THE BUGLE

NEW HOPE FOR THE KAFUE FLATS

A THRIVING WETLAND FOR ALL



We celebrate a significant grant that will amplify our impact in the Kafue Flats, an essential African wetland in Zambia. The area covers more than 6,500 square kilometers and supports more than 470 resident and migratory bird species, including the Wattled Crane, pictured here. Also in this issue, we journey to remote northern Australia and Papua New Guinea to assess little-known populations of Sarus Cranes and Brolga. Photo: A pair of Wattled Cranes in Zambia. International Crane Foundation

VOLUME 52, NUMBER 3 NOVEMBER 2026

FIELD NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

BY DR. RICH BEILFUSS, PRESIDENT & CEO



Photo by Mariah Lundgren

When Dr. George Archibald and Dr. Ron Sauey co-founded the International Crane Foundation in 1973, little was known about the world's cranes and the places they live. China and Russia, home to nine of the world's 15 species of cranes, were closed to most outsiders. War raged in the Saruslands of Vietnam and Cambodia. We knew almost nothing about the cranes across most of Africa. Fewer than 50 Whooping Cranes existed in the wild.

As the world opened up, new opportunities emerged. We'd explore the wintering grounds of Siberian Cranes from the duck marshes of Iran to Poyang Lake in China. We discovered Red-crowned Cranes in the forbidden DMZ of Korea. We celebrated Sarus Cranes emerging from the ashes of war in Vietnam. In Africa, new studies revealed huge flocks of Wattled Cranes on the Kafue Flats of Zambia and war-ravaged Zambezi Delta of Mozambique. Our first annual crane count in Wisconsin became the foundation for tracking Sandhill Crane recovery and population expansion over the next 50 years.

By the 1990s, we had gained much deeper knowledge of the world's cranes and the places where they dance. We also had a bit more funding to work with and a wealth of contacts worldwide. Our focus shifted to launching long-term conservation projects in countries that were previously closed—China, Russia, Vietnam, Zambia, Mozambique, and elsewhere—and many of those projects continue today. We laid the groundwork for reintroducing Whooping Cranes once lost to eastern North America. We discovered the challenges of abundance, as the recovery of Sandhill Cranes revealed new conflicts with farmers on cornfields.

Today the world still holds crane mysteries and big conservation opportunities. In this issue of *The Bugle*, Indo-Pacific Program Director Dr. Tran Triet and I share the story of our recent travels in Australia to understand the status and needs of threatened Sarus Cranes and to search for disappearing Brolgas in Papua New Guinea. Southern Africa Regional Director Mwape Sichilongo shares his personal journey, from wading knee-deep to discover a Wattled Crane nest to leading our most ambitious project worldwide: securing a thriving Kafue Flats for cranes, people, and abundant wildlife. Whether we're extending signature projects in more than a dozen countries or strengthening collaborations along the Central Flyway here in North America, we continue to explore new ways to help cranes, communities and our natural heritage thrive.



A Wattled Crane pair with a day-old chick at Blue Lagoon National Park. Mwape Sichilongo/International Crane Foundation



NEW HOPE FOR THE KAFUE FLATS AND ITS COMMUNITIES AND CRANES

BY MWAPE SICHILONGO, REGIONAL DIRECTOR – SOUTHERN AFRICA

Wattled Cranes in flight over the Kafue Flats. Ufulu Studios

I was 14 years old when I first visited the Kafue Flats at Lochinvar National Park. What I saw fuelled my imagination and ambition. The birds and the herds I saw that day gave me the words I use today, almost half a century later. When I began working for the International Crane Foundation in 2018, I participated in a crane nest survey in knee-high water in the floodplain. Standing before a Wattled Crane nest for the first time, I felt as if I had re-discovered myself.

Zambia's Kafue Flats are a wetland of international importance under the Convention on Wetlands, a key bird and biodiversity area under BirdLife International, a Man and Biosphere Reserve under UNESCO, and a protected area under Zambian national parks and wildlife legislation. Covering 6,500 square kilometres, the area supports more than 470 resident and migratory bird species. It is also home to the Kafue Lechwe, an antelope found nowhere else in the world. Critically Endangered vultures also depend on the ecosystem for foraging and nesting.

