

IN THIS ISSUE

April 2016 crane census ...1

Cranes and pivots ...4

Blue Crane genetics study ...4

Funding update ...4

Crane sightings and the build-up to the 2015-2016
 breeding season ...5

APRIL 2016 CRANE CENSUS

Our wet-season crane census at Etosha National Park took place from 4-8 April 2016, with an encouraging final count of 16 adults/subadults plus two chicks. This year the team consisted of Holger Kolberg, Gabriel Shatumbu and Sethi Guim of the Ministry of Environment & Tourism; Hanjo Böhme and his friend, Mathias Patzelt from Germany; and Mike and Ann Scott.

As we know by now, our wet season counts are usually lower than those during the dry season, once the birds return to the Park (last year's maximum in the dry season was 23 birds). For this reason, we did not carry out a dedicated aerial survey at this stage but will continue to count opportunistically throughout the year. Conditions were relatively dry, although there has been some rain.

We are pleased to report that we have finally managed to fit our satellite tracker to a Blue Crane, namely to a large chick on 5 April 2016 at Charitsaub. This is a milestone event in the life of the Namibia Crane Working Group – hats off to our very capable team! The device is a solar leg-mount, manufactured by North Star and associates. The bird is ringed with a green tag (NCM); the second chick at Halali Seepage was also ringed (NCN).

The tagged crane has transmitted regularly every four days. Good quality locations are being received, and the solar charging appears to be working. The GPS locations are kindly being downloaded and archived by Dr John Mendelsohn.

At the time of writing the bird was still at Charitsaub, and is expected to fledge soon. Hopefully the tracking device will be able to show us which areas the cranes are using when they leave the Park in winter.



Top: Group from Halali Seepage: NHD (2010), NBN (2008) and a tiny chick, later ringed NCN (*photo Wilferd Versfeld*); Centre (L to R): Holger Kolberg, Sethi Guim, Mike Scott, Hanjo Böhme, Ann Scott, Gabriel Shatumbu (*photo Mathias Patzelt*); Bottom (L to R): Sethi Guim, Mike Scott, Crane NCM, Hanjo Böhme, Holger Kolberg, Gabriel Shatumbu (*photo Ann Scott*)



Some of the GPS locations (green) obtained for Blue Crane NCM in the Charitsaub area in April 2016
(Google earth map generated by John Mendelsohn)



Blue Crane NCM upon release with its newly fitted satellite transmitter and rings (photo Holger Kolberg)

The group, including the chick with the satellite tag, was observed at Charitsaub by Gabriel Shatumbu on 18 and 19/4/16, who reports that the tag was in place as deployed.

The pair at Salvadora again laid a second clutch that failed. In 2015 this pair and the pair at Halali Seepage both laid a second clutch that was not successful. This is the first time that second clutches have been recorded for Blue Cranes in Namibia.

Ringed cranes

The following ringed birds have bred this year:

- Charitsaub (1 chick NCM): NHF (2006) & NHH (2007)
- Halali Seepage (1 chick NCN): NBN (2008) & NHD (2006)
- Salvadora (2 clutches, 0 chick): NHM (2009) & unringed

Other ringed birds that have been reported (November 2015-April 2016, see crane observations below):

- NBZ (Chudop area; 2008)
- NBW (Fischer's Pan; 2008)
- NCJ (Various sites; 2014)
- NCK (Various sites; 2014)

One of our most dedicated and enthusiastic team members, Wilferd Versfeld, has taken a sideways step by retiring from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. He will be involved with managing his game farming and tourism enterprise on the borders of Etosha. We know he will also continue to be involved in crane conservation, and wish him and his wife Elsie and their family a happy and fulfilling next chapter of their lives. Thank you, Wilferd, for your invaluable contributions towards carrying out the Namibia Crane Action Plan, and all the many hours spent observing and tracking down our cranes.



Wilferd Versfeld has spent many happy and productive hours tracking Blue Cranes at Etosha (photo Ann Scott)

Thank you

A big thank you to all our supporters for their ongoing interest and encouragement. Special thanks to all our funders, as listed at the bottom of page 1, and including the Environmental Investment Fund for sponsoring the costs of the satellite tracking device.



