NAMIBIA
Crane Working Group

# Namibia Crane News 35

## March 2008

### GOOD RAINS – AND FLOODS – IN THE NORTH OF NAMIBIA

News of the highest rainfalls in Caprivi and Kavango in 50 years; extensive floods in North Central; and good rains at Etosha and Bushmanland. Although the rains bring about exciting movements of birds, we also have sympathy with those whose lives and homes have been adversely affected by the floods.

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## CAPRIVI & KAVANGO

## Status of Wattled Cranes on the flood-plains of north-east Namibia: results from an aerial survey in September 2007

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### Areas surveyed

The Okavango River in Namibia, from the Angolan border just northwest of the bridge on the Trans-Caprivi highway south to the Botswana border; the entire length of the Kwandu-Linyanti-Lake Liambezi-Chobe system, including the whole Mamili National Park; and the Zambezi River for its entire length on Namibia's border, including parts of the adjacent East Caprivi floodplains, were surveyed from the air in September 2007 (Figure. 1). The same methods were used as for the Caprivi wetlands aerial survey in 2004 (Chase 2007, Stander 2004; see Namibia Crane News No. 6). Strip widths of 250 m on each side of the aircraft were counted, at an altitude of 90 m. The survey was flown by means of a total count with transects 500 m apart, providing a 100% sampling coverage. Detailed flight paths are shown in Figure 2 (available on request). We report here on the number of Wattled Cranes observed, and compare this to the August 2004 survey (Brown *et al*. 2004).

A pair of Wattled Cranes at Lake Ziwey, Ethiopia
(*Photo: Gunther Nowald, courtesy of ICF/EWT Partnership*)

### Results & Discussion

Eleven Wattled Cranes were recorded in the Mahango / Buffalo area on the lower Kavango floodplains. In 2004 four cranes were seen in this area (Table 1). Twenty Wattled Cranes were recorded in the East Caprivi in 2007 (Figure 3; available on request), the same number as in 2004. Most (15) were seen in the Mamili National Park (eight in 2004), and five on the western side of the Kwandu in the Bwabwata National Park. No cranes were seen on the Linyanti-Chobe east of Mamili (eight cranes seen in this stretch in 2004), and none on the Zambezi and eastern floodplains. In total, 31 Wattled Cranes were recorded in the north-eastern wetlands of Namibia in 2007, compared with 20 birds in 2004.

During this survey no Wattled Cranes were observed in large tracts of suitable habitat in conservancies and other communal areas. They appear to be confined largely to the Mamili and Bwabwata National Parks. This coincides with the distribution patterns recorded during the survey for other wetland species such as lechwe and reedbuck in this region. It is clear that there may still be significant disturbance and persecution of wildlife in communal areas, including in conservancies, along the Kwandu system and presumably also along the Kavango and Zambezi systems. Wattled Cranes, lechwe and reedbuck are ideal indicator species to monitor levels of poaching and disturbance in these wetland systems.

There does seem to be an indication of local move-ments of Wattled Cranes (Figure 1). On 13/8/07, just before the aerial survey, 10 were recorded at Kasika Conservancy and on 20/8/07, four at Malengalenga Conservancy (close to Mamili National Park; Event Book & Incident Book Records). After the survey, on 8/10/07, another eight were observed at Malengalenga.

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| Species | Survey Stratum and Species Counted | | | | | | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Linyanti/Chobe | | Kwando | | Mamili NP | | Zambezi | | Kavango | | | |
| Year | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 | 2004 | 2007 |
| Wattled Crane | 8 | | | 5 | 8 | 15 | | | 4 | 11 | 20 | 31 |

Table 1. Numbers of Wattled Cranes counted in five strata on two aerial surveys (2004 and 2007) of the Caprivi river systems, Namibia.

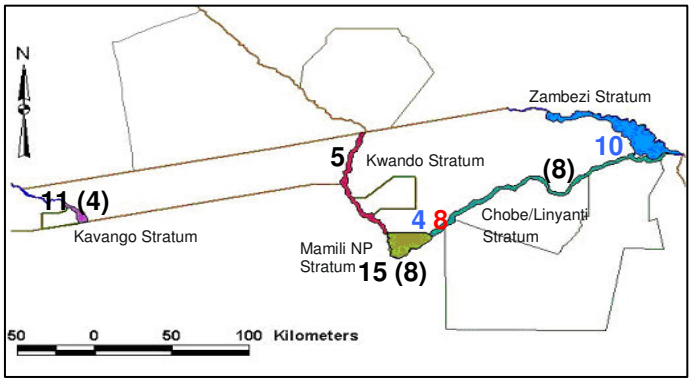


Figure 1. Layout of five strata for the north-east aerial survey and distribution of Wattled Cranes during the aerial survey (2007; 2004 in brackets), with ground sightings before the aerial survey (blue) and after the aerial survey (red).

