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MARCH 2018 AND AUGUST 2018 CRANE CENSUSES

This year we were fortunate in being able to conduct two crane censuses: a wet-season ground survey from 15-18 March 2018, and a dry-season combined aerial and ground survey from 6-9 August 2018.

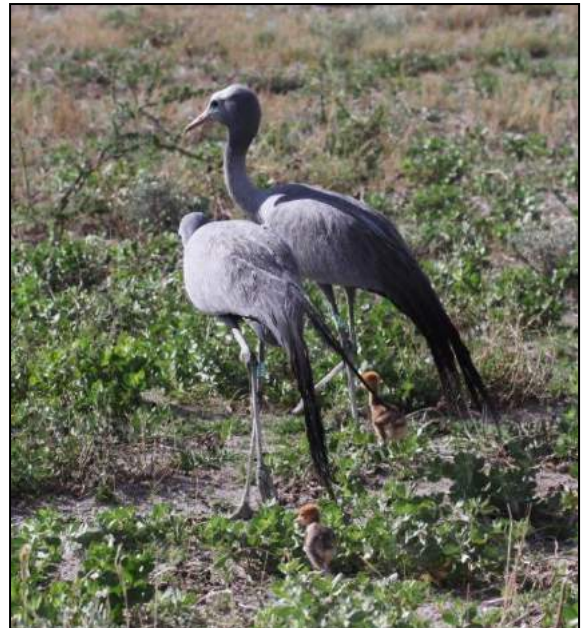
March 2018 wet-season survey

The March survey was conducted within Etosha National Park by Gabriel Shatumbu of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), with student interns Maggy Angula and Simon Vakamwena (Namibia University of Science and Technology [NUST]); Hanjo Böhme of the Namibia Bird Club; and Mike and Ann Scott. Accommodation for both surveys was kindly provided by Vilho Absalom, at the MET's Namutoni Environmental Education Centre (NEEC).

We counted a total of 16 Blue Cranes (adults/subadults), as well as four chicks. Two more chicks from an early first clutch at Halali Seep did not survive, bringing the total to six chicks for the season. One Wattled Crane was also observed at Fischer's Pan on 15/3/18 (18.785S 16.935E).



(L to R) Mike Scott, Hanjo Böhme, Simon Vakamwena, Maggy Angula and Gabriel Shatumbu during the 2018 summer crane census at Etosha National Park (photo Ann Scott).



Adults NHD and NBN with two early small chicks, observed by Miha Krofel near Halali Seep on 31/12/17; this turned out to be the first of two clutches (photo Miha Krofel).



Gabriel Shatumbu with one of the two chicks he ringed at Twee Palms during the 2018 summer crane census at Etosha National Park (photo MET).

The Namibia Crane Action Plan is supported by the Namibia Nature Foundation and is kindly funded by the Hessische Gesellschaft für Ornithologie und Naturschutz e.V. (HGON), in association with Mathias Stein & Barbara Hudec

The August 2018 aerial survey was generously supported by Westair Aviation (Pty) Ltd, through the Namibian Chamber of Environment; Mokuti Etosha Lodge and Ongava Lodge; and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism
 Namibia Crane Working Group co-ordinators: Ann & Mike Scott
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<http://www.nnf.org.na/CRANES/index.htm>





Student interns Maggy Angula and Simon Vakamwena, with the chicks (NEM and NER) that they helped Gabriel Shatumbu ring at Twee Palms on 17 April 2018 (photo Gabriel Shatumbu).

Gabriel, Maggy and Simon ringed three of the chicks on 17/4/18, as follows: two at Twee Palms (NEM, NER) and one at Halali Seep (NEB), where the second chick had already fledged. The latter two chicks are from a second clutch (see above). This is the third year running that a second clutch has been recorded (one in 2017 and two in 2016). Maggy is busy with a project to investigate the population dynamics of Blue Cranes in relation to rainfall at Etosha.