Two-year old crane NCI at a gravel pit with rainwater west of Halali; the cranes appear to prefer this fresh water to that of the waterholes (photo Holger Kolberg)



Two-year old crane NCI and unringed companion near a gravel pit west of Halali on 5 April 2016 (photo Holger Kolberg)



Adults NHF and NHH with their chick (later ringed NCM) at Charitsaub waterhole with a group of plains zebra on 4 April 2016 (photo Ann Scott)



Unusual sighting of two Blue Cranes (NBZ and unringed companion) at Koinachas waterhole on 7 April 2016 (photo Ann Scott)



Adult NBZ picking up prey items from fresh elephant dung in the Chudop area on 8 April 2016: is this an adaptation for successful feeding during dry times? (photo Ann Scott)



Back to one of our key questions: how do Blue Cranes manage to survive and to rear chicks in an environment that is so rich in predators? (photo Ann Scott)

CRANES AND PIVOTS



Circular irrigation (pivot) areas on the Kavango River near Nzinze, east of Kahene where a Blue Crane was recorded in 2012 (Google earth map)

Following on recent reports of the deliberate poisoning of cranes (using Diazinon) in agricultural developments with pivots for irrigation in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, some concerns have arisen about the potential conflict involving our own cranes on such irrigation areas in north-eastern and north-western Namibia. There is also a possibility of poisoned seeds being ingested by wildlife there.

These irrigation areas show up on Google earth; along the Kavango River there are at least four such schemes around Rundu (two west and two east), and two near Divundu; also one at Katima Mulilo. Apparently an EIA is in process for another such irrigation scheme near Nkurenkuru. There are also irrigation schemes in the north-west, e.g. at Olushandja.

Our concern stems from the fact that a subadult Blue Crane (ringed NAG) was picked up near Kahenge in October 2012 (see newsletter No. 50, April 2013), which is some 33 km west of a pivot area (Nzinze - 17.835629S 18.959114E). As we know, the cranes move around outside Etosha National Park during the dry months; as confirmed by this unusual record. Like the other Blue Cranes in the Overberg, the Eastern Cape and elsewhere in South Africa, our cranes could also be attracted to these rather limited agricultural areas, especially in dry times. They could try to feed on crops at any stage: seeds, newly germinated plants as well as crops ready for harvest.

We are keen to know which birds visit these pivot areas (including cranes) and in what numbers; at what times of the year/agricultural cycle; whether they are perceived as a problem, and what control methods are being used. If so, the Namibia Crane Working Group is willing to work together with the authorities and anyone else to try to seek solutions. Blue Cranes are critically Endangered in Namibia and also Globally Threatened; there may be fewer than 30 birds left in the country, and we need to investigate and address any possible unnatural sources of mortality. The practice of wildlife poisoning may well be underestimated today.

BLUE CRANE GENETICS STUDY

Prof. Nigel Barker (currently at the University of Pretoria in South Africa) is busy with a far-reaching genetics study that will determine whether our small Blue Crane population is genetically distinct from the main South African population. This study is being carried out in association with the International Crane Foundation/ Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership in South Africa. The Namibia Crane Working Group has collected a number of blood samples obtained while ringing our birds, as part of the basis for this study.

Nigel is now collaborating with Prof. Paulette Bloomer of the Genetics Department at the university. They have appointed an honours student, Andrea Hilton-Barber, who will take on the Blue Crane genetics work. The first step will be for her to develop a literature review and project proposal. She will have from mid-April to the end of September to generate all the data (submitting a progress report in July) and will then do the final analyses and write-up. She will also produce a poster and powerpoint presentation of the final results.

We are excited at the progress being made with this critically important investigation.

FUNDING UPDATE

We would like to thank the Hessische Gesellschaft für Ornithologie und Naturschutz e.V. (HGON) and associates in Germany, Mathias Stein and Barbara Hudoc, for their continued and invaluable financial support over the years.

A big thank you also to Ute and Klaus Ultsch of Germany and Hildegard Becker of Swakopmund, Namibia, for your recent donations towards our conservation activities.

The generous funding for our action plan provided by the Environmental Investment Fund (EIF) of Namibia has covered the costs of the satellite tracker recently fitted to a Blue Crane.

Your interest and invaluable support are sincerely appreciated.



CRANE SIGHTINGS and the build-up to the 2015-2016 breeding season

For record purposes, we include all sightings reported – and thank our faithful contributors, especially for the ring resightings. Unfortunately we could not include all of your beautiful photographs, but we do keep them on record.

Annabelle Venter (adventer@iway.na)]

23-25/11/15: Thanks very much for sending the newsletter, it's always very interesting.

I have just returned from Etosha this evening and saw a total of 20 cranes in 3 separate sightings.

