



August 2007

ONWARDS ... TO Oponono!

The Etosha Blue Crane saga continues

Ann & Mike Scott, Wilferd Versfeld & Steve Bellan

It's a strange, remote, flat landscape, treeless (apart from a few isolated makalani palms) and covered by sparse grass. The water in the pans is clear and saline, the sands snow white and clean, with no mud at the water's edge. But this is no sea, no ocean – this is the shore of Lake Oponono, part of the extensive Cuvelai wetland system that feeds southwards into Etosha Pan from the highlands of Angola.

For three days (15-17 August 2007) we puzzle about why Namibia's small population of Blue Cranes would prefer this apparently barren area to the confines of Etosha National Park during the dry times of the year. We are busy with our second dry-season census of these cranes, to compare with similar counts in August 2006, and with wet season counts in April 2006 and April 2007. This time a simultaneous aerial count will not be possible, so we are doing a thorough ground search. Wilferd Versfeld of the MET Etosha Ecological Institute (EEI), Okaukuejo is our very able guide, and Steve Bellan of Berkeley University, California, provides enthusiastic assistance.

Wednesday 15/8/07

After leaving the EEI we bump along tracks for four hours and are soon coated in fine white dust. At 16h00 we arrive at the southern edge of Lake Oponono where, finally, we find a group of 10 Blue Cranes foraging on the dry, short grasslands, close to a flock of 15 Crowned Cranes. Our position is 18 10.873 S; 15 46.282 E. We try in vain to pick up a signal from the bird we fitted with a radio transmitter in April 2007 (see newsletter No. 29, May 2007).



Blue Crane roosting area on the shores of Lake Oponono, north-west of Etosha NP (Photo: Ann Scott)

THE CUVELAI SYSTEM

The seasonal Cuvelai System originates in highland areas some 300 km to the north of Etosha NP in Angola, where annual rainfalls often exceed 700 mm. This complex network of interconnected channels – known locally as 'oshanas' – initially spreads out and later converges once it crosses the Namibian border.

Water flows vary each year, depending on the amounts of rain and where it falls. Much of the water in the oshanas is also often the result of heavy falls of rain within central northern Namibia. A good flow, or 'efundja', occurs in about four out of ten years on average, when water surges south- /south-eastwards down to the Omadhiya Lakes, to the Ekuma River and into the Etosha Pan.

About a quarter of Namibia's people live in this unusual drainage system, their homes spread across the flat landscape dominated by a network of shallow channels. The presence of relatively fertile soils and access to water in shallow wells attracted people to settle here hundreds of years ago. Much of the area is much more densely populated than immediately to the north in Angola ...

Information on this fascinating system is provided in:

- *Atlas of Namibia. A Portrait of the Land and its People.* John Mendelsohn, Alice Jarvis, Carole Roberts & Tony Robertson, 2002. Published for the Ministry of Environment & Tourism by David Phillip, Cape Town.
- *Guide to the common plants of the Cuvelai wetlands.* N.V. Clarke, N.V. 1998. Southern African Botanical Diversity Network, Windhoek, Namibia.



Well-worn cattle paths criss-cross the Oponono plains, in the foraging area of the cranes (Photo: Ann Scott)



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Wilferd Versfeld (left) and Mike Scott search for a signal from our radio-tagged crane (Photo: Ann Scott)

We drive further north-westwards to some water tanks, where the water has been piped in for the cattle. To test one of our hypotheses about what the cranes may be feeding on, we examine countless dung pats and eventually find a small dung beetle – but only one – underneath one. That night we camp at the southern edge of Lake Oponono. Above us the stars are brilliant. When it is well dark, we drive slowly up to the site where the Blue Cranes have been feeding. We search for more than an hour with spotlights, but the cranes have disappeared.

Thursday 16/8/07

We awake to a strong, icy southerly wind that almost succeeds in ripping our tents down. Fourteen Blue Cranes are back at the previous day's site, foraging busily while facing into the wind. We watch them for some time, then drive off about 8 km to the north-west, where the inlet of the Etaka River is marked by another large lake. Here we find two juvenile Wattled Cranes, near a group of cattle at the water's edge.

On our way we have encountered more and more herds of cattle, Nguni-types with beautiful painted markings. Some of the herdsmen's huts are occupied and the dogs rush out, tails wagging. Wood is scarce and a precious commodity, used mainly (with other materials) for constructing kraal fences.

