



The Crane Call

Autumn 2016



Established in 1989 to conserve our Cranes and their Habitat.

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On the 20th of April, we learned of the tragic passing of our former Chairman, Andy Ferendinos

Andrew Ferendinos.

Andrew was born in Harare, but lived in South Africa for most of his life, spending his formative years in Sabie, where he acquired his love of nature. He received a Bachelor of Social Science degree with honours at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Durban in 1995. He had a great love of the natural world and ran an Environmental consultancy firm from offices in Hilton.

On the 16th April, he tragically passed away, whilst involved in his newfound passion for snorkelling off the Bluff in Durban.

In spite of his reticence to take on the formal role of Chairman of the KZN Crane foundation, particularly at a stage in his personal and business life, when he was faced with his own challenges, he selflessly accepted the mantle, and agreed to help the foundation through an extremely difficult period of its history. Had it not been for his contribution, the KZN Crane Foundation may well not have survived the crisis.

Andrew will be long remembered for his gentle nature, humility, dignity and great contribution to conservation and the environment.



Chairman's Report

As with all things, the past year has had its share of both positives and negatives for the cranes. On the positive side, 1434 Blue Cranes, 3221 Grey Crowned Cranes and 291 Wattled Cranes were recorded in the 2015 Crane census carried out by EWT and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife. Although the number of Wattled Cranes was lower than the 2014 census (311), it was the second highest number recorded in the 22 year history of the census and importantly, the main non-breeding (or Floater) flock of Wattled Cranes was not located during the count, this would indicate that the total population remains well over 300 birds. In all, the populations of all three species has steadily increased since 2001.

The results of the census certainly vindicate our existence and would be a matter of great pride to our founder members who established the Foundation in 1989, in the face of plummeting populations of our Blue and Wattled Cranes.

This positive news comes as a beacon of hope amongst the barrage of negative tidings, on almost all fronts, that we've become so used to hearing in recent years. The key to this success lies with the Farmers who have become increasingly conscious of their role in the conservation of our natural heritage and have taken a greater interest in the well-being of Cranes and their habitat.

Our role, together with our partners (EWT and Ezemvelo), is to support and encourage the land owners and to spread the message to local communities through our Education programs. This mission is supported by our four key initiatives, of Landowner Engagement, Community Engagement, Gene Pool Security and Habitat Security. Our progress in each of these areas is covered more fully below.



On the negative side, we are very concerned about the likely impact of the protracted drought, which has already caused many dams and wetlands in the midlands to dry up. It is very likely, that this will impact on the ability of Wattled cranes to find suitable nesting sites and hence on the potential number of chicks raised this year.

If this is only a periodic El Nino cycle, it may be viewed as a normal event, from which the crane population will recover. However if it is a precursor of a longer term dry period, resulting from global climate change, the implications for the survival of Cranes is much more serious.

Over and above the threat of climate change, midlands communities have been up in arms recently, over the proposed introduction of shale gas Fracking in the area. Should this become a reality it is very probable that our Cranes will be lost altogether, as fracking will not only have a detrimental effect on our scarce water resources but will turn the landscape into a rabbit warren of industrial fracking sites (as indicated in the photo below of fracking in Queensland), destroying the remaining natural habitat of cranes.



With these threats in mind, we have been working hard towards restoring our Wattled Crane Rearing program (see the article below on our Gene Pool Security initiative) and to this end we've built a new road to the Usher Conservation Centre and are in the process of building new accommodation at the centre, for interns. Both as a result of the very generous support of N3TC.

In order to ensure the implementation of our programs, we have added three new staff members, in Ryne Ferguson, Nkanyiso Ndlela and Penny Letley and have been very fortunate in co-opting the services of Adrian Flett and Sandy Steward, to the committee, in order to elevate our capacity in the areas of finance and education respectively.

In the area of promoting our image, we have produced a high quality brochure and significantly raised our profile on Facebook through the efforts of Ryne as well as introduced our 'Floater Flock' Members only intranet site.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you, our members, for your continued support and to remind you that the AGM will be held in September (date and venue will be announced in due course) as well as to remind you that annual subscriptions are now due:-

(Ordinary Members R150.00, Pensioner/Student R100.00, Family R250.00, Corporate R2,000.00)

Our banking details are as follows:- Account Holder: KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation, Bank: Nedbank, Branch: Cascades, Branch Code: 134325, Account Number: 1343031338

Community Engagement

Our Educational Program

A key element of our program to conserve cranes and their habitat, is community engagement, our objective is to spread knowledge about cranes and the environment to school children across the current and former range of our cranes

The program is driven by Nkanyiso Ndlela, Sandy Stewart and Jenny Stipcich.

Nkanyiso, our Education Field Officer, is permanently employed by the KZNCF and tasked with visiting local schools and presenting our '*Cranes in the Classroom*' program. The creative teaching material we have developed provides a progression from Grades 1 -6 and is C.A.P.S. supportive, integrating conservation and biology with other learning areas including Life Orientation and the Creative Arts.

