



# **Virginia McKenna Award for Compassionate Conservation Final Report September 2021**

## **Project Title**

Combatting the illegal trade of endangered Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda

## **Executive Summary of the Project Proposal**

Just five years ago in Rwanda, there were Grey Crowned Cranes in captivity everywhere in hotels and in the gardens of private houses. They were captured and sold openly in cities and towns around the country. Many people thought it was okay to keep cranes in captivity and were unaware of the consequences of doing so; the cranes were often stressed, malnourished, had their wings broken to prevent them flying, did not breed and died prematurely. There were only an estimated 300 remaining in the wild in Rwanda and with increasing threats to their habitat and being continually poached for the illegal trade, they were rapidly heading towards extinction. Olivier Nsengimana decided to take action and launched a project to save the endangered Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda. While we have now successfully achieved our goal of removing all Grey Crowned Cranes from captivity in Rwanda, we want to ensure that the illegal trade is abolished in the long term.

In 2021 we planned to 1) increase awareness of our key conservation messages among community members living nearby key crane habitats, 2) reduce the number of illegal activities recorded by our team of Community Rangers at Rugezi Marsh, 3) increase the number of chicks monitored by Community Rangers and Champions that are successfully fledged, 4) improve habitats by planting indigenous trees at key crane habitats and 5) improve the cross-boundary collaboration between Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania to work together to monitor and protect cranes. With MTA funding, we planned to scale up the cross-boundary collaboration without which a comprehensive approach to species protection would not be possible. These ongoing activities, will mean that we can ensure the welfare of Grey Crowned Cranes and continue our progress, with the population of cranes being restored, moving from 'declining' to 'stabilising' to 'increasing'.

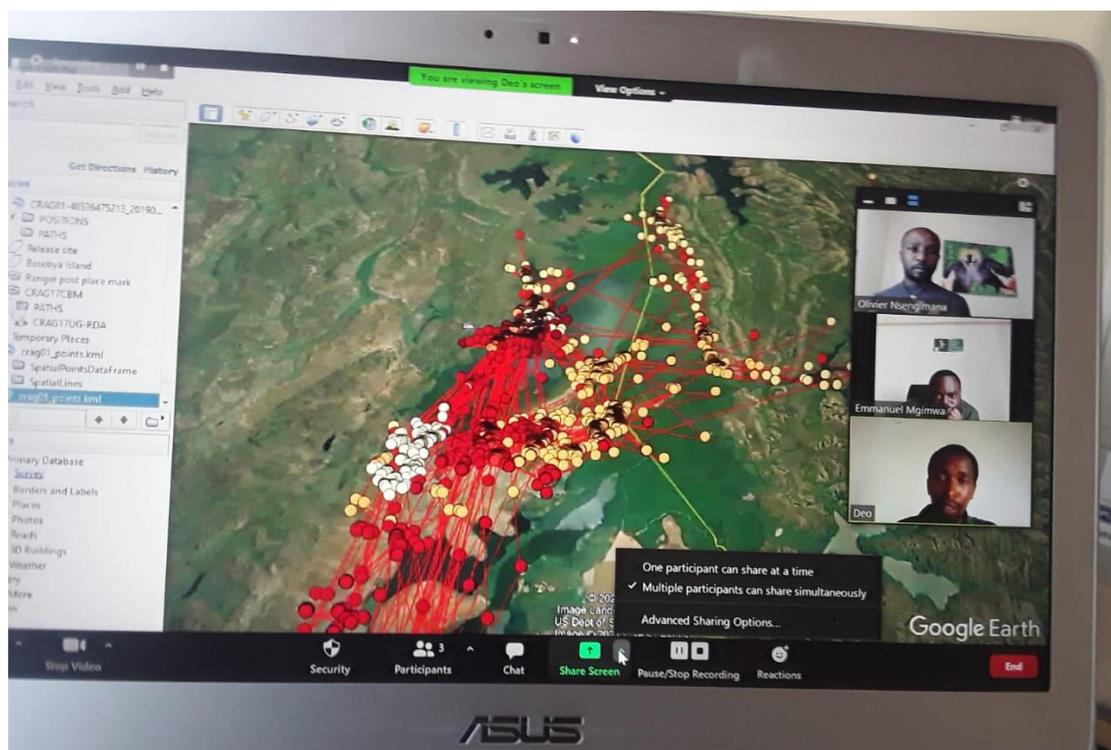
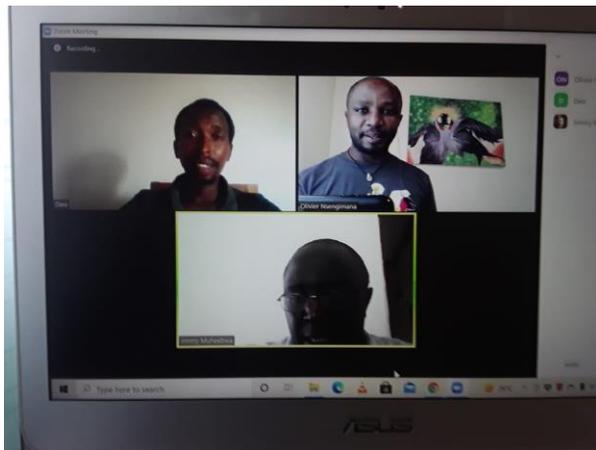
## **Activities Achieved with Award Funding**