Other (older) Wattled Crane records from conservancies include 16 at Kasika (August 2005) and 14 at Malenga-lenga (19/9/06), as well as a regular stream of records of smaller numbers/pairs.

Further work may still be needed within conservancies to achieve the management levels required to deliver conservation benefits for specialist wetlands species. This habitat and its associated species provide some of the main tourism attractions of the region, as well as important potential resources to conservancies. These components clearly need to receive more concerted focus and effective conservation action.

**Acknowledgement**
We would like to thank Simon Mayes for introducing the survey team to community members and to the Ministry of Environment and Tourism staff based in the protected areas of the Caprivi, and to Simon, Dorothy Wamunyima and Richard Diggle for providing feedback to communities and Ministry staff. The USAID funded Life Plus programme and the ICEMA project provided funding for this survey. Dave Ward and the Eastern Caprivi conservancies and parks are thanked for the additional Wattled Crane records.

**References**
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Chase, M 2007. Aerial wildlife census of the Caprivi River Systems, a survey of rivers, wetlands and floodplains. Final report submitted to the Namibia Nature Foundation. Windhoek, Namibia.
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## Wattled Crane sightings from East Caprivi for 2007

Dave Ward, email dward@iway.na

31/1/08: Below is a list of crane sightings from east Caprivi conservancies and parks for 2007 taken from game guards Event Books and MET Incident Books.

**Malengalenga Conservancy**
29/04/07 Two birds seen on flood plain, block 47 77
15/05/07 Four birds seen on flood plain, block 47 77
30/07/07 Two birds seen on flood plain, block 49 77
20/08/07 Four birds seen on flood plain, block 47 77
08/10/07 Eight birds seen on flood plain, block 47 77

**Kabulabula Conservancy**
14/06/07 Three birds feeding on flood plain, block 19 18
01/07/07 One bird feeding along Chobe River flood plain, block 19 15

**Kasika Conservancy**
02/08/07 One bird feeding on flood plain, block 9 16
13/08/07 Ten birds feeding on flood plain, block 9 14

**Wuparo Conservancy**
18/01/07 Three birds feeding in open grassland, block 48 84

**Bwabwata National Park (Susuwe Core Area)**
09/09/07 One bird feeding on flood plain at Chisu, block 99 13
20/09/07 One bird feeding on flood plain at Chisu, block 99 13

**Bwabwata National Park (Buffalo Core Area)**
04/10/07 Two adult birds on flood plain at S18 10.962 E21 45.576
05/10/07 Two adult birds flying over flood plain at S18 10.565 E21 44.382
05/10/07 Three birds (2 adult and 1 juv.) feeding on flood plain at S18 12.244 E21 46.314

**Mahango National Park**
04/08/07 One bird feeding on flood plain, block 183 42
05/08/07 Two birds feeding on flood plain, block 183 45
04/09/07 Two birds feeding on flood plain, block 183 44
02/10/07 Three birds (2 adults and 1 juv.) feeding on flood plain at S18 11.051 E21 43.840
04/11/07 Three birds feeding on flood plain, block 184 42

# BUSHMANLAND

## Wattled Cranes are back

**Dries Alberts**, MET Parks & Wildlife Tsumkwe
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16/1/08: We had good rains (60 mm) on 12-13/1/08. The pans are still empty, but with a few pools of rain water scattered around. I saw 5 Wattled Crane yesterday (our first for 2008) of which 2 were younger than the rest. Also saw about 30 Flamingo. I left Nyae Nyae pan with rain falling, so hopefully it will soon fill. At this stage, the pan still needs to be saturated.

30/1/08: We have had loads of rain, for the month alone already 220 mm. Big clouds currently hanging around. Last week Friday (25th) we saw groups of 4, 7 and 6. So in a matter of a week, we had 12 new visitors.

