



Mid-year Newsletter 2022

At the mid year point of 2022 the KZN Crane Foundation can report on an eventful first six months.

We experienced one of the wettest Autumns in recorded history. Springs which we never even knew existed sprung up and caused some challenges on the Bill Barnes Conservancy and, throughout KZN. With water tables high, wetlands and catchment areas were flushed with flowing water.

This was followed by a winter during which we have experienced some of the coldest temperatures on record.

As we all know, these extremes can be expected due to the volatility of global warming.

Your Committee has met 3 times in 2022 and we can report that all programmes and activities are running smoothly.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The interactive Environmental Education Programme started in 2021 and is gaining momentum. This programme involves teachers from rural and urban Government Schools attending Professional Learning Community Workshops at the KZN Crane Foundation Usher Centre. Two Workshops took place in 2021 and followed by two in 2022, with another one scheduled soon. The objective of these workshops is to upskill teachers with Environmental content knowledge Education and teaching practices so that they can use this knowledge at their respective schools. To date, some 35 teachers from local schools have attended.

The other leg of the programme is visits by Grades 4 to 7 learners who take part in environmental lectures and interactive discussions at the Usher Centre before embarking on a 3 kilometre trail over grasslands, wetlands and waterways. The outcome here is that learners have an unforgettable experience. For the vast majority being out in the wild open spaces is a first and unique event.

Although school learner visits started slowly in 2021 due to red tape in schools needing permission from the Department of Education, we at the mid point of 2022 are in full swing with a large number of learners having attended or are scheduled to attend. Word of mouth has certainly done its job and we are receiving requests for visits from schools as far as Estcourt, some 70 kilometres away. In 2022 some 840 learners have attended or are currently scheduled to partake.



FARMERS & CRANES – The Sentinels Programme

The Sentinels coffee table book, authored by Daniel Dolpire, is one of the most valuable tools to achieve awareness and understanding of Cranes and their habitats, and the need to protect both. Critically important in Crane conservation are farmers, many of whom are custodians of habitats in which Cranes breed and forage. The KZN Crane Foundation raised the funding for the production and printing of The Sentinels. Now, thanks to further generous donors, we are distributing The Sentinels to farmers who own and run farms which have or are potential Crane habitats.

Each book is accompanied by a personal letter to the farmer. To date some 70 Sentinels books have been individually presented to farmers in the Mooi River, Kamberg, Hlatikhulu areas. An additional 80 books are in the process of distribution with the target areas being Nottingham Road, Underberg and Kokstad.



CRANE RESEARCH

In the years leading up to 2020 the KZN Crane Foundation was engaged in research into Wattled Crane Isolation Rearing and protocols for release into the wild. This specific programme has ended for the foreseeable future.

We are pleased to have committed to supporting an exciting project - **A bird's eye-view:**

Using drones to investigate the breeding success, nest site characteristics and habitat usage of the endangered Grey Crowned Cranes in the Drakensberg, KwaZulu-Natal.

Carmen Demmer lives in Underberg, in KZN. Is doing her Masters through the University of South Africa (UNISA), in association with various organisations including the Underberg Farmers Association, the Endangered Wildlife Trust and the KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation. This project aims to use novel conservation tools to gain a better understanding of Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*) breeding success, nest site characteristics and habitat utilisation.



The endangered Grey Crowned Cranes are important ecological indicators, meaning that their presence or absence in the ecosystem communicates information about the health. Currently, the Drakensberg's Grey Crowned Crane population is stable, however, decrease in their population in other parts of Africa is mainly due to habitat loss, illegal removal of eggs and chicks from nest sites and collisions with powerlines. Some factors that complicate the conservation planning of this species are the major knowledge gaps in their ecology as well as the difficulty in monitoring this species' behaviours and habits

using traditional on-foot field work methods – the cranes are sensitive to human disturbance and prefer to nest among tall reeds in difficult to access wetlands.

These challenges are also common amongst other endangered and inaccessible species but research indicates that several of these difficulties can be overcome by using unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) such as drones. Drone technology is revolutionising research by allowing researchers to collect affordable, fine-scale data and access areas that were previously very costly or impossible to reach. But as exciting as drone technology is, it needs to be deployed with careful consideration of the target species to ensure that the species' chance of survival is not reduced.

A large component of this project will explore how Grey Crowned Cranes respond to the presence of drones. If we find that Grey Crowned Cranes are not disturbed by drone monitoring we will start using drones to monitor this species' breeding success and nest site characteristics in the upcoming breeding season. The KZNCF's contribution will greatly improve the technological resources available to this project, allowing access to cutting edge drone mapping software and replacement parts for the drone which may wear out over time. As such, the KZNCF's support is crucial to the success of this research project. The methodology being used in this project is novel and the information gathered during this project will contribute to filling core knowledge gaps and identifying important areas and habitats for for this species to continue breeding and foraging successfully.

BILL BARNES CONSERVANCY

The 462 hectare reserve is our home and our pride. Situated next to Nottingham Road, the Bill Barnes is central to an area of both reserve and the surrounding farms. In June a group of members carried out an evening count using spotter torches N3 Highway (Kildare) and the R103 (Springvale). The numbers were encouraging, particularly as we know of other game which we did not see on the night.



Game count

The grand totals were: Oribi 29, Reedbuck 323, of which 24% males 76% females, Duiker 43, Bushbuck 8, Waterbuck 1, Jackal 5, Porcupine 9, Hares 11, Also 1 Spotted Eagle Owl, 1 Marsh Owl

In 2021 we did not do a game count due to the Insurrection and Covid. The 2020 game count we spotted 9 Oribi and 352 Reedbuck.