The funds of this award were put towards activities to promote the cross-boundary collaboration between Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania. Some of the activities were delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic which impacted both implementation, but also the financial health of our organisation. Due to the economic impact of the pandemic, we saw a drastic cut in funding, with donors withdrawing funding, grant applications freezing and a reduction in funds that had previously been committed. As a

result, some of the award funds were put towards maintaining the salaries and support for our team of 30 Community Conservation Champions across Rwanda which has been reported below.

**Activity 1: Organise a meeting between RWCA, International Crane Foundation (ICF) Uganda and Nature Tanzania to discuss challenges, current activities and ways forward.**

This meeting was delayed due to travel restrictions related to COVID-19, however as we realised that travel restrictions were unlikely to change, we organised a series of online meetings with the 3 partner organisations in Tanzania and Uganda (Nature Tanzania, Nature Uganda and International Crane Foundation) to explain the rationale behind the work, begin the collaboration and set out the next steps forward. The organisations were really enthusiastic to start working together and we began to design a co-ordinated approach to protect Grey Crowned Cranes across the regions.



*Top Left: Zoom meeting with Nature Uganda, Top Right: Zoom meeting with Nature Tanzania  
Bottom: Discussing results of our GPS tags tracking crane movements with Nature Tanzania*

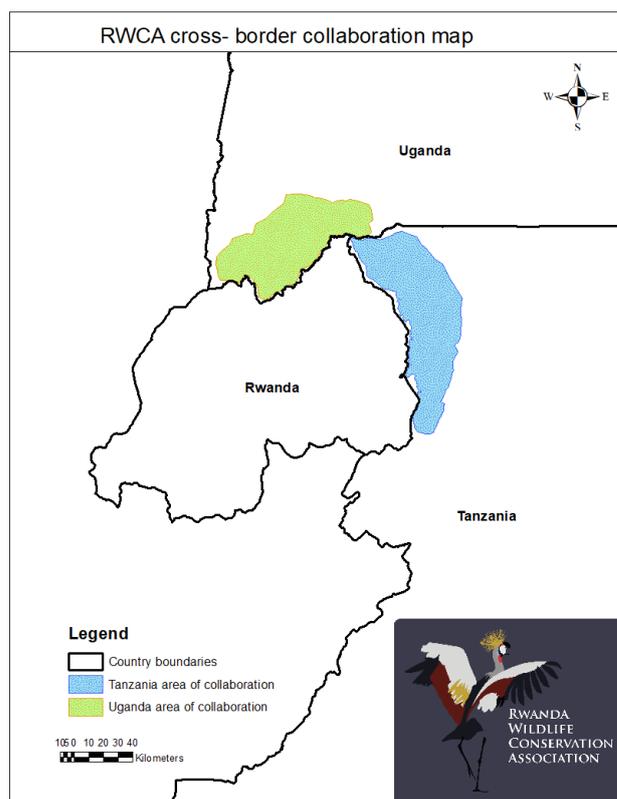
## Activity 2: Create an Action Plan for Cross-boundary collaboration actions

During the online meetings and discussions, we made an action plan for first steps towards cross-boundary collaboration. The actions involved a commitment to work together, a decision to conduct some initial mapping exercises and identification of areas we will focus on, and discussion around the concept of Community Conservation Champions and applying the model to other countries. We agreed that we would recruit and train 10 new Community Conservation Champions in Uganda and 10 in Tanzania. We also discussed the use of colour bands to better identify and monitor cranes from each region.