On 3 February we saw 22 Wattled Cranes: 1, 2, 3, 3, 7, 1, 1, 2 and 2

On 12 February we saw 19: 3, 3, 3, 5, 3 and 2
So all is bliss and absolutely wonderful in Nyae Nyae right now. All the pan systems are full to the brim. Namibia Country Lodges just flew in from Windhoek and they said there are literally hundreds of pans off the road which are full with loads of birds on them. So, like always, the sightings are limited to roads only and I am sure we are missing lots.

In January we did see 40 Flamingo, but then they disappeared, up to now. Maybe they were scouts? The one thing which is standing out amongst all the previous years, is the quantity of frogs!!! We have absolute billions of them this year, the most I have ever seen! And the Open-billed Storks and other feathered friends are having a blast with the little amphibians. Loads of food.

17/2/08:
We saw 24 Wattled Cranes in groups of: 3, 3, 3, 2, 10 and 3. In the group of 10, we clearly saw 3 which were juveniles; 1 in particular was very "young" and stood like half the length of its "parents" tall. It is definitely the youngest bird I have seen to date.
Also, at long last, the 40 Flamingo have returned and we expect the big flocks to soon follow. The last month of so, we have also had approx. 200 Woolly-necked Stork, which is also the most we have ever seen.

## NORTH CENTRAL – FLOODS!

**Nancy Robson**
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(Via sabirdnet & Namringers)

If anybody has thoughts about coming in this direction & plan to travel off the tar roads you need to make quite sure places are access able. The tar road to Ruacana was underwater but I understand that has subsided.
I have been unable to make contact with Kunene River Lodge so do not know what that road is like that way.
We are having floods here, like few have seen before. It is said that the last severe floods like this were in 1950! The water originates from the Kunene River in Angola. We have had a lot of rain, just to add to the water. The floods are all along the old flood plains from the river. I have been told that in Ondjiva (60 kms north of the Namibia/Angola border) even road bridges have been washed away! Hundreds of homesteads here have been submerged in these floods. On the 5 km gravel road from where I live to Oshikango, huge dongas (ditches) have been washed across the road. On my return from Otjiwarongo last week I had to do a 55 km detour to get home. The water is likely to be around for many months yet.

## ETOSHA

**Wilferd Versfeld**, email versfeld@mweb.com.na

11/2/08: I did a crane survey last Friday (8/2/08) to Namutoni. The weather was not ideal as it was misty and raining on and off. Found only two cranes breeding south of the causeway at Springbokfontein, about halfway along. There are two eggs which can be clearly seen from the road. I went to all the normal places and Okashana but nothing and no radio bird signal.
Oponono is very wet as I could not get to Ekuma, but will try to go to Oponono next week.
Rainfall so far for the season end of Jan 2008: Namutoni 309.9 mm, Nehale 340.4 mm, Okaukuejo 151.1 and Ombika 187 mm.

26/2/08: The only cranes we could find last week were the two breeding at Springbokfontein. Two are also seen regularly at Sueda but I haven't seen them.

## KAVANGO


### Investigation of threats to rare and endangered birds along the Lower Okavango River in Namibia

**Extracts from a project report by Chantel Louw**
(Polytechnic of Namibia - Mentor Ms S. Bethune; Tutor Mrs M. de Klerk); 26 November 2007

The overall aim of this study was to investigate threats to the rare and endangered bird species in the Lower Okavango River in Namibia. The specific objectives of this project were:

- Identification of rare and endangered bird species likely to occur along the Lower Okavango River in Namibia.
- Determining which of these rare and endangered bird species presently occur in the three selected study areas (a protected site – Mahango Game Park, a semi-protected site – Joseph Mbambangandu Conservancy and an unprotected site – Makena village).
- Investigation of threats to these rare and endangered birds, in particular illegal fishing, predation by avivores, disturbance by river traffic, harvesting of reeds, fire, poisons and traditional uses.

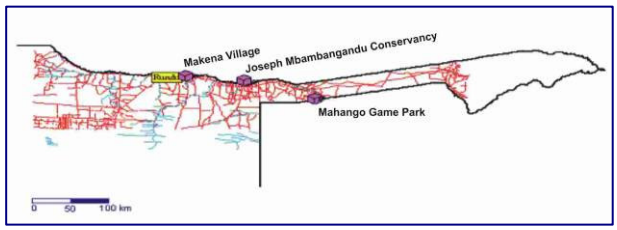
Of the 396 species known to occur in the Lower Okavango River in Namibia (Hines 1987), 51 or 13% are considered rare or endangered, making it important to protect the wetland birds in this area. These include Pel's Fishing Owl (*Critically Endangered*: Simmons & Brown 2006); Wattled Crane, African Marsh Harrier, Slaty Egret, Saddle-billed Stork and Rock Pratincole (all *Endangered*); and African Skimmer and African Fish-

Eagle (*Vulnerable*). The high bird diversity as well as the rarity of so many species attract tourists interested in bird watching and have high potential as a money earner in the region.

