

= African crane =

The African crane (*Crex egregia*) is a bird in the rail family that breeds in most of sub-Saharan Africa away from the arid south and southwest . It is seasonally common in most of its range other than the rainforests and areas that have low annual rainfall . This crane is a partial migrant , moving away from the equator as soon as the rains provide sufficient grass cover to allow it to breed elsewhere . There have been a few records of vagrant birds reaching Atlantic islands . This species nests in a wide variety of grassland types , and agricultural land with tall crops may also be used .

A smallish crane , the African crane has brown and streaked blackish upperparts , bluish and grey underparts and black and white barring on the flanks and belly . It has a stubby red bill , red eyes , and a white line from the bill to above the eye . It is smaller than its closest relative , the corn crane ; that species is also lighter plumaged , and has an eye stripe . The African crane has a range of calls , the most characteristic being a series of rapid grating krrr notes . It is active during the day , and is territorial on both the breeding and non breeding grounds ; the male has a threat display , and may fight at territory boundaries . The nest is a shallow cup of grass leaves built in a depression under a grass tussock or small bush . The 3 ? 11 eggs start hatching after about 14 days , and the black , downy precocial chicks fledge after four to five weeks . The African crane feeds on a wide range of invertebrates , along with some small frogs and fish , and plant material , especially grass seeds . It may itself be eaten by large birds of prey ; snakes ; or mammals , including humans , and can host parasites . Although it may be displaced temporarily by the burning of grassland , or permanently by agriculture , wetland drainage or urbanisation , its large range and population mean that it is not considered to be threatened .

= = Taxonomy = =

The rails are a bird family comprising nearly 150 species . Although the origins of the group are lost in antiquity , the largest number of species and the most primitive forms are found in the Old World , suggesting that this family originated there . The taxonomy of the small cranes is complicated , but the closest relative of the African crane is the corn crane , *C. crex* , which breeds in Europe and Asia , but winters in Africa . The African crane was first described as *Ortygometra egregia* by Wilhelm Peters in 1854 from a specimen collected in Mozambique , but the genus name failed to become established . For some time it was placed as the sole member of the genus *Crecopsis* but subsequently moved to *Crex* , created for this species by German naturalist and ornithologist Johann Matthäus Bechstein in 1803 . Richard Bowdler Sharpe considered that the African bird differed sufficiently from the corn crane to have its own genus *Crecopsis* , and later authors sometimes placed it in *Porzana* , based on a resemblance to the ash-throated crane , *P. albicollis* . Structural differences rule out *Porzana* , and the placement in *Crex* is now the most common and best supported treatment . Phylogeny and morphology confirm that the *Porzana* cranes are the closest relatives of the *Crex* genus . The genus name is onomatopoeic , referring to the repetitive grating call of the corn crane , and the species name *egregia* derives from Latin *egregius* , " outstanding , prominent " .

= = Description = =

The African crane is a smallish crane , 20 ? 23 cm (7 . 9 ? 9 . 1 in) long with a 40 ? 42 cm (16 ? 17 in) wingspan . The male has blackish upperparts streaked with olive brown , apart from the nape and hindneck which are plain pale brown ; there is a white streak from the base of the bill to above the eye . The sides of the head , foreneck , throat and breast are bluish and grey , the flight feathers are dark brown , and the flanks and sides of the belly are barred black and white . The eye is red , the bill is reddish , and the legs and feet are light brown or grey . The sexes are similar in appearance , although the female is slightly smaller and duller than the male , with a less contrasting head pattern . Immature birds have darker and duller upperparts than the adult , a dark bill , grey

eye , and less barring on the underparts . There are no subspecific or other geographical variations in plumage . This crane has a complete moult after breeding , mainly prior to migration . Although this species occurs in fairly open habitats , it lacks the pure white undertail used for signalling in open water or gregarious species like the coots and moorhens .

The African crane is smaller than the corn crane , which also has darker upperparts , a plain grey face and different underparts barring pattern . In flight , the African species has shorter , blunter wings with a less prominent white leading edge , and deeper wingbeats than its relative . Other sympatric cranes are smaller with white markings on the upperparts , different underparts patterns and a shorter bill . The African rail has dark brown upperparts , a long red bill and red legs and feet .

