



## CRANE COUNTS CONTINUE TO FLY IN KWAZULU-NATAL

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KwaZulu-Natal will celebrate a unique anniversary this year, when the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW) celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> consecutive annual crane aerial survey in July.

Ian Rushworth of EKZNW said: “The 20 year anniversary makes this survey one of, if not *the*, longest running aerial survey of cranes anywhere in the world. A wonderful achievement considering that as a province we are responsible for more than 85% of the country’s Wattled Crane population.”

KwaZulu-Natal is home to all three of South Africa’s crane species, all of which are threatened. The province has proved to be the stronghold for Wattled Cranes in the country, with approximately 85% of the estimated 250 Wattled Cranes found in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg mountains and foothills. South Africa’s Wattled Crane population is listed as *Critically Endangered* due to a significant decline in numbers between the late 1970’s and 2000. This same area is also home to approximately 60% of the country’s Grey Crowned Crane population, which is estimated to be between 5500 and 6500 birds. Unfortunately the status of our national bird, the Blue Crane, in KZN is poor as their numbers have dwindled to around 1000 individuals over the last 3 decades due largely to the loss of grasslands within the province. It is for these reasons that 20 years ago, EKZNW initiated a crane aerial survey to take place during June and July annually. This is the peak Wattled Crane breeding season, as well as the time of the year when Grey Crowned and Blue Cranes flock together.

The main aims of the surveys are to:

- Determine the population size of Wattled Cranes in the province,
- Determine the breeding status of known Wattled Crane pairs,
- Identify trends in the Grey Crowned and Blue Crane populations, and
- Locate Wattled Crane nests with two egg clutches.

Each year, the aerial survey totals approximately 25 hours of flying and covers approximately 20 000 km<sup>2</sup> over five days.

“The information collected over the last two decades has been hugely valuable. It has helped us to monitor trends in crane populations, while also contributing significantly to the development of a viable captive breeding flock of Wattled Cranes that is managed through the Wattled Crane Recovery Programme,” commented Tanya Smith of the EWT.

**Physical Address:** Building K2, Ardeer Road, Pinelands Office Park,  
Modderfontein 1609, Gauteng, South Africa

**Postal Address:** Private Bag X 11, Modderfontein 1645, Gauteng, South Africa

**Tel:** +27 (0) 11 372 3600 **Fax:** +27 (0) 11 608 4682 **E-mail:** [ewt@ewt.org.za](mailto:ewt@ewt.org.za) **Web:** [www.ewt.org.za](http://www.ewt.org.za)

The Endangered Wildlife Trust is a non-profit, public benefit organisation dedicated to conserving species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

**NPO Number:** 015-502, **PBO number:** 930 001 777, **Member of IUCN** - The International Union for Conservation of Nature  
The Endangered Wildlife Trust is US 501(c)(3) compliant under **US IRS Registration number:** EMP98-0586801.



The Wattled Crane Recovery Programme is a national programme implemented by five partner organizations, namely: EKZNW, the EWT, the Johannesburg Zoo, the KZN Crane Foundation and the African Association of Zoos and Aquaria (PAAZAB). The aims of the programme are to prevent the extinction of Wattled Cranes in South Africa by supplementing the wild population with chicks produced from abandoned second eggs collected from the wild, or from the captive breeding flock, and to build a viable captive population.

“The aerial surveys allow us to locate nests with two egg clutches, therefore facilitating the collection of the second laid eggs, which are always abandoned by the adults once the first egg has hatched,” continued Smith. “These eggs are then removed and incubated until they hatch, after which the chicks are hand-reared and integrated into the captive breeding flock.”

It is evident from the long-term monitoring achieved through the aerial surveys that the steady decline of all three crane species in KZN, as witnessed between 1970 to 2000, has ceased. This has largely been due to the efforts of the EWT, EKZNW, KZN Crane Foundation, landowners and other key stakeholders. The EWT strives to ensure the long-term survival of Wattled Cranes in South Africa through conservation in action and has contributed significantly to the conservation of South Africa’s Wattled Cranes for nearly two decades.

“We are fortunate to have a committed group of stakeholders in the KZN region who are dedicated to the conservation of Wattled Cranes. The aerial surveys are evidence of all our hard work over the past 30 years bearing fruit and we look forward to further successful collaborations and partnerships in our efforts to save our cranes,” concluded Smith.

Wattled Crane conservation in KwaZulu-Natal is sponsored by PG Bison and Rand Merchant Bank. For more information on the annual crane aerial survey or the Wattled Crane Recovery Programme, please contact Tanya Smith on [tanyas@ewt.org.za](mailto:tanyas@ewt.org.za)

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**Contact:** Tanya Smith  
Senior Field Officer  
African Crane Conservation Programme  
Endangered Wildlife Trust  
Tel: +27 83 394 7476  
[tanyas@ewt.org.za](mailto:tanyas@ewt.org.za)

Ian Rushworth  
Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife  
Tel: +27 33 239 1511  
[ianr@kznwildlife.com](mailto:ianr@kznwildlife.com)

**Physical Address:** Building K2, Ardeer Road, Pinelands Office Park,  
Modderfontein 1609, Gauteng, South Africa

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Nomonde Mxhalisa  
Communications Manager  
Endangered Wildlife Trust  
Tel: +27 11 372 3600  
[nomondem@ewt.org.za](mailto:nomondem@ewt.org.za)

**Physical Address:** Building K2, Ardeer Road, Pinelands Office Park,  
Modderfontein 1609, Gauteng, South Africa

**Postal Address:** Private Bag X 11, Modderfontein 1645, Gauteng, South Africa

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