From the results of this study it is clear that the better protection improves conditions for finding rare and endangered birds. Some people in the conservancy feel that they want their children to see these rare and endangered birds some day. Thus they feel that all the birds in there area need protection and since they are a conservancy they are aware of the need to use their resources more sustainably. In the park, laws protect all animals, including birds. However, at village level, awareness of the ecological as well as the economic benefits of wetland birds and their habitats needs to be improved, perhaps starting with environmental awareness about rare and endangered birds at school.

**Recommendations**

- Extend the present Okavango Delta Ramsar site northwards to include the Lower Okavango River in Namibia and possibly to also include the Mucusso Park in Angola because of the high bird diversity and the rarity of so many species.
- Provide better protection to wetland habitats such as swamps, reedbeds and riparian forests alongside the river to improve the conditions for the rare and endangered birds and promote tourism based on this natural resource e.g train more bird guides and provide more guided bird tours.
- Encourage future students to further investigate impacts of illegal fishing methods, particularly the increasing use of mosquito and drag nets and how this affects the food supply of fish-eating birds.
- Keep livestock and domestic cats and dogs away from vulnerable habitats, particularly during the bird nesting time, and discourage burning of reedbeds and grasslands in the floodplain areas.
- Put up signs at Rundu beach, camps, lodges, parks and at favourite angling spots alongside the river to warn anglers and tourists to be careful not to disturb rare and endangered birds such as the African Skimmers on sand banks and islands.
- Take measures to control reed harvesting alongside the river and set aside areas of protection of reedbeds to support wildlife, both birds and fishes.
- Further research should be done during both the dry and wet seasons to find out which bird nests occur within different habitats along the river and how are they are affected by human pressures, particularly fire, reedbed and forest clearing.
- Actively promote awareness of ecological and economic benefits of wetland birds and their habitats, starting with environmental awareness about rare and endangered birds at school. Fact sheets can be compiled to show the results of this research to give feedback to the community and raise awareness about threats to birds and the environment.



The study area, showing Makena Village, Joseph Mbambangandu Conservancy and Mahango Game Park.

## WHY CONSERVE OUR WETLANDS?

The health and well-being of people is intricately linked to the state of their environment. But in order to be able to provide such essential services, ecosystems need to be kept in a healthy condition.

Wetlands ensure a steady supply of clean water, which is essential for human health. Wetlands are uniquely designed to purify water through natural processes, acting like the kidneys of the landscape. Firstly, they slow down water and this allows sediments in the water to be deposited. Then, wetland plants, such as reeds and bulrushes, and wetland soils and microbes stabilise and store many pollutants including excess nutrients and toxins from sewage and agricultural chemicals and fertilisers, and heavy metals from mining and industrial processes. This helps reduce the possibility of enrichment downstream. Wetlands also act like sponges, slowing down flood waters and storing rain water.

Wetlands support a diversity of plants and animals that are specially adapted to wetlands and can live nowhere else, and also provide feeding, roosting and breeding sites for a range of other species. Wetlands provide many people with a means of earning a living. Good food (e.g. fresh fish) keeps people healthy, and many wetland plants are also edible to people. These systems provide good, nutritious food for livestock, but it is important that they are grazed wisely and protected from over-trampling. Wetlands are also a source of traditional medicines, e.g. plants.

Wetlands offer attractive open spaces for people to visit to walk, bird-watch or just enjoy being in nature. In areas where nature-based tourism has been developed, these areas are a source of income. They are also fascinating outdoor classrooms where learners can discover more how the different components of wetland systems function together.

Wetlands are threatened by a range of impacts that can reduce their ability to be beneficial. But if they are returned to a healthy state in time, some or even all of these services can be recovered. We need to ask what is causing the decline in a degraded wetland so that we can improve its condition in a way that addresses both the symptoms and the causes.

**OUR WETLANDS ARE FRAGILE SYSTEMS – THEY NEED OUR HELP TO SURVIVE!**

Based on a special edition of the newsletter, “Gumboot” of *Working for Wetlands*, a programme of the SA National Biodiversity Institute, email wetlands@sanbi.org.