Checked the cranes up to Halali today, the three at Rietfontein are last year's two chicks plus one subadult unringed (NCK & NCJ). There used to be 5 in that group so maybe the other two are nesting on the edge of the pan on the plain east of Rietfontein. The three nesting pairs are still all sitting, found the Seepage nest also.

**16/1/15**

Photograph of Salvadora nest on 16/1/15. The eggs from the first clutch have disappeared.



**22/1/15** Went to Halali this morning, Salvadora pair does not seem to have any chicks, they were on the plains south of the Y junction and watched them for a long time and saw no chicks. Seepage pair I could not find. It has not rained so they must be on the pan's edge not visible from the road. Charitsaub pair has one chick, very small, one to two days old at the water's edge. The 7 cranes are still at Andoni of which two are ringed, reported this morning and cranes heard at Namutoni but not seen.

**3/2/15**

Have just been out to Halali again. Charitsaub pair is on the plains, too far to see if chick still alive. Salvadora pair seems to be attempting a second laying, as the unringed bird was making a nest again to the north-west side of the waterhole, but not same place and went to sit down. Ringed bird close by. Seepage could not see any chicks as they were on the south side of the road and had a long look but could see no chicks, they were staying close to each other so chicks could be hidden?

**8/2/15** Chris Thorburn (chris.s.thorburn@gmail.com)

I recently enjoyed a wonderful 2 days in Etosha National Park with my wife. I noticed a flyer in the office at the Okaukuejo camp about the Blue Crane species around the park and that if we noticed any we should contact you guys. Well it so happens that whilst editing photos of my trip I noticed one in the background of a photo I took of some zebras drinking at Charitsaub on 26/1/15. I have also attached a zoomed in photo of the blue crane with the tag on its leg.



**11/2/14** Wilferd Versfeld

Just been to Halali again, some good news. The Salvadora pair is sitting on two eggs, I had a look to make sure this time. The Charitsaub pair chick is still alive and well and on the plains and not close to water. The three cranes were at Charitsaub as well (NCK, NCJ). Could not find the Seepage pair so still do not know what they have.

**18/2/14**

Went east yesterday and possibly found the whole population of 17 and one chick. Andoni 2 unringed and one Wattled Crane, Namutoni fountain 2 unringed, Chudop 2 (NBZ and unringed), Seepage 2 near old nest site (no chicks but standing around pecking at the ground, very suspicious like wanting to re-lay again), Salvadora 2 (one on nest other close by), Charitsaub the 3 walk-about cranes (NCJ, NCK and unringed), South of Charitsaub on the open dry hot plain the 2 and the chick, between Newbrownii and Kapupuhedi 2 unringed. So that gives us 17. The reason I found them was that it is dry and they are staying close to the water now.

**27/2/15**

The Seepage pair also lost whatever they had and have re-laid two eggs (see picture of nest with second clutch – most unusual for Etosha).



**2/3/15** Hanjo Böhme

Received an SMS from Uschi Kirchner just now. She is in Etosha at the moment. She saw a Blue Crane pair each at Nebrownii/Koinachas/Klein Namutoni today. With this dryness around these birds fly to unusual places.

**5/4/15** Ute von Ludwiger (email utevl@iway.na)

I saw the 2 cranes with the chick (quite a bit bigger) near Charitsaub, but on the main road. Then 2 cranes between Rietfontein and Halali on the plain. No cranes between Halali and Namutoni on the plains, and nothing around Namutoni.

**8/4/15** Roger Swart (email rogerswart@afol.com.na) via John Mendelsohn (john@raison.com.na)

Axel Hartmann who is now with Save the Rhino Trust told me last week that they have a pair of Blue Cranes at Palmwag. I didn't see them myself when we were there. Sounds odd to me, especially as there hasn't been much rain that way this year.

*(Ed: We are busy investigating ...)*

**14/4/15** Olwen Evans (creativejunction@me.com)

I've been following the Blue Cranes at Etosha for 2 days now and have found 9+3+2=14 birds. One chick. NHM & NBZ are easily legible tags. The pair with the chick are NHH and NHF (?).

**15/4/15** The pair with the chick were near the main road South of Charitsaub. The group of 9 close by, at the turnoff from the main road going towards Salvadora and the other pair have been at Nebrownii waterhole for the past 5 days.



Many of the above crane sightings have been faithfully collated by Wilferd Versfeld of the Etosha Ecological Institute at Okaukuejo, and we pay tribute to his dedication over the years. Wilferd is assisted here by his colleague Seth Guim (left) in an eagle-eyed scan for cranes near Salvadora (photo Ann Scott)

## CRANE REPORT: DECEMBER 2014

Eckart Demasius (email e-b.de@iway.na)

All photographs in this article are © Eckart Demasius

My wife and I usually seek some sanity at Etosha at the end of the year and whilst doing that we keep a keen look out for Blue Cranes.

Our first sighting of Blue Cranes was at Charitsaub where the usual breeding pair was at the waterhole. I could recognise a green ring on the right leg of one of the birds.



Blue Crane at Charitsaub, 26/12/2014

Another breeding pair was at Salvadora, one bird was feeding on the plains and its left leg was ringed.



Blue Crane at Salvadora, 26/12/2014

The marking on the ring could be identified as "NHM".



Ring marked "NHM"

On 27 December we traversed the area around Halali and at noon we were at the Rietfontein waterhole where for the first time we saw Blue Cranes, three in all. One bird was clearly a juvenile bird.



