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## **Annual Farmer's Day - Dullstroom 27 September 2003**

The Highlands Crane Group annual farmer's day is now a well and truly established event on the Dullstroom calendar, confirmed this year by a turn out of well over a 100 people. The event was held as usual at the Verloren Valei Nature Reserve. It was a very apt venue as it is a shining example of what the Dullstroom environment has to offer, namely spectacular wetlands and grasslands, biodiversity second to none and last but not the least, one of the few remaining breeding sites for Wattled Cranes.

**Crane news for the Dullstroom area** was both good and bad. The good news was that there are two large flocks of Grey-Crowned Cranes in the area, the one flock numbering around 60 birds. Other good news is that the Blue Cranes have started making their appearance in the area in numbers after their winter vacation. The Standerton area, which now also falls under the auspices of the Highlands Crane Group, has had a fantastic increase in Blue Crane numbers. After an absence of years, farmers are now regularly sighting flocks of up to 200 birds. This is something to be proud of. For a long time now farmers in Standerton have not witnessed any Blue Cranes nesting, but recent reports indicate that the birds are forming breeding pairs. In the past what few birds were in the area left during spring. The Standerton farmers must be doing something right.

**Our Wattled Cranes are battling this year.** Only one pair at Verloren Valei has managed to hatch a chick. The portion of the Lakenvlei wetland where two pairs have traditionally bred is dry because of the severe drought and the birds have failed to nest so far. A pair near Machadodorp has also not nested, possibly due to disturbance at the nest site.

**Back to the farmers day...**

**This year's guest speaker** was Professor Steven Piper from the University of Natal who gave a talk on vulture restaurants and the role of the private landowner in the protection of our large bird species. Our thanks to Steven for travelling all the way to Dullstroom and presenting a splendid and encouraging talk.

**One of the main aims of the day** is to award farmers and community members for their contributions to crane conservation. The farmer of the year award went to Pete Meiring. Pete manages a farm near Tonteldoos. He has persuaded the owners to invest vast sums of money to rehabilitate the farm. The farm is being cleared of all alien vegetation, which is then being replaced with indigenous vegetation. The streams and wetlands are also being repaired. Pete's mission is - to put something back into nature and create a bird paradise!

**Brian Kemmey received the John Murray floating trophy.** This trophy is awarded to a farmer for continued support to the Highlands Crane Group. Brian has played a pivotal role in ensuring that the Dullstroom area is developed on a sustainable basis. As chairman of the Upper Kwena Water Association, Brian has been campaigning endlessly to ensure that the area's natural resources are not over utilised. This fits in very well with the broader mission of the Highlands Crane Group, that is protecting crane habitat and Brian has worked closely with me on this issue.

**Crane Custodian boards** are also awarded annually to people who have made a contribution and who protect cranes on their property. Receivers were as follows:

Benja Grobler, Koos du Preez, Martiens Rautenbach, Cornelius Janse van Rensburg, Shawn Catterall, Ingrid Gordon and Frans Krige. Certificates were awarded to Peter Arderne, Helen and David Gaynor, Tinus O'Neill, Nestlé and Anglo Chairman's Fund.

**The farmer's day relies heavily on community support,** and this year the "Dullstroomers" came to the fore again by providing all the necessities to make the day possible.

Thank you to

- Mpumalanga Parks Board and Balungile Bengu, the reserve manager, for providing the venue again. Balungile's team, as usual, were outstanding, making pap, packing out chairs and putting up tents. Park's Board also sponsored the blesbok and bushpig for the spitbraai.
- Nature conservationist Frans Krige for giving up a public holiday to go and shoot the blesbok (and for putting up with my inexperience at hunting).
- Tinus and Johnny O'Neill and André Scheepers who manned the spitbraais from seven that morning. It is the eighth time that Tinus has done the braai, and I don't know if we as the final consumers of the delicious braai'd meat, realise what hard work it is.
- Bertus Struwig donated a sheep for the "umpteenth" time
- Craig Husson from Walkersons, Anne des Brulais and Ingrid Scheepers made salads

- Brian Wolmarans and Steven de Meyer donated ice-cream
- Tannie Ria Grobler loaned her pap pot
- SANEL, through Hermiena Erasmus provided tables and chairs
- Awie and Alicia de Swart provided cold room facilities
- Wayne Hamster from the Duck & Trout provided drinks at cost
- Pete Meiring and Chris le Roux donated the firewood.
- Bronwen Evans provided accommodation for visitors at a reduced rate.

Many thanks also to our main sponsor's Nestlé and Anglo as well as all the other sponsors such as Millstream, Hollard, M-Print, Anglo Platinum and Mitsubishi. Heather Robinson from Nestlé and her family attended the day. Anthony Battalion from Millstream also attended as did Johann Theron from M-Print. Thanks for the commitment and interest in our project.

Thank you again to the Dullstroom community for all the support.

## Photo gallery

Arrival of the Struwig family from over the hills... "their annual pilgrimage".



Our sponsors, Anglo Chairman's Fund and Nestle (Heather Robinson from Nestle in attendance) received certificates for their generous support as well as Helen and David Gaynor for their continued support of the HCG project.



A snapshot of the display stand



Guests enjoying the sunshine after a filling meaty meal



Leon Theron and Prof. Stephen Piper



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