

SAVING ENDANGERED GREY CROWNED CRANES IN RWANDA

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THE Grey Crowned Crane (*Balearica regulorum*) is the only species of crane in Rwanda and a spectacular and iconic species in the country's diverse natural landscape. Sadly however, they face increasing threats to their habitat and a growing illegal trade. Rwanda is a country challenged with population growth and poverty which often results in a huge competition for resources. Much of the natural marshy habitat of the cranes has been taken over by agricultural activities and a lack of conservation awareness within communities readily results in the poaching of cranes, chicks and eggs even though it is illegal to do so.

Grey Crowned Cranes are often kept domestically by hotels and wealthy families who are unaware of the environmental consequences of doing so. In captivity, the cranes are usually stressed, malnourished, have broken wings to prevent them flying and cannot breed. As a result, the population of Grey Crowned Cranes has dramatically fallen by 80% over the past 45 years; with less than 500 living in the wild in Rwanda today. In 2012 the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) raised the threat listing for the crane to "endangered", highlighting the need for immediate action.



This project has been designed to reverse the trend in illegal trade and boost the wild populations of Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda. It adopts a holistic approach, to tackle the problem from all angles to ensure the impact is long-term and sustainable.

The first step was to launch a national media campaign in collaboration with the Rwanda Development Board to raise awareness amongst the general public about the Grey Crowned Crane and its endangered status and the laws that exist to protect it. This led to a nationwide amnesty calling for people to register any cranes they have in captivity so that we could issue every captive crane in the country with a unique identifying leg band. A national database was set up to provide a baseline of the extent of the illegal trade and will allow us to more easily prosecute people who are found with newly poached cranes. So far 130 captive cranes have been registered, mainly in Kigali city but it is expected that with further media campaigns, this number will exceed 200.

The second step was to work with local communities around the marshland where the biggest population of Grey Crowned Cranes live. Engaging and educating them to understand the importance of protecting the habitat of the cranes will ensure that the problem of illegal trade is tackled from the source. We provided training to local leaders and security officials and will work with local school children, setting up conservation clubs to inspire the future generation of conservationists. We also plan to work with poachers to support them in finding alternative means of income and to volunteer as rangers in the region to report any illegal activities.

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Captive Crane with the registration leg band. Photo credit: Thierry Grobert Rolex



Dr. Nsengimana using the VetScan VS2.



Wild Crane in Akagera National Park. Photo credit: Thierry Grobert Rolex

In addition, we recently moved 40 Grey Crowned Cranes from captivity back to the wild. We had assessed all the captive cranes and selected those that were most likely to do well in the wild to be rehabilitated and reintroduced. This is a momentous achievement and one of the first of its kind. We built a purpose made quarantine facility and during the quarantine period, the cranes underwent a complete physical exam and samples were collected to test for different diseases.

One crucial component of medical diagnosis of disease is the clinical chemistry and we could not have conducted this without the support of ABAXIS. ABAXIS donated The Avian/Reptilian Profiles Plus for the VetScan VS2 analyzer. These rotors are specific to avian species and provide 12 blood parameters. Looking at the blood chemistry results of every crane is very important as it gives an indication of the overall health of the crane and the

function of specific organs. The blood chemistry results, alongside haematology, physical examination and disease test results enabled us to make a detailed assessment of every crane. Through this, we could ensure they were completely healthy before their reintroduction as well as avoiding the risk of introducing a new disease to the wild that could be a threat to other birds or animals. All blood chemistry analysis we carried out using the VetScan VS2 analyzer donated for use by the Gorilla Doctors in Rwanda.



Team members processing samples from the cranes during health checks.

Once all the cranes were clear of disease and the quarantine period was complete, they were moved to the release site at Akagera National Park. The rehabilitation facility gives the cranes time to relearn or remember behaviours such as foraging that they will need to survive in the wild, as well as re-grow feathers that were cut in captivity. During this time, the cranes are supplemented with food but this is slowly reduced to encourage them to look for their own food and become less reliant on people. As we monitor the cranes closely in the rehabilitation facility, we are assessing how they are adapting to their new environment. The facility has no roof so when the cranes are ready and able to fly again, they are free to return to the wild. We hope to take another group of Grey Crowned Cranes back to the wild in the near future and hope that one day, we will see flocks of cranes flying overhead as we used to do years ago.

For more information on the project please contact Dr. Olivier Nsengimana at nsengolivier@gmail.com or follow our the progress of the project at www.facebook.com/cranesrwanda



*One of the first reintroduced cranes had chicks!
Photo credit: Sarah Hall - Akagera Management Company*



Dr. Nsengimana talking to students who study near Rugezi Marshland about cranes.



Previous captive cranes in the quarantine facility.