A biodiversity hotspot and a natural water reservoir, the Flats support local livelihoods and give identity to the local Batwa, Tonga, and Ila communities. The Kafue Flats are vital to Zambia's economy and food systems, supporting the production of sugar, beef, fish, and hydropower. Families depend on the fresh waters of the Kafue Flats for fish, grazing, and fertile soils for farming that sustains economies. To the nation, they are an asset of immense intergenerational value. And to the Wattled Crane, they are the most important floodplain in the world.

However, droughts, floods, degraded grazing areas, loss of wildlife, declining fish stocks, uncontrolled fires, invasive plant species, and the effects of climate change are steadily changing both the landscape and the lives of the communities that call the Kafue Flats home.

This year, a major investment through the eighth replenishment of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF 8) offers renewed hope for protecting and restoring the Kafue Flats and strengthening community resilience. The five-year, $9 million GEF 8 Kafue Flats Project launched on May 29, 2026, and is one of Zambia's most significant integrated environmental restoration, protected area management, and climate resilience initiatives in the last 20 years.

The project was developed jointly by the Government of Zambia in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Crane Foundation. ICF will lead the project implementation on the ground with a newly recruited team dedicated to the project and bringing new capacity. The GEF 8 Kafue Flats Project



Wattled Crane pair in Kafue National Park. Mwape Sichilongo/International Crane Foundation

is an investment in protecting ecosystems that will safeguard wildlife, strengthen climate resilience, and improve livelihoods for communities that depend on the Kafue Flats for survival. It will benefit cranes too!

The project has come with urgency and hope. Under the theme "A Thriving Wetland for All," the Kafue Flats Restoration Partnership's scaled-up initiatives combine environmental protection with community resilience and sustainable development.

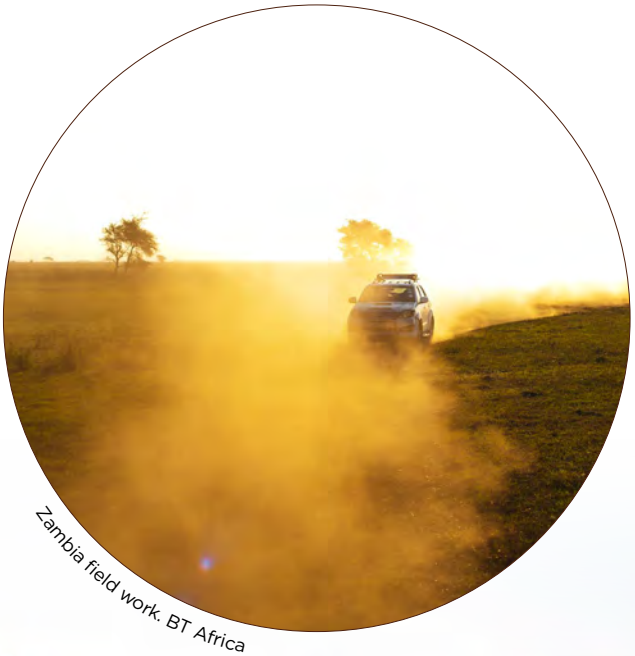
The project will tackle poaching and wildlife crime, reduce human wildlife conflict, restore degraded wetlands, strengthen fire management, and continue removal of the invasive *Mimosa pigra* plant that threatens wetland health in at least 3,000 hectares of wetlands, helping revive wildlife habitats and improve ecological health across the floodplain.

Importantly, the project places communities at the center of conservation. Thousands of households will benefit through climate-smart livelihoods, enterprise development, ecotourism opportunities, and cash-for-work landscape restoration initiatives. Community-based interventions in rotational grazing will improve livestock and wildlife management and address disease risks affecting both animals and people. This recognizes the close link between healthy ecosystems, resilient communities, and sustainable local economies.

