

Bird of the Year 2015



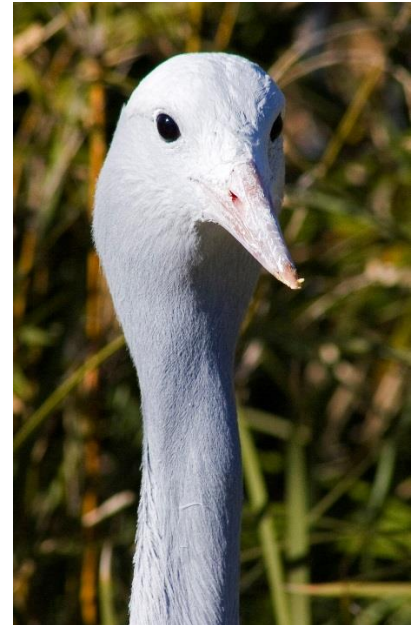
Blue Crane *Anthropoides paradiseus*

Fact Sheet

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Identification

One of the smaller crane species, Blue Cranes stand 1 – 1.2 metres tall and weigh between 4.2 and 5.8 kilograms, with a wing span of 1.8 – 2 metres. Body plumage is silvery bluish grey becoming darker on the upper neck and the lower half of the head and nape. The tertial feathers of the wing are long, dark and dangle nearly to the ground, giving this crane an elegant appearance. Males and females are virtually indistinguishable. Juveniles are slightly lighter blue gray than adults, and lack the long wing tertials.



Habitat and Distribution

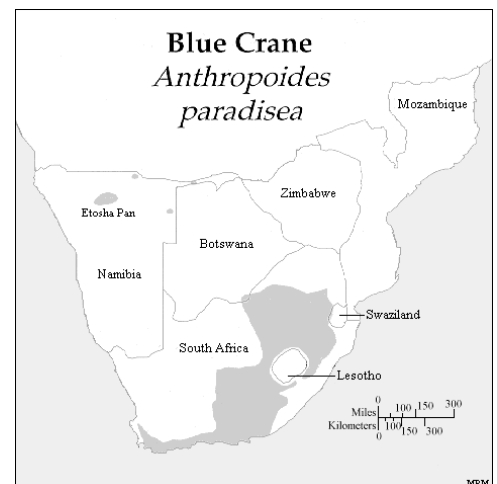
The Blue Crane has the most restricted range of any member of its family. It is virtually endemic to South Africa, with a remote population surrounding Etosha Pan in northern Namibia.

Blue Cranes inhabit the South African highveld grasslands and the moister eastern, grassy Karoo.

In the last 60 or so years, however, they have colonised the wheatfields and pastures of the south-western Cape to such an extent that this region is now the national stronghold of the species.

Breeding pairs frequently vacate their nesting territories in winter and join roving flocks, populated year-round by non-breeding (most likely young, unmated) birds that travel widely over the local landscape.

These flocks sometimes encompass thousands of birds and, when they congregate to roost in shallow, open-water dams and pans, they provide a thrilling visual and auditory spectacle at dusk and dawn.



Breeding

The spring breeding period is heralded by the spectacular dancing displays by mating pairs for which cranes are renowned. Pairs are monogamous, and solitary, territorial nesters. Blue Cranes often nest close to water. But, just as frequently, when circumstances dictate they are happy to breed at a distance from any wetlands.

The richly coloured eggs are laid directly on the ground, typically on a small 'pad' made of vegetation, stones or dung, and the usual clutch size is two.

After an incubation period of 29 to 30 days, the newly hatched chicks are little more than fawn-coloured bundles of fluff and are fiercely protected by their parents during the long and perilous 12-week period before they can fly.



Food

Blue Cranes are omnivores, but the bulk of their diet probably comprises vegetable matter such as bulbs, seeds, roots and leaves. They are often found foraging in cultivated fields of maize, wheat and lucerne, typically being attracted to germinating crops early in the planting cycle and then fallen grain after harvesting. In the Western Cape, they have been seen foraging at livestock feedlots. The less prominent, animal component of the diet includes insects, termites, worms, crabs, fish, frogs, reptiles and small mammals.

Threats and Challenges

The Blue Crane is most vulnerable in flight to collisions with the increasing network of overhead powerlines criss-crossing the South African countryside, this is currently the most significant threat facing this species. The Blue Crane's penchant for feeding in crop fields can also bring it into conflict with farmers as a result of real or perceived damage caused to crops. In the past, this conflict may have resulted in some farmers desperately trying to protect their crops through the use of poison. Accidental or deliberate poisoning does still occur, but this is less common. The threat remains however, as many birds can be killed in a single or few incidents. In addition, the Blue Crane has lost extensive areas of its ancestral habitat to other, less compatible forms of land-use, such as commercial afforestation, as well as to urbanisation and dense rural settlement, especially in the grassland biome.

Until recently the Blue Crane was thought to be on an ongoing slide to extinction. The remarkable colonisation of large parts of the south-western Cape, together with recent information suggesting a stabilisation, even an increase, in some other regions, now paint a more positive outlook and the species is categorised as Near-Threatened in the 2015 edition of the South African Red Data Book.

There can be little doubt that tireless local conservation efforts, and especially those focusing on the threat of poisoning, have helped turn this corner for the crane.



Acknowledgements

Text: David Allan, International Crane Foundation, Endangered Wildlife Trust

Images: Mark D. Anderson, Warwick Tarboton, Steven W. Evans

Map: International Crane Foundation



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