Blue Cranes at Rietfontein, 27/12/2014

Both adult birds were ringed with a green ring, but the distance was too big to identify anything on the ring.

We then proceeded to Salvadora to make sure that those Cranes had not visited Rietfontein. This was not the case.



Blue Cranes at Salvadora, 27/12/2014

The one bird was clearly ringed, most likely "NHM". At Charitsaub the resident pair seemed to be breeding already.



Blue Cranes at Charitsaub, 27/12/2014

Returning to Halali for lunch, we saw the Salvadora Crane "NHM" was feeding on the plains...



Salvadora Crane "NHM", 27/12/2014

... same for the three Cranes at Rietfontein. Clearly there was a new Crane "family" or group at Rietfontein.





Blue Cranes at Rietfontein, 27/12/2014

During the afternoon drive all these cranes were seen at the respective waterholes again.

On 28 December we travelled towards Namutoni and at Springbokfontein one pair of Blue Cranes was seen, although the island on which they usually breed was not surrounded by water at all. Generally, the area was very dry.



Blue Cranes at Springbokfontein, 28/12/2014

No Cranes were seen on the "vlaktes" (plains) around Chudop, possibly because this area was also still very dry. At Fischer's Pan there were also no cranes.

At Andoni waterhole we had a really good surprise. Arriving at the waterhole we were rather disappointed with the small amount of game at the waterhole, we then travelled to King Nehale Gate and after returning to the waterhole a Wattled Crane waited for us !!!



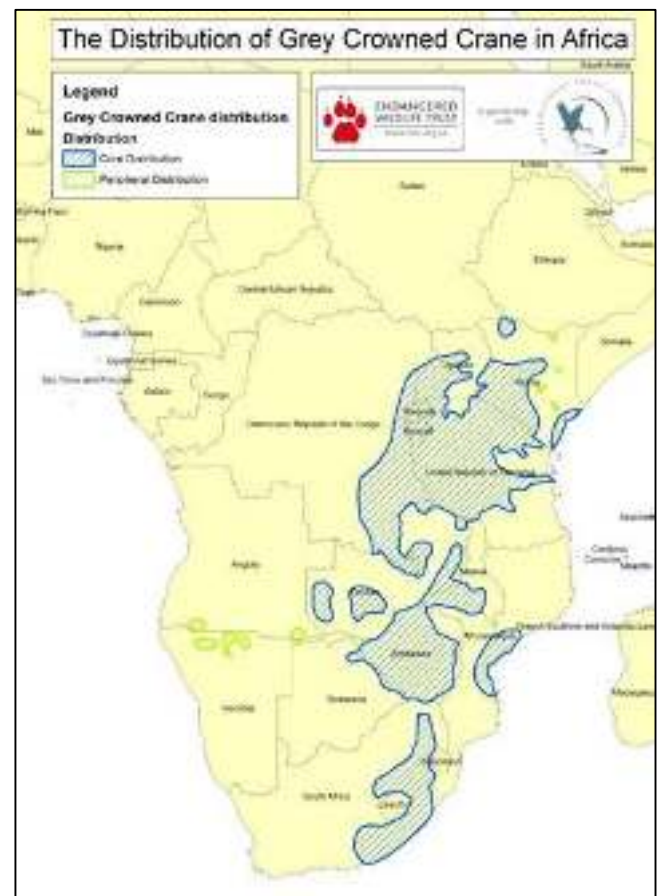
Wattled Crane and blue wildebeest at Andoni waterhole, 28/12/2014



Wattled Crane at Andoni waterhole, 28/12/2014

We returned to Namutoni via Aroe Vlei and Twee Palms, but at neither area could we locate any more cranes.

## LATEST GREY CROWNED CRANE DISTRIBUTION MAP



The final draft of the Grey Crowned Crane distribution map is shown above. This has been compiled for the Crane Specialist Group - Crane Action Plan – and will also be used for the Single Species Action Plan. The Namibia Crane Working Group has made inputs on the distribution of this species in Namibia (and Angola): see green areas.

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## UPDATE ON THE FLIGHT PATHS FOR WETLAND FLAGSHIPS PROJECT

### Greater Flamingo shows strong habitat preferences at Mile 4 Saltworks



According to the latest data (13-28 April 2015, see map above), our satellite-tagged Greater Flamingo (marked with a green ring NFL) is still at Mile 4 Saltworks, where the device was fitted on 16 November 2015 (see previous newsletters). The rainfall over the past season appears to have been insufficient, or of unsuitable timing, to warrant movement inland for breeding.

At the saltworks the bird shows strong and consistent habitat preferences for the "oyster pond" on the right, and the adjacent pond to the left. The fresh sea-water intake flows into this oyster pond and the water is clear; this quality of habitat appears to be enhanced by the mariculture operations at this site, including filter feeders such as oysters. The water in the pond on the left is a different colour, and obviously different in quality, but still important for the flamingo.

Wendy Gold, a learner from St Paul's College in Windhoek, is busy with a project to investigate the distribution of this flamingo in relation to habitat, including water quality. We are looking forward to the results!



Wendy Gold and her father, well-known geologist Dr Roger Swart, collect samples of different-coloured water from various ponds at Mike 4 Saltworks (*photo Ann Scott*)

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 and supported by the Environmental Investment Fund of Namibia (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 (<http://www.nnf.org.na/project/nampowernnf-partnership/13/5/5.html>).

We would like to thank all those who are supporting this project in different ways, including the Klein family for access to the saltworks.