



**ENDANGERED  
WILDLIFE TRUST**  
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# Grey Crowned Cranes, Wetlands, and Communities

THE INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION-  
ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST PARTNERSHIP FOR AFRICA

One of Africa's most beloved birds is in serious trouble. **The Grey Crowned Crane—once common across the wetlands and grasslands of eastern and southern Africa—has declined by more than 80% over the last twenty-five years, and is now an endangered species.** The loss and degradation of wetland breeding grounds, driven by rapid human population growth, grinding poverty, and the expansion of subsistence



Photo by Shawn Olesen

and commercial agriculture, are largely to blame. Most Grey Crowned Cranes occur on private farmlands. As the cranes are pushed into smaller and more marginal wetlands to care for their eggs and young, they are increasingly disturbed by people, dogs, and livestock. Eggs are eaten. Chicks are easily captured for domestication within Africa, or export to distant countries.

**But there is hope for these beautiful birds.** Despite serious losses across Africa, important strongholds still remain for the species in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia and South Africa. In South Africa, Grey Crowned Cranes are increasing. In other countries, there is enormous potential to learn from the South African experience, and take action on behalf of these beleaguered birds. The Grey Crowned Crane is an iconic species. With their golden crowns and stunning colors, Grey Crowned Cranes adorn currency, stamps, soccer jerseys, travel brochures, and other publicly visible canvases. It is the national bird of

## How Cranes Got their Golden Crowns

A great king was stranded on the vast plains on a very hot day. He entreated various birds and animals for help during his wanderings, but none would help him. He was becoming weak and very angry, until he met a flock of cranes. The king asked the cranes for help and they gladly shaded the old king with their beautiful wings and helped him find shelter among the trees.

In thanks, he placed his hand on their heads, and there appeared small golden crowns. The cranes thanked him for this generous gift and then flew off. Several months later, a crane appeared on the king's doorstep in a bedraggled state. He told the king the cranes were now hunted day and night for their golden crowns.

The king, realizing his foolishness and the greed and jealousy of others, transformed the gold crowns into a halo of golden feathers, which the cranes still have today.

Uganda, appearing prominently at the center of the Ugandan flag and in the National Coat of Arms. Concern is growing about the decline of these majestic birds among people throughout the region, from government agencies to community leaders to schoolchildren, and the time to act is now.

*If we can develop innovative, alternative incomes for the impoverished communities that depend for their livelihoods on the wetlands that they share with cranes, everyone wins.*

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## OUR IMPACT

**The International Crane Foundation/Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership for Africa focuses on the iconic Grey Crowned Crane, the wetlands they depend on, and the communities that share these lands across Africa.** We monitor the status, distribution, and threats to Grey Crowned Cranes across all fifteen of their range countries, but focus in-depth on conservation and livelihood solutions in five countries with important strongholds for this species. In Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zambia, we engage in innovative strategies to reverse the decline for the species. In South Africa, we focus on adaptive management to sustain and learn from the only significant and increasing population of Grey Crowned Cranes. We evaluate our impact on crane population trends and breeding productivity, on the health of the wetlands they depend on, and on the socio-economic advancement of local communities who commit to crane and wetland conservation. We use the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation for the planning, implementation, and adaptive management of all our field projects.

### Safeguarding the National Bird of Uganda

Uganda is home to the largest population of Grey Crowned Cranes in Africa, with strongholds in and around the Kabale wetlands of southwest Uganda and Kaku Kiyanja and surrounding wetlands of southcentral Uganda. Rapid human population growth places immense pressure on these productive wetlands. Grey Crowned Cranes and many other species are undergoing rapid population declines as the quality and extent of their wetland habitat declines. **For nearly 20 years, local community leader and conservation biologist Jimmy Muheebwe has worked tirelessly to reverse this decline.** He studies the root causes of threats to these cranes, and works with community groups to improve their livelihoods while protecting cranes and their habitats. Jimmy has formed dozens of school wildlife clubs to raise awareness about cranes and biodiversity through drama, dance, and song. He explains the rich array of



*In Uganda, we achieve our impact in partnership with the local conservation organization Nature Uganda. We also work in close partnership with the Ministry of Water and Environment, Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, Uganda Wildlife Authority, and Uganda Wildlife Education Centre.*

ecosystem services provided by healthy wetlands, and how these services benefit local communities in diverse ways. Going forward, we will expand Jimmy's legacy in Uganda by:

- Empowering community-based Crane Custodians to safeguard cranes at Kaku Kiyanja, Nyamuriro, Kiruruma, Mugandu and other key sites in southwestern and southcentral Uganda by reducing nest and chick disturbances and preventing the removal of eggs and chicks for the illegal bird trade.
- Negotiating voluntary Conservation Agreements that provide benefits to local communities in return for conservation actions that reduce threats to cranes or their habitats.
- Providing training and mentorship to community leaders and residents, to encourage sustainable livelihood practices that incorporate climate-smart, biodiversity-friendly agriculture, and that promote the green economy, sustainable market chains, and alternatives to environmentally damaging practices.
- Incorporating family planning, empowerment and education of girls and women, and human health into the community projects we develop, through strategic partnerships that advance Population-Health-Environment programs.
- Encouraging community members to create buffer zones between their crops and wetlands and engaging them in replanting large expanses of papyrus in wetlands that were once plowed and cultivated.
- Facilitating the development of Community-Based Wetland Management Plans between local communities and authorities, providing the legal framework for communities to sustainably use and manage important wetlands.
- Developing a nationwide campaign for all Ugandans to take pride in and responsibility for the future of Grey Crowned Cranes, promoting concrete actions they can take to protect cranes and wetlands.