The following (ringed) birds bred or attempted to breed during the summer 2017-2018 season:

- Charitsaub (nest, no chicks): NHF (2006) & NHH (2007)
- Salvadora (nest, no chicks): NHM (2009) & unringed
- Halali Seep (first clutch: two chicks 31/12/17; second clutch two fledglings: NEB & unringed): NHD (2006) & NBN (2008)
- Chudop (nest?): NBZ (2008)
- Twee Palms (two fledglings: NEM, NER, ringed 17/4/18 by Gabriel Shatumbu): unringed adult pair
- Nebrownii (nest?): NCJ (2014) & unringed

Other ringed birds that were reported: NBW (2008), NCK (2014), NCN (2016), NEF (2017).

We are grateful for the regular reports of crane sightings, including ringed birds, that we continue to receive from visitors to Etosha National Park, which enable us to piece together the movements of Etosha's elusive Blue Cranes throughout the years (see page 5 below for details of sightings, and photographs).



Vilho Absalom of the MET Namutoni Environmental Education Centre at Etosha continues to make an invaluable contribution by promoting awareness about the conservation of cranes and their wetland and grassland habitats amongst local communities (photo Ann Scott).

August 2018 dry-season survey

The follow-up aerial census was conducted by Dr Nad Brain, our capable pilot; Hanjo Böhme; and Mike and Ann Scott. The flight focussed on areas north of the Park that are visited by the cranes at times, namely the Omadhiya Lakes including Lake Oponono, whereas the accompanying ground count was conducted within the Park.

We received generous support for the survey, including the use of a Cessna 182 plane made available for conservation by Westair Aviation (Pty) Ltd, through the Namibian Chamber of Environment (NCE); landing facilities made available by the Mokuti Etosha Lodge and Ongava Lodge; and logistical support, aircraft fuel and accommodation from the MET (also see page 4 below).

We spotted a record 26 Crowned Cranes in the Omadhiya Lakes area during the flight, as follows: six at 18.16836S 15.76393E; three at 18.14933S 15.76284S; and 17 at 18.14824S 15.77678E (previous records include maxima of 15 in 1994 and 2007). However, only two Blue Cranes were found, at Andoni during the ground survey. For the present we are still working on the maximum dry-season count of 32 Blue Cranes in September 2017.



(L to R) Ann Scott, pilot Nad Brain, Hanjo Böhme and Mike Scott with the Westair Aviation Cessna 182 plane during the survey.

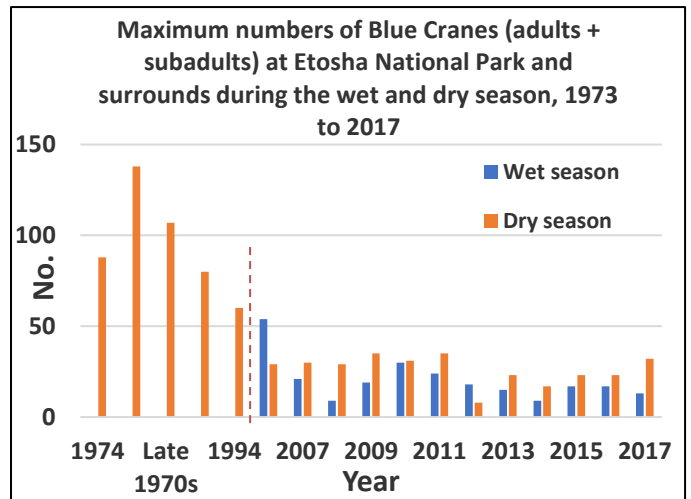


(Top and centre): The dry-season aerial census over the Omadhiya Lakes area to the north of Etosha (8/8/18) yielded no Blue Cranes; however, a record 26 Crowned Cranes were counted.



Only two Blue Cranes were counted during the dry-season survey, within the Park at Andoni waterhole on 7/8/18 during the ground count.

