

Agriculture and cranes

4 of a 9 part brochure series



The South African landscape has, over the years, been changed by human activities such as agriculture, mining, forestry and industrial and tourism developments. The three species of cranes occurring in South Africa, the Blue, Wattled and Grey Crowned Crane, have had to adapt to this changed environment or possibly face extinction. In most cases the changes have been detrimental, but in some cases they have proven to be beneficial.

Land uses that can negatively affect cranes are:

- Forestry
- Certain types of crop farming e.g. potatoes
- Draining of wetlands
- Mining
- Urbanisation

Land uses that can benefit cranes:

- Wheat and sheep farming in the Overberg

- Stock farming. *Pic 2*
- Certain forms of crop farming e.g. maize and wheat
- Grass pastures

Threats that cranes encounter in agricultural areas

Agrochemicals

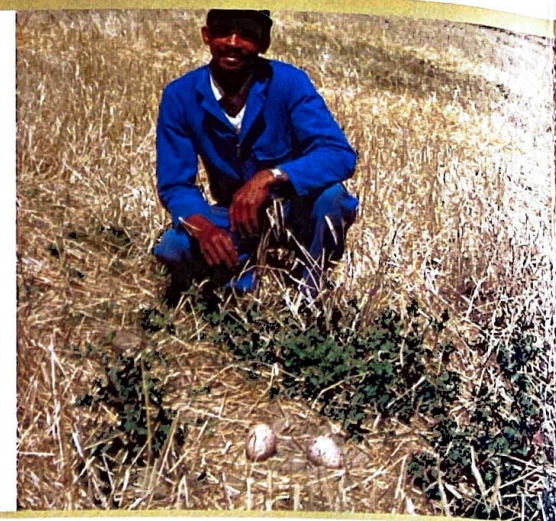
The first hazard associated with agriculture practices is the use of AGROCHEMICALS. There is no doubt that agrochemicals played a significant role in the decline of the populations of cranes in the past. The current situation has fortunately changed as fewer poison cases are being reported. This is due to the work done by various working groups of the Endangered Wildlife Trust, that have lobbied for the production of more environmentally friendly agrochemicals. The threat of agrochemicals will never disappear and continuous work to educate and inform both the suppliers and users is required to ensure that these products do not pose a threat to cranes.

*** See brochure 5 on Poisonings for more information.*



2 Cranes often frequent agricultural lands in which to forage or even nest, exposing them to specific agricultural threats

Cover Cranes are vulnerable to entanglement with livestock fences



3 Cranes nesting in agricultural lands are vulnerable to potential trampling during harvesting

Power lines

One of the biggest threats to cranes and other large terrestrial birds is collisions with power lines. Fortunately, the ESKOM-EWT Partnership has devised a mitigation measure, the 'bird flapper', which reduces the number of collisions at sites where incidents have been recorded. The downside of this problem is that most marking is done reactively, which means that a number of cranes have to collide with powerlines before the line is registered as a problem site. Proactive marking projects have been developed so as to identify potentially hazardous sites before collisions occur, allowing these powerlines to be proactively marked.

*** See brochure 7 on Power lines for more information.*

Farm fences

Unfortunately, very little can be done about this threat. Fencing is an integral part of agricultural management and it is unlikely that an alternative to fencing will be found in the foreseeable future. Fences pose a threat to unfledged cranes trying to climb through the fence – they often become entangled, as well as to fledged birds – they sometimes collide with the fences when taking off and landing. *Cover pic*

Harvesting season

In the Western Cape, Blue Cranes breed in wheatlands. In this region, Blue Cranes begin breeding in the 'artificial grassland' created when the wheat/barley is cut into windrows to allow it to dry. But these lands still need to be harvested, resulting in the potential for nests to be squashed during this process. *Pic 3*. Landowners have devised a system to protect nests by marking them before harvesting takes place, but they need to be aware that any crane nests left exposed for too long will attract crows or other predators, that may eat the eggs.

Baling twine

Cranes can get entangled in baling twine (used for hay bales) left lying in the field. In severe cases cranes die from starvation, while others have their limbs amputated. The solution to this problem is simple – do not leave baling twine lying around. Landowners must be aware that this is a significant threat to cranes, and that by simply removing the twine, a contribution is made to crane conservation. *Pic 6*



4 Crane chicks can fall into drinking troughs and drown



5 Place stones/rocks in troughs to enable crane chicks to climb out

Water troughs

Crane chicks can fall into drinking troughs and drown. It is easy to prevent this by permanently keeping a rock or branch in the trough so that the chick can climb out. *Pic 4 and 5*

Fire

Burning is an important veld management tool. It could, however, adversely affect nesting cranes. If possible, try not to burn camps that have nesting cranes in them or burn after the crane breeding season.

*** See brochure 2 and 3 for more information.*

Disturbance

This is one of the most difficult threats to measure. Cranes' tolerance to disturbance differs not only between species, but also between individuals of the same species. Cranes are most sensitive to disturbance during the breeding season, which may lead to the loss of breeding effort. However, disturbance outside the breeding season can alienate cranes from an area. In the agricultural context, disturbance is caused by vehicles, humans and dogs. In some cases it may not be possible to avoid disturbance, but where possible, it

As can be seen, the threats that agriculture poses to cranes are numerous but are not insurmountable. Some can be solved within a fairly short length of time while some may not be resolved in our lifetime. However, the foundations for the solutions have been laid for future generations of environmentally aware citizens to continue with



6 Baling twine often becomes entangled in the crane's legs if left lying in the lands

should be kept to a minimum. Nowadays farms are offering accommodation for tourists and use cranes as draw cards – especially if they are nesting. While such eco-tourism is good, disturbance to the cranes at their nest should be kept to a minimum by not approaching so closely that they become agitated and move off. Repeated visits of this nature may lead either to the nest being abandoned, and/or the eggs being taken by predators.

What you can do

- Use agrochemicals responsibly
- Contact the Wildlife Conflict Prevention Group on (011) 486 1151 (office hours) or the Nashua Wildlife Poisoning Helpline on 082 446 8946 for advice on the responsible use of agrochemicals
- Report all crane and wildlife interactions with powerlines to the Eskom/EWT Partnership on 0860 111 535 or email megand@ewt.org.za
- Regularly check your farm fences in the vicinity of crane breeding sites during the breeding season

- Be aware of cranes breeding in croplands which require harvesting, mark the nests so as to prevent damaging the nests and prevent predation of the eggs during the process
- Do not leave baling twine in the veld. Please be responsible and collect all excess baling twine
- Place stones/rocks in livestock watering troughs to allow crane chicks to climb out if they fall in while drinking
- Be aware of cranes breeding in areas that require burning – burn appropriately or delay the burn until the cranes have finished breeding
- Minimise disturbance to nesting cranes

Farmers that participate in crane conservation by employing the above mitigation measures are valued by the EWT and acknowledged for their contribution through our Crane Custodian Programme. (See *Education and Awareness Project* in main brochure)

This brochure series has been developed for farmers and the public to use in conserving the three cranes species and their habitats. For more information about EWT and cranes, call (011) 486 1102 or email crane@ewt.org.za

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