

Ornithological Observations



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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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ARE TRADITIONAL HEALERS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DECLINE OF BLUE CRANES IN NAMIBIA?

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Much has been published about the plight and decline of Blue Cranes *Anthropoides paradiseus* from Namibia over the last few years (Brown 1992, Simmons *et al.* 1996, Kolberg *et al.* 2006, Simmons *et al.* 2006, Scott *et al.* 2009, Scott *et al.* 2011). Blue Cranes are considered to be one of the world's most range-restricted crane species; endemic to southern Africa as well as Critically Endangered and seemingly declining in Namibia (Simmons and Brown, in press) and Globally Threatened (BirdLife International 2012).

These these birds are viewed as of critical conservation importance as their numbers have declined alarmingly in recent years, from 80 in 1992 (Brown 1992) to 35 in September 2009 (Scott *et al.* 2011). General threats in southern Africa include poisoning, power-line collisions, loss of its grassland breeding habitat owing to afforestation, mining, agriculture and development. Prolonged droughts and the direct competition for food by domestic stock are viewed as the main threats in Namibia (BirdLife International 2012).

The Etosha Blue Crane population is quite mobile, as the birds move locally within the Etosha National Park (ENP) as well as regularly migrating to the Omadhiya Lake System, including Lake Oponono. This area forms part of the Cuvelai River system that flows through the Omusati Region north of Etosha. In years of floods, known as "Efundja", more water drains into the Etosha Pan than usual (Fig 1). Although the birds and their breeding sites are protected within ENP, they are vulnerable when feeding in the grasslands outside the park. The northern boundary fence across the Andoni Plains (northeast ENP) has influenced local wildlife movements resulting in tall, often moribund, grass on these Plains. This probably affects the foraging patterns of the Blue Cranes locally – i.e. they migrate to areas outside the ENP where areas have been grazed short by cattle making foraging easier and predator avoidance better. After the breeding season when the Blue Cranes start congregating in flocks they are almost always found in close proximity to cattle outside ENP and to wildlife within the park boundaries.

The Omadhiya Lake System covers an area of 32 324 km² of flat or slightly undulating and sodic soils drained by a network of rivers and shallow pools supporting an estimated 15 600 people in 2000. The area is managed by the local Tribal Authority who control land use in the area. The Blue Crane population is expected to have increased over the last eight years, particularly after the good rains in recent years that improved grazing and allowed water to remain for longer, providing drinking water for cattle and improved fishing in the area (Fig 2).