What are the reasons for the decline in Blue Crane numbers in Namibia, and what has been done so far



Blue Crane numbers in Namibia have declined from 80 in 1974 and 60 in 1994 to 51 in 2006; 35 from 2007 to 2011; and thereafter only 23, with an encouraging increase again to 32 in September 2017 (see figure above; data Namibia Crane Working Group).

According to the Namibian Red Data Book for Birds (Simmons, Brown, Kemper 2015), the reasons for the decline in Blue Crane numbers in Namibia include increased competition for habitat due to human activities in areas to the north of Etosha, in the form of farming, burning, fencing, hunting, snaring and fishing. Illegal hunting of cranes is suspected, including for medicinal uses. Cranes also remain vulnerable to natural predation, especially in protected areas. Increased human population size and borehole drilling in the north, together with the effects of long-term changes in rainfall patterns, may eventually reduce the permanence of the perennial springs around the Etosha Pan, forcing the cranes from the area. Isolated and small populations can be prone to inbreeding effects if genetic heterogeneity has been lost. The above authors consider that this, together with the other threats listed above, could push such a small population to extinction within a few generations.

The Namibia Crane Working Group (NCWG) has been monitoring the population since 2004, mainly by means of regular wet- and dry-season counts. Maximum annual numbers are usually recorded during the second half of the year during the dry season, within the Park.

By way of investigating crane distribution, movements and breeding activity, more than 30 chicks have been fitted with large green plastic rings, each with a unique alphabetical code, and invaluable data are being obtained from regular resightings, including from interested tourists in the Park. Satellite telemetry devices have been fitted to four cranes, and VHF radio transmitters to five. Although useful data have been obtained on local movements, it is still not known conclusively which specific areas the

cranes visit when they leave the safety of the Park. It is possible that the population sink may be taking place outside the Park.

The NCWG is also attempting to address the need for conservation at the grassroots level through an awareness and information programme, including through the Namutoni Environmental Education Centre at the Park. However, the effectiveness of such awareness activities could be enhanced considerably with the identification of targetted areas and factors, and any communities (if relevant) that could influence the cranes.

Where to from here?

The key questions that thus remain are: what are the specific reasons for the decline in Blue Crane numbers, where is this happening and how can the causes be addressed?

It is considered that satellite telemetry may still be the best way to reveal the population sink, and we are currently following up on some exciting opportunities in this regard. We hope that the results of both GPS and GSM tracking of the Namibian Blue Cranes will help indicate where the decline in numbers is taking place, and where the reasons may be sought. Once we have confirmation and answers to these questions, a strategy to address the causes for the decline can be fine-tuned to specific localities and factors (and any communities involved, if relevant), thereby enhancing the effectiveness of conservation measures.

Thank you to our supporters

The Namibia Crane Working Group has been fortunate to enjoy ongoing collaboration and support from a wide range of partners and supporters, both local and international, since 2004; these include the International Crane Foundation / Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership, the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET), dedicated volunteer conservationists and many others.

The Namibia Crane Action Plan is supported by the Namibia Nature Foundation. At present our activities



are generously funded by the *Hessische Gesellschaft für Ornithologie und Naturschutz e.V.* (HGON) and their associates in Germany, Mathias Stein and Barbara Hudec.

The use of an aircraft for our August 2018 aerial survey, made available for conservation by Westair Aviation (Pty) Ltd, was kindly facilitated by Dr Chris Brown and Henriette Krohne-Frey at the Namibian Chamber of Environment (NCE); landing facilities were made available by Ivan Kasozi at the Mokuti Etosha Lodge, and by Ongava Lodge. Logistical assistance, aircraft fuel and accommodation were provided by the MET. Special thanks to our pilot, Dr Nad Brain, and to Hanjo Böhme for his unstinting efforts in arranging the logistics and making this survey possible!