This year the KZNCF will work in eleven local rural schools and impact about 1400 learners. Sandy Stewart, our newest volunteer, has brought her considerable educational experience and knowledge to the team. She will mentor Nkanyiso and involve herself with education projects including applying for the accreditation of our teaching material. Jenny Stipcich, a member of the committee, helps with the mentoring programme and the writing of reports and education proposals.

In the past, a major obstacle to our ability to get out to schools and spread the word was transport, Nkanyiso had to rely on lifts and taxis, which are not always available in remote areas. However, as a result of the generosity of Northstar, who donated a motor cycle, he is now able to get to all the schools in the Nottingham Road area. The Rosetta/Nottingham Road Conservancy have facilitated this improved mobility, by assisting Nkanyiso in getting a driver's license.



Community Engagement

Part of our project involves partnering with environmental organizations and conservancies on awareness programs, such as Earth Day and The Three Cranes Challenge, where we have worked with the Karkloof Conservancy and the Endangered Wildlife Trust. The Midlands Conservancy Forum, the Midlands Meander Association Education Project and Fundisa for Change have also assisted Nkanyiso with his personal teaching development.

Our holiday programme, 'The Beautiful Nature Club' provides a safe fun, educational experience for children. This takes place in Bruntville and the Usher Centre. The learners spend their days exploring the countryside and engaging in exciting environmental activities.



The education programme is vibrant and shows excellent growth every year. We really do believe that we are making a difference.

Landowner Engagement

The future survival of cranes is entirely dependent land owners and the role they play in facilitating the breeding and foraging needs of the birds. Our landowner engagement program seeks to find ways to work with farmers and encourage them in their role as stewards of the environment and custodians of Cranes. In this respect we work closely with EWT in promoting the Crane Custodian program which was one of our earliest initiatives aimed at informing farmers about the plight of cranes and their habitat and encouraging them to take an active role in crane conservation.

Over recent years the we have tended to take a less active part in this program, leaving most of the work to EWT, however, we are currently in discussion with them to find ways to refresh the initiative and for the KZNCF to play a more proactive part.



Landowner Engagement

A key role in our work with farmers is to help reduce crop damage by cranes and identify farming practices that optimise land productivity, whilst at the same time meeting the environmental needs of cranes. In this respect, Charlie McGillivray has been a leading proponent of 'No Till' farming methods, both on his own farm in the Karkloof and in spreading the message of the advantages of the practice to other environmentally minded farmers, through a series of talks on the subject. Here's a recent article which appeared in The Witness on 29th April.

OUR VIEWPOINT CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

It sometimes takes centuries for people to learn that their most basic beliefs are wrong.

The farmers in Karkloof have overturned centuries of farming tradition by growing crops without tilling the land.

In farming, change is slow. It has taken nearly two decades to bring no till farming to Karkloof, but the benefits have been many.

Crop yields have increased and much less diesel is used — a major expense on any farm. Unexpectedly, many animals, plants and insects, including some endangered species, have returned to the farm lands.

In part, the success of no till farming has arisen from new technology that has, for instance, made mechanical planting less expensive.

Then there has, through scientific research, been a growing awareness of how organic carbons benefit the soil, agriculture and the environment. These organic carbons are lost through tilling. But the farmers in Karkloof do not only owe their success to a confluence of human endeavour outside of their control.

Their success was also only achieved by them being able to recognise the need for change, and experiment with it, in the hope of a better outcome.

Long distance swimmer Lewis Gordon Pugh wrote: "The days of exploration of Shackleton and Scott are long gone. Everything has been climbed, crossed, done. Now what we're exploring are the full boundaries of human endeavour. It's not physical — it's all in the head."

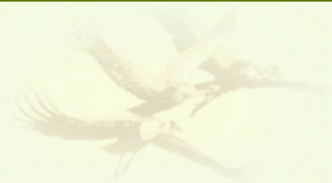
Too often, in the humdrum of daily life we forget that there is always scope for change: to work better, farm more efficiently, spend more wisely, learn a new language, grow the vegetables faster. We only change if we first question the old ways of doing it.

Change is almost always disruptive in our lives, it is always hard work, but it can free us from the past and its mistakes, and make us happier people.

"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time.

"We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek," U.S. President Barack Obama once said.

How have you changed today?"



Gene Pool Security

The cash flow constraint which led to our decision to suspend the Wattled Crane Chick rearing program last year gave us pause to re-assess our priorities. We concluded that raising chicks in order to simply supplement the wild flock with a couple of birds a year was unlikely to have any significant, positive long term impact on the overall population and that, the cost of the program was prohibitively high. However, the scientific data which we were able to gather on the last chick rearing program was invaluable. We believe it provided the first step in a ladder towards developing the necessary protocols and knowledge which may be necessary in the event of a catastrophic event which resulted in the decimation of the Wattled Crane population. Such knowledge would be vital should the only hope of resuscitating the population lie in human intervention and the human rearing of chicks.

