



birdlife
Northern
Queensland



2022 Crane Count Report

Save Birds. Save Life.

Traditional Owner acknowledgement

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

Report authors

Edward Bell, Sanne Boland, and Ceinwen Edwards

Introduction

The 2022 annual Crane Count took place on Saturday 10, and Sunday 11 September 2022.

We had an overwhelming response this year to the count with over 80 people assisting over the two days and we'd like to start by thanking everyone who took part this year for all their help. This was Edward's second time coordinating the count and considering the numbers involved we felt that it went smoothly, and he'd like to thank everyone that completed the google form for registration as it helped a lot when dealing with the numbers of people involved. We'll always try to make the count as streamlined and accessible as possible so if you have any comments or feedback don't hesitate to email us at northernqld@birdlife.org.au

Date for the diary – next year's count will be on Saturday 9 and Sunday 10 September 2023, note this is the second weekend in the month. It has been moved to avoid the Targa Rally, also don't worry the Barra Bash has moved again and will not be on the same weekend!

Sarus Crane (C) Peter Valentine



Day Transects

Table 1: Day Transect Totals 2023

Route	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
10/02/22 Kairi	173	1	0	174
10/02/22 Reisens	47	0	54	101
10/02/22 Mt Quincan	3	0	2	5
10/02/22 Mareeba to Rocky Creek	57	148	12	217
10/02/22 East Barron	278	93	100	471
10/02/22 Kaban/Tumoulin	20	91	320	431
10/02/22 Willets Swamp	45	74	0	119
10/02/22 Bromfield Swamp	12	5	0	17
11/02/22 Innot Hot Springs	2	57	0	59
Totals	637	469	488	1594

Like last year the transects were carried out over two days due to the size of the area needing to be covered. The main Tablelands area from Mareeba to Tumoulin was covered on the Saturday and the Innot Hot Springs cluster being done on the Sunday. Across both days, we recorded only 1594 cranes which is 27% less than last year due to the reduced number recorded on the Sunday at the Innot Hot springs site.

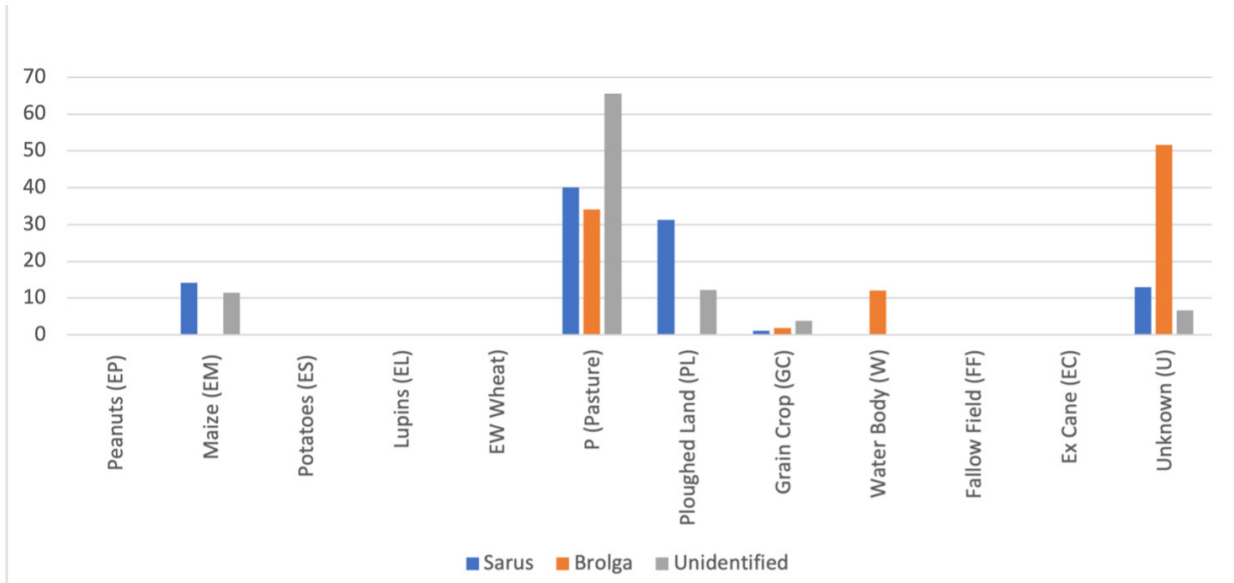


Chart 1: Crop usage as a percentage of total Cranes seen.

As per previous years the land use of the paddocks where cranes were sighted was identified. In contrast to last year, most cranes were sighted this year in pasture. This is again most likely down to the decrease in Brolgas in the Innot Hot Springs area where last year alone 762 were sighted in grain crops as opposed to just 57 this year.

The reasons for this sharp drop are still unclear but one hypothesis is it could be down to a change in agricultural land use in the area. The last 12 months have seen significant increases in cotton in the area on paddocks that would have previously supported crops that the cranes used for food. While we can't confirm this, we will be looking into it more in the coming years.

A positive note, despite the overall decrease in birds sighted, the number of Sarus Cranes positively identified during the day is the highest in the last 5 years.



Figure 1: Sarus Crane near Yungaburra (C) Diana Womersley.

As per previous years the land use of the paddocks where cranes were sighted was identified. In contrast to last year, most cranes were sighted this year in pasture. This is again most likely down to the decrease in Brolgas in the Innot Hot Springs area where last year alone 762 were sighted in grain crops as opposed to just 57 this year.