- 16 at Andoni waterhole (23/11/15)
- 2 about 4 kms east of Halali T-junction (25/11/15)
- 2 about 2 kms west of Halali T-junction on main road (25/11/15)

The second two sightings were within minutes of each other as we were driving from east to west, so were definitely not the same pairs.

Phil Palmer (phil@birdholidays.fsnet.co.uk)

2/12/15: Just a quick note to say that we recorded 11 Blue Cranes at the Andoni waterhole, Namutoni on 2/12/15.

Two of the birds were ringed with green rings: NCJ & NCK
Do you know how old these birds are now? (*Ed: 2014*)

Hartmut Kolb (Tour guide; hh@info.na)

23/12/15: Today at the junction main road Chudop coming from Namutoni I saw 4 Blue Cranes. Three of them had rings. The letters are, NCK, NBZ, NCJ. Then there were 2 cranes at the Andoni water hole.

Mark Smiles (marksmiles63@gmail.com)

1/1/16: Pair (NCJ & NCK) were seen between Okaukuejo and Okondeka on 26/12/15 and a pair (NHF & one not photographed) at Charitsaub waterhole on 28/12/15. In total, we recorded at least 10 birds in our 5 days - 8 of which were on 28/12/15 in a stretch between the Sueda/Salvadora/Charitsaub cluster and Nuamses and included NHF. We also saw one (presumably one of the eight) on a waterside flood during a night game drive the same evening between Halali and Rietfontein.



Hugo Haussmann (Hubis Tours & Safaris; hubis@iway.na)

7/1/16: I couldn't believe my eyes yesterday when I saw this breeding couple at Salvadora! Look at those 3 eggs and at what a place. Luckily there is almost no game in that area at the moment! The one crane is marked, but I could not read it with my binocular! Spectacular, even the guests were excited!





7/1/16: I saw another 2 cranes today around 12h00 near the eastern junction/turnoff to Chudop (there is a bit of water). This one seems to have the mark "NBZ". The other one was unmarked.



Wilferd Versfeld (wilferdversfeld@gmail.com)

8/1/16: On 5/1/16 there were only 2 eggs in the nest at Salvadora so they have just started breeding.

The pair at Charitsaub is also sitting on a nest, they did not get up while I was there, the pair at seepage is also on the nest but you must know where to look to see the nest. Andoni had 2 and Doring Draai turn off had 2 cranes, the 3 at Nebrownii is moving around and only one at the moment.

Ute Von Ludwiger (Tour guide; utevl@gmx.net)

30/1/16: I found these cranes all on one day, on 30/1/2016.

The first pics are between Chudop and Namutoni.

The middle ones just before Charitsaub. With one young one. Did not come out too good, far away. The last one sitting on the sand, may be breeding, at Salvadora.

19/2/16:

I found yesterday and today two cranes at Kapupuhedi, one ringed.

One crane on the nest at Salvadora, got up for us to show the egg(s)

2 on the Main road from Halali to Namutoni, where we went close to the pan and got the eggs last year. One ringed. Too far to make it out. They had the young chick, bigger as I saw last time the chick at Charitsaub. Did not see any there today

21/2/16:

2 cranes without rings near Doringdraai to the right hand side. Saw them only in the morning.





Wilferd Versfeld

1/2/16: Good news, the crane pair at Charitsaub have hatched one chick. This morning there was a small wobbly redhead under one parent. They hatched this week within the last few days if not yesterday.

The pair at Salvadora is still incubating on three eggs? I helped a stuck tourist who said the parent got up and there were three eggs.

I did not get as far as Seepage due to the broken down tourist.

Wilferd Versfeld

4/2/16: More good news, Halali Seepage has hatched one chick (*see photo on page 1*).

I could not find Charitsaub pair this morning, so sure they are hiding somewhere as it has rained a bit so there is veld water around.

I spent some time at Salvadora and have to change my opinion in that there is only two eggs. Last week I had to rely on the broken down tourist on the number of eggs. See best two photos, they were turning the eggs and you can see other things lying around so the other egg could be a kalk klip.

Found no cranes at Nebrownii or up to Okondeka and Adamax.



Heidi Dednam (Gava Explorations; heidid@gavaexplorations.com)

7-8/2/16:

We were in Etosha last week and at Nebrownii saw a pair of Blue Cranes on 7/2/16, one of had a green leg ring with NCJ inscribed and there was a blue crane breeding at Salvadora on 8/2/16.