MORE CRANE NEWS AND VIEWS

New Wattled Crane populations discovered in Angola



Extensive Buluzi Plain habitats at the Zambezi River headwaters in Angola (photo Rich Beilfuss).

Story submitted by **Rich Beilfuss**, International Crane Foundation President & CEO

Reference: International Crane Foundation (ICF) newsletter - Contact Call April 25, 2018

<https://www.savingcranes.org>, info@savingcranes.org

I've just returned to South Africa following a remarkable few days of aerial surveys in Angola, and a great visit with our team in Zambia prior to that.

In Angola, we did the first-ever wildlife survey of the Zambezi River headwaters (called the Buluzi Plain), an absolutely massive floodplain area that *may well be the largest wetland system in Africa*. We flew 14 hours over this region in a small Cessna plane, with ecologist John Mendelsohn from Namibia, two Angolan biologists, David and Sara Fernandes, and International Crane Foundation supporter Tom Leiden.

We discovered three previously unrecorded populations of Wattled Cranes, including two breeding grounds.

I was especially excited that one of the breeding grounds is contiguous with the Liuwa Plains of Zambia, where we have been involved for several years – an excellent



Wattled Crane family – note the juvenile on the right (photo Rich Beilfuss).

opportunity for a future transboundary Ramsar "Wetland of International Importance" or new protected area. We saw Wattled Crane pairs with chicks that ranged from about 2-4 months old.

I am grateful to Tom Leiden for supporting this trip, and our work in Africa, and to my Executive Administrative Assistant Stormy for a lot of complicated last-minute logistics (including 14 flights!).

Grey Crowned Crane ISSAP published

Kerryn Morrison, International Crane Foundation / Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership, (kerrynm@ewt.org.za)



The AEWA* International Single Species Action Plan for Grey Crowned Cranes that was endorsed at the AEWA Meeting of the Parties (MOP) in November 2015 had been officially published: see below for a link to the plan online.

<http://www.unep-aewa.org/en/publication/international-single-species-action-plan-conservation-grey-crowned-crane-ts-no-59>

*AEWA: *Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds*

CRANE SIGHTINGS THROUGHOUT THE 2017-2018 BREEDING SEASON

ONE EARLIER CRANE SIGHTING

16/1/17 Piet J. van den Hout
(vandenhoutpiet@gmail.com)



Still had some colour ring-readings of Blue Cranes in my notebook, and send you pictures of the birds as well. This one concerns observations in January 2017; the bird was alone (NBN).

2017-2018 BREEDING SEASON: BLUE CRANES

2/10/17 Toni K Hart (tkhart@iway.na)
We counted 26 cranes at Andoni on 2/10/17.

Ed: From your photographs, we can confirm these birds:

- NHF 2006 & NHH 2007 (breeding at Charitsaub)
- NHM 2009 (breeding at Salvadora, with an unmarked bird)
- NHD 2006 & NBN 2008 (breeding at Halali "Seep", on the pan)
- NBW 2008
- NCJ 2014
- NCN 2016

This is most of the marked birds that have been around, some breeding, for the past few years, and it's really valuable to be able to confirm that they have arrived back in the Park as a group (after being away for some of the winter months). The only ones we can't spot (yet) are NBZ (2008 – Chudop), NCK (2014) and NEF (2017).

We had a relatively high count of 32 on 25/9/17, and your count supports this figure (previously there appeared to be only 23 birds left).



22/11/17 Irmgard (EA) Rusch (earusch@iafrica.com.na), via Gudrun Middendorff (gudrunm@iway.na)
 I had the following sightings in Etosha of blue crane:
 22/11/17: 2 bc at Kapupuhedi, NCJ green band 10h50
 22/11/17: 2 bc on main road Rietfontein-Halali main road NCK 12h31
 23/11/17: 2 bc on main road Halali-Namutoni NHD 7h49
 At least 2 bc in the distance, but could not identify the nr.
 One young flamingo standing lonely in Charitsaub.

