



Part of the April 2007 Etosha census team (L to R): Immanuel Kapofi, Liamie Erckie, Erastus Kapolo, Nad Brain (pilot), Cllr. Lotto Kuushomwa, Samuel Nanguti, Josef Bonifantius & Mike Scott (Photo: Ann Scott)



All three crane species are found in the vast, ever-changing Lake Oponono wetlands north-west of Etosha. Finding these cranes in this habitat is worse than looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack! (Photo: Ann Scott)

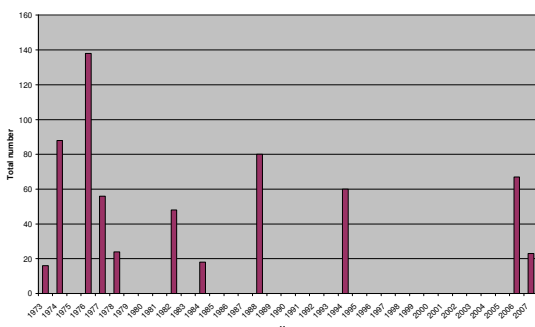
## NEWS FROM ETOSHA

### April 2007 crane census and capture

On 23 April 2007 our faithful Team once more converged on Namutoni, for our third aerial/ground population census of Etosha's Blue Cranes, this time combined with a capture attempt in order to fit radio telemetry. Compared to April 2006's excellent total of 60 adults + 7 juveniles, we obtained only 19-22 adults + 1 juvenile. We also counted 8-11 Crowned Cranes and 8-12 Wattled Cranes in the Oponono wetlands. The Blue Cranes comprised a group of 2 adults + 1 juvenile, and another of 4 adults, near Salvadoria in the Halali area; 9 birds on the Fischer's Pan wetlands, and 2-4 birds at Lake Oponono to the north-west of Etosha. The August 2006 count for Etosha count was also low: 27 adults + 2 juveniles.

From the available data we have from 1973 (see graph), it appears that Blue Crane population numbers for Etosha and surrounds do vary from year to year (and from season to season). In 2006 Etosha experienced an exceptionally good rain season, whereas 2007 has been very dry. 1976 saw a huge total of 138 cranes; did 2006 fall into the same

Etosha Blue Crane numbers: 1973-2007



category? If so, where did the extra birds come from, and where have they gone to? Michael Wink's preliminary (unpublished) result that he can distinguish genetically the Etosha Blues from SA birds argues strongly in favour of the Etosha population being "closed" or isolated (R.E. Simmons, pers. comm.). We are now left with the feeling that some of the Etosha birds may have moved into southern Angola, possibly into the wetlands in the upper reaches of the Cuvelai system which feeds into the Etosha Pan. This impression appears to be confirmed by the findings of our North Central participants, where Erastus Kapolo has been interviewing herders and farmers about crane sightings and movements in north-western Owamboland. It seems that an aerial survey over southern Angola could be one of the quickest ways of obtaining an answer, and we are already making investigations. Later this year, we also hope to fit two Blue Cranes with satellite telemetry.

Our first attempt at capturing a crane was successful! On 24 April, we took note of where a group of cranes had been feeding at the edge of Fischer's Pan for most of the day, and drove slowly up to that spot once it was properly dark (at 23h00), using two spotlights to scan the area. When we located the cranes, Dirk Heinrich moved closer to one bird on foot using only a powerful torch, and was able to capture it deftly with a hand net. We fitted the harness, with a radio transmitter, and released the bird carefully. Next morning we were pleased to find it feeding in the same area. The next night we were not as lucky as the cranes were now more wary.

Our radio bird and the others in the group have now moved off out of range, and we are waiting for the





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ground crew to and report back. We are fortunate to have a volunteer student Hannah Thomas to help us for two months with tracking and behavioural studies.

Our crane week culminated with a short workshop where local crane conservationists reported back on their activities and did some planning for the year ahead. We hope to bring you more details of the survey and the workshop in our next issue.