We then began some activities to help us in the assessment and planning stage:

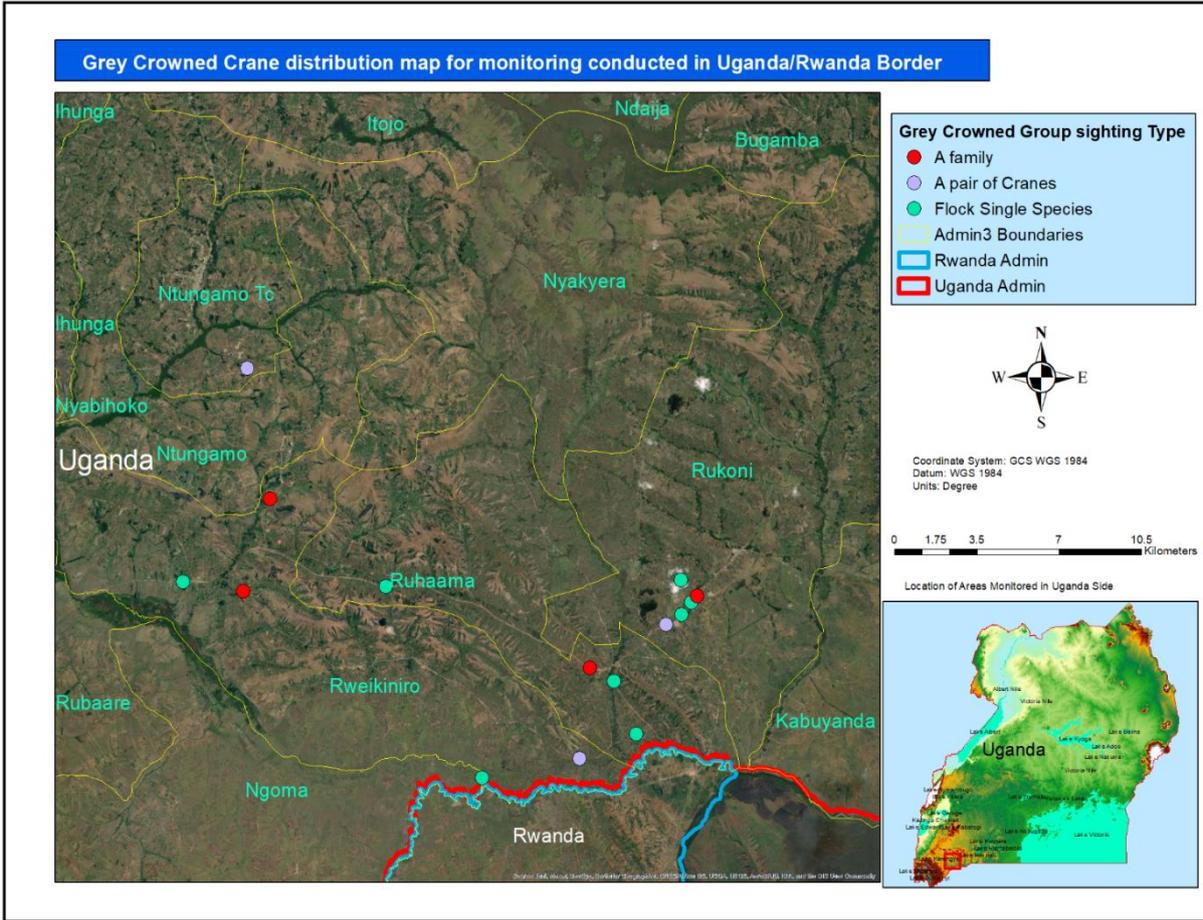
### a) Mapping Exercises

RWCA staff have coordinated with the partner organisations to accurately map the areas where the cross-border collaboration will take place. These areas have been targeted as known Grey Crowned Crane areas and important wetland areas.



