



## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Dear friends of the KZN Crane Foundation,

We have come to the end of another successful year at the foundation. Our committee has met throughout the year to discuss all the items that need attention and I am grateful for their time and input in all the different aspects of the running of the foundation. We welcomed new school students into the programme and look forward to all the new school students we will meet in the new year, the education trail is a great way of teaching about the environment and we thank our sponsors for allowing us the opportunity to continue this year. The reserve has had incidents of the fences being breeched and, after an emergency meeting, have decided to electrify and alarm the perimeter. Our trails are being used well and have become popular with members and visitors, the ongoing maintenance is continuing and we look forward to some exciting new routes that will be opened soon. The resident pair of wattle cranes are still raising their chick which is approaching full size, a testament to the environment they are able to nest and rear in.

We thank our members and sponsors for your support and look forward to another positive year with new projects and we hope to see you all enjoying the Bill Barnes Reserve as much as possible. We wish you all a Merry Christmas and a happy New Year!

Warm Regards,

James Berning



## ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

The most rewarding activity of the KZNF Crane Foundation is the Environmental Education Programme. Hundreds of learners from Government Primary schools visit the Usher Centre and Bill Barnes Conservancy each year to attend lectures and walk the 3 kilometers of the Education Trail. Most, if not all of these children have never been to and experienced a wilderness area. Their lives have been restricted to towns or townships with ever-present challenges of pollution, noise and anti-social behavior. 2023 started off with teachers attending Professional Learning Community Workshops in February, March and April during which posters for schools, Cranes in the Classroom booklets, and other learning materials were handed out. Teachers were instructed about and given Excursion Worksheet examples, introduced to practical Risk Analysis protocols, and took part in First Aid Courses which resulted in many being presented with Level 2 First Aid Certificates. Along with the teachers, both on the excursions and back at their schools, we are able to give learners exposure to nature and Nature-based Education opportunities. The desired outcome is for the learners to connect, relate to, experience, and understand nature and our place in the planet's living systems. We need to empower learners to make informed decisions and take responsible actions for environmental integrity. Taxis transport the learners to and from the Usher Centre. Groups range from 30 and up to 45. In each group, at least one teacher attends and guides the groups alongside the KZNCF Edu Facilitator, Malwande Dlalisa. One truism guides us: "Give young people an experience of the wild, the wetlands, the clear running water. Let them hear the calls of birds as the only audial disturbance. See the Oribi and the Reedbuck on the wide and open grasslands. For children at an impressionable age, it is an experience that will be imbedded forever. The understanding of the need to conserve and protect the environment will remain with them throughout their lives".



Taking soil samples.



The joy of a school outing.



Malwande explaining Wetland systems.

## Grey Crowned Crane Research Project

Progress and lessons from the past two years: researching the endangered Grey Crowned Cranes in the southern Drakensberg, KZN

By Carmen Demmer

As 2023 draws to a close, my research project, which has focused on the breeding success of the endangered Grey Crowned Cranes, is also nearing its end. Both triumphs and challenges over the past two years of my research have certainly grown me as an individual and researcher. The KZN Crane Foundation has been a dedicated supporter throughout this project, and I am grateful for their ongoing engagement and encouragement. While contributions originated directly from the KZNCF, I appreciate and acknowledge the support and donations that were indirectly provided by all of the Foundation's stakeholders. As such, I would like to use this as an opportunity to share an update on this project's progress with the KZNCF's stakeholders. Despite some challenges along the way (mainly relating to better understanding and implementing the procedures of studying an endangered species with a relatively novel tool), the research aims of this project were successfully met in due time. Through this research project, we have better understood this charismatic and endangered species' breeding behaviour and how they interact with their environment. We have also gained invaluable practical knowledge and skills in using drones for conservation and ecology, which would not have been easily achieved without the support of the KZNCF. These findings are currently being prepared for public communication, and we intend to share them with the stakeholders of this project in the coming months. My thesis is also in its final stages of compilation and will be submitted by the end of 2023. I hope this research will actively contribute to better monitoring cranes and larger wetland nesting waterbirds – to maintain key breeding sites in agricultural areas and to help encourage successful future breeding outcomes of this endangered species.

