

Driefontein Grassland Ramsar Site

Introduction

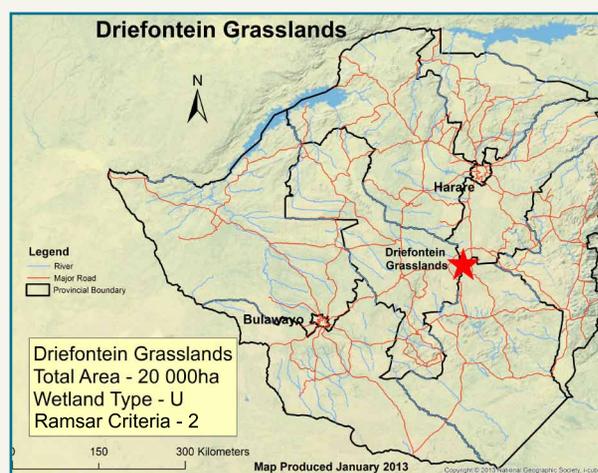
The Driefontein Grasslands, is located between Chivhu, Mvuma and Felixburg, covering three provinces; Masvingo, Midlands and Mashonaland East in central Zimbabwe. It is characterised by open wet grasslands and patches of Miombo woodlands which separate the grasslands. Most of the landscape is under natural highveld grassland, dominated by the thatching grass *Hyparrhenia* which can grow to a height of 3 metres. The area is one of the seven Ramsar sites in Zimbabwe. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands provides a framework for wetland conservation and asks that nations promote the sustainable utilization and conservation of wetlands. Driefontein is located outside protected area systems and therefore is communally managed. The site is an Important Bird Area (IBA), an area that is rich in birds and supports three globally threatened bird species. Driefontein Grasslands provides important ecosystem services to communities living within.

Biodiversity

Driefontein Grasslands is rich in birds and other biodiversity. Three globally threatened bird species namely the Wattled Crane, Grey Crowned Crane and Secretary Bird are found here. Driefontein Grasslands IBA is the key breeding and foraging area for cranes, supporting more than half of the total cranes population found in the country. The Grey Crowned Crane, which is quite common in Driefontein, is an endangered bird species. Many other specially protected bird species such as the Kori Bustard, Black-bellied Korhan, Saddle Billed Stork, White-backed and Lappet-faced Vulture, and Batelaur Eagle are found in this area. Mammals which include waterbuck, zebra, vervet monkeys, baboons, warthog, spring hares, impalas, squirrels and jackals are also found. The wetlands in Driefontein support a diverse species of amphibians and plants.

Miombo woodlands which are dominated by *Brachystegia spiciformis* (Msasa) play an important role in protecting the watershed. In addition, the woodlands provide wild fruits for wildlife and communities.

There are many dams and dambos that provide a year round source of water for humans, livestock and



Map of Driefontein Grasslands Ramsar site



The globally threatened Wattled Crane

wildlife.

The dambos which are used for breeding by cranes and other bird species are also used by communities for horticulture and even maize production as they are not prone to droughts that are common in the area. There are many streams that run through (and/or originate from) the area which include Shashe, Nyororo and the major river is Sebakwe. Wetlands play an important role in recharging these rivers/streams with water.



A flock of Grey Crowned Crane enjoying the wetland

Cultural Values and Tourism

One natural perennial pan, Widgeon Pan, is considered sacred by locals and traditional rituals are performed there occasionally. Locals associate the recent drying up of the pan to an ignorance in observing the traditional norms of the area.

Threats

Major threats to Driefontein Grasslands are veldt fires, and wetland habitat loss as a result of encroachment of cultivation into sensitive areas of the wetlands. Uncontrolled veldt fires destroy nesting sites, eggs and chicks, crane foraging habitats, and disturbs the hydrology of the wetlands.



Veldt fire in Driefontein Grasslands

Overgrazing in some parts of the wetland is another key threat to the area. Illegal egg collection of cranes is also a threat to the key bird species in the area. Direct human disturbance to breeding sites causes disturbances to the cranes which require calm places for breeding. This, coupled with other threats has resulted in a limited number of conducive breeding sites available for the threatened Grey Crowned Crane

and the Wattled Crane.

Conservation measures

Driefontein Grasslands was historically used for cattle ranching by commercial farmers who integrated crane conservation into their practices. After 2000, there was a significant change in land use from commercial cattle ranching to mixed farming by subsistence farmers. BirdLife Zimbabwe, who have been active in the area since the early 90s, have been working with communities and other stakeholders to incorporate crane conservation into this type of farming. Four Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) established by BirdLife Zimbabwe in Shashe, Chinyaure, Daviot and Chipisa are playing a pivotal role in promoting wetland and crane conservation in Driefontein Grasslands. In addition, the local authorities and the extension officers, both environmental and agricultural, have also been instrumental in promoting sustainable use of wetlands. In July 2010 a Conservation Action Plan for Wattled Crane and Grey Crowned Crane in Zimbabwe focusing on Driefontein Grasslands was developed, and is in place. Further funding is required for the future implementation of this action plan.

The Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP) Team in Zimbabwe is currently conducting research on testing environmental friendly models that could be applied to reduce maize crop damage at the site. Historically BirdLife Zimbabwe engaged in livelihoods improvements through community gardens to reduce pressure on wetlands and biodiversity.



Community awareness education on crane and wetland conservation in Driefontein Grasslands

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