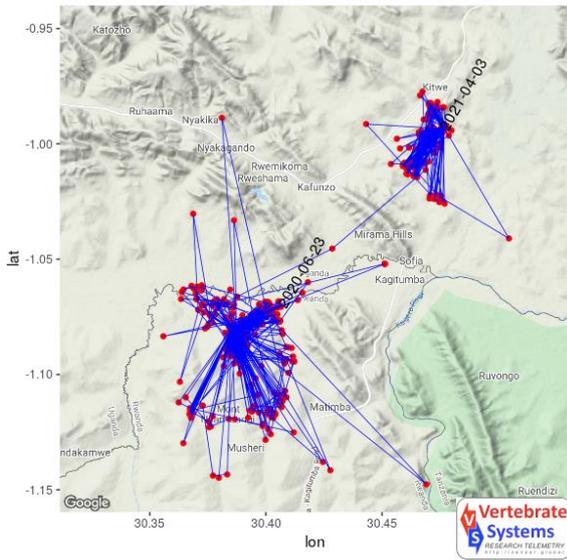
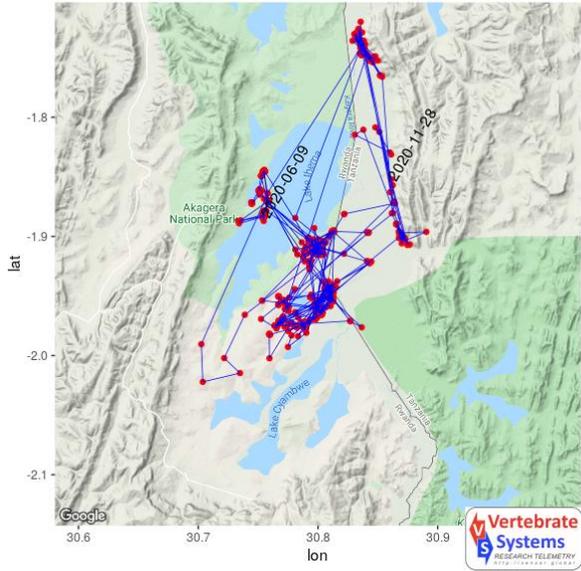
With funds from this grant, International Crane Foundation Uganda undertook a more detailed mapping exercise in the region close to the Rwandan border to identify the distribution of Grey Crowned Cranes and start highlighting key areas that need to be protected. This was an important exercise to better understand the area and accompanying threats. A total of 106 Grey Crowned Cranes were sighted during this exercise. The main threat that was identified was habitat destruction due to agricultural encroachment and livestock grazing.

A similar mapping exercise took place in Tanzania with Nature Tanzania, identifying key crane areas and we are awaiting their results.



**b) GPS Data Collection**

We continue to collect data from 5 GPS tags we attached to Grey Crowned Cranes near the border of Rwanda. This data is very useful for us to better understand the movement patterns of cranes and highlight key areas in need of protection. Sadly 2 additional tags have been lost after cranes were poached in Uganda. This highlights to us the urgent need to increase protection and work together with a co-ordinated approach across the region. Some of the funds from this award, have helped go towards the data fee for collecting ongoing data from our remaining tags.



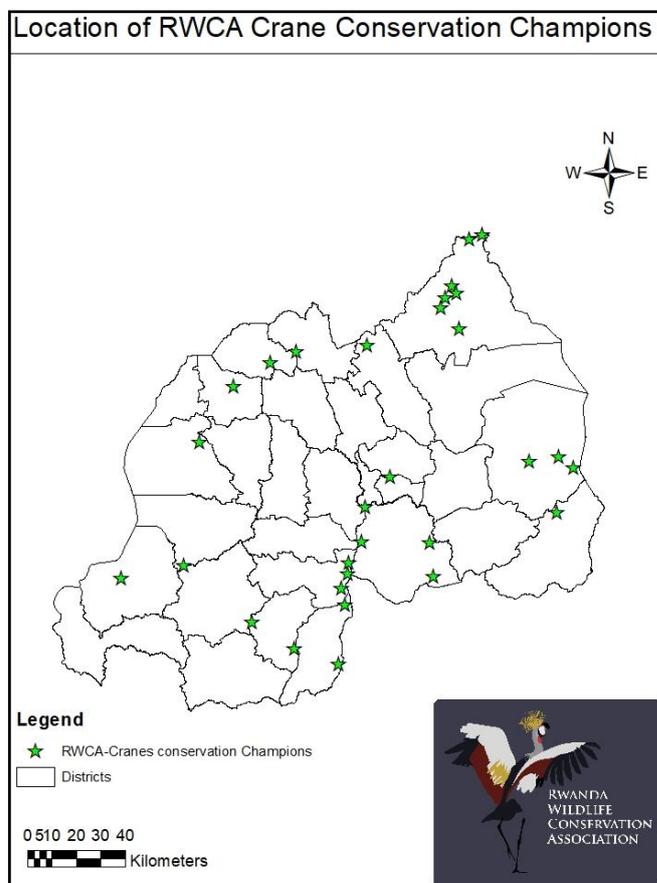
*Left: GPS points tracking one crane regularly crossing the Rwanda-Tanzania border*  
*Right: GPS points tracking one crane regularly crossing the Rwanda-Uganda border*