Photo by International Crane Foundation



Photo by Jim Harris

## Community Action for Grey Crowned Cranes in Kenya

The wetlands of Western Kenya are another major stronghold for Grey Crowned Cranes. **Since 1993, we have supported the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group, a registered Community-Based Organization in Kenya under the leadership of local leader and crane enthusiast Maurice Wanjala.** Focused in and around Saiwa Swamp National Park, an important breeding area for Grey Crowned Cranes, we developed a model demonstration area for conservation-friendly livelihood projects that reduce the human pressure on wetlands and their watersheds. These projects include the establishment of native tree nurseries and fish ponds, production of livestock fodder, and encouragement of dairy goats and bee-keeping. Maurice

engages primary and secondary schools, church congregations, and women's groups in cultural activities that promote land stewardship and crane conservation. We are now expanding these efforts into other strongholds for Grey Crowned Cranes in western Kenya, including the Sio-Siteko Wetland and surrounding Busia Grasslands (a designated Key Biodiversity Area), and the Kingwal Swamp and surrounding watershed. In these areas we focus on:

- Empowering community-based Crane Custodians to safeguard cranes in western Kenya by reducing nest and chick disturbances and preventing the removal of eggs and chicks for the illegal bird trade.
- Negotiating voluntary Conservation Agreements that provide benefits to the community in return for conservation actions that reduces threats to cranes or their habitats.
- Celebrating cranes, wetlands, and wildlife through our annual Cracide Day and Crane Festival, which is fully-supported by local government, private stakeholders, and local communities.
- Protecting springs outside of wetlands, ensuring a clean and reliable source of drinking water for communities and livestock.
- Managing a large tree nursery to provide indigenous seedlings and fruit trees for community-based restoration of riparian zones near streams and wetlands.
- Developing a new Community Conservancy or protected area for Kingwal Swamp, through a formal agreement under Kenyan Law that promotes community land management for wildlife conservation and compatible land uses that improve livelihoods.
- Providing training and mentorship to community leaders and residents, to encourage sustainable livelihood practices that incorporate climate-smart, biodiversity-friendly agriculture, and that promote the green economy, sustainable market chains, and alternatives to environmentally damaging practices.
- Incorporating family planning, empowerment and education of girls and women, and human health into the community projects we develop, through strategic partnerships that advance Population-Health-Environment programs.

*In Kenya, we work in partnership with the local organization Community Action for Nature Conservation (CANCO) and the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group. We also collaborate with the Kenya Wildlife Service, the National Museums of Kenya, Conservation International, Wetlands International and others.*



Photo by Erica Cochrane

## A New Dawn for Rwanda's Cranes and Wetlands

Rwanda's population of Grey Crowned Cranes is smaller than those of neighboring Uganda and Kenya, but the country serves as a model for developing regional crane and wetland conservation strategies. **Since 2011 we have piloted approaches in Rwanda that we use in high priority projects across the region, including Conservation Agreements linked to important livelihood options.** At Rugezi Marsh in northern Rwanda, we introduced modern bee-keeping methods and cooperatives that reduced the frequency of damaging fires associated with traditional bee-keeping—a key threat to the marsh and its inhabitants. We facilitated the development of fodder production cooperatives to reduce the overharvesting of plants from Rugezi Marsh for cattle

food. We established micro-enterprises to support the tourism industry. From the capital Kigali to Akagera National Park in eastern Rwanda, we support efforts to successfully reintroduce Grey Crowned Cranes back to the wild that have been confiscated from captivity. Going forward, we are:

- Ensuring the long-term sustainability of our Conservation Agreements for bee-keeping, fodder production, and micro-tourism enterprises.
- Advancing new livelihood options that further reduce threats to Rugezi Marsh and contribute to a greener local economy.
- Facilitating the declaration of Rugezi Marsh as a National Park under the Rwanda Development Board to ensure provide legal protection, management, and law enforcement.
- Initiating ecotourism opportunities involving cranes and wetlands by building the first eco-lodge at the Rugezi Marsh, contributing to national policies on tourism, and providing a platform for further activities by other key tourism stakeholders.
- Building on our educational outreach and Crane Custodian successes in Uganda and Kenya to encourage stewardship of breeding cranes and reduction of threats to Rugezi Marsh.
- Providing expertise in veterinary sciences and wildlife monitoring to support the reintroduction of confiscated Grey Crowned Cranes back to the wild at Akagera National Park, and applying the lessons learned from this successful approach to comparable programs in neighbouring countries.



