

Blue Crane

Bloukraanvoël

Anthropoides paradiseus

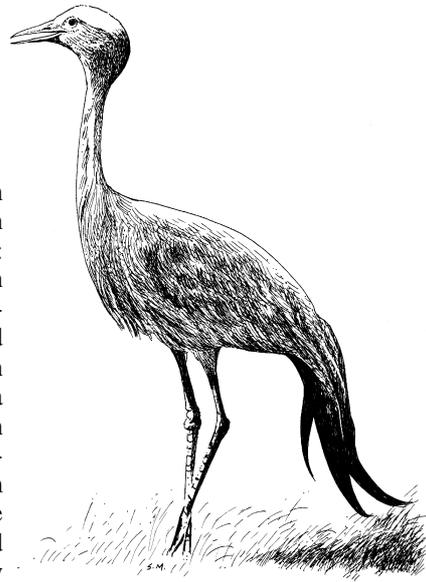
The Blue Crane is endemic to southern Africa with most of its range falling in South Africa. There are three strongholds: the Overberg region in the southwestern Cape Province; the eastern Cape Province; and western KwaZulu-Natal and southeastern Transvaal. There is also an isolated breeding population in Namibia centred on Etosha Pan (Brown 1992), with occasional records of vagrants from elsewhere in that country (e.g. Winterbottom 1971d). Botswana records came from the extreme southeast; there are no confirmed breeding records for Botswana (Penry 1994). It has not been reliably recorded in Zimbabwe (e.g. De la Harpe 1989). In Swaziland it is restricted to the Malolotja Nature Reserve (2631A) where it breeds (Parker 1994). It is a rare nonbreeding visitor to Lesotho (Osborne & Tigar 1990; Bonde 1993).

The South African population is *c.* 20 800 birds, with *c.* 5600 in the fynbos biome, *c.* 5800 in the Karoo and *c.* 9400 in the grassland regions (Allan 1993). The Etosha Pan population in Namibia is *c.* 80 birds (Brown 1992). Not more than *c.* 10 occur at any one time in either Botswana (Urban 1988) or Lesotho (Osborne & Tigar 1990) and there are *c.* 12 in Swaziland (Parker 1994).

Its closest living relative is the only other wholly dryland crane, the Demoiselle Crane *A. virgo* of Europe and Asia (Krajewski 1989). The Blue Crane is found in pairs, family groups and flocks which can exceed 800 birds; even larger concentrations occur at major roost sites (Els & Els 1983; Allan 1995c). It is conspicuous and easily identified.

Habitat: In the fynbos biome it inhabits cereal croplands and cultivated pastures and avoids natural vegetation (Allan 1995d). By contrast, it is found in natural vegetation in the Karoo and grassland biomes, but it also feeds in crop fields (Maclean 1993b; Allan 1995d). In the Karoo it occurs in the grassier eastern areas (Allan 1995d). At the Etosha Pan, dry grassy plains on the fringes of the pan are used (Brown 1992). The occurrence in Mopane is due to the Etosha Pan being placed in this vegetation type.

Movements: Published statements are contradictory (Allan 1993). Seasonal changes in group size cause lower reporting rates during winter when it congregates in large flocks, resulting in fewer encounters. Road count data from 1965–66 (Siegfried 1985) and 1988–93, in the Karoo and fynbos biomes, suggest a change in pattern of movements between the periods: in 1965–66, there was winter movement out of these biomes, but during 1988–93 there was a marked winter movement into the fynbos and probably also the Karoo (Allan 1993). In the grassland biome there are altitudinal movements to lower areas during the winter in the eastern Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) and KwaZulu-Natal (Walkinshaw 1973); there is a movement to the north in the latter region during winter (Johnson & Barnes 1986). In the Free State it appears to be largely resident but with nomadic local movements (Geldenhuys 1984a). It seems to move into the Karoo from the grasslands of the eastern Cape Province during winter (Vernon *et al.* 1992; Allan 1993). The Namibian population is believed to remain within Etosha–Cuvélai drainage system, but there is considerable movement with birds some-



times moving to Lake Oponono (1815BB) during the wet season (Brown 1992).

Breeding: In South Africa, egg-laying spans August–April, mainly September–January, and occurs slightly earlier in the fynbos as compared with the grassland biome (Allan 1993). Egg-laying at Etosha is later, December–March (Brown & Clinning in press).

Interspecific relationships: It often forages alongside Crowned *Balearica regulorum* and Wattled *Bugeranus carunculatus* Cranes, especially in croplands (pers. obs). It has been recorded hybridizing with the Wattled Crane (Lawson 1968; Johnson 1985; Vernon & Boshoff 1986).

Historical distribution and conservation: It is listed in the global Red Data book as 'vulnerable' (Collar *et al.* 1994). It was not included in the South African

Red Data book (Brooke 1984b) because it was not then considered threatened (e.g. Van Ee 1981). The conservation status in South Africa varies between the three biomes it inhabits. It has expanded its range into, and become remarkably common in, the agricultural regions of the fynbos, having been absent from this biome originally (Allan 1992b, 1993). Its distribution and abundance appear not to have changed in the Karoo (Allan 1992b, 1993). The grassland biome was probably the ancestral stronghold, but it has decreased *c.* 90% in this region (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Quickelberge 1989; Johnson 1992; Tarboton 1992b; Vernon *et al.* 1992; Allan 1993, 1994a). The map confirms this, showing a fragmented distribution and low reporting rates in the grassland biome, except in the far northeast. The map shows almost total absence from Transkei and Lesotho, probably resulting from high human population densities (Allan 1993). Elsewhere in the grassland biome the main threats are poisoning (prompted by birds feeding in agricultural fields), collisions with overhead transmission lines, and loss of habitat to afforestation, urbanization and crop farming. The Etosha Pan population is considered stable (Brown 1992). All populations of Blue Crane require ongoing and thorough monitoring, as well as the implementation of appropriate management strategies in farming areas.

D.G. Allan

Recorded in 762 grid cells, 16.8%

Total number of records: 9634

Mean reporting rate for range: 13.2%

Reporting rates for vegetation types