Another major focus is climate adaptation and resilience. More than 25,000 hectares of rangeland will be improved, while climate-resilient enterprises will be supported. We will also integrate climate adaptation into district planning. More than 5,000 community members will benefit directly from improved livelihood opportunities and climate resilience measures. The project builds on the work that the International Crane Foundation has been implementing with the Zambian government and WWF in the last five years, developing a model that balances ecosystem conservation with human well-being. For a shared floodplain, balance means that what is good for wildlife is good for livestock, for people, and for cranes!



A team from the community around Lochinvar National Park removing Mimosa pigra. Griffin Shanungu



Zambia field work. BT Africa



Our ebullient staff celebrate the launch of the Kafue Flats Project grant. Jim Ongowo/International Crane Foundation

ASSESSING THE CRANES DOWN UNDER

BY DR. RICH BEILFUSS, PRESIDENT & CEO

Photos by Dr. Tran Triet, Indo-Pacific Program Director

"Three Sarus on the left—one's a juvenile," I shouted. Dense forest had opened up into a small grassy plain, and a family of cranes appeared. Dr. Tim Nevard added, "Six Brolgas on the right. All adults." Dr. Tran Triet, ICF's Indo-Pacific Program Director, took careful photos of each group, and we carried on down the road. Half a mile ahead, we delighted to a larger group of twelve Sarus Cranes and four Brolgas flying across the road and landing just close enough to distinguish the pale-headed juveniles, already full size, from their bright red-headed parents. Searching out the cranes of northern Australia takes a lot of miles, coffee, and perseverance. We'd drive 1,200 miles of roads in all during our week together on the Atherton Tablelands and Gulf of Carpentaria.

The crane landscapes of Australia are just one of many places where we are seeking to quantify crane numbers and threats over the next few years. The International Crane Foundation is leading the process to update the status of all 15 species of cranes for the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species. The Red List is the globally accepted record and standard for the conservation status of animal, fungi, and plant species. The Red List is an important tool to encourage action for biodiversity conservation and policy change. As many as 12 of the world's 15 crane species will likely be on the Red List after our review.

Assessing Sarus Crane numbers and threats in Australia is essential to understanding the overall Red List status of the species. While the Sarus population in India and Nepal is relatively large and stable, most other populations are declining or have been extirpated entirely, as in the Philippines. Although Australia is the wealthiest country in the Sarus range, the species is not consistently monitored, and its status is poorly known. The population estimate has a wide range of uncertainty, and Sarus occur almost entirely on private lands facing unclear threats. With funding support from the Leiden Conservation Fund and close collaboration with team leaders/local experts Dr. Tim Nevard and Edward Ball, I traveled to Australia with Triet to resolve this information gap through field observations and discussions with as many craniacs as we could meet. Triet and I have collaborated on Sarus Crane conservation for more than 30 years!

We timed our trip to the dry season, the period when Sarus and Brolga abandon their breeding grounds and join larger flocks. This is when the birds are most readily observed from roads, and we can assess the habitat they are selecting as well as potential threats. Sarus and Brolga are more difficult to study during their breeding season, which occurs during the "Big Wet" of Australia, when water spreads everywhere, roads frequently flood, and the world's largest man-eating crocodiles, known as "Salties," patrol the wetlands.



Adult and juvenile Sarus Cranes in flight. The good proportion of juvenile Sarus Cranes we saw suggested a healthy breeding season the previous year.

We tallied 274 Sarus from our road survey, fewer than hoped. But many were in family groups with one to two juveniles, suggesting good productivity last breeding season. Land use change is an obvious threat—meadows and wheatfields planted to sugar fields harbor no cranes or other wildlife. Powerlines linked to expanding wind farms are an emerging threat as well. And prolonged drought, especially with climate change promising longer, hotter dry seasons in the future, is certainly a challenge.

