

UNRAVELLING THE MYSTERY

BirdLife Botswana is embarking on an ambitious project to unravel a long-standing mystery concerning the movements of Wattled Cranes in the Southern African region. During the nineteen-seventies and eighties, and especially during the early nineties, large flocks of thousands of Wattled Cranes have appeared in unexpected places where they were not usually resident, for example, in the Zambezi Delta in Mocambique and in the Makgadikgadi area of Botswana. This gave rise to the notion that unpaired birds form up into large 'floater' flocks (as happens with other crane species) and move throughout South-Central Africa looking for suitable habitat where they eventually form life-long pair bonds and settle on permanent territories. Under such a scenario, it is obvious that the Okavango Delta Wattled Crane population cannot be viewed or managed in isolation - if the young birds spend several years moving around the region, where they are vulnerable to a variety of mortality factors, this could severely undermine recruitment into the population, and explain why it appears stable at about 1,400 birds.

On the other hand, it is entirely plausible that the large flocks seen previously were birds dispersed from the wetlands in Zambia, which up to the nineteen-nineties harboured the largest Wattled Crane populations in Africa, but which subsequently declined dramatically. Prime, productive wetlands in the Kafue Basin have, for example, been destroyed by wholesale hydrological changes following the construction of the Kafue Gorge and Itezihitezhi Dams; what happened to the thousands of Wattled Cranes that frequented this area? For a large, powerful bird like a Wattled Crane, it is a relatively short flight from Kafue to the Okavango or Makgadikgadi. Could this explain the sighting by professional guide Bruce Cattle, of over 1,000 Wattled Cranes in the PomPom area of the Okavango Delta in May, 1999?

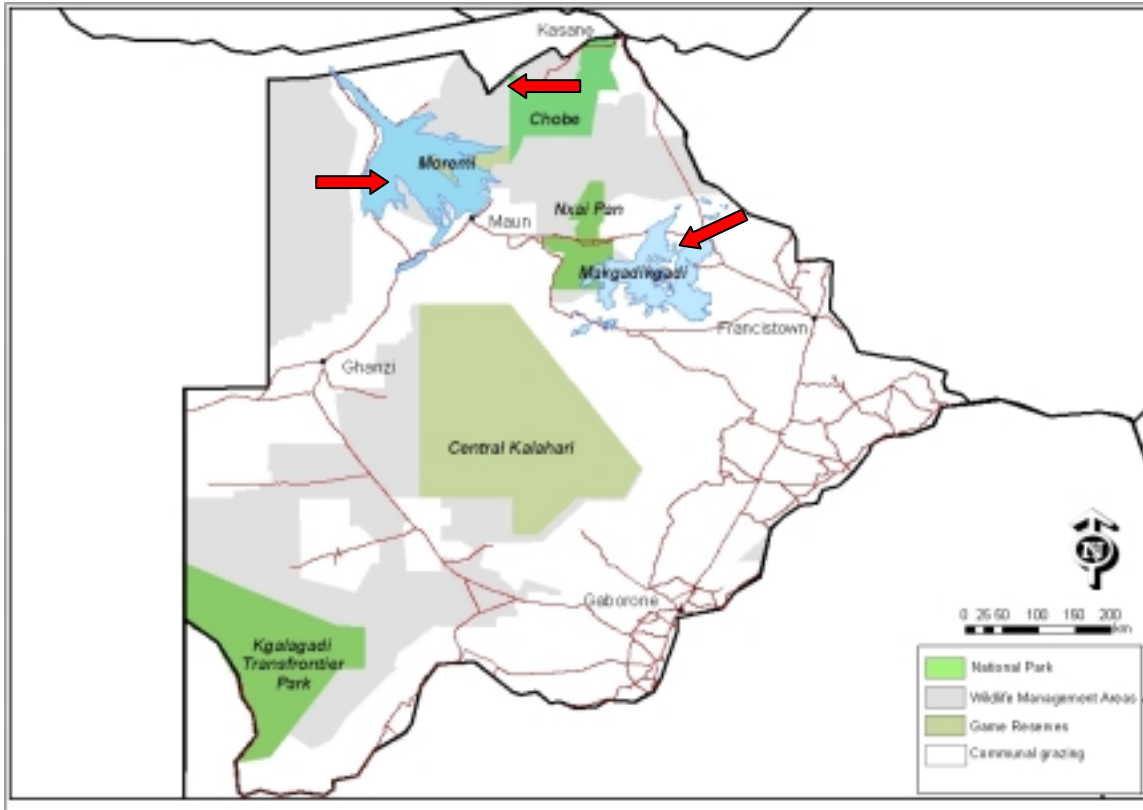


Photo: J Macdonald

Speculation could continue *ad infinitum* – we simply do not know enough about this globally threatened bird to make any predictions that would ensure its adequate conservation and survival during the 21st century. The only way to obtain real answers is to fit a sample of Wattled Cranes with satellite transmitters so that their exact movements can be monitored over potentially vast distances and for a protracted time period. Fortunately the technology exists, and has been continually refined; it is however, very expensive, and this has precluded BirdLife Botswana from addressing the issue at hand.

Earlier this year however, David and Cathy Kays of Ngamiland Adventure Safaris, whose Jao Concession is in the Wattled Crane heartland in the Okavango, offered to purchase and donate three satellite transmitters to BirdLife Botswana to initiate this project. This generous offer was matched by two other Maun businessmen with a long-standing commitment to the conservation of the Okavango, Mark Muller and Brian Bridges, who through their two businesses (Ngami Toyota and Mulbridge Transport) funded a further three transmitters or PTTs as they are known for short (Platform Tracking Telemetry device). This extraordinary gesture by local Maun-based businesses, has enabled BirdLife Botswana to order the PTTs from North Star Science and Technology in America – leading manufacturers of satellite tracking devices for wildlife species, and to engage with the French company Argos to arrange for regular downloading of the information from the satellites.

BirdLife Botswana plans to fit two transmitters to immature Wattled Cranes in floater flocks in the Makgadikgadi Pans area where substantial numbers of cranes are to be found at present following the abundant rains. It is anticipated that as the pans dry out, the birds will move – although to precisely where it is not known! A further two Wattled Cranes will be targeted in the Jao Concession – in this case an adult on an established territory and its recently fledged chick – the aim being to determine the movements of a different segment of the population that these two individuals will represent. Finally the remaining PTTs will be fitted to immature birds in the Linyanti IBA – this Wattled Crane population here appears to be a relict of a previously larger population almost mid-way between the Zambian wetlands and the Okavango Delta. It is not known if these cranes are sedentary or move between major wetlands in the region.



Arrows show areas where satellite transmitters will be fitted to Wattled Cranes

A project of this nature is fraught with uncertainties – if we knew what to expect of the birds, we wouldn't need to fit them with PTTs! Thus it is with keen anticipation that we look forward to the roll-out of this project and, at last, getting a real insight into the local and regional movements of this flagship of the Okavango.

Watch this space for regular updates!