**Activity 3: Recruit and train Community Conservation Champions in other countries to monitor and protect Grey Crowned Cranes**

**Activity 4: Introduce the use of CyberTracker app to record sightings of Grey Crowned Cranes across three countries**

**Activity 5: Develop Conservation Agreements with farmers to promote co-existence between wildlife and people**

Activity 3, 4 and 5 we have not yet been able to implement because of the delay in some activities due to COVID-19 restrictions as well as cuts in our funding. These activities are still planned and we have just applied for a grant to continue our cross-boundary collaboration work. Despite not being able to complete these activities yet, we were able to use the funds for to continue supporting our team of 30 Community Conservation Champions at biodiversity hotspots across Rwanda. This was such crucial work, and we were so appreciative of their efforts as they were able to continue much of their work during the pandemic, despite the core staff team being stuck in Kigali city at times! We have been able to keep all our programmes running and have become creative at adapting those that were not able to happen.



They have worked hard to monitor the areas in which in they work, record sightings of Grey Crowned Cranes, monitor and protect breeding areas, educate fellow community members and raise awareness of any activities that degrade the wetland, working in close collaboration with local leaders. They have also dealt with incidents of poaching of crane eggs or chicks.



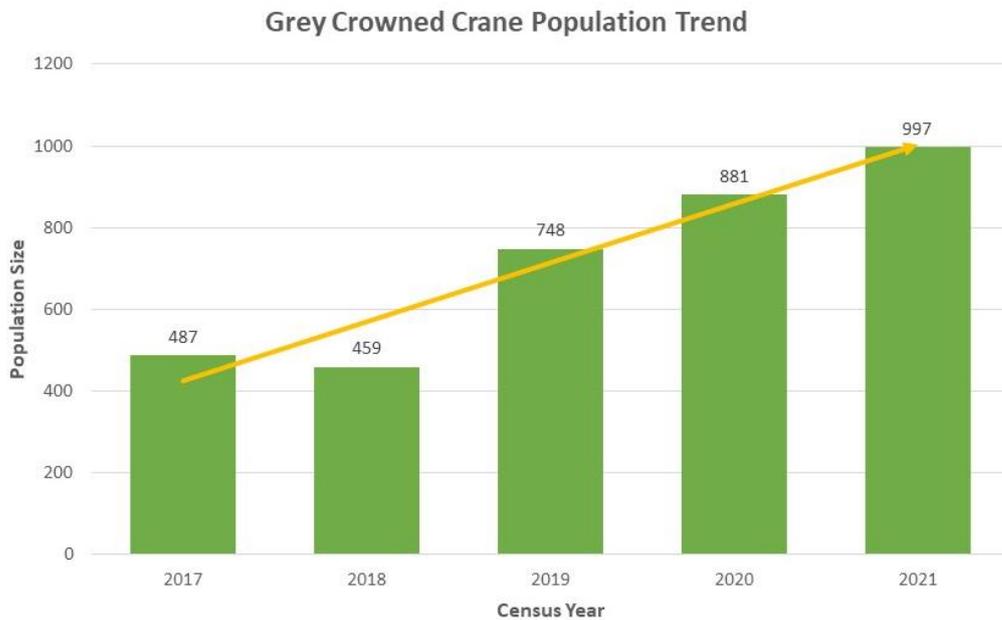
*Top Left: Community Conservation Champions monitoring wetland areas.*

*Top Right & Middle: RWCA staff check in on Champions and provide more training on how to use the CyberTracker app to report crane sightings.*

*Bottom: A Grey Crowned Crane chick that had been poached. Our Champion was able to intervene and reunite the chick with its parents.*

## 2021 Grey Crowned Crane Census

We also conducted our 2021 annual Grey Crowned Crane census across Rwanda which involve both aerial and ground surveys. Our team of Community Conservation Champions are also involved in the census alongside our core RWCA staff. The results were very positive, sighting a total of 997 Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda, showing another increase which suggests that our activities are having an impact on crane population numbers.