We realised that whilst we have developed the necessary protocols for the rearing of chicks, we have no idea of how well these chicks would fare in the wild, or whether they would integrate with wild birds and successfully pair and breed.

We therefore resolved that we should continue with the chick rearing program in order to gather the additional scientific data necessary and develop the additional protocols necessary regarding fledgling release and integration. This phase requires the use of electronic tracking devices, to monitor the movements and habits of released birds.

Where are Gobble, Ivan and Rusty now?

The scrawny chicks that we raised in 2014 have grown into handsome adults at their new home in Limpopo



Gene Pool Security

Over the past six months, we've been working steadily towards our aim of resuming the Wattled Crane chick rearing program and completing the collection of the necessary scientific data. To this end, we've upgraded the access road to the Usher Conservation Centre, and initiated plans for additional accommodation (for interns) thanks to generous funding from our primary sponsor, N3TC. We have also initiated the construction of a screen-fence (kindly sponsored by CHEP) between the UCC and the rearing facility, to screen the birds from the potential of habituation to the sight of humans they may see at the UCC.



With the egg collecting season upon us, the committee met on the 29th April, to evaluate the progress of our very tight rearing program project plan. The aim of the meeting was to review a number of critical elements of the plan and make a go/no-go decision on the project. The decision was to be based on such things as:- availability of funding, completion of the sampling of blood tests from wild birds, the identification of suitable tracking equipment, etc.

In most aspects it was agreed that we were on track for the rearing program, but in one key element, nature has dealt us a wild card. As indicated in the article on the Bill Barnes Crane and Oriibi Reserve, the dam at the UCC has dropped to about 20% capacity, with a real danger that by the end of winter (the Crane rearing season) it will have dried up completely. In addition, the wetland that we use to walk the cranes and encourage them to learn the art of foraging, has all but dried up. The situation also threatens our bore-hole water supply to the UCC, which among other things means that we could not guarantee water supply to the rearing domes. This in the opinion of the committee presented an unacceptable risk to the project and with great disappointment, the decision was taken that we would not rear any chicks this season.

In place of this, we have switched our primary focus to work with EWT in the tracking of parent reared chicks and establishing benchmarks regarding the habits of fledged parent reared chicks, for comparison with those of human reared chicks (once we resume the chick rearing program).

Habitat security

The Bill Barnes Crane and Oribi Nature Reserve.

Our mandate, as stewards of the Bill Barnes Crane and Oribi Nature Reserve is to create a model farming environment, which harmonises the conflicting demands of conservation and farming and to use this as a template for other conservation minded farmers. In this respect, we are required to submit to periodic veld audits and to adhere to a well-defined veld management and grazing program. This includes the never ending task of invasive alien plant control, which involves on-going vigilance and spraying (mainly for Bramble), as well as the seasonal burning or mowing of the veld.

Our greatest challenge over the past year has been the drought, which has seen the level of our dam dropping to below 20% (and winter has not yet started). This will impact on the grazing quality of the veld and create a real dilemma regarding which camps should be grazed and which need to be rested, as the needs of the cattle could well conflict with the stewardship plan.

The photo's below, of our dam, illustrate the severity of the drought.



The new Spring Grove to Midmar water pipeline runs along the South Western boundary of the reserve, and contractors have spent the past two years, laying the pipes. In doing so, they have unearthed mounds of rocks, which we have got them to move to two areas in the reserve in order to create potential new habitats for various animals including Rock Hyrax or Dassies. To this end, we will probably have to introduce suitable food plants into the immediate area. *Dassies* are indigenous throughout the area and it will be good to have a population in the Reserve and may encourage some of the larger raptors to visit.

With all the pipes and associated infrastructure in place and water being transferred from Spring Grove to Midmar, rehabilitation of the pipeline servitude by the contractors commenced prior to Easter. Obviously, drought conditions have made rehabilitation very difficult indeed, but it is hoped that by the time the contractors return the servitude to us in or around this time in 2017, the indigenous grasses will have established themselves successfully.

The Sentinels

In the last edition of our Newsletter, we featured some the wonderful photographic work that Daniel Dolpire has done towards the production of his definitive photographic record of the Cranes of Southern Africa, which he has given the working title 'The Sentinels'. He has completed most of the required material on Wattled Cranes and has made substantial progress on that of Grey Crowned Cranes, but has yet much work to do on the images of our National bird, the Blue Crane and estimates that the work will take another two years to complete.

On a recent trip to the Maasai Mara, the game guides were bemused by Daniel's obsession with getting shots of Northern Grey Crowned Cranes as opposed to lions and other big game.

