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Northern
Queensland



2024 Crane Count Report

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Traditional Owner acknowledgement

We'd like to acknowledge that this survey was carried out on the lands of the Muluridji, Jirrbal, Tableland Yalanji and Ngadjon people. We'd like to pay our respects to them as the first custodians of this land.

Report authors

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Cover

Brolgas in Katherine NT © Melissa Wooderson.

Introduction

The 2024 Crane Count took place on Saturday 7th and Sunday 8th September 2024.

We had a great response with 55 people assisting over the two days, many of whom are returning crane counters! Thanks to all those who volunteered their time. This count is only possible thanks to the great support of the local birding community we have here in the Far North. We would also like to extend our thanks to the landholders who allowed us, once again, to count cranes on their land. The counts that we obtain on privately owned land form a significant part of the overall count, as there are some very valuable roost sites on private land and without landholders allowing us access, we would miss a large proportion of cranes.

While we were fortunate enough to make it back in time from Europe to lead the count, a huge thanks goes to Sanne for a lot of behind-the-scenes admin and of course to Ceinwen Edwards for again organizing the Southern Tablelands and Innot area counts.

The weather held off for the majority but as always got chilly on dusk. Google forms worked well again for the registration this year but as always if you have any comments or feedback don't hesitate to email us at northernqld@birdlife.org.au

Sarus in flight © Mel Christie



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Day Transects

Table 1: Day Transect Totals 2024

Route	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
Saturday 07/09/2024				
Mt Quincan	0	0	8	8
Reisens	28	0	75	103
Kairi	351	0	3	354
East Barron	25	51	107	183
Mareeba to Rocky Creek	25	66	268	359
Kaban/Tumoulin	49	31	187	267
Tolga	8	0	0	8
Willets Swamp	0	0	0	0
Saturday totals	486	148	648	1282
Sunday 08/09/2024				
Innot Hot Springs	29	168	20	217
Totals	515	316	668	1499

As has been done in previous years, the transects were carried out over two days due to the size of the area to be covered. The main Tablelands area from Mareeba to Tumoulin was covered on the Saturday and the Innot Hot Springs cluster was done on the Sunday. Across both days, we recorded 1499 cranes (see Table 1).

This is a 6% decrease on last year's 1594 cranes.

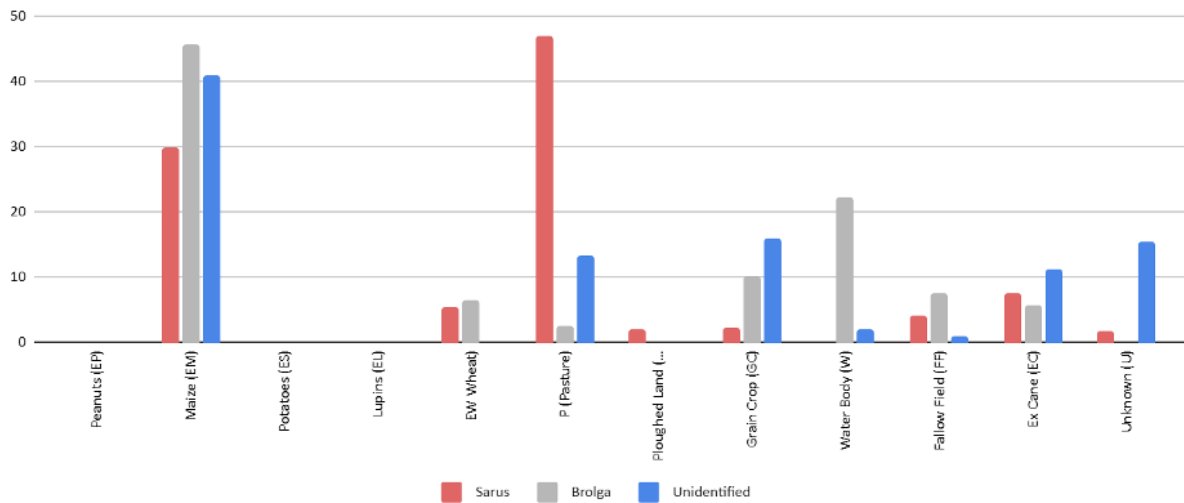


Figure 1: Crop usage as a percentage of total Cranes seen.

We continue to gather data on the crop usage of the birds sighted during the day (see Figure 1). Not surprisingly, pasture and cropped maize were the preferred areas again. We will continue to monitor these and are hoping to be able to compare it to the changing land use across the Tablelands as we see more cotton, orchards and cane replace the maize and peanuts.