The Brolga is a Least Concern species on the IUCN Red List with an estimated population of at least 50,000 in the wild, mostly in Australia. As with the Sarus, however, there is a wide range of uncertainty with the Brolga population estimate that makes it difficult to assess their population trends over time. In addition to updating our assessment of Brolga across Australia, we made an important side trip to nearby Papua New Guinea (PNG). About 200 Brolgas occur on PNG's southwest border with Indonesia, but the species has not been recorded elsewhere in decades, and some large poisoning events have been reported. We traveled more than 800 miles by small boat through remote and sparsely populated Fly River wilderness where these birds once occurred, stopping on riverbanks wherever we observed concentrations of waterbirds. Triet flew our small drone far out over the floodplain to video the landscape and check its birdlife.

Despite what appeared to be plenty of suitable habitat, we didn't locate any additional Brolgas. This suggests that this local population is highly endangered, perhaps threatened with extinction in PNG. Our partner in PNG, the Ok Tedi Development Foundation, has built strong connections with the communities of the Fly River region and will use our findings to raise awareness about the plight of these birds. Triet will help them plan further conservation action.



Extensive cattle ranches in northern Australia provide habitat for both Sarus Cranes and Brolgas.

To learn more about the Red List status of all the cranes worldwide (and much more!) please check our website for my webinar, "From Endangered to Abundant: The Status of the World's Cranes in 2026." (Go to savingcranes.org/webinar-library for this and other From the Field webinars.)

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Jean Skaife

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Member: 50+ years
Crane Legacy Society

When longtime member Jean Skaife passed away this year, Co-founder Dr. George Archibald wrote this brief tribute.

"Jean Skaife was one of the International Crane Foundation's first members and one of our most enthusiastic and loyal supporters since our founding. In the summer of 1973, she showed up at the Sauey farm where ICF had its birth and first decade of life. Over the next half century, Jean visited ICF every year and always brought along friends to interest them in our work. She travelled with me to Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia, China and South Africa, and until her passing kept in touch with colleagues from several nations. She wanted to celebrate her 100th birthday at ICF, but came down with Covid for a spell. She recovered and lived to 104. Yes, cranes are symbols of longevity!"

GIVE A GIFT IN TRIBUTE

Cranes connect us. Revered as symbols of peace, longevity and fidelity in cultures around the world, a gift to save cranes makes a wonderful tribute to a loved one. Your gift in honor of or in memory of someone special contributes to the International Crane Foundation's commitment to a world where cranes, people, and our natural heritage thrive together.

Find out more at
savingcranes.org/tribute

BIG ACHIEVEMENTS, SMALL ACTS OF DEDICATION



Whooping Crane Biologist Matti Prukop wades into wetlands to test water quality. Katie Fernald/ International Crane Foundation

Recently, we've marked some big successes. As you've read in this issue of *The Bugle*, we're gearing up for much greater impact in the essential Kafue Flats in Zambia thanks to securing a $9 million grant this year. In December 2025 we closed on the first conservation land deal in our history and bought 1,150 acres in coastal Texas for our new Wolfberry Whooping Crane Sanctuary. In Vietnam last April, Thai and Vietnamese dignitaries joined us as we released young Sarus Cranes bred in Thailand into Tram Chim National Park, the culmination of years of international cooperation and planning to bring Sarus back to the place they once thrived.

It's great to have a party, to say "We did it!" and commemorate big achievements like these. Yet most days, our work is more routine. We make trips to the wetland to survey crane nests, test water quality, or remove invasive plants. We talk with landowners and walk their fields with them. We make calls and sit down with partners and stakeholders. These everyday tasks continue important work that in many cases began decades earlier. It's these small acts of dedication that lead up to the milestone, and that will keep happening long after the party is over. Whether you've stood with us at one of our big events or whether you've been quietly supporting us behind the scenes for years, we couldn't do it without you. The world is a better place because of the commitment of people like you. Please make your year-end gift today.

MAKE YOUR YEAR-END GIFT TODAY
Return your gift in the enclosed envelope
savingcranes.org/donate
608-356-9462 ext. 807

GIVE A TAX-SAVVY GIFT FROM YOUR IRA

If you are 70½ or older, consider making a gift directly from your IRA to the International Crane Foundation through a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). A QCD can be a tax-smart way to support cranes while potentially reducing your taxable income. For those who need to take Required Minimum Distributions, a QCD may also be a meaningful way to direct part of that distribution toward conservation. Please speak with your tax advisor or IRA plan administrator to determine if this is a good option for you, and learn more at **savingcranes.org/donate**. Or call Hannah Field, Senior Development Officer, at 608-356-9462 ext. 117.