Photo by Sundhir Herle

*Key partners in Rwanda include the Integrated Polytechnic Regional College at Kitabi, the Rwandan Environment Management Authority, the Rwanda Development Board, and the Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association.*

## Stopping wildlife poisoning in Zambia

Zambia's Luangwa Valley is an important haven for Grey Crowned Cranes, and home to diverse and abundant wildlife populations, including three species of Critically Endangered vultures and Endangered African Wild Dogs. **Local crane populations have suffered dramatic declines in recent years due to the use of poisons in and around South Luangwa National Park and surrounding lands.** Poisoning of cranes is sometimes accidental, aimed at deterring crop depredation by cranes, other birds, or insects. Poisoning may also be deliberate, aimed at killing cranes and other animals for food or for traditional medicinal uses. The recent expansion of cotton agriculture to the Luangwa Valley has resulted in the widespread availability of pesticides used as poisons, and unprecedented levels of poisoning of cranes as well as

*In Zambia, we work in close partnership with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, African Parks Foundation, Bird Watch Zambia, University of Zambia, World Wide Fund for Nature, and other community and wildlife conservation organizations.*

vultures, carnivores, and other species. Our urgent actions to reduce poisoning in the Luangwa Valley focus on:

- Conducting baseline research and rapid rural appraisal to better understand the reasons communities are using agricultural poisons and their impact on species of concern;
- Engaging with cotton companies that are active in the region to regulate the distribution of agro-chemicals, explore alternative agro-chemicals that have a lesser impact on wildlife, and ensure the safe and responsible use of agrochemicals on cotton farms;
- Working with small-scale farmers to improve and diversify their farming activities and reduce their dependency on agro-chemicals;
- Raising awareness about the impact on human health when people consume poisoned wildlife—people sometimes die from consuming poisoned meat—as well as the impact of accidental and intentional poisoning on wildlife populations.
- Leading training workshops with key stakeholders to ensure the effective management of poisoning incidents. This includes providing information on laws and enforcement, and ensuring that the poisoning scene is decontaminated to ensure that no additional wildlife is affected.

## Learning from success in South Africa

The Mpumalanga Highland Grasslands and Drakensberg region of South Africa support the only major increasing population of Grey Crowned Cranes in Africa. The region supports two other species of threatened cranes (Wattled and Blue Cranes) and many other rare and threatened species that depend on healthy wetlands. This conservation success story arises from our twenty-five year commitment to intensive conservation action, in partnership with provincial authorities and other organizations. Integral to our success is the long term-relationships and trust we have built with local farmers and others using this landscape. This provides a solid foundation of trust upon which we are able to share our mission, motives, and conservation interventions. New threats to cranes in this area have emerged over time, and the opportunities for conservation have evolved. But because we have been invested here, and have long worked “in the trenches,” we have adapted nimbly and successfully as challenges have arisen. For example, the Drakensberg is a major source of water for South Africa and is now a key part of South Africa’s Strategic Water Source Areas, yet only



Photo by Jim Harris

*In South Africa, we work closely with Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, Mpumalanga Parks and Tourism Agency, KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation, Eastern Rural Solutions, and BirdLife South Africa. We are also part of the Healthy Catchment Alliance in this area, a collaboration between this project, the Endangered Wildlife Trust’s Source to Sea Program, Conservation South Africa, Eastern Rural Solutions and Wildlife, and the Environment Society of Southern Africa.*

a small fraction of this area is formally protected. **Our project focuses on cranes as flagships for the protection and restoration of key wetlands in the Drakensburg and Mpumalanga Highland Grasslands regions, and the sustainable management of this nationally significant water source.** Going forward, we will maintain our positive impact by:

- Applying innovative approaches, such as the Biodiversity Stewardship Programme, Conservation Servitudes, and Conservation Agreements, to expand the Protected Area network across this region.
- Developing strategic corporate partnerships around innovative financial mechanisms and incentives (such as carbon sequestration and trading) to provide long-term security for key wetlands
- Improving the capacity of local communities to manage their wetlands and surrounding grasslands for biodiversity and beneficial ecological services.
- Partnering with the South African government-run “Working for Wetlands” program and other organizations to restore wetlands and their watersheds for the benefit of people, cranes, and other wildlife.
- Safeguarding ecological infrastructure and identifying priority landscape corridors that provide climate change resilience that can offer alternatives to unsustainable land use practices and land development.

## WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT

The International Crane Foundation/Endangered Wildlife Trust Partnership for Africa leads innovative programs and projects to safeguard Endangered Grey Crowned Cranes and the diverse and productive wetlands that sustain cranes, wildlife, and communities. We are the partner of choice for governments, private businesses, academic institutions, and other non-profit organizations seeking new ways to secure wetlands and biodiversity in the densely settled agricultural landscapes of Africa. Iconic Grey Crowned Cranes, cherished by peoples and nations across eastern and southern Africa, are vital indicators of ecological health, flagships for wetland conservation, and transboundary ambassadors for the rich diversity of life and local communities that depend on wetlands.



Photo by Warwick Tarboton

***Please join us in safeguarding healthy cranes, wetlands, and communities in Africa.***

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