



BEYOND OPONONO – TO ANGOLA!

Ann & Mike Scott & Nad Brain

As Etosha becomes progressively drier this year, its Blue Cranes have moved out northwards into the wetlands of the Lake Oponono area. By August 2007, no cranes can be found within Etosha, and only 15 at Lake Oponono. At this stage we have no idea where the missing birds could be. Southern Angola appears to be a strong possibility, especially the Upper Cuvelai system, which eventually flows down southwards into Etosha. Although we have records of both Wattled and Crowned Cranes in southern Angola, there are no confirmed records of Blue Cranes in this country; still, we agree that it is important to investigate this area before the next rainy season.

At short notice, the International Crane Foundation/ Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership is able to provide invaluable co-finance to our basic funding. Paul van Schalkwyk kindly makes his turbo Cessna 206 available, and the necessary flight clearance is obtained. On 25 September 2007, Nad Brain flies up from Windhoek to meet us at Okaukuejo. The local MET staff provides logistical and other support.

The following day we take off to the north, doing a quick but fruitless check at Lake Oponono, and refuel at Ondangwa. Then we are winging over southern Angola at 200-300', flying northwards over neat kraals with their demarcated cattle-holding areas and huge baobabs, makalani palms and other trees. We do not see many people. Some 150 km into the country, the habitat has become bushier and we are now over the Parque Nacional da Mupa (Mupa National Park). The large, greenish Kunene River rushes into view and, as the habitat northwards does not appear to be suitable for Blue Cranes, we turn to the south-west and follow the floodplains across the southern Lubango area. In contrast to the arid, apricot-coloured surroundings the vegetation is lush, with sandbanks and reeds that show the passage of strong waters during the past rainy season. The birdlife appears to be rich: we spot several African Fish Eagles, and darters, cormorants, teal and other waterbirds – but no cranes, of any species. The terrain then becomes rockier, with dramatic rapids at increasing frequencies. We reach the large Calueque Dam and the Ruacana Falls, the latter fairly dry. Across the border and once more in Namibia, we fly over the Olushandja Dam and back in a south-easterly direction along the course of the now dry



Top: Neat kraals and drainage systems in Southern Angola. Centre: Extensive floodplains of the upper Kunene River. Bottom: Ruacana Falls on the Namibia/Angola border, with the Calueque Dam in the background (*Photos: Ann Scott*).



Olushandja Dam, on the Etaka River (Namibia).



Dry watercourse of the Etaka River (Photos: Ann Scott)

Etaka River. We fuel at Ondangwa once again, elated but somewhat despondent that we have not found any cranes. We fix the radio antennae onto the wings of the plane, hoping to find the bird fitted with a radio transmitter on 23 April 2007.

Then we are climbing steadily to 5 000-6 000' over a hot, white landscape. We reach the southern shores of Lake Oponono. Suddenly the radio receiver jumps into life: at last, a signal on frequency 151.130! Then below us a large group of 30± Blue Cranes flashes into view, steel-grey birds standing in steel-grey water. All face into the wind, each body arched in a graceful question mark. We echo the question: where have these birds been during the past dry months? There are yet more questions. Shortly before we set off on the Angola survey, we received this report:

Dries Alberts: MET Parks & Wildlife, Tsumkwe; email mettskwe@iway.na
 "I found your Blue Cranes in the Balyerwa Conservancy (just South of the Mamili National Park) in the Caprivi on 7 September 2007! We saw them only once, although we were in the area for about a week. This reading was taken approximately 1 km from where we saw the birds: S 18 18 500 E 023 36 061. They were in the flood plains, about 25 odd birds. We found them feeding on one of the pans. This area had burned a couple of weeks ago and had new green shoots coming through. The entire area is surrounded by marshes with water aplenty ..."
 However, Dries returned to the same area from 7-17/10/07 but could not find any cranes, despite an intensive search on foot at various times, in channels and on flood plains. The birds had disappeared!



A signal from the radio-tagged crane is picked up ...



... and we find 30± Blue Cranes at Lake Oponono (Photos: Ann Scott)





Pilot Nad Brain and Ann Scott with the turbo Cessna 206 used for the survey (Photo & inset: Mike Scott)

To date we have only one or two other records of Blue Cranes in Caprivi. The Mamili area is about 900 km east of Etosha. Blue Cranes are not normally known to migrate over large distances such as this. It seems likely that some/all of these birds have now returned and joined the original group of 15 birds at Lake Oponono.

Fortunately, our network of supporters is keeping a further look-out for cranes in strange places. We have since received this feedback:

Patrick Aust: NNF Crocodile Project; email patrickwaust@hotmail.com

"We have almost finished the aerial surveys of the Caprivi/Kuvango wetlands. We have seen several Wattled Cranes and a pair of Crowned Cranes but no Blue Cranes. Mamili is very full so it is possible that the cranes have moved further north to the inundated grasslands/ ploughed lands of the southern conservancies ... the SPAN project now has a couple of receivers floating around Bwabwata NP and I've asked Simon Meyes if he can keep scanning your crane frequency whilst tracking the collared giraffe/ eland released on the Kwando conservancies. Hopefully it will help out if the radio collared bird decides to take the gap again!"

Linda & Jeff Millington, email millington.linda@gmail.com

"We saw 4 adult + 1 juvenile Wattled Crane on 22/9/07 at Buffalo, on the opposite side of the Kavango River from Mahangu Game Reserve – but no Blue Cranes!"

Mark Muller: BirdLife Botswana/Ngami Toyota; email muller@ngami.co.za

"I have copied your message to a couple of folks who operate in Linyanti so they can be on the look out. I have in the past, I think on three occasions, seen Blue Cranes in the Western grasslands of the Makgadikgadi pans and even once in 1975 photographed a pair with a small chick. However the area is extremely dry right now and I do not think it is at all suitable for them. If we hear anything we'll keep you posted."

Where to from here?

- The first Southern Angola Crane Survey has served to highlight the importance of the Lake Oponono area for the cranes during dry conditions, and we need to find ways to promote its protection.
- We are planning to fit a satellite PTT onto 1-2 cranes during the next rainy season (April 2008 or earlier), and up to five more radio transmitters.
- We continue to seek information on recent Blue Crane sightings in Caprivi and elsewhere.
- We hope to find further funding to survey the area east of Mupa National Park, including more of the upper Cuvelai area, in Angola.
- Finally, we are seeking ways to establish and build up contacts with local conservationists in Angola.

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Blue Crane genetic material

On 31 August 2007, nine blood samples from five Blue Cranes at Etosha were sent to the BioBank in Pretoria; and a further six samples from two more cranes have been forwarded to Donella Young by Prof. Michael Wink. These samples were collected by Wilferd Versfeld, Holger Kolberg and Tim Osborne during 1999-2007. Their analysis will help determine whether the Etosha Blue Crane population is genetically different from the core population in S.A.