The reasons for this sharp drop are still unclear but one hypothesis is it could be down to a change in agricultural land use in the area. The last 12 months have seen significant increases in cotton in the area on paddocks that would have previously supported crops that the cranes used for food. While we can't confirm this, we will be looking into it more in the coming years.

A positive note, despite the overall decrease in birds sighted, the number of Sarus Cranes positively identified during the day is the highest in the last 5 years.

Roost Counts

This year's count encountered a couple of issues before the day had even arrived. Access to some sites was altered or restricted this year in response to biosecurity concerns over foot and mouth. Luckily no cases have been reported yet in Australia and the cases in Indonesia appear to have dropped. Hopefully in 2023 this will mean we can regain access to some sites which will be done in consultation with landholders. We'd like to reassure all landholders who kindly allow us onto their properties that we always carry out risk assessments and we can adopt biosecurity precautions if required and we thank all of them for their continued support over the years.

Another issue this year was the Barra Bash clashing with the count that led to an increase in boat traffic across Tinaroo for the weekend of the count. Reports from this year's counters indicate that it may have disturbed the Cranes and dispersed them to other roost sites. The Barra Bash was early this year for some reason but for 2023 appears to have moved to October so hopefully next year Tinaroo will have a normal level of traffic and the Cranes should be able to roost on its shores if conditions are right.

And finally, while the weather wasn't the main issue it still appeared with a heavy shower soaking some volunteers just as the count got underway but luckily it cleared quickly unlike last year!

Figure 2: Sarus Cranes coming into land (C) Cam deJong.



Table 2: Northern Tablelands Roost Totals 10/09/2022

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
West Barron Storage	72	134	506	712
Mareeba Wetlands	0	26	0	26
Species Totals	72	160	506	738

Table 3: Central Tablelands Roost Totals 10/09/2022

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
Pelican Point	6	0	0	6
Malcolm Rd	0	0	0	0
Lakeshore Farm (Old DPI)	4	0	0	4
Rockridge Farm	30	0	96	126
Godfrey Farm	0	0	0	0
Old Boar Pocket Rd (East)	0	0	0	0
Old Boar Pocket Rd (West)	14	0	3	17
Tinaburra Boat Ramp	106	24	40	170
Hasties Swamp	0	0	0	0
Willetts Swamp	30	419	77	526
Quincan Swamp Upper (Kirrakoppa Rd)	1	4	53	58
Quincan Swamp Home Dam (Ball Rd)	7	0	23	30
Bromfield	88	23	97	208
Species Totals	473	472	409	1354

Table 4: Southern Tablelands Roost Totals

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
Bullock Swamp	0	0	0	0*
Elicks Dam	0	20	34	54
Sinapius/Edwards Dam	20	38	9	67
Hardwicks Dam	31	104	44	179
Species Totals	51	162	87	300

Table 5: Innot Hot springs Roost Totals

Site	Sarus	Brolga	No ID	Site Totals
General Plains	0	5	0	5
Avocet Dam	0	0	0	0
Clear Water Dam	0	0	0	0
Mid Point Dredge Ponds	0	3	0	3
Dam Wall Dredge Ponds	0	0	0	0
Species Totals	0	8	0	8

The total roosting count for all birds was 2400 cranes, a 36% decline on last year's total. Again, the Innot Hot Springs area is of concern as the absence of Brolgas noted during the day counts continued with the roost counts. Only 8 birds were reported in that area in comparison to 1465 in 2021. Whether the cropping has had an impact, or the birds had already begun to return to the breeding grounds we won't know but we'll be looking at ways to better understand these issues next year.

The West Barron Storage Pond near Mareeba was the largest roost this year with 712 birds coming in at dusk.

Willetts declined slightly on last year but one of the landholders mentioned he'd noticed the numbers decline in the week leading up to the count. This fits with the fact that Edward counted approx. 700 birds there 2 weeks prior to the count while checking on roosts.

Bullock Swamp did count 267 Brolgas landing but starting around 18:00 all the birds began to take off and leave the area observed by the counters. Based on the experience of the counters and their knowledge of the area we believe they most likely moved further on along the valley but as this cannot be confirmed we have not included them in this year's final count – Table 4. Our reasons for this are that the site is less than 5km from the other sites in the Tumoulin area and although the numbers are not all accounted for, we cannot be certain that some of the birds that left Bullock didn't arrive at the other sites in the area as they all continued to have cranes arrive while the Bullock Swamp cranes departed. This is unfortunate but to maintain the integrity of the counts data and make sure that its comparable from year to year we have taken a conservative approach as the count was always designed to give a minimum estimate of cranes on the Atherton Tablelands.

Finally the number of birds unidentified was similar to last year with 42% of birds being unidentified. This is an ongoing issue and the factors of low light and distance really being the key factors to tackle. We are putting in for grant funding to try and get a couple more scopes. Hopefully this will allow us to maybe focus more on ID at a handful of sites where large numbers of cranes remain unidentified.

Brolga (C) Mel Christie



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, Mitch Cole, Robbie Dalgety, J & D Godfrey, Peter & Chelley Howe, Graham & Felicity Johnsson, Owen, Kathy & Mitch Jonsson, Matthew Klein, 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 80+ people taking part over both days including 24 students from the School for Field Studies who have returned after the hiatus due to COVID. We look forward to seeing you all again next year!

Final acknowledgments go to both Graham Harrington and Elinor Scambler for their advice and continued guidance.

2023 Crane Count

Dates for your diaries:

- **Saturday, 9 September for the Atherton Tablelands Area**
- **Sunday, 10 September 2023 for the Innot Hot Springs Area**

Please note it is again on the second weekend in September to avoid the Targa Rally.



BIRDLIFENQ.ORG