If there's one piece of wisdom I've gained from this project, it is that: "Effective conservation is only possible through *authentic* collaboration between a diverse group of people. No matter how insignificant an individual's interest or effort may seem, it is important to acknowledge each one, as even small contributions make a difference to the overall success of a shared goal. "

Therefore, this article would be incomplete if I did not express my gratitude to the many like-minded people I met along the way. Without the generosity, support, and participation of the KZNCF, individual community members, and all landowners who participated in this study, this project would not have been possible. We also need to be reminded that the survival of our crane species does not depend merely on conservationists. Rather, their "*Conservation will ultimately boil down to rewarding the private landowner who conserves the public interest.*" – Aldo Leopold, which requires authentic partnerships and collaborations among various parties. I consider it a great privilege to have worked alongside the KZNCF over the past two years, and I am confident in the success of their future ongoing efforts in conserving our local crane species.





## Bill Barnes Reserve Update

At this time of year after good rains and warm, sunny days, the rolling hills of the reserve are at their most beautiful, blanketed in lush green grasses touched with russet where the seedheads are emerging. A closer inspection sees the emergence of tiny delicate flowers and bulbs that have sprung to life and are now in full flush. Everywhere is insect and bird life. Indicators that in grasslands there is a chain of life, an ecosystem unique and critical to the wider world. Reedbuck remain mostly well hidden in the fringes of the wetlands during the heat of the day and emerge in numbers to graze during the late afternoons. The Oribi population is doing well and are often seen in either pairs or in threesomes with one male and two ewes. Our resident pair of Wattled Cranes has successfully reared a chick which was hatched in September and is now grown to adult size. Soon it will fly with the adult pair to join a floater flock where after a week or two the adults will return alone to roam and guard their territory and start the annual cycle again. We have also seen Grey Crowned Cranes and Blue Crane – pairs breeding, which indicates the variety of vegetation and suitable topography of the Bill Barnes Reserve. The Bill Barnes is an example of how a set aside of natural, untouched grasslands for biodiversity conservation is complimentary with agriculture. The three land donor farms graze their cattle on rotated veld camps under the guidance of an environmental management plan. The use of long grass grazers imitates the big herds of history, converting grass into dung which provides nutrition for larvae of species like dung beetles and also acts as nature's renewable fertilizer.



## Bill Barnes Trails

Mountain bikers, runners and walkers regularly use the Earth Route, Central and Education trails. Bridges and fence crossings have held up well and the trails themselves are now firm and hardened from regular usage. Over the next couple of months, we will be laying more hardening material humps and shaping drainage channels to reduce chances of erosion.

A new trail, which will bring in a 3 kilometre loop on the northern slopes of the Conservancy is due for completion in January.

## Electric Fence



Since its inception, the Bill Barnes Conservancy has relied on the protection of a 1,8 metre bonnox fence along the south and south/western exterior perimeter of the reserve. Recently we have come across places where the fence has been cut and some poaching has taken place. The committee of the Crane Foundation decided in early December to commission the installation of a simple 4 strand of electric wires, which will deliver quite a hefty kick plus send a zone-specific alarm message. Fortunately, predation has been light and our populations of Oribi and Reedbuck remain healthy. Please would our members be mindful of the dangers of this fence and take precautions to not get too close. The northern and eastern boundaries of the Bill Barnes will retain standard 5-strand fencing allowing antelope and small mammal movements between us and to the remaining natural veld on neighboring farms stretching in a band from above Rosetta and to the N3 Highway.

## MEMBERSHIP & SPONSORS

Our full access membership is gaining popularity and we have welcomed many new families into our foundation. We thank each of you for supporting the KZN Crane Foundation and especially to our donors who are the reason we can keep providing the opportunities in our environmental community. If you know of anyone who would be interested in becoming a donor or member of the foundation please contact us on: [kzncranefoundation@gmail.com](mailto:kzncranefoundation@gmail.com) for any queries.

Wishing all of our supporters, members and donors – both past and present – joy and positivity over the Festive Season and 2024.



## SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE ON THE CONSERVANCY

What appear to be swathes of open grasslands interspersed by wetlands and streams, there is abundant life – if you take time to pause and observe with patience. These are just some of the examples:



Black Winged Plover nest



Wattled Plover chick



Long Tailed Widow (Sakabula)



Stone Chat



Red Collared Widow



Sombre Bulbul



Reedbuck fawn



An old oribi ram





Satyrium macrophyllum



Grey Crowned Cranes



Each year, for the last 20 years the resident Wattled Crane pair have successfully reared chicks from nests in three different wetland locations on the Conservancy.



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**Committee:**

James Berning (Chairman) John Pitout (Deputy) Jon Bates, Chris Brown, Antonia Mkhabela, Janet Snow, Rebecca Wakeford, Craig Elstob, Brent Coverdale, John Haigh, John Huson.