



IUCN SSC Crane Specialist Group



Conservation Success Stories

Combating the illegal trade of Endangered Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda



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IMPLEMENTED BY

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THREAT ADDRESSED

Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda faced severe threats from the illegal pet trade, valued for their symbol of wealth and longevity. Often kept by hotels and wealthy families who were unaware of the protective laws, captive cranes endured broken wings, malnutrition, stress, inability to breed, and premature death.

TARGET

Implement the Single Species Action Plan for Grey Crowned Cranes by 2024. (T-001)

**Recent
census
in
2024
counted
1,293
Grey
Crowned
Cranes**



SUCCESS LEVEL

Highly successful

Success category: Reduction in threat magnitude

Success subcategory: Illegal traffic of species

Success story:

The Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association (RWCA) developed a multidisciplinary approach to end the illegal trade of Endangered Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda. Working with the Rwandan Government, RWCA launched a national media campaign on television and radio to raise awareness about the cranes' Endangered status and protective laws. The campaign offered a public amnesty, allowing people keeping cranes to register them and avoid prosecution. This collaborative, educational approach prioritised cooperation over punishment and became key to the project's success.

The RWCA, with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) Conservation Department, visited hotels and homes nationwide where cranes were kept. These visits enabled education, health checks, and fitting each bird with a numbered leg band for monitoring. The data provided key insights into crane trade and captive population health. Gradually, the cranes were confiscated to begin reintroduction to the wild.

To support this process, RWCA built a quarantine facility where cranes underwent health checks and disease screening. Healthy birds were transferred to a rehabilitation facility in Akagera National Park, where they relearned survival behaviours and re-grew flight feathers. The roofless facility allowed cranes to leave when ready. With government support, RWCA registered 315 captive Grey Crowned Cranes, 166 of which were rehabilitated and reintroduced. Continuous GPS monitoring showed many reintroduced cranes bred successfully and clarified movement patterns. For cranes too disabled to survive in the wild, RWCA restored a wetland in Kigali, providing a near-wild habitat for 70 rescued cranes and educational activities. This initiative highlights RWCA's commitment to crane welfare, regardless of their ability to return to the wild.

RWCA's holistic approach also tackles the root causes of the illegal crane trade. Working with communities near key habitats, RWCA raises awareness, strengthens law enforcement, and offers alternative income opportunities to deter poaching. These efforts have reduced demand for cranes in the pet trade and sources of illegal capture. Vital work continues through ongoing monitoring of reintroduced cranes and a network of Community Conservation Champions protecting Grey Crowned Cranes across wetlands nationwide. Continued implementation of community nature-based solutions ensures RWCA's actions benefit both people and wildlife for lasting sustainability.

The impact of RWCA's work is clear. All Grey Crowned Cranes have been removed from captivity in Rwanda, and populations have steadily increased. The first national census in 2017 recorded 487 wild cranes, while the most recent in 2024 counted 1,293 individuals. ■ RICHARD BERRIDGE



REASONS FOR SUCCESS

Key reasons for success include: 1) government collaboration granting RWCA authority to confiscate captive cranes; 2) an educational approach encouraging public ownership of conservation; 3) public participation in protecting wildlife; 4) a holistic strategy addressing poaching and illegal trade; 5) partnership with Akagera National Park; 6) skilled veterinary teams; and 7) international partners building local capacity.

Vulnerable Northern River Shark,
(*Glyphis garricki*)
Photo: Grant Johnson

Interviews about human wildlife
interactions with local inhabitants
Photo: Kiran Thapa Magar

Vicuña management by Cooperativa
Agroganadera de Santa Catalina and Comunidad
Aborigen Atu Shapi de Morritos.
Santa Catalina, Jujuy Province, Argentina
Photo: Yanina Arzamendia

Story photo credits

Conducting crane health checks
Photo: Michael Maguire

Grey Crowned Cranes found in captivity
Photo: RWCA

Reintroduction of Grey Crowned Cranes
to Akagera National Park
Photo: RWCA

Community songbird monitoring and
protection, Indonesia
Photo: Asian Songbird Trade SG archives

Cacti from genera *Copiapoa* and *Eriosyce*
confiscated in Italy and repatriated to Chile in 2021
Photo: Andrea Cattabriga