



February 2007

RECCE FOR PROPOSED BLUE CRANE CAPTURE AT ETOSHA

Ann & Mike Scott and Dirk Heinrich, Immanuel Kapofi, Holger Kolberg, Anne Lacy, Kerry Morrison, Wilferd Versfeld;
Email ecoserve@iway.na

During the week of 19-23 February 2007 our Blue Crane team undertook a recce at Etosha National Park, to investigate the possibility of capturing these birds in order to fit radio and satellite telemetry. Although we didn't quite end up with a bird in the hand, we have made good progress with tracking the movements of the cranes, and with developing our capture method.

Four days of observations

Monday 19th February: we went out in a vehicle with spotlights from 21h30-24h30, on the trail of a family group of two adults and two large juveniles seen at 14h00 in the Chudob "triangle" (18 49.886 S 16 55.071 E) west of Namutoni. Of special interest is the fact that these were the two chicks ringed in April 2006 and resighted at Andoni in August 2006, now moved back to their original nesting area (see newsletters No 18, May 2006 and No 21, September 2006). We found no cranes, but lots of hyaenas and some lions at a carcass at Doringdraai. We searched the area around Fischer's Pan but with no luck.

Tuesday 20th: we sat with a group of four adults near the Twee Palms waterhole (east of Namutoni), from 17h30. They had been sighted here the previous day. We watched them closely as they moved further northwards towards a group of mixed game - wildebeest, zebra - and got a fix on their position as the sun set (18 46.676 S, 17 00.009 E). We waited until it was properly dark and then moved closer - but again they were elusive and did not show up in our search, which continued until 23h30.

Wednesday 21st: Holger and Dirk (and one of the spotlights!) had to leave; Wilferd suggested trying again with the Chudob family group. We sat with them from 16h00 as they fed busily and, just as the sun was setting, they gathered together in a group and took off together in a north-easterly direction: to the far (north-western) end of the Fischer's Pan causeway. We followed, via the road, and found the group in what turned out to be an important discovery: their roost site. They were with a medium-sized group of flamingos (mostly Lesser) and various other waterbirds. Again we got a fix on the cranes, which were standing in a little bay in some very



Top: Blue Crane family group at Chudop triangle, with juveniles ringed in April 2006; Centre: Flamingos take off from the newly discovered crane roosting site; Bottom: Part of the Team (L to R): Anne Lacy, Wilferd Versfeld, Mike Scott, Holger Kolberg, Dirk Heinrich and Kerry Morrison (photos Ann Scott).

shallow water, and waited until it was dark. Suddenly we heard an amazing sound: cranes calling as they came in to land! It was about 20h00. We switched on the spotlight and found at least one other crane, besides the group of four. Wilferd moved in and got



February 2007

very close to one before the other cranes caught sight of him. This suggests that with two spotlights and a few head-lights, a capture would indeed be possible. We backed off and returned to the road. As we drove up to the other side of the roost site, the cranes took off, flying very low just over our heads, indeed we could almost have caught one of them by hand!

Thursday 22nd: we did not wish to disturb the cranes unnecessarily, but sat quietly at the roost site (by now named "Crane Corner") from 19h00-21h00 and sure enough, the family group arrived again. Just before dark they split up and we left the two adults standing in their usual spot, while the two juveniles had moved off further to the north-west; it's probably high time for the juveniles to leave the adults.

Other Blue Cranes recorded

We found only one pair that appeared to be on a nest, on the causeway west of Springbokfontein (18 56.512 S, 16 41.471 E). We checked at Andoni (north of Namutoni) on 20th February and ... no cranes. The excavated waterhole on the west was dry: it appears that the cranes favour this water body, but don't use the one with the borehole, to the east. During the week we covered all the areas where cranes are likely to occur, by road, and our total count was a maximum of 12. Wilferd counted no cranes in the Oponono area the week before. Many questions remain.

Next steps

The next census is set for 23-27 April 2007. We would like to try another capture during this period, by which time our radio and satellite transmitters should have arrived. We are busy collating and analysing all the existing MET crane records for the area and would appreciate hearing if anyone else has or knows of any other sources of data, no matter from how long ago.

Thank you

A special thank you to the International Crane Foundation and ICF/EWT Partnership for support and for sharing experience and knowledge with us. This field work was generously subsidized by *The Overberg Explorer*.

CRANE NEWS FLASHES

Where do Etosha's Blue Cranes come from?

Prof. Adrian Craig, Dept Zoology & Entomology, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa. Email A.Craig@ru.ac.za

I have long been intrigued by the Blue Crane outlier in Namibia - what is known of the history of this population? Might the birds not have been introduced from SA at some point in the past? The early German literature which I have seen makes no mention of Blue Cranes in the 19th Century, but does report other species in the north. However, I have not undertaken any comprehensive literature search. Are there old specimen records?

More on Blue Crane diet

Mick D'Alton, Overberg Crane Group, Bredasdorp, Western Cape, SA; Email mandjdalton@xsiner.co.za

With regard to the Blues' feeding habits I suppose it's unnecessary to add that grasshoppers seem to be the most important item for young cranes. We have seen that young birds seem to fly at a younger age in years of plenty (grasshopper wise) indicating that they play a large role in their development.

Name changes for cranes ...

Kerryn Morrison, ICF/EWT Partnership; Email kerryn@ewt.org.za

BirdLife has changed the scientific name of the Wattled Crane to *Grus carunculatus*, which ICF has accepted. However, they also changed the Blue Crane from *Anthropoides* to *Grus*, which we have not followed.

Rob Simmons, Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, SA; Email harrier@botzoo.uct.ac.za

Throughout the new Namibian Red Data Book I followed the new Roberts name changes (with one exception). Thus I changed the Wattled Crane from *Grus* to *Bugeranus carunculatus*, but I did not change the Blue Crane. BirdLife of course have a website which gives the sources for all their decisions.

Carey Krajewski, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Zoology, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, US; Email careyk@siu.edu

My lab has just finished sequencing the mitochondrial genomes of all 15 crane species and we've some preliminary phylogenetic analyses. These won't be finished for several months, but we do appear to have resolved enough to show that the Wattled, Blue, and Demoiselle Cranes are a group that is nested within *Grus*. I have mixed feelings about how to handle this in terms of classification, though I will come up with something definite by the time we're ready to publish our results later this year. Certainly the simplest solution for those three species is to put them in *Grus*. If a decision must be made immediately, that would be the safest one.