Uschi Kirchner (Tour guide; uschi@safarisuk.ch)

13-14/2/16: I'm just back from Etosha – southern side of the pan only. I spotted the following Blue Cranes:

13/2/16: Kapupuhedi, 2 birds (one unringed and one NCJ, green on left leg)

14/2/16: Salvadora, 2 birds (one seemed breeding next to water and one walking in far distance) Unfortunately I was unable to see any rings!

Near Chudop, actually 200 m from turn off at main road, 1 bird NBZ, green, right leg.



Hartmut Kolb

15/2/16: Today at 14h40 I saw Blue Crane NCJ with another crane at Nebrownii waterhole. One crane is still breeding at Salvadora.

Paul & Helen Gascoigne (pauldunelark@aol.com)

18/2/16: Touring Namibia again on our way through Etosha we had the following Crane sightings.

Kapupuhedi waterhole 10.15 am Sunday 14.2.2016. 2 Cranes one with a ring. The ring was green in colour we think bearing the letters NCJ.

Also 11.15am Sunday 14.2.1016. Salvadora waterhole a further 2 Cranes neither had rings.

One bird was at a nest which appeared to have 2 eggs. We are currently staying with Neil and Gudrun and Neil informs us that Hugo Haussmann sighted a Crane nest at Salvadora with three eggs on 7.1.2016. Neil is not sure if you are aware of this sighting.

Neil goes on to say that if Hugo's sighting is correct, he believes he had pictures. Our sighting must be a second clutch. It is quite likely some disaster occurred to the first clutch. In view of the time difference.

Finally Monday 15.2.2016. Andoni waterhole. 2 Cranes unable to see if there were any rings but we think not. They were stood amongst a large herd of Wildebeest. We have photographs of all the birds, the nest and eggs which were taken by a friend, David Orman.





Ute Von Ludwiger

20/2/16: I saw some more cranes today.
2 between Rietfontein and Halali turnoff, both NO rings.
2 at Twee Palms, No rings.
No more chicks.



Hugo Haussmann

8/3/16: I have been 4 days to Etosha with some birding professionals from Norway. I do have more news regarding Blue Cranes, with one photo.
The attached photo is that of the couple at S 18 58 47,5 EO 16 26 37,3 (*Ed: Halali Seepage*). They were observed on 27/2/16 at 12h10 as well as the next day around 14h00. They seem to stay in that area. Only one chick could be observed. See attached photo. They feed about 200 m south of the main road.
Another pair was spotted north of S 19 00 09,8 EO 16 22 47,6 (*Ed: 2.7 km west of Halali turnoff*). This happened on 27/2/16 at 16h35, not too far from the above mentioned area, but on the other side of the road. The grass was quite high and no chick/s were spotted. None of the markings on their legs could be observed.

It is difficult to say if these birds could be the same as mentioned above.

On 29/2/16 we observed another pair at S 18 46 25.2 E 17 01 41.2, around 17h50. This was also north of the road and in the Twee Palms area. No chicks could be seen.

The pair at Salvadora seems to be still breeding. I am a bit stunned that this is still the case! However I can now confirm that they do breed only on 2 eggs!



Ute Von Ludwiger

8/3/16: I saw some more cranes in Etosha on 8/3//16.

5 ringed cranes with one chick at Charitsaub. Was difficult to see the rings. Most of them quite close together.

1 crane still sitting on Nest at Salvadora

1 crane between Salvadora turnoff and Halali to the right.

Also a ring on.



Ute Von Ludwiger

9/3/16: Cranes on 9/3/16.

2 cranes at the airstrip on the road to Klein Okevi. The pics are from them, 1 ringed.

2 at Andoni, first waterhole to the left after the toilets before you come to the plain. None ringed.

Nothing at Twee Palms.



- 2 cranes feeding, outside Namutoni, on Fisher's Pan road, one with a tag NBW. 22/3/16 at 8h00am (S18° 48.188' E016° 57.324')



Gabriel Shatumbu (gshatumbu@gmail.com)

13/3/16: See attached sightings on blue cranes observed on 13 March 2016.



Susan Roux & Daphne Viljoen (seafish@iway.na)

31/3/16: We recorded the following Blue Crane sightings at Etosha this month:

- 2 cranes feeding, after Okaukuejo, one with a tag NCJ 18/3/16 17h30pm (S19° 10.144' E106° 01.401')
- 2 cranes feeding, after Salvadoria on road to Halali, one with a tag but was too far to read (have included best pic before camera batt died, maybe you can work it out?) (Ed: Probably NHM). 19/3/16 at 14h50pm (S19° 02.199' E016° 17.240')