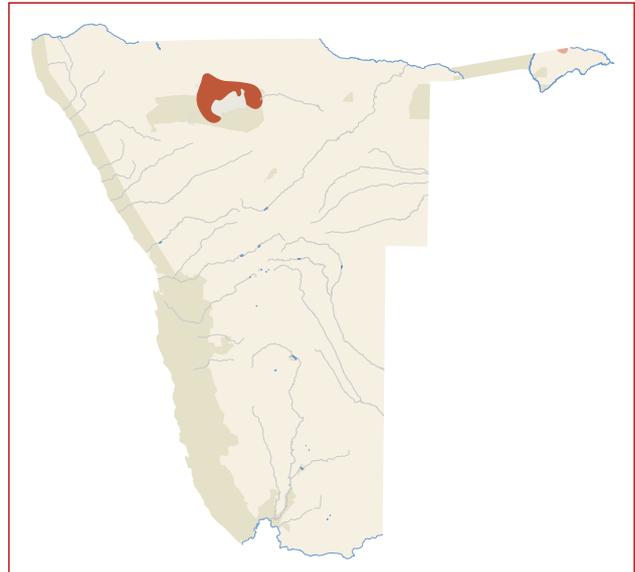


GREY CROWNED CRANE (CROWNED CRANE) |

Balearica regulorum

RE Simmons | Reviewed by: K McCann; HA Scott; W Versfeld

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Conservation Status:	Critically Endangered
Southern African Range:	Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique
Area of Occupancy:	9,500 km ²
Population Estimate:	Fewer than 50 birds
Population Trend:	Slow decline
Habitat:	Grass fringes of wetlands and ephemeral pans
Threats:	Habitat degradation, illegal trade, hunting, climate change

one time during wetland counts in Namibia from 1990 to 2000 was 16 birds from Lake Oponono, and 15 birds were recorded from the same area in 2007 (HA Scott, W Versfeld pers. obs.). It is rarely seen within the borders of Etosha, because it prefers the drier grasslands that are associated with wetlands. Consequently, it is recorded mainly in wetland counts at the ephemeral freshwater depressions of Lake Oponono north of Etosha, where an average of 10 birds were seen five times between 1994 and 1999 (W Versfeld pers. obs.), and the nearby Lake Oshituntu, where an average of five birds were seen six times between 1991 and 2000 (W Versfeld pers. obs.). This dropped to an average of four birds present between 2007 and 2014 in these shallow lakes (HA Scott, W Versfeld unpubl. data), suggesting a long-term decline. It also occurs around Fischer's Pan at the eastern end of the Etosha salt pan, where one or two birds have been recorded. Most sightings occurred in April when these ephemeral pans and some grasslands are flooded. Its area of occupancy covers 9,500 km² (Jarvis *et al.* 2001) – the smallest range of the three species of cranes in Namibia.

This species' total population was estimated at 50,000 to 64,000 birds in 2005, but probably numbered far fewer birds in 2012; most occur in Uganda and Kenya (Meine & Archibald 1996, Beilfuss *et al.* 2007, IUCN 2012a). The southern African subspecies is variously estimated at 8,000 to 12,000 birds (Meine & Archibald 1996, Dodman 2002).



DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

Two subspecies of the Grey Crowned Crane are recognised; *B. r. gibbericeps* is found in eastern Africa, whereas *B. r. regulorum* is endemic to southern Africa. Its range in southern Africa is confined to three discrete and highly fragmented populations. East and north-eastern South Africa support about 4,000 to 5,000 birds (Beilfuss *et al.* 2007). A fluctuating population is found in central Zimbabwe, with scattered records elsewhere, numbering approximately 3,000 birds; an additional 100 birds are thought to occur in Botswana (Allan 2005b). In Namibia, it is only found in the grasslands north of Etosha and there are a few records from the Zambezi and Okavango rivers. This population was estimated at fewer than 50 birds by Brown (1992b) in the late 1980s, a time when large-scale drought may have reduced numbers. The maximum number of birds recorded at any



ECOLOGY

The Grey Crowned Crane prefers the grass fringes of wetlands rather than the large tropical wetlands themselves in southern Africa (Maclean 1993, Allan 1997j); this explains its absence from the major wetlands of northern Namibia, and the Okavango Delta of Botswana (Allan 1997j), where it is seen rarely (McCann 2004). In Namibia, it is frequently associated with small pools in grassland such as around Lake Oponono, north of Etosha, rather than larger bodies of water (W Versfeld pers. obs.). It is not resident in Namibia, but appears in January, probably with the seasonal rains, and disappears again around July (Allan 1997j).

