

TOP SPOT

WORDS & PICTURE
MARK D ANDERSON



The five-cent bird

In the Karoo, they call the blue crane “the five-cent bird” because its image appears on the coin. Mark D Anderson tells us more about our national bird.

Upstanding citizen

When our forefathers needed to decide on a national bird, the blue crane must have been an easy choice. It has all the right qualities: It’s elegant and tall, performs beautiful courtship dances, and is a loyal partner and a devoted, protective parent. A *mossie* and a *fisant* don’t come close.

Proudly South African

The blue crane is an almost exclusively South African bird – only a few dozen are found outside our borders, in northern Namibia. They’re at home in the country’s eastern grasslands, the Karoo shrub veld, and the wheat fields of the Overberg and the Swartland.

Numbers up or down?

The blue crane is listed as “vulnerable” in *The Eskom Red Data Book of*

Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. It’s estimated that only 21 000 birds remain, down from well over 100 000 in the early 1900s.

Reasons for the dramatic population decline include the destruction of the bird’s grassland habitats, the use of agricultural pesticides in KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, and poisons used to kill brown locusts in the Karoo.

Cranes collide with electricity and telephone lines and get entangled in fences. Their chicks drown in stock drinking troughs, and breeding cranes are sometimes disturbed by dogs.

Some people like to capture chicks and raise them as pets. These birds seldom survive, and those that do face a life of misery. Anyone caught illegally capturing blue cranes faces a stiff fine or even a jail sentence.

HI, HONEY! This nesting pair of blue cranes was photographed on a farm in the Karoo where they were taking turns to incubate two eggs. Blue cranes are monogamous, and elaborate displays like this greeting help to keep their bond strong.

Want to get involved?

Yes, you!

Count cranes. Help to keep tabs on crane numbers by joining the Coordinated Avifaunal Roadcounts (CAR) Project if you live in an area where blue cranes occur (☎ www.avian-demographyunit.org).

Spot rings. If you come across a colour-ringed blue crane, tell SAFRING (☎ safring@adu.uct.ac.za) or the South African Crane Working Group (☎ crane@ewt.org.za).

Report collisions. Inform the Endangered Wildlife Trust (☎ jons@ewt.org.za) if you know of blue cranes colliding with power lines.