= = = Voice = = =

Like other rails , this species has a wide range of vocalisations . The male 's territorial and advertising call is a series of rapid grating krrr notes repeated two or three times a second for several minutes . It is given most often in the breeding season , usually early or late in the day , but sometimes continues after dark or starts before dawn . The male stands upright with his neck extended when advertising , but will also call when chasing intruders on the ground or in flight . Both sexes give a sharp , loud kip call as an alarm or during territorial interactions , adapting a similar pose as for the advertising call . Once breeding starts , the birds become much quieter , but territorial birds commence the kip call again during the non @-@ breeding season , especially when there is a high density of African cranes in the area . A wheezy kraaa is associated with threat displays and copulation ; imitation of this call by a human can bring a rail to within 10 m (33 ft) . Newly hatched chicks make a soft wheeeez call , and older chicks cheep .

The rasping advertising call is readily distinguished from the hwitt @-@ hwitt @-@ hwitt of spotted crane , the monotonous clockwork tak @-@ tak @-@ tak @-@ tak @-@ tak of striped crane , or the quick @-@ quick of Baillon 's crane . The corn crane is silent in Africa .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The African crane occurs throughout sub @-@ Saharan Africa from Senegal east to Kenya , and south to KwaZulu @-@ Natal , South Africa , except in arid areas of south and southwest Africa where the annual summer rainfall is less than 300 mm (12 in) . It is widespread and locally common in most of its range , apart from the rainforests and the drier regions . Nearly all the South Africa population of about 8 @, @ 000 birds occur in KwaZulu @-@ Natal and the former Transvaal Province , and much good habitat is protected in the Kruger National Park and iSimangaliso Wetland Park . This crane is only a vagrant to southern Mauritania , southwest Niger , Lesotho , South Africa 's northern and eastern Cape Province and North West Province , and southern Botswana . Further afield , it is rare on Bioko Island (Equatorial Guinea) , and there have been two records each for Sao Tome and Tenerife , the Canary Islands birds being the first records for the Western Palaearctic . Holocene remains from North Africa suggest that the species may have been more widespread when the climate was wetter in what is now the Sahara .

This crane is a partial migrant , but although it is less skulking than many of its relatives , its movements are complex and poorly studied ; the distribution map is therefore largely hypothetical . It is mainly a wet @-@ season breeder , and many birds move away from the equator as soon as the rains provide sufficient grass cover to allow them to breed elsewhere . Southward movement is mainly from November to April , the return north beginning when burning or drought reduces the grass cover again . This species is present throughout the year in some West African countries , and in equatorial regions , but even in those areas numbers vary seasonally due to local movements ; north @-@ south migration has been noted within countries including Nigeria , Senegal , The Gambia , Ivory Coast and Cameroon . Migration takes place at night and involves small groups of up to eight birds ; It may be one or two months after the rains begin before the grass is sufficiently high for breeding birds to arrive . Even in southern Africa , some birds may stay after breeding if enough

usable habitat remains .

The habitat is predominantly grassland , ranging from wetland edges and seasonal floodlands to savanna , lightly wooded dry grassland , and grassy forest clearings . The crane also frequents maize , rice and cotton crops , derelict farmland and sugarcane plantations close to water . A wide range of grass species are used , with a preferred height of 0 . 3 – 1 m (0 . 98 – 3 . 28 ft) tall but vegetation is acceptable up to 2 m (6 . 6 ft) tall . It normally prefers moister and shorter grassland habitats than does the corn crane , and its breeding territories often contain or are close to thickets or termite mounds . It occurs from sea level to 2 , 000 m (6 , 600 ft) but is rare in the higher altitude grasslands . Its grassland habitat is frequently burned in the dry season , forcing the birds to move elsewhere . In an East African study , the average area occupied by one bird was 2 . 6 hectares (6 . 4 acres) when breeding , and 1 . 97 to 2 . 73 ha (4 . 9 to 6 . 7 acres) at other times . The highest densities occur in lush or moist grassland such as the Okavango Delta .