25 & 26/11/17 Ignace Ledegen

(i.ledegen@grensparkzk.be), Bird ringing group Lier, Belgium; via Kevin Shaw (shawka@capenature.co.za & support@bluecrane.org.za)
 On our birding trip to Namibia we were able to find some blue cranes that were colour ringed. I contact you in hope you can help me with a contact number in Namibia.
 Observations of colour ringed blue cranes:
 On 25/11/17: Charitsaub pool in Etosha N.P. - one crane blue ring on the right with inscription NHH, one crane blue ring on the left with inscription FHN (NHF).
 On 26/11/17: Andoni pool in Etosha N.P., total of 11 blue cranes together with one wattled crane - one crane blue ring on the right (not sure) with inscription NEF, one crane blue ring on the right (not sure) with inscription NCN.

15-18/12/2017 Fred Hodgson (fhodgson@manx.net)
 There was a pair of Blue Cranes at Salvadora with one sitting tight on the far side of the small pond. Regularly seen on our visits but too far for a ring.
 A singleton was regularly seen either side of the main road between the Halali turn and Rietfontein. I say 'singleton' but of course it could have been different birds each time we passed.
 Another pair nesting at Charitsaub with the 'sitting bird' carrying the ring NHF. Following your reply I took a hard look at NHF's photos. Could this be an egg in the nest? If so, 18/12/17 is the date. The mate was there but some distance away feeding among some springbok.



I have another photo of NBN but cannot recall where it was. From the time it could have been the 'singleton' mentioned above as we were in that area at that time.
 (Ed: Halali Seep?)

31/12/17 Miha Krofel (miha.krofel@gmail.com)
 On our recent trip to Etosha we observed on 31/12/17 a pair of adult paradise cranes with two chicks north of Halali. They had rings with labels NHD and NBN (see page 1 for photograph).
 Ed: Our first report of these two chicks was on 3/1/18, so this sighting places the date of hatching more accurately.

26/1/18 Paul Gascoigne & Helen Pooley (pauldunelark@aol.com)
 Yesterday we travelled through Etosha from Namutoni to Okaukuejo side. At the turn from the main road for Chudop we came across 5 Blue Cranes, we thought 2 adults 3 Juveniles (Pentad 1845-1655).
 One bird had a ring, see attached picture. Also with the Blue Cranes 1 Wattled Crane.
 (Ed: Possibly NEF?)



26/1/18 Piet van den Hout (vandenhoutpiet@gmail.com)
I send you an observation of at least 12 blue cranes and one wattled crane on 26/1/18. Blue Cranes with rings: NBZ and NCJ.



16 & 18/2/18 John Davies (johnpeter.davies@gmail.com)
We recorded a pair of Blue Cranes in Etosha 2.1 km east of Salvadora water hole on 16/2/18 at 16:37. The one bird had a green ring on the left tibiotarsus with NCK on it.
The pair of Blue Cranes (no rings) at Twee Palms waterhole had two quite small chicks when we were there the afternoon of 18/2/18.



23/2/18 Holger Kolberg (holgerk@afol.com.na) and the South African Bird Ringing Unit (SAFRING), Bernd Guenther (bernd_guenther@gmx.de) and other members of the public

Recorded movements of NCJ (ring no. 903935):

25/3/14 Halali Seep initially ringed by Holger Kolberg as a 0 to 1/2 year

16/12/16 Nebrownii (997 days, 57 km)

5/6/17 Nebrownii/Olifantsbad (1168 days, 22 km)

23/2/18 Rietfontein South (1431 days, 32 km)

26/3/18 Jenny Gardiner (gardiner@afol.com.na)

23/2/18: The first sighting was of 3 blue cranes just before the turnoff to the Salvadora water hole, Etosha, coming from Halali. The one crane has a ring but I did not realise it at the time and I cannot see the number.