At midday we return to the Lake Oponono area, to the site where Wilferd and Hannah Thomas had observed two groups of 8 + 14 Blue Cranes on 31 May 2007 (see newsletter No 29, May 2007). Nearby is a shallow pan that still holds water. Here we find 11 Blue Cranes, apparently from the same group we had spotted in the morning. The cranes peck repeatedly at the roots of the short, dry grass. Even though



Cattle at the inlet of the Etaka River, with two juvenile Wattled Cranes in the background (Photo: Ann Scott)

three separate groups of 70-80 cattle each pass close by, in most cases accompanied by a few herdsmen and 2-3 dogs, only some of the cranes look up briefly, and then all continue with their busy task. At 16h30, another four cranes join the group, bringing the total to 15 (the maximum number we observe on the trip).

Soon after sunset, all 15 cranes take off in the direction of Lake Oponono, honking gently. That night we are luckier in that we are able to approach fairly close to the group of cranes, roosting in the water – but almost immediately they take off.

Friday 17/8/07

Having puzzled for most of the past two days about what the cranes could be feeding upon, we now have the opportunity to examine the previous day's feeding grounds minutely. Tentatively we identify the grass as *Sporobolus spicatus* (but this awaits confirmation).

We make what appears to be an exciting discovery: the cranes have excavated the grass roots, fed on part of them and then tossed them aside. Closer examination reveals that some/most of the roots are partly enclosed in a "sheath", which is moist and juicy, and this could be the source of food (PTO for photograph). We hope to follow up on the nutritional properties of these root parts in due course. It also appears that this grass is found in the two vegetation types within Etosha where the cranes occur: sweet grassveld on lime (on the pan's edge) and in Andoni-veld. If so, this could be an important link in explaining the local migrations of the cranes between Etosha and the Lake Oponono area! There is much work ahead to verify these preliminary observations, but we are cautiously excited at our discovery. We wonder whether this finding has been noted elsewhere ...



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Above: Foraging Blue Cranes have pecked at the roots of the grass plants. Are they in search of the "sheaths" encasing part of most roots (below)? (Photos: Ann Scott)

On our way home, at 11h30, we have a last view of our 15 Blue Cranes and 12+ Crowned Cranes near the southern shores of Lake Oponono – heads facing into the wind and ... pecking away single-mindedly.

Saturday 18/8/07-Sunday 19/8/07

We drive around on most of the tourist roads within the Park from west to east and back again; but there are no cranes around during this very dry time. Even at Andoni, water is extremely limited and the other animals queue up thirstily. This means that, with our having found only 15 Blue Cranes in total, there could still be up to 45 cranes "missing" ... all the more reason to fit one or two birds with satellite telemetry, with a flight over the upper Cuvelai system in Angola a strong interim option.

A special thank you to the local MET staff for logistical support for the above survey, to the Polytechnic of Namibia for radio telemetry equipment, to Ben Strohbach of the NBRI for information on grasses and to The Overberg Explorer for financial support!

Radio crane

On 23 April 2007 we captured a Blue Crane near Namutoni and fitted a radio transmitter with the frequency of **151.130** (with a large green ring with the code NBG on the left leg; see newsletter No. 29, May 2007). Please would you inform any of your contacts who may be doing radio tracking – anywhere – in case they pick up a signal at this frequency during the course of other observations.

Etosha Symposium

The Etosha National Park Centennial Symposium was held at the end of June 2007, to celebrate the centenary of the founding of this great African Park. The Namibia Crane Working Group compiled a poster on the Namibia Blue Crane Project for this prestigious occasion, which Wilferd Versfeld of the MET Etosha Ecological Institute kindly presented on our behalf.

Cranes to be included in Kavango/Capri wildlife survey

The MET is planning an aerial survey for Kavango and Caprivi in September and early October. The Namibia Nature Foundation will be supporting a detailed wetlands survey of the lower Okavango River and floodplains, the Kwandu, Linyandi, Chobe and Zambezi systems. This will be a repeat of the survey done in 2004 (see newsletter No. 6, December 2004). The survey will again be counting cranes, and we look forward to the results in due course.

First ACWAC newsletter

The African Cranes, Wetlands and Communities Programme of the ICF/EWT Partnership has launched its newsletter, the first of its kind to encompass information on the conservation activities on all four of Africa's resident crane species. It includes items on some very worthwhile initiatives from a spread of African countries, and two items by the NCWG.

What is disquieting to read is that the present global population estimate for Wattled Cranes has dropped to only 7 700 birds, with a major decline of 35% in SA over the past 20 years. News of this kind should make us double our efforts to keep our cranes as an integral part of our landscape!

Please contact the project coordinator and editor, Kerry Morrison, if you would like to make contact and/or be placed on the mailing list:

Email: kerry@ewt.org.za

Websites: www.ewt.org.za & www.savingcranes.org



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