== Behaviour ==

The African crane is active during the day , especially at dusk , during light rain , or after heavier rain . It is less skulking and easier to flush from cover than other cranes , and is often seen at the edges of roads and tracks . An observer in a vehicle can approach to within 1 m (3 . 3 ft) . When a bird is flushed it normally flies less than 50 m (160 ft) , but new arrivals may occasionally fly twice as far . A flushed crane will frequently land in a wet area or behind a thicket , and crouch on landing . In short grass , it can escape from a dog using its speed and manoeuvrability , running with the body held almost horizontal . It may roost in a depression near grass tussock and it will bathe in puddles .

The African crane is territorial on both the breeding and non - breeding grounds ; the male threat display involves the bird standing upright and spreading the feathers of the flanks and belly like a fan to show the barred underparts . He may march towards the intruder , or walk side by side with another displaying male . The female may accompany the male , but with feathers less widely fanned . Fighting at territorial boundaries involves the male birds jumping at each other and pecking . Paired females will attack other females in the territory , especially if the male has shown an interest in them .

== Breeding ==

Breeding behavior commences with a courtship chase with the female running in a crouch , pursued by the male , who adopts a more upright stance and has his neck outstretched . The female may stop and lower her head and tail to allow copulation ; this takes just a few seconds , but may be repeated several times in an hour . The nest is a shallow cup of grass leaves , sometimes with a loose canopy , built in a depression and hidden under a grass tussock or small bush ; it may be on dry ground or slightly raised above standing water , or occasionally floating . The nest is about 20 cm (7 . 9 in) across with the internal cup 2 . 5 cm (0 . 79 – 1 . 97 in) deep , and 11 – 12 cm (4 . 3 – 4 . 7 in) wide . The clutch size is from 3 to 11 pink - coloured eggs ; the first is often laid when the nest is little more than a pad of grass , and a further egg is laid on each subsequent day . Both sexes incubate , and the eggs start hatching after about 14 days ; all hatch within 48 hours despite the extended laying period . The black , downy precocial chicks soon leave the nest but are fed and protected by the parents . Fledging occurs after four to five weeks , and the young can fly before they are fully grown . It is not known whether a second brood is raised .

== Feeding ==

The African crane feeds on invertebrates including earthworms , gastropods , molluscs and the adults and larvae of insects , especially termites , ants , beetles and grasshoppers . Vertebrate prey such as small frogs or fish may also be taken . Plant material is eaten , especially grass seeds , but

also green shoots , leaves and other seeds . The crane searches for food both within vegetation and in the open , picking insects and seeds from the ground , turning over leaf litter , or digging with its bill in soft or very dry ground . It will chase faster moving prey , reach up to take food from plants , and wade to pluck food items from the water . Crop plants such as rice , maize and peas may sometimes be eaten , but this bird is not an agricultural pest species . It forages singly , in pairs or in family groups , sometimes in association with other grassland birds such as great snipes , blue quails and corn cranes . Chicks are fed mainly on animal food . As with other rails , grit is swallowed to help break up food in the stomach .

= = Predators and parasites = =

Predators include the leopard , serval , cats , the black @-@ headed heron , dark chanting goshawk , African hawk @-@ eagle and Wahlberg 's eagle . In South Africa , newly hatched chicks were taken by a boomslang . If surprised , an African crane will leap vertically into the air before running away , a tactic believed to help it to evade snakes or terrestrial mammals .

Parasites of this species include ticks of the family Ixodidae , and a feather mite , *Metanalgus elongatus* , of the subspecies *M. e. curtus* . The nominate form of the mite occurs thousands of kilometres away in New Caledonia .

= = Status = =

The African crane has a huge breeding range estimated at 11 @, @ 700 @, @ 000 km² (4 @, @ 500 @, @ 000 mi²) . Its population is unknown , but it is common in most of its range , and its numbers appear to be stable . It is therefore classed as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List . Overgrazing , agriculture and the loss of wetland and moist grassland have reduced the availability of suitable habitat in many areas , such as some parts of the southern KwaZulu @-@ Natal coast which have been urbanised or planted with sugarcane . In other areas , grassland may have increased locally in recent years as woodland is cleared . This crane is considered to be good eating , and is killed for food in some regions . Despite these adverse factors , it appears to be under no real threat .

Although most rails in the Old World are covered by the Agreement on the Conservation of African @-@ Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) , the African crane is not listed even in Kenya , where it is considered " near @-@ threatened " . Like its relative , the corn crane , it is too terrestrial to be classed as a wetland species .