This species typically nests on the edges of wetlands amongst tall reedy vegetation (McCann 2000b), but it chooses more open habitat in Namibia. Two nests were recorded in 2008 during aerial surveys over Lake Oponono (HA Scott, W Versfeld unpubl. data), and two breeding records from the Namibian nest record scheme indicate egg-laying in February and June (Brown *et al.* 2015). Elsewhere it begins egg-laying in spring, with a peak in December and January in South Africa, and a peak in December to February in Zimbabwe (Allan 1997j).

These cranes feed on frogs, reptiles (Maclean 1993), and insects that may be disturbed by foot stamping and especially locusts, grasshoppers and crickets. As a generalist, it also feeds on seed heads of sedges and the fresh tops of grasses (Archibald & Meine 1996).



THREATS

This species faces widespread degradation of its breeding and feeding habitat elsewhere in its range (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996, McCann 2000b). Habitat degradation in the vicinity of lakes Oponono and Oshituntu is relatively minor at present because human occupation is seasonal. Nonetheless, there is no protection offered to this species from opportunistic hunters and trappers who bring their cattle to these ephemeral wetlands. Trapping with snares is known to be common in this area, although most are set in trees and not on the ground (W Versfeld pers. obs.). However, any nests would probably be found and destroyed and, given the large flight distances of birds, they may be shot in this region (W Versfeld pers. obs.).

Illegal trading of wild-caught individuals appears to be a significant issue, particularly in East Africa (Morrison 2009a, 2009b). It is also said to suffer from poisoning and from collisions with and electrocutions in overhead power lines (McCann 2000b). Deliberate poisoning has not been recorded in Namibia and neither has collision with overhead power lines. If global climatic changes bring less rainfall to southern Africa (Midgley *et al.* 2001), then

this species, like many wetland species dependant on the flooding of ephemeral wetlands, is likely to be seen less frequently and may decline in population size in southern Africa (Simmons *et al.* 2004).



CONSERVATION STATUS

The southern African subspecies is classified as *Critically Endangered* in Namibia because of its very small population of fewer than 50 birds (Criterion D) and the evidence of a slow decline in the Lake Oponono region. This represents less than 1% of the estimated 8,000 to 12,000 birds in southern Africa. The South African population was considered *Vulnerable* (Barnes 2000a) and is now considered *Endangered* (Taylor *et al.* in press). The global status of the entire species was upgraded from *Least Concern* to *Vulnerable* in 2009 and to *Endangered* in 2012 (IUCN 2012a), following recent large-scale decreases in its strongholds in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya (Morrison 2009a). A comprehensive recovery plan has recently been initiated, covering all range states, including Namibia (Morrison 2015). The species is listed in Annex 2 of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA), in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and in Appendix II of the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS). Any revised or new Namibian Parks and Wildlife legislation needs to give *Specially Protected* status to this species.



ACTIONS

As Namibia's rarest crane species, the Grey Crowned Crane needs a careful assessment of population numbers in Namibia. The possibility of birds breeding in the Oponono and Oshituntu lakes region following good rains is required in particular. In addition to research, direct protection, including the collection of snares and baits, and education of local herdsman as to the importance of this area for birds, are required. To this end, the Namibia Crane Working Group was established in 2004, and a comprehensive Crane Action Plan was drafted (Scott & Scott 2009). A regular newsletter pertaining to crane conservation efforts is published by the Namibia Crane Working Group (<http://www.nnf.org.na/CRANES/index.htm>), and includes reports on surveys, conservation of critical habitat, capacity-building activities and crane-related tourism.

Namibia has made inputs to the international workshop to draft a single species action plan, and the recommendations therein should be implemented by the group. This includes recommendations addressing human disturbance and poisons that these cranes are susceptible to (Morrison 2015).