Special thanks to Peter Cunningham and the Polytechnic of Namibia for funding for tracking equipment and for this survey, in cooperation with *The Overberg Explorer*. We thank Wilderness Safaris Namibia for subsidizing flying services by Dr Nad Brain, and Francois Schneider of Namibia Wildlife Resorts for camping accommodation. Our Team consisted of: Hanjo Böhme, Dr Nad Brain, Liam Erckie, Dirk Heinrich, Immanuel Kapofi, Holger Kolberg, Ann & Mike Scott, Hannah Thomas, Wilferd Versfeld and - from North Central - Cllr. Hon. Lotto Kuushomwa, Josef Bonifantius, Erastus Kapolo & Samuel Nanguti.

(Photo: Wilferd Versfeld)



## Blue Crane chick ringed

**Wilferd Versfeld** (email [versfeld@mweb.com.na](mailto:versfeld@mweb.com.na))

I ringed a Blue Crane chick on 12 March 2007, to the east of Salvadora waterhole in the Halali area with a plastic ring, NHH (see picture) and obtained a blood sample. There was only one chick with two adults.

*Ed: This appears to be the only chick produced this season, possibly on account of very dry conditions.*

## Etosha August 2006 Blue Crane survey

A report entitled, *Where have all the Blue Cranes Gone? Second Crane Survey Supplies more Questions than Answers* (by Holger Kolberg, Nad Brain, Peter Cunningham, Claire Kolberg, Ann Scott, Mike Scott, Gabriel Shatumbu & Basilia Shivute) was published in Roan News (December 2006, pp 20-21; also available on our website: [www.nnf.org.na/CRANES/index.htm](http://www.nnf.org.na/CRANES/index.htm)).

## WHERE DO BLUE CRANES ROOST?

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

As you will see above, we are in the process of developing a capture method for Blue Cranes at Etosha, and success seems to hinge to a large degree on where the birds are roosting. In February 2007, we were able to track down one roost site in a wetland near the causeway at Fischer's Pan, north of Namutoni. This was used by a family group with two large juveniles (which flew there from their feeding area, at sunset), and several other cranes. We are also fairly sure that a larger group of cranes roost at the western waterhole at Andoni - when it has water. It appears to be a gravel pit that is filled by rain water but is unusually empty, for this time of the year, due to the low rainfall. There is a second waterhole nearby, with a borehole, but the cranes don't seem to use it. Our main question is, actually: do any of the pairs in Etosha roost on their own at their daytime territories (probably yes during nesting/chick times, but maybe not once the juveniles can fly?). We thought it would be interesting to look again at where cranes roost in other areas (even though there are fewer predators there!). We know they roost at some of the farm dams in the Overberg (e.g. Rietpoel), in the Western Cape; but do they always roost communally, or do some pairs stay at their daytime feeding areas, even when they do not have eggs/chicks?

**Mark Anderson**

(Email: [manderson@half.ncape.gov.za](mailto:manderson@half.ncape.gov.za))

In the Eastern Karoo, Blue Cranes roost in farm dams (and other open water). In the early evening, I have seen large flocks arriving at these roost sites, as well as smaller groups of cranes and pairs of birds. I presume that, during the non-breeding season, most (all) Blue Cranes roost in these wetlands. I have however not come across Blue Cranes in the veld at night, so I am not sure if some birds do not use wetlands for roosting purposes. During the breeding season, Blue Cranes and their chicks will of course not roost in wetlands. I am not sure what Blue Cranes did historically, i.e. prior to farm farms. Ephemeral pans would have been occasionally inundated. Also there is often water in some of the smaller rivers and drainage lines, but these are also not permanent. Predation pressure in the Eastern Karoo is fairly limited, especially in comparison to historical times, but I am sure that black-backed jackals, caracal and feral dogs prey on crane chicks.