25/2/18: The second sighting was about 1 km from the main road on the Gembokvlakte turnoff, just after Nebrownii coming from the Okaukuejo side. The next day we found them in almost the same place, near the main road. One had a ring – NCJ. I attach photos of this bird.



1/4/18 Gudrun & Chris Weaver

(gudrun.denker@saiea.com), via Gudrun Middendorff (gudrunm@iway.na)

During the Easter weekend (30/3/18-1/4/18) in Etosha we had a good look at the Blue Cranes. The two adult Cranes were seen on the way from Namutoni to Halali on the main drag between Sueda and Charitsaub (NHH and NHF: top). The pictures with the chicks were taken on the way to Fisher's Pan halfway between Twee Palms and Aroe. Pictures were taken by Chris Weaver.



14/4/18 Gabriel Shatumbu (gshatumbu@gmail.com)

Observations as follows:

Nebrownii NCJ +1

Charitsaub 1 with green ring + 3

Halali Seepage NCK + 1

April 2018 Andrea Severin (andrea.severin.it@gmail.com)

This is from April 2018 - Etosha - Nebrownii waterhole. Found this comment from Toni Hart on my post: NCJ with its non-ringed partner.

Comment by Gabriel Shatumbu (gshatumbu@gmail.com)

Excellent, they spent most of their wet season at Nebrownii water-hole, no nest attempt this season, but courtship observed.



17/4/18 Gabriel Shatumbu (gshatumbu@gmail.com)

Sent: Wednesday, April 18, 2018 11:40 AM

Crane's count: Nebrownii NCJ + 1, Charitsaub 1 with green ring + 3, Halali turn-off NCK + 1, Halali Seepage 2 adults with green rings + 2 chicks, Twee Palms 2 adult + 2 chicks.

Crane's chick ringing; 17.04.2018 Halali seepage NEB + 1 flew away unable to be ringed.

Twee Palms NEM+NER.

21/4/18 Heidi Prem (hp.munich@gmx.de), via Rolf Adrian (rolf.adrian@diamonddamibia.com)

These pictures were sent to me by a lady from Munich, who regularly comes to visit Namibia. She has seen the cranes on 11/4/18 (AM) along the main route between Halali and Namutoni: within twenty minutes 3 pairs and 1 single bird.

Ed: NHM? – Salvadora

NHF? Charitsaub?



25/4/18 Andy Kempster (tkempster@gmail.com)

We read your piece in Travel News Namibia on the Blue Cranes and it stuck in our minds. We then went to Etosha and think we saw the attached crane looking very healthy and relaxed on 25/4/18 at one of the waterholes in the middle towards Gaseb (not the best photo but we are very confident that it was a crane).

(Ed: near Nebrownii)



3/5/18 Beate & Stefan Löffler (bs.loeffler1@gmx.de)

On 3/5/18 3pm I watched an adult couple with 2 nearly full-grown chicks near the Twee Palms waterhole in Etosha. The chicks are marked NEM and NER. The adults are not marked.



4/5/18 Hanjo & Benita Böhme (gmbhanjo@iway.na)

The two chicks at Twee Palms are doing well and were feeding with the adults on the plains between the Onguma fence and the road leading to Aroe. Another pair was just east of Charitsaub with one bird ringed. The third pair was just west of Nebrownii waterhole feeding on the plains there. No cranes at Andoni or elsewhere, but lot of water in the bush.

WATTLED CRANES

2/10/17 Toni K Hart (tkhart@iway.na)

Recorded one Wattled Crane at Andoni, with 26 Blue Cranes.



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On 26/11/17: Andoni pool in Etosha N.P., total of 11 blue cranes together with one Wattled Crane (also see above).

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I send you an observation of at least 12 blue cranes and one wattled crane on 26/1/18.

15/3/18 Ann & Mike Scott (ecoserve@iway.na) & Hanjo Böhme

One Wattled Crane was observed at Fischer's Pan, together with 6 Blue Cranes (from 18.785S 16.935E).

