Jane Nayituriki, a female farmer from the Burera district in Northern Rwanda, has been waking up early every morning to catch the migratory grey-crowned cranes flying along the neighboring Rugezi wetland before raising chicks as domestic pets.

Nayituriki, a mother of four, was a member of a group of poachers who used to set up their camps in different parts of marshland zones in Rwanda to catch the grey-crowned cranes flying in her village.

These illegal activities by local villagers were conducted before an initiative to address this threat to cranes was developed. Nayituriki is now among a group of crane poachers who recently refrained from the illegal acts and found other means of earning a living.

Official estimates in Rwanda show that the grey-crowned crane is hunted for meat and alleged medicinal value but also, some people use the birds as pets in their households and hotels. They are also sold to global illegal wildlife dealers.

The plumage of the adult crane is gray with white wings that contain feathers with a range of colors, with a distinctive black patch at the very top. The head has a crown of stiff golden feathers, which makes it considered as a symbol of wealth in Rwanda.

“Umusambi Village” located in the outskirts of Kigali City has helped conservation experts reduce poaching in Rwanda (Credit: Aimable Twahirwa)

The Rugezi swamp has long been among famous sites in Rwanda where thousands of grey-crowned cranes congregate. Beyond Rwandan borders, the species is listed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List as endangered species from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Kenya south through Tanzania and Burundi to Mozambique.

The Rugezi Marsh, a protected area in Northern Rwanda, is home to some endangered grey crowned cranes (Credit: Aimable Twahirwa)

While grey-crowned cranes are part of Rwanda’s wildlife species, the illegal domestication of these endangered birds for both commercial purposes and consumption has gained ground in recent years.

In response, the Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association (RWCA) has made a concerted effort since 2015 to address the threats posed to grey-crowned cranes: confiscating all cranes being kept illegally in domestication, returning those that are in good health to the wild in the Akagera National Park, and working towards establishing a good captive facility for those that cannot be released – serving ultimately as an education centre for crane conservation.

A sanctuary for disabled birds

Several hundred grey-crowned cranes that fell victim to poaching and wildlife trade in the past few years are now safe in a newly established facility known as "Umusambi Village" (Cranes Village) located in Nyandungu, a suburb of Kigali city.

During the rescuing operation, conservationists retrieved many cranes that were disabled and injured as a result of living in captivity.

"Umusambi Village" is currently a sanctuary for about 70 of these birds, which can no longer fly.

The 21-square-hectare captive village is the first of its kind in the country after the Cabinet of Rwanda approved in September 2020 the draft law giving green light to private companies or associations seeking to venture into wildlife conservation for commercial purpose in the country.

Before the new law, associations like the Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association were only authorized to take cranes from captivity into the wild, but the new measures allow the association to run reserves like Umusambi Village privately.

Some of the people who used to capture cranes are now employed in the conservation reserve, which is also generating revenue from tourists who come to see the cranes.

"Thanks to these efforts, local communities living around the site are benefiting from ecotourism opportunities in their area," said Dr Olivier Nsengimana, a Rwandan veterinarian who designed the project aimed at saving the country's endangered grey-crowned crane.

Dr Olivier Nsengimana, a Rwandan conservation leader working to save the endangered and symbolic grey-crowned crane (Credit: Aimable Twahirwa)

Nsengimana is the Executive Director of Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association, a local non-government organization seeking to abolish the illegal trade of the grey-crowned crane in Rwanda.

Habitat loss and poaching

Estimates show that these birds are the only species of crane found in Rwanda. However, they continue to be threatened by several human factors, including habitat loss and poaching of adults, chicks and eggs.

A draft of new legislation was approved by the Rwanda Government Cabinet in 2020 that prohibits the domestication and illegal trade of wild grey-crowned cranes. However, the practice is still common in rural areas and urban settings.

These threats, according to experts, are often driven by poverty, livelihood disadvantage and lack of conservation awareness, as well as people and animals competing for the same habitat.

Increased pressure on land, mainly for agriculture and human settlement, has made it difficult to effectively conserve grey-crowned cranes, according to Nsengimana and Ruhagazi of RWCA.

This is because land pressures affect the species' breeding cycle as the bird's main habitat is wetlands and marshlands, said Telesphore Ngoga, who is the head of the conservation division at the government's Rwanda Development Board (RBD).

While Rwanda is home to an incredible variety of biodiversity, the country is challenged by high population density and poverty. Rwanda currently has a population of over 12.6 million people living on 26,338 square kilometers of land. Land and resources are often overstretched due to high competition between people and wildlife.

Back to the wild

Despite the threats, conservation experts say the threats against this endangered bird species have greatly improved in Rwanda due to the recent initiatives.

According to Nsengimana, the number of grey-crowned cranes in Rwanda has reached impressive levels, driven by measures such as providing support and engaging communities in initiatives to reduce poaching.



The outreach program has led to voluntary registrations of illegally held Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda (Credit: RWCA)

The latest estimates by the RWCA show that the population of this threatened bird species has grown by over 105 percent — from 487 cranes in 2017 to 997 in 2021.

Some wetland zones in Akagera National Park, located about 100 kilometers from Kigali, have become a vital transfer station for the formerly domesticated species. 319 cranes have been removed from captivity, 242 of which have been reintroduced to the wild in the national park.

Dr. Deo Ruhagazi, Crane Project Programme Manager and Field Veterinarian at RWCA, said that while selling rare birds was a major economic activity for rural households, “community awareness has been important to those engaged in poaching, selling and keeping cranes at home.”

One of the successful measures includes the development of bird-themed tourism including an awareness campaign focusing on the environmental consequences to those reluctant to hand back any crane they might have.



Dr Olivier Nsengimana, Chair and founder of Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association caring to one of the birds (Credit: Aimable Twahirwa)

"Local residents have transformed from poachers to bird protectors as they have realized that protecting cranes is protecting themselves," said Ruhagazi.

Since 2014, the RWCA in collaboration with the International Crane Foundation’s Conservation Medicine Department has undertaken public awareness campaigns and helped to officially register 319 cranes held in captivity to supplement a remnant population in eastern Rwanda.

Support for development and production of this story came from InfoNile, in partnership with Oxpeckers Investigative Environmental Journalism, with funding from the Earth Journalism Network.