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INTRODUCTION

Namibia is the driest country in southern Africa and has restricted areas of wetlands and grasslands suitable for cranes. The three species of cranes occurring in Namibia have a distribution limited to the north of the country and occupy three distinct habitats: the grasslands of the Etosha Basin; the ephemeral wetlands of the Oshana, Grootfontein, and Bushmanland areas; and the wetlands associated with the permanent river systems of the northeast.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Blue Crane (Anthropoides paradiseus)

The Namibian population of Blue Cranes is restricted to the grasslands of Etosha National Park and the Andoni flats just to the north of the park in the Oshikoto Region (Figure 1). The habitat of this species is secure as most of the 1,400 km² (Brown 1990) of short grassland falls within the Etosha National Park. Even though the habitat outside the park is suitable for this species there are few records of Blue Cranes on the Andoni flats. Expansion and establishment of a resident population outside the park is unlikely, as the area is a focus for new settlements and cattle posts. Vagrant birds have been recorded in the south of the country at Stampriet and along the Okavango River (Winterbottom 1971), and a pair was recorded from the Nyae-Nyae pans in former Bushmanland (Hines 1989).

The total population of the Etosha Basin is thought to be fewer than 100 birds, and Brown (1990) suggests there is little evidence that the population was ever much larger. The population is thought to be currently stable with little change in numbers over the past ten years (T. Archibald pers. comm.). The genetic viability and the relationship of the Etosha population to the South African population warrants further research, especially considering the decline of the South African population in recent years. The degree to which South African birds supplement the Etosha population needs to be determined as this may be crucial to the long term survival of the small Namibian population.

Wattled Crane (Bugeranus carunculatus)

Wattled Cranes are widely distributed in the wetland areas of northern Namibia (Figure 1), with several distinct populations present. Resident birds are found within the Mahango Game Reserve/West Caprivi Reserve section of the Okavango River and along the Linyanti River in the Mamili National Park. Total numbers are low with four pairs known to breed in the Mahango Game Reserve in 1992 and about 6-8 pairs recorded in Mamili National Park in 1993 (Grobler pers. comm.). This population is thought to move onto the floodplains of the Zambezi, Kwando-Linyanti-Chobe Rivers during high flood periods and is likely to be supplemented by birds from Botswana and Zambia. Breeding takes place in the winter when water levels fluctuate the least and when food availability is at its highest on the floodplains of the northeast. There are unconfirmed reports of Wattled Cranes breeding in the Lake Onponono and Omuramba Owambo areas during years of exceptional rainfall.

There is a distinct seasonal population of Wattled Cranes occurring in northern Namibia. During the wet season (October-April) considerable numbers of Wattled Cranes have been recorded in the ephemeral wetlands of the Bushmanland, Grootfontein, and Oshana regions. Total numbers are hard to assess but up to 95 individuals have been recorded in the Nyae-Nyae area of Bushmanland (von Plato pers. comm.) and 62 birds were recorded in March 1992 at Lake Onponono (Cunningham pers. comm.). The origins of these birds is not known but it is surmised that the Bushmanland and Grootfontein birds are part of the Okavango Delta and possibly Zambian populations. The birds occurring in the Oshana Region (especially in the Lake Onponono area) are thought to come from the poorly known wetlands of southern Angola. Counts of birds in the Bushmanland area from 1984-90 indicate that about 60% of the population is made up of two adults with a fully fledged juvenile in attendance. These areas of ephemeral wetlands are, therefore, thought to be important post-breeding dispersal areas providing abundant food in a time when the productivity of permanent wetlands (where the birds breed) is at its lowest. The regional movements of Wattled Cranes and the importance of the ephemeral wetlands in the population biology of this species warrant further research.

Threats to the species are difficult to determine. Hunting pressures in the Lake Onponono area are likely to be the greatest threat in the Oshana Region, as is the disturbance by cattle and herders in the same area. Suitable habitat for this species has steadily decreased in the Oshana Region during the recent past through the rapid growth of the human population and there is little hope that this will end. The seasonal habitats of Bushmanland and Grootfontein areas are more secure, with advances in communal resource management programs in Bushmanland securing some sort of conservation status for the Nyae-Nyae pans area. The breeding habitats on the Okavango River and the Linyanti Swamp areas fall within proclaimed conservation areas.
Unseasonal fires set in reed beds and on floodplains are the greatest threat to successful breeding in these areas.

Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*)

The status of the Grey Crowned Crane in Namibia is uncertain. Confirmed records are widely distributed and there are reports of this species from the Okavango River, Grootfontein, and the Chobe River (Winterbottom 1971). Discussions with older members of communities in the Okavango Region indicate that this species was well known along the Okavango River but documented historical records are few (Hines 1987). The Ekuma River mouth area in northern Etosha National Park and the Oshana Region are the only areas where this species has been reliably reported in recent years (Brown 1990).

No birds are resident in Namibia and numbers are generally low (Brown 1990). Breeding has been recorded along the Ekuma River (Brown 1990), but suitable habitat is only sporadically available and it is unlikely that a resident population will become established. Numbers fluctuate between years, with higher numbers in wetter years. The origin of these birds is unknown but it is thought that they are from the extensive wetland systems of southern Angola.

**DISCUSSION**

Although total numbers of cranes occurring in Namibia are small compared to other southern African populations, the country hosts some important sub-regional populations. Particularly important in this regard is the geographically isolated population of Blue Cranes occurring in the Etosha Basin. This population has been little studied, but warrants considerable investigation with regard to the viability of the population and its genetic characteristics compared to the rapidly declining South African population.

The large ephemeral wetlands of the Oshana, Bushmanland, and Grootfontein areas are utilized seasonally by significant numbers of Wattled Cranes when productive habitats are limited in the permanent wetland systems where they breed. The role of these dispersal areas in breeding success and overall population dynamics of the Okavango, Zambian, and Angolan populations warrants further study.

Threats to the major Namibian crane populations are low, the greatest pressures coming from continued agricultural expansion in the Oshana, Bushmanland, and Okavango areas. Most of the populations are at least partially protected and it is hoped that the Communal Resource Management initiative being developed by the Ministry of Wildlife will address the conservation needs of those populations outside of formal conservation areas.

**REFERENCES CITED**