*2021 Grey Crowned Crane census in Rwanda*

The International Crane Foundation have also expressed the wish to conduct a simultaneous census in Uganda to give a wider picture of crane populations in the region. They are planning to look for funds and maybe this will be possible to implement in August 2022.



*2021 Grey Crowned Crane census in Rwanda*

## **Broader Goals of RWCA's work**

As described in our application, RWCA was also aiming to achieve the following during 2021 activities:

- 1) increase awareness of our key conservation messages among community members living nearby key crane habitats,**

Despite COVID-19 impacting a lot of our community awareness raising and education activities, our teams of Community Conservation Champions and Rangers have continued to participate in this work in their areas.

From October 2020 to August 2021 (11 months) our Community Rangers and Champions have organised 135 events or meetings reaching 8,317 people. Even when restrictions were tight, they found creative ways to pass the message such as using a loud speaker during market day!



2) reduce the number of illegal activities recorded by our team of Community Rangers at Rugezi Marsh

Our team of Community Rangers are doing such great work at Rugezi Marsh and completing daily patrols of the areas. We recruited additional Rangers at the end of 2020 bringing our team up to 50. This coincided with COVID-19 where we saw an increase in illegal activities taking place such as poaching, fishing and especially grass cutting, due to the economic effect of lockdowns preventing people from working and earning a living. We have seen an increase in poverty and hunger during this time. As a result, the number of illegal activities taking place around the marsh has risen – this is partly because of our increased number of patrols and partly due to the economic impact of the pandemic. For example, we have found many women cutting grass from the marsh to make mats which they sell to make money for their family. We take time to understand the evolving challenges of the communities around the marsh and are establishing community solutions to try to reduce the pressure on the marsh habitat – for example we are starting a fodder grass project whereby we will grow grass on land within the communities, so that community members can come and cut the grass for their animals rather than cut it from the marsh.



From October 2020 to August 2021, our Rangers have completed 1,823 patrols of the marsh and have recorded 3,454 illegal activities, 1,986 (58%) of which were serious enough to be reported to local leaders for follow up.

**3) increase the number of chicks monitored by Community Rangers and Champions that are successfully fledged**

The teams of Community Champions and Rangers use the CyberTracker app to record sightings of Grey Crowned Cranes and other details such as behaviour and habitat. From October 2020 to August 2021, they recorded 2,097 sightings in CyberTracker which can help us to monitor and better understand the crane populations over the year, across seasonal changes and in different regions.

In addition to that they have a method of identifying and monitoring key breeding areas and will give each breeding event a unique code and monitor the outcome – from nest building, eggs, hatching of chicks up to the fledging of those chicks. In 2021, the Rangers and Champions have been monitoring 65 breeding pairs, with 131 chicks, 96 of which successfully fledged (73%). This is a slight increase of 68% fledging rate in the previous year.



*Community Conservation Champions monitor crane breeding sites.*

4) improve habitats by planting indigenous trees at key crane habitats

At the end of 2020 and into 2021, we were able to restore two islands within Rugezi Marsh by planting 21,775 indigenous trees from 30 different species. During these events we involved 374 community members (61% of whom were women) who received a stipend for their work. We focus on 'growing trees' rather than just 'planting trees' so with the ongoing support of community members, we are continuing to follow up and monitor the planted trees to ensure maximum survival rate and restoration of the islands.



*Community members involved in tree planting events at an island within Rugezi Marsh*

**Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our organisation and activities, we are proud to have achieved so much this year. We are excited for the next steps, so that we can continue growing our impact on the conservation and protection of Grey Crowned Cranes and important wetland areas in Rwanda, and across our borders to the neighbouring countries.**



All of us at RWCA would like to thank you for your generous support and encouragement for the work we are doing. We could not achieve such great results without you!