Sarus crane © Lynette Kay Ensor



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Roost Counts

Table 2. Northern Tablelands Roost Totals 07/09/2024

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
West Barron Storage	175	525	0	700
Mareeba Wetlands	0	89	7	96
Species Totals	175	614	7	796

Table 3. Central Tablelands Roost Totals 07/09/2024

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
Malcolm Rd	0	0	0	0
Lakeshore Farm (Old DPI)	54	0	0	54
Godfrey Farm	0	0	0	0
Old Boar Pocket Rd (East)	0	0	0	0
Tinaburra Boat Ramp	0	0	38	38
Black Gully Boat Ramp	35	0	0	35
Hasties Swamp	0	0	0	0
Willets Swamp	171	121	57	349
Battles Swamp	59	0	0	59
Ball Rd (Quincan)	18	0	43	61
Bromfield	7	9	36	52
Species Totals	344	130	174	648

Table 4. Southern Tablelands Roost Totals 07/09/2024

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
Bullock Swamp	8	181	16	205
Elicks Dam	1	26	37	64
Sinapius/Edwards Dam	17	4	7	28
Hardwicks Dam	0	0	0	0
Species Totals	26	211	60	297

Table 5. Innot Hot Springs Roost Totals 08/09/2024

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
General Plains Swamp	3	411	0	414
Avocet Dam	0	4	0	4
Clear Water Dam	0	0	0	0
Mid Point Dredge Ponds	0	0	0	0
Dam Wall Dredge Ponds	0	0	0	0
Species Totals	3	415	0	418

Light rain set in again towards the end of the count, but people remained in high spirits. Access wise we still couldn't count from the Reisen Farm due to biosecurity concerns, but we again set up over at Tinaburra and did our best to count from there (see Table 2, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5).

The total this year for all birds was 2159, a drop of 33% on the previous year.

We've discussed previously that while this may seem alarming there have been significant rises and falls in the past, as in 2021–2022 (see Figure 4). Overall, we've tried to look at the trend for the last few years and while for both species we have seen a decline it has followed a significant rise with new roosts discovered and high counts established (see Figure 3). On a positive note, our unidentified individuals have had a negative trend which means we are seeing fewer unidentified birds making up part of the survey which

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is a good step towards increased accuracy and validity for the crane count (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).

We must recognise that there are many factors that this survey simply can't account for.

This is a survey of the species on their wintering grounds, a common methodology to count migratory cranes in other countries. Ours breed up in the Gulf of Carpentaria during the wet season and have been coming to the Atherton Tablelands now since at least the late 1960's. We do not know year to year what percentage of birds are coming down from the Gulf but hope to begin to reconcile that in the next few years with additional surveys (keep your eyes peeled for details). We also don't have an easy way of estimating breeding success each year in the Gulf prior to their arriving with juveniles as the breeding grounds are remote, inaccessible in the Wet and inhabited by large numbers of estuarine crocodiles which make surveys an OHSS nightmare.

These are normally key values for estimating populations but we have holes, so to speak, in our knowledge. The crane count is and will continue to be invaluable as it's a fantastic long-term data set which will only become more valuable in time once we find ways to plug these gaps with more data!

With that in mind I want to wish everyone involved a huge thanks and hope to see you again next year.

Sarus Crane landing at Bromfield © Tim Nevard



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Figure 4. Species total counts by year with a 3-year running average.