DIRECTORS

Richard Beilfuss, Madison, WI
(President & CEO)
Jill Allread, Oak Park, IL (Chair)
Larry Kueter, Denver, CO (Vice Chair)
Tom Leiden, Hunting Valley, OH
(Treasurer)
George Archibald, Baraboo, WI
(Co-Founder)
Barry Ackers, South Africa
Susan Carnahan, Saratoga, CA
Sue Chin, Ossining, NY
Chris Corpus, Dallas, TX
Linda DiSantis, Atlanta, GA
Batsukh Galsan, Mongolia
Stephen Gast, Houston, TX
Garry George, Los Angeles, CA
Will Haffner, Chicago, IL
Carolyn Hendricks, Bethesda, MD
Eleanor Hoagland, New York, NY
Andy Holman, Milwaukee, WI
Chris Hunt, Santa Barbara, CA
Liz Keating, Cambridge, MA
Heidi Kiesler, Glencoe, IL
Micaela Levine, Milwaukee, WI
Connie Maneaty, Highland Park, IL
Mizinga Melu, Zambia
Elizabeth B. Pinckney, Charleston, SC
Steph Tai, Madison, WI

OTHER OFFICERS

Robert Dohmen, Menomonee Falls, WI
(Secretary)
Steve Kuhn, Lodi, WI
(Chief Financial Officer)

The Bugle is the triannual newsletter of the International Crane Foundation. The organization was founded in 1973 by Ronald Sauey, Ph.D. (1948 - 1987) and George Archibald, Ph.D.

Editor: Angela Woodward

Bugle comments or questions? Please email Bugle@savingcranes.org or send mail to P.O. Box 447, Baraboo, WI 53913. To become a sponsor of this publication, please contact the editor. Memberships make our work possible. Please join or give a gift membership. Email membership@savingcranes.org if you have questions about your membership.

Membership Annual Rates:

Individual	$55
Family	$75
Advocate	$150
Champion	$300
Guardian	$750
Patron	$1,000
Benefactor	$5,000
Cranemaker	$10,000

International Crane Foundation

E11376 Shady Lane Rd.
P.O. Box 447
Baraboo, WI 53913-0447
www.savingcranes.org

Electronic Service Requested

SHOP OUR NEW RETRO LOGO COLLECTION



We've revived and revitalized our classic logo from the 2000s to adorn a whole new assortment of merchandise. From pins to stickers, patches to hats, and sweatshirts to tees, we've got your vintage vibe covered. (Yes, the 2000s are "vintage" now....)

Your purchase directly supports the work of the International Crane Foundation to save cranes and the places where cranes dance.

See the full selection of designs at
craneshop.org
608-356-9462 ext. **171**

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, GEORGE!

International Crane Foundation Co-founder Dr. George Archibald celebrated his 80th birthday this year. George has a lot to be proud of when he thinks about the success of the organization he co-founded in 1973. Today most of the world's 15 crane species are stable or increasing, including one of North America's rarest bird species, the Whooping Crane. The International Crane Foundation has conserved hundreds of thousands of hectares of wetlands and grasslands, and people around the world have benefited from our programs and partnerships alongside their crane neighbors. We couldn't have done this without George's vision, his persistence, his optimism, and the countless friends and supporters who have helped his dream come true.



Dan Bare/International Crane Foundation



IT'S EASY TO GIVE A GIFT MEMBERSHIP

Share a joyful year of cranes, conservation, and inspiration with your family and friends with a gift membership. Gift memberships include free admission to our *Crane Discovery Center* visitor experience in Wisconsin and reciprocal admission or discounts at more than 150 participating zoos and aquariums across the country.

We will customize your message for Christmas delivery if you make your purchase by Tuesday, Dec. 15. Call **608-356-9462** ext. **807** or visit **savingcranes.org/membership**.

Red-crowned Cranes. Ted Thousand