

Cranes

Enviro Facts 27

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For centuries man has been enthralled by the beauty of cranes. They are the most elegant of all birds and their trumpeting calls and carefree, bounding courtship dances are evocative of our wildest places. The lifelong devotion shown by mated pairs has become a symbol of romantic attachment in human folklore.

Cranes are one of the most threatened bird groups worldwide, with eleven of the world's fifteen extant species being threatened. There are three species of crane in South Africa, the blue crane, grey crowned crane, and the wattled crane. All three species are endangered.

Blue crane

The blue crane is endemic (occurs in no other country) to South Africa and is our national bird. Numbers of blue cranes have declined dramatically in the past two decades, in some areas by as much as 80%. This decline has occurred mainly in Mpumalanga, Free State, and KwaZulu-Natal. However, blue crane numbers are stable and possibly increasing within the grassy Karoo and the Overberg region of the Western Cape.

The blue crane is a bird of dry, upland grasslands and is less dependent on wetlands than wattled or grey crowned cranes. The blue crane eats mainly insects, but also grass seeds and newly planted and waste grain. Blue cranes spend the breeding season in higher altitude grasslands, moving to lower altitudes during the winter months. Flocking occurs year-round, but intensifies in winter.

Wattled crane

The wattled crane is the largest of all three cranes and the most rare of Africa's six species. Most wattled cranes are found in south-central Africa, with smaller populations in Ethiopia and South Africa. The total world population estimate of 13 000 to 15 000 individuals has remained constant over the last decade. In the past these birds were widespread throughout South Africa, today they are found only in KwaZulu-Natal, the highland regions of Mpumalanga, the north-eastern Free State, and a small region of the Eastern Cape.

The wattled crane is the most wetland-dependent of the crane species as it uses wetlands for both foraging and breeding. They feed mainly on aquatic vegetation, including the bulbs and rhizomes of submerged sedges and wetland plants. Wattled cranes also eat grain, grass seeds and insects when foraging in open dry habitats surrounding their marshy home. They rarely use agricultural lands, and if they do, they feed mainly on leftover grain in harvested maize fields. Their dependence on wetlands for breeding means that they may abandon their nest if the wetland is disturbed.



In South Africa there are approximately 250 remaining individuals, including only 80 active breeding pairs.

Grey crowned crane

The grey crowned crane is the oldest species of living crane and the most abundant of the resident African cranes. Recent estimates place the total African population at between 85 000 and 95 000. In South Africa the population has decreased by approximately 40% over the last twenty years from 5 000 to 3 000.

Grey crowned cranes use mixed wetland or grassland habitats for breeding and feeding. They nest in or on the edges of permanent or temporary wetlands (using smaller wetlands than do wattled cranes), but may also nest in well-vegetated farm dams. They like to forage in open grasslands next to wetlands where they feed on grass seeds, insects and other invertebrates. Grey crowned cranes also forage in agricultural lands (pastures, irrigated areas, fallow fields, newly planted cereal crops, or harvested fields where they feed on harvest leftovers). The grey crowned crane's generalist feeding habit has allowed it to adapt well to human settlement, therefore they can be found most often in man-modified environments.

Grey crowned cranes are non-migratory, but undertake very local movements in response to food availability through different farming practices. Along with the black crowned crane, these cranes are the only cranes able to roost in trees.

Threats to cranes

- The primary threat to cranes is habitat loss, through the damming and draining of wetlands for agricultural purposes, as well as the afforestation of our diminishing grasslands.
- Direct persecution of cranes through shooting or poisoning, for food or to remove cranes from agricultural lands, has reduced especially blue crane and grey crowned crane numbers.
- Accidental poisoning of cranes in agricultural lands through the misuse of agrochemicals still threatens our crane populations.
- All three crane species are vulnerable to collisions with overhead powerlines.
- Only grey crowned cranes are susceptible to electrocutions on transformer boxes, where they like to roost.
- The removal of unfledged chicks from the wild as a food source, to be kept as a pet, or for breeding for trade purposes, has reduced their breeding productivity in the wild.
- The hunting of crane chicks by uncontrolled dogs impacts on breeding sites. Other threats include entanglement with farm fences and baling twine, drowning in animal water troughs, or extended disturbance at breeding and roosting sites.

Did you know?

- All three crane species are protected by law, i.e. they may not be disturbed, persecuted or removed from the wild.

- Cranes mate for life and may live for 50 - 60 years.
- Over 70% of South Africa is privately owned, and much of this is farmland. Compare this with the less than 5% of the land officially conserved as national parks or proclaimed reserves and it becomes clear that the private landowner or farmer can play an important role in wildlife conservation, especially crane conservation, as these birds occur almost exclusively on privately owned land.
- Cranes are indicators of the health of two of our most highly threatened ecosystems, namely wetlands and grasslands. We have lost almost 50% of our wetland ecosystem in South Africa. Only 2% of our valuable grassland biome is conserved (see Enviro Facts "Wetlands" and "Grasslands").

What you can do

- Wetlands supporting wattled crane breeding pairs should not be burnt during winter months when they may have eggs or unfledged chicks.
- Landowners can establish crane feeding sites, for example grain laid out in an open area, or the planting of a grain mix away from crops. Such sites attract cranes away from crops.
- Poisoned grain and mealies are often used illegally to kill birds for food, and cranes often fall victim to this. Discourage this practice and promote the safe use of agrochemicals among farm workers. Report any poisoning incidents to the Poison Working Group: 082 446 8946.
- Report powerline electrocutions to the toll-free help line: 0800 111 535.
- DO NOT remove eggs or chicks from the wild for any reason.
- Avoid disturbing cranes during the breeding season or at roosting sites.
- Any landowner with a breeding pair of wattled cranes on the property is urged to register the farm as a Natural Heritage Site.
- Report any sightings, breeding sites or mortalities to the National Crane Conservation Project.