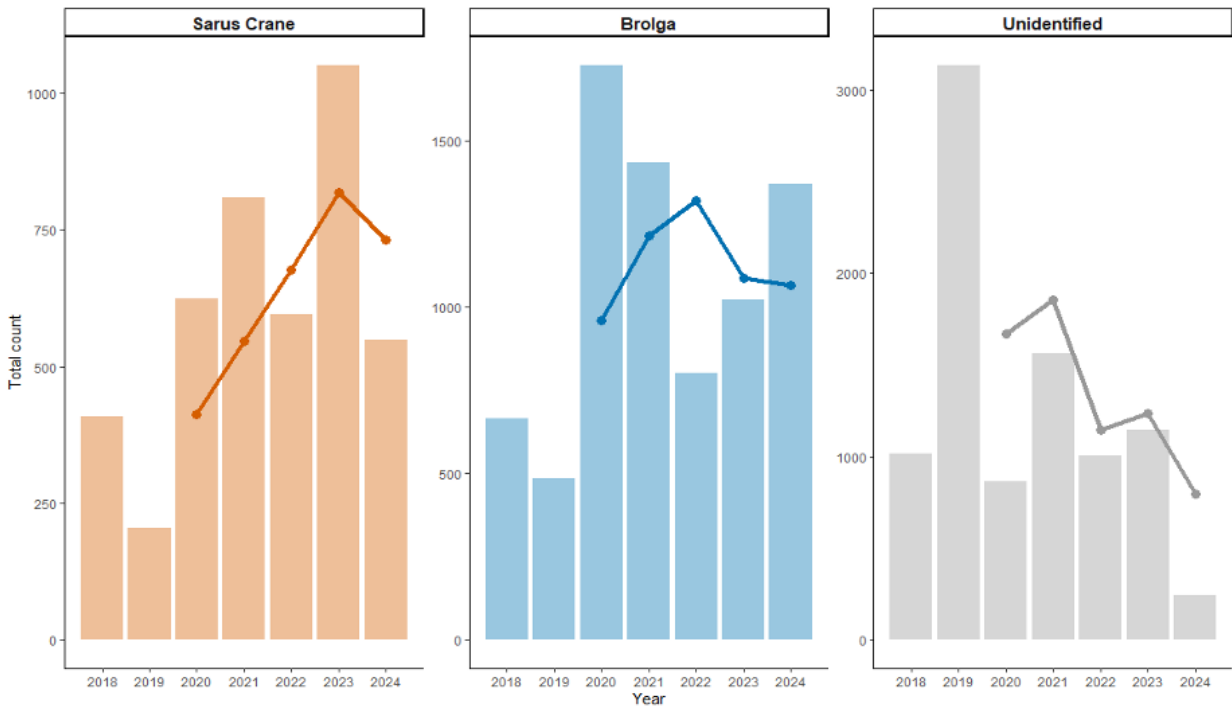
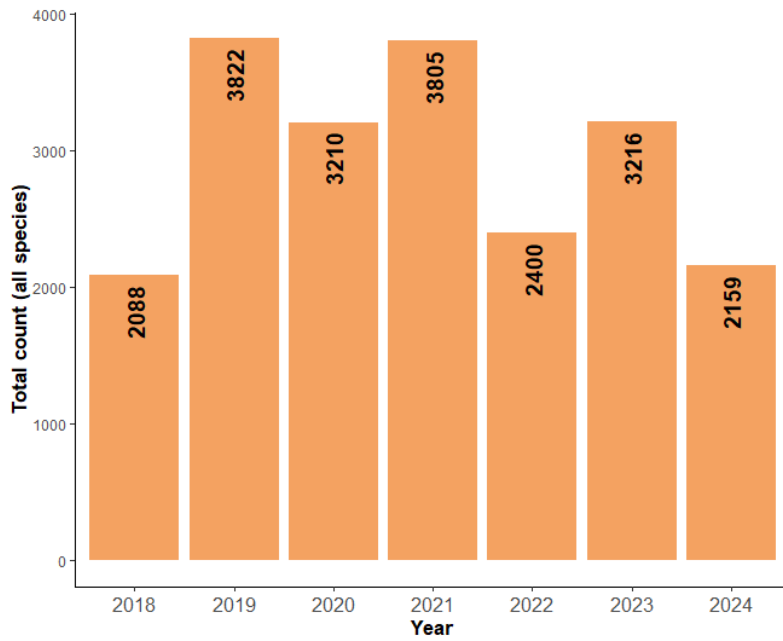


Figure 5. Total count both species and unidentified birds by year (2018–2024).



Acknowledgement and thanks

Firstly, we would like to thank all the landholders that granted access to their properties.

Alan & Muriel Booth, Dustie Cockayne & Jack Fox, Robbie Dalgety & family, John & Daphne Godfrey, Peter & Chelley Howe, Graham & Felicity Johnson, Owen, Kathy & Mitch Jonsson, Matthew Kleyn, Grant Newman, Kate & Peter Waddell and the Board of the Forever Wild Shared Earth Reserve (formerly Mareeba Wetlands).

We'd like to take this opportunity to remind all landholders who kindly allow us onto their properties that we always carry out risk assessments and all participants are covered under Birdlife's insurance. We can also adopt biosecurity precautions as required and we thank all of them for their continued support over the years and hope to continue working together into the future.

Secondly a huge thank you to all the volunteers who took part and made the count a success this year. We were overwhelmed with over 50+ people taking part over both days including students from the School for Field Studies. We look forward to seeing you all again next year!

Extra surveys

If anyone has an interest in doing some pre-count checks at roost sites please get in touch with us. These checks involve doing a mini count of a roost in the weeks leading up to the count. You can go to the assigned roost site around 4pm and count birds coming in until sunset. It is a lovely way to spend an evening, a good way to get your eye in prior to crane count day and really helps us out. If we know where cranes are predominantly roosting prior to crane count day we can concentrate our efforts.

In memoriam

Finally, we'd like to mention that this year we lost Graham Harrington. He showed me (Edward) the ropes and offered us plenty of guidance along the way. He was instrumental in initiating the crane count, and after Elinor Scambler's 20 years' leadership, Graham ran it until I took it over. He will be sorely missed.



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