These counts are obviously not accurate but they do give a very useful general picture that game is pretty abundant.

On the Bill Barnes our resident pair of Wattled Cranes have reared a chick which is about a month away from flying at this date of writing.

Alien vegetation control

Denotations of herbicides were gratefully received for control spraying aimed at the eradication of American Bramble and Bracken.

Bramble is estimated to have been 90% eliminated. Bracken, which is not alien, has been proliferating on the Conservancy over the last few years. We can only think that this may have been due to global warming. Although Bracken is a naturally occurring plant, it can cover and repress grasses in the veld. Thus negatively affecting grazing and general grass and other natural plant species. Trials using tractor spraying methods and Drone spraying were carried out. The results of both appear to be successful but the ultimate test will be in the Spring of 2022 when regrowth of Bracken areas will be monitored.



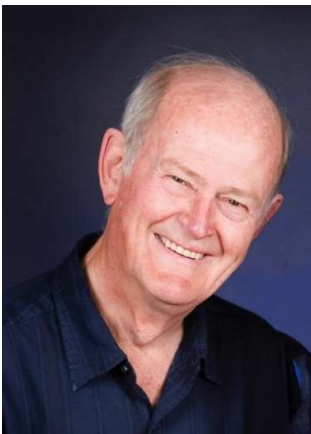
Trails

Due to the excessive rains over the summer and autumn we found ourselves with the challenge of springs and runoff which required two new bridges to be built. These were constructed over a weekend in June with the assistance of a group of students from St Charles College.

The new membership linked entrance gate, which is controlled via a G Remote app operates reliably and allows for secure and traceable access for mountain biking and walking/jogging on the Bill Barnes Conservancy.



Tribute to Don Porter from the KZN Crane Foundation



In April this year we paid tribute to Don Porter at a moving memorial service in Durban.

Don was the founding Chairman of the KZN Crane Foundation in 1989. We are so fortunate to have had the gift of a man who gave of his time, intellect, vision and acumen to a cause which was and is becoming ever more important – the reversal of the trend of loss of habitats and the understanding of the importance of biodiversity.

In the decades leading up to the late 1990s the populations of the three SA crane species were dropping alarmingly. There were mass poisonings by crop farmers due to ignorance and much destruction of habitats.

Don and his team, Bill Barnes, Dave Johnson and Henry Davies and others steadied and arrested the downward momentum. Don was one of the key driving forces behind the incredible important first South African Crane Conference which was held in Nottingham Road, December 1989, thus establishing the Kwa Zulu Natal Midlands as a key area for

cranes as well as forging strong links with the International Crane Foundation.

Tributes and condolences to Jean and Annie have come from past Chairmen and the KZN CF Committee members. From George Archibald the founder and past President of the International Crane Foundation. Kerry Morrison, the International Crane Foundations Director for Africa. Also Henry Davies and Kevin McCann who were mentored by Don and who carried on the task.

The latter tell stories of Don, most hilarious being his rather alarming, and to them, terrifying driving along mountainous country dirt roads. All recall his charismatic personality and determination to drive home his opinions and directives at meetings. The wagging finger. The persuasiveness. Also Don's raucous laugh. His twinkling eyes. The Cranes and us owe Don Porter a lot. He undoubtedly saw what Peter Mattheissen – author of *The Birds of Heaven* saw and wrote about:

**“Perhaps more than any other living creatures,
cranes evoke the retreating wilderness,
the vanishing horizons of clean water and air upon which their species
- and ours, too, though we learn it very late –
must ultimately depend on for survival”**

Our condolences go out to Don's wife Jean and daughter Annie. We thank them and friends for the donations to the Foundation in lieu of flowers.

Rest in Peace Don.

Farewell to Daniel and Di Dolpire

Recently retired, Daniel Dolpire has served the Foundation with distinction from 2014 when he first started work with Anne Burke and David Oosthuizen with pictures of Wattled Cranes at Hlatikhulu. He developed an enthusiasm for cranes and this evolved into a marathon task of some 50,000 photographs of the three species in KZN, the Western and Northern Cape, the Karoo and even as far as Kenya. His legacy is the Sentinels coffee table book for which he meticulously selected some 240 of the best photographic images, authored and had published.

The Sentinels has been described as the very best medium for promoting awareness of the need for conservation of the cranes and the habitats they need to survive.

Daniel is pictured with newly arrived granddaughter Hailey and his wife Di who was his vital support for some five years and many thousands of kilometres of travel, research and proofreading. They have moved to the Western Cape. From their home there they will be doing a lot of travelling both in SA and internationally.

Daniel will be meeting up with Western Cape Blue Crane conservation organisations and will no doubt continue his photographic crane odyssey.

We wish Daniel, Di and family very best wishes and convey our gratitude for the invaluable efforts in the cause of Saving Cranes.



MEMBERSHIP

The KZN Crane Foundation has had a wonderful response from the community after launching the “full access” membership. We have welcomed many new members and their families who are now able to access the Bill Barnes Conservancy by using the G-Remote App on their phones and entering the conservancy via the pedestrian gate near the Midlands Community College. By including a family membership option, we have opened up the conservancy to many more residents as a way of exploring nature without having to travel too far! The feedback from members has been positive, with many members commenting on the wildlife they encounter on their run, walk or cycle. We thank all new members for their support of the foundation and look forward to welcoming any new members, we can be contacted at kzncranefoundation@gmail.com for any queries regarding membership.

