

HUGE OKAVANGO FLOOD COMING



Photo: P Hancock

The flood that pulses through the Okavango system every year brings with it change and new life; every flood is different, making it very difficult to predict conditions in advance. There are however three measurable parameters that tell us a great deal about the extent to which the delta will flood in any given year – they are:

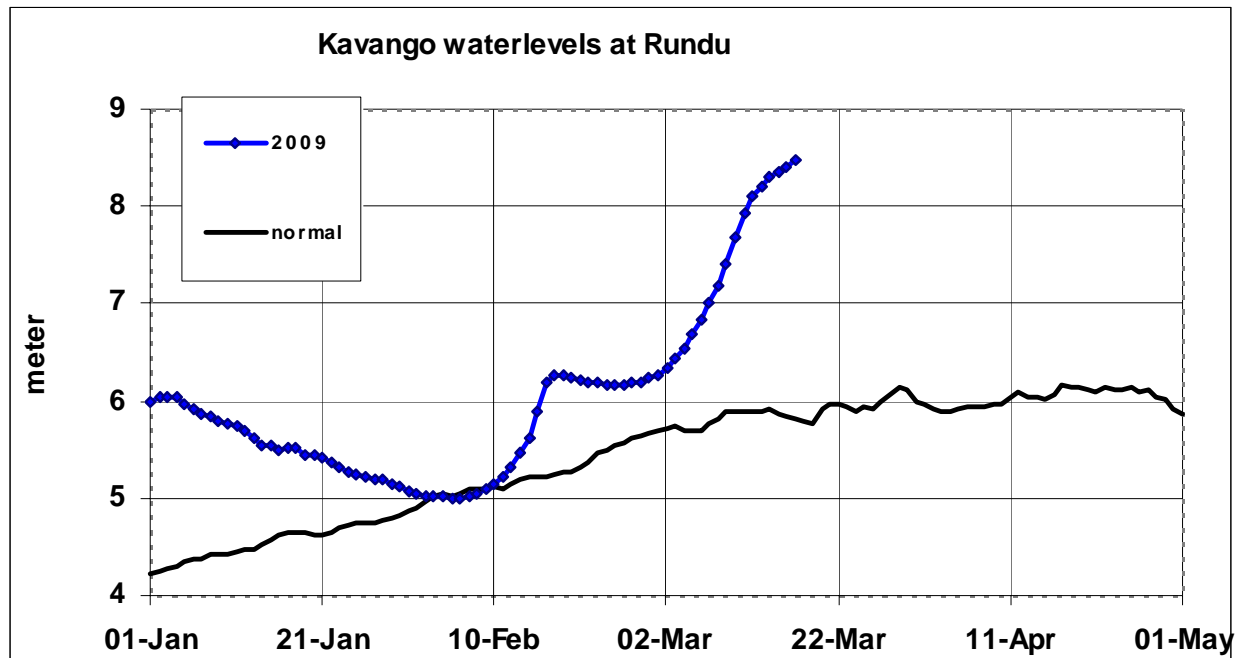
1. Extent of the previous year's flood
2. Amount of summer rainfall
3. Amount of water reaching the upper panhandle at the end of summer

Since the floods of the previous few years have been quite substantial (note how much water is in Lake Ngami and the Boteti River - both of which have been dry during the 1990s) the groundwater throughout the delta has been recharged. This has been supplemented by good summer rains over the delta, topping up water almost to flood levels at present, at a time when the delta is usually at its lowest ebb. This is the situation that the incoming flood will meet; even if it is only a mediocre flood in terms of its magnitude, it will flood extensively.

However, the incoming flood has already reached almost unprecedented levels since measurements were first kept, starting in 1959. The graph overleaf shows the level of the incoming Okavango River flood at Rundu (in blue), just upstream of the Botswana border – it is very much higher than 'normal' (black line) – in fact, at present it is exceeded only by the 1963

flood level. By all accounts, this year will be a bumper flood for the Okavango!

Graph courtesy Guido van Langenhove



It is not just the Okavango River that is full and flooding; the Kwando, Chobe and Zambezi are also expected to reach exceptional levels for recent years.

What does this mean for birds? Quite simply, if you're a waterbird, good times are coming! Lake Ngami has been filling to over 50 km² in extent for the past few years, and attracting tens of thousands of waterbirds - in 2009 it is expected to flood right up into the adjacent woodland. At the other end of the Kunyere faultline lies the Mababe Depression, already filling from the exceptionally full Khwai River. During the 1970s when this area was last inundated, it provided exceptionally rich habitat for waterfowl. Water levels in the Linyanti, including Zibadianja, are already high, and the Savuti Channel is flowing towards the Chobe National Park boundary - this water could conceivably reach the Savuti Marsh at the northern end of the Mababe Depression. Lake Liambezi, another birding hotspot, is already starting to fill. And what of the Boteti River? During the 1960s and 1970s, there were healthy populations of waterbirds from Khumaga to Rakops, and many associated species such as African Green-Pigeon, Meyer's Parrot and even sandgrouse (coming in to drink from surrounding areas) - this is likely to be revived.

Although birds don't have the sophisticated models and predictive capability available to us, whichever way the water goes, the birds are sure to find it!