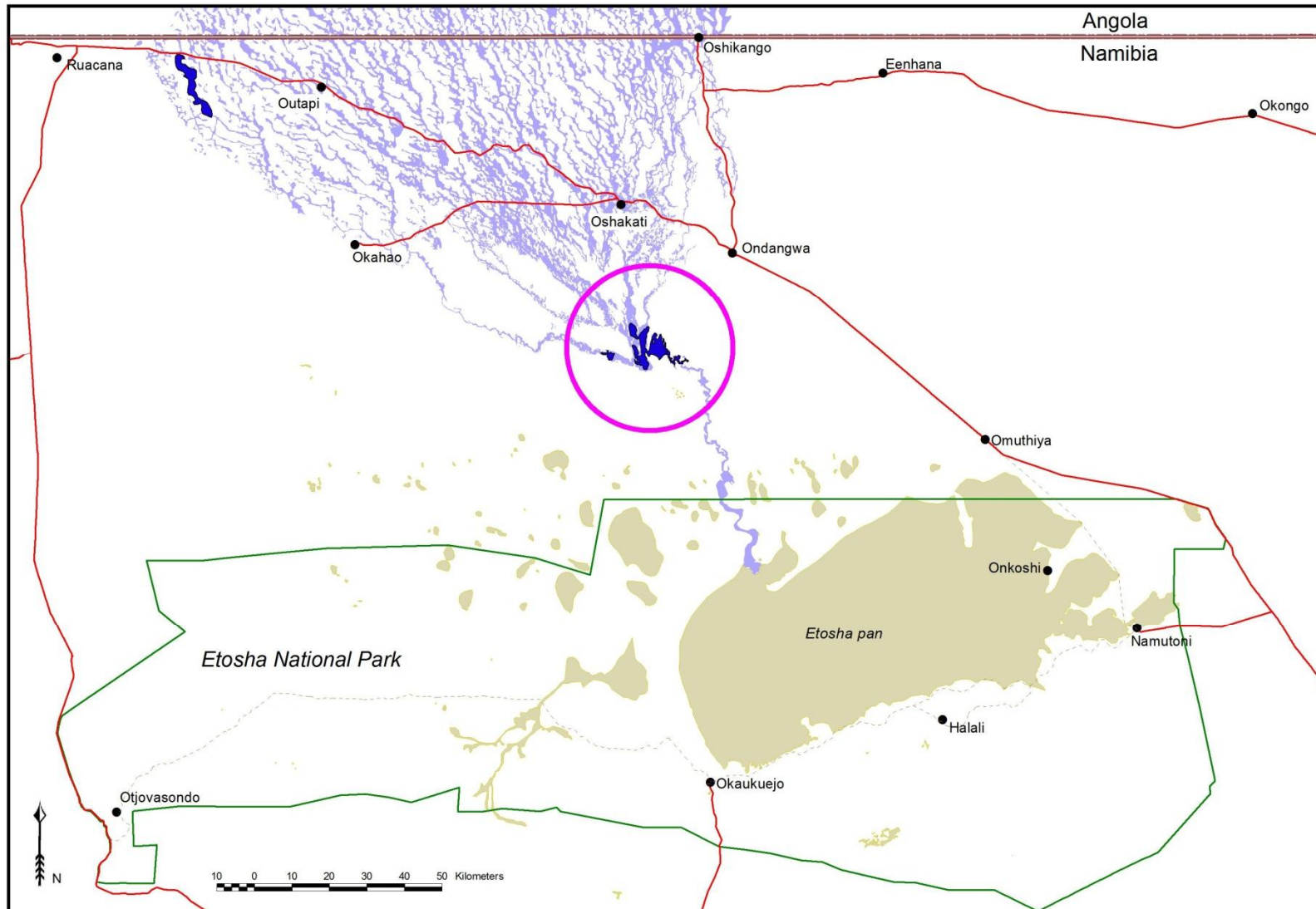


Fig 1 - The Cuvelai drainage system with study area indicated (circled) in the Omadhiya Lake area (Map – Tony Robertson).



Fig 2 - Blue Cranes use wetland habitats within the Etosha NP during the breeding season in summer (Photo: Ann Scott).

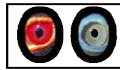
A study, using structured interviews, and focusing on cattle herders and fishermen was conducted during September and October 2011 in the Omadhiya Lake system area. The aim was to determine if human impacts were contributing to the decline of the Blue Cranes outside the ENP and to improve awareness about their importance, vulnerability and conservation within their foraging range. Although most interviewees were suspicious, with only 15 out of 65 people willing to pass on information, those interviewed confirmed that Blue Cranes visited the area and some were shot for meat while the feathers were used as decoration, especially by headmen. It was during these interviews that one respondent, an old man, informed



Fig 3 - Typical grasslands and cattle in the Lake Oponono area (Photo: Ann Scott).

us that Blue Cranes were also used for traditional purposes, although would not mention what these were. Furthermore, three interviewees made telephonic contact afterwards as they were afraid of talking in front of other people, confirming the hunting of Blue Cranes for traditional purposes.

It was reported that Blue Cranes were targeted and caught quite successfully using fishing line anchored to trees and other structures with hooks baited with small frogs, fish and locusts. This method was especially used in temporary crop fields after good rains when the Blue Cranes came to feed on the grain. Leg traps were also used to



catch them, but this was considered to be a less effective technique as the cranes break off their toes and usually escape.

These anonymous conversations confirmed that Blue Cranes were targeted for meat, but also revealed an interesting traditional medicinal use of the "pope's nose" ("Okalufwiti") which is used to heal human babies born with a tail-like structure just above the buttocks. To ensure the successful removal of this structure on humans, the "pope's nose" had to be cut off the crane by a traditional healer while the bird was still alive, after which the bird would be killed for food. It was stressed that the "pope's nose" should be removed while the bird is alive as once dead it would be of no value anymore. The results are limited, but this survey did confirm that Blue Cranes are being targeted for food including traditional medicinal purposes outside ENP. The traditional use of wildlife, vultures in particular, has been documented from Namibia (Hengari *et al.* 2004, Sambu and Cunningham 2007). As far as we could determine this is the first reference to Blue Cranes being used for traditional purposes in Namibia.

Although the threats of the traditional use of wildlife have been largely avoided for various reasons in Namibia, this practice probably contributes more to the demise of wildlife than we would like to acknowledge. There are no known numbers of traditional healers currently operating in Namibia, but in 2004, 1 500 traditional healers applied to register as such with the Ministry of Health and Social Services (see Hengari *et al.* 2004). This targeting of Blue Cranes for meat and traditional purposes can be viewed as an added stress which marginal populations such as that of the Namibian Blue Crane probably cannot sustain, and at the present rate it is expected to contribute to the disappearance of the cranes from Namibia.

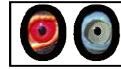
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