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**Mick D'Alton** (email [mandjdalton@xsinet.co.za](mailto:mandjdalton@xsinet.co.za))

If only we could see in the dark! I know cranes roost in quite large numbers on the vleis in the Overberg, Western Cape as I have seen them come in at dark when we are bird hunting. I also know that they used to roost in large numbers at Soutpansvlakte (east of Bredasdorp). I have a pair of confiscated birds with clipped wings on the farm (near Bredasdorp) and they roosted in a shallow pool a short way from the house. A few wild birds, from 2 to 6 used to roost with them for a while before Christmas but I see them no more and the clipped birds now roost in our large dam in front of the house, which has very little shallow water and so is not really suitable. I think they do sometimes roost in small groups at small water bodies.

Another thought is that our birds are having their simultaneous moult now, and then they need a fairly large expanse of shallow water. Here in the Overberg they also use low bushes to run into to hide. There are usually fully flighted birds amongst the groups, we think to confuse predators into thinking that all the birds can fly. This may mean that there is a large concentration of birds somewhere where the conditions are suitable now, but not necessarily used by them at other times! The next thing is that if there is a simultaneous moult going on somewhere and you can find it, you may have a lot of flightless birds that could be caught (with a lot of sweat) in the daytime.

**Kevin Shaw** (email [shawka@cncjnk.wcape.gov.za](mailto:shawka@cncjnk.wcape.gov.za))

I notice that in certain areas where the pairs stay in the same vicinity throughout the year, with a suitable waterbody, they will roost every night in the waterbody. I am currently helping a UNISA technikon student with her habitat utilisation project. She is monitoring daily habitat use of two crane pairs in suboptimal crane habitat. It is quite a large area and each pair roosts in their own dam every night. Both pairs have chicks – unfortunately one pair lost theirs - so it would be interesting to see what would happen now. In other areas the birds roost in large numbers, either because they are in moult or for unknown reasons. We do not know why they roost communally in some cases, and in other cases not. I think it is purely by chance and depends on where the individual crane is in the landscape at the time that it decides to fly to water to roost. Is it alone and if so when it flies to the nearest suitable roost site, will it be alone or will other cranes also pitch up, etc.? In areas with large numbers of cranes, the chance of finding only one or two crane cranes at a roost site also decreases.

**Vicki Hudson** (email [vhudson@capenature.co.za](mailto:vhudson@capenature.co.za))

My observations in the Caledon area are that the roosting patterns of the cranes are very erratic and unpredictable, as they change according to the conditions of the day/week/month. Sometimes a pair will roost on their own in a dam close to their day time foraging site, other evenings they will join others at a larger roost site. Some roost sites are used every evening throughout the year, but it's not always the same cranes there each day. In harvest and planting season the cranes often use the roost site nearest to where the foraging is best for that time. In other territories a farm will have one pair (difficult to say if it's the same birds though) which stay in their territory, using the same roost site throughout the year (this has been reported in areas with low crane densities).

### NEWS FROM BUSHMANLAND

#### After a good start, a very dry season!

**Dries Alberts** (email [mettskwe@iway.na](mailto:mettskwe@iway.na))

10/4/07: No news from our side, except that the rain has stayed away! The last month or so, we have had only 3 Wattled Cranes after the pans dried up. It is extremely disappointing, especially if one considers how well and long the pans had water (see newsletter No. 25, January 2007). The rain has definitely avoided us this year.

#### Bushmanland 1975

**Mick D'Alton** (email [mandjdalton@xsinet.co.za](mailto:mandjdalton@xsinet.co.za))

What an interesting newsletter (No. 25), congrats on getting the whole thing going and becoming so dynamic! The vista from the photo looking out over the pan with two cranes in the foreground looks so similar to one I took in 1975, only there weren't the cranes in my picture, that I think it must be the same site. I also have a photo of two Wattled Cranes that I saw at another site on the same visit.



A full Nyae Nyae Pan in 1975 (Photo: Mick D'Alton)



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