



## Season 2, Episode 1: The Comeback of Grey Crowned Cranes in Rwanda

This is **How to Save It** from the Whitley Fund for Nature, the podcast where you'll find a hefty dose of optimism and inspiration.

<Medley of 2025 winners saying

Olivier.....To a young person, to an old person, all of us, it's our role to protect

Andres... How can we create solutions that are both positive for people, but also for wildlife?

Yara.....They just want to hunt, raise their cubs, live in peace in the forest, just that

Farina.... You always have to make sure whatever you promise, you must fulfil

Ayu.....And spread the words about how beautiful, how wonderful they are to the world.

I'm **Kate Humble**.

And I'm **Edward Whitley**. I founded the Whitley Fund for Nature in 1993.

And since then, we've been proud to support hundreds of conservationists, all working at the grassroots level within their communities. I'm so proud to introduce you to **this year's** seven winners of our annual awards.

It'll be a feast for the ears. And helping us on this world tour is the wonderful Kate Humble. Many of you will know Kate from her television work and pioneering journalism. She's also a generous, dynamic and visionary WFN ambassador.

Kate, it's an absolute pleasure to have you here with us.

**Kate:** Thank you, Edward. Well, I think it's fair to say that this year's WFN winners have not disappointed.-We have some really fantastic stories for you, and we'll be hearing about tiny frogs, singing gibbons, majestic birds and the world's smallest elephant species.

I do hope you'll come away from each of these episodes feeling as uplifted and inspired as I do every year when I meet the latest WFN winners.

So, on with the show.

<Sounds of children>

**Kate:** Our Grey Crowned Cranes. Let's protect them. Children chant with excitement alongside Dr Olivier Nsengimana in Rwanda. Moments like these are special for Olivier. As a child he watched in wonder as the cranes soared overhead.

**Olivier:** So I grew up in a village and we lived on a hill but there were some parts that were still like bush and wetlands were still available. And our life with my colleagues, my friends, was like free range. So we would run around. And our parents never worried that we would have any harm. I think they knew that nature would take good care of us. We would be climbing the trees, jumping in the river.



We would see wildlife. And that was like a really part of life. Having access to nature, being nature, I think it built something big in me to really fall in love and then they have that part of nature in me. It's when I went to vet school towards the end of the training of vet school that I realised animals, the same animals I used to see when I was a little boy, they are in danger and I could be one of the person who really make a difference.

And that really that's what moved me and made me want to really start working to save wildlife, especially the Grey Crowned Crane, this beautiful bird that I saw when I was a little boy flying and thought was a giant. And we always wanted to make feathers to fly like the Grey Crowned Cranes. And really the idea of having these beautiful birds disappear in my country was so depressing and I couldn't stand and see them, watch them disappearing.

**Kate:** Without access to Hollywood movies, the cranes provided entertainment and inspiration for a young Olivier. They were, he says, his version of a superhero.

**Olivier:** It's very elegant, loves dancing and they're so beautiful to watch. They are found in East, Central and then Southern Africa, but unfortunately, they have been reducing and nearly getting extinct in some of the countries where they used to be because of the demand for illegal pet trade and habitat loss, which is wetlands.

Wetlands around the world, they are under danger. And that means Grey Crowned and many other species don't have perfect places for breeding, for building their nests and hatch chicks. And they don't have a place to find food.

**Kate:** Rwanda is known as the land of a thousand hills, but it's the country's 860 wetlands which captivated Olivier. These wetlands play several important roles. They're nesting sites for the cranes and are carbon sinks. They also slow floodwaters, protecting local communities.

### **Olivier**

Rwandan wetlands, they are they're so rich, actually. So much diversity. And really, when I'm in some of those wetlands, that's when I feel like home. And the sound of the frogs, the calls of the birds, and then the wind, very calm water. It's so soothing, and I feel like I'm home every time I'm there.

Recently we did a research on one of the biggest wetlands in Rwanda. It's called Rugezi marsh. It's in the north of the country. And this kind of research we did was really to actually show what wetlands are worth. You know, like now, you know, countries have a really great understanding that wetlands are so beneficial, crucial to water to other ecosystem services like flood control, providing good air, carbon, sinking of carbon.

So we were able to count over 600 species in this wetland of animals and plants, over 400 of them were not counted for this place before so we have brought to light over 400 species that were not known for this wetland. This is a wetland that is on a high altitude, so it's unique for biodiversity.

So we found like about 14 species that are endemic to the Arbatani Rift, nine species that are endangered, and for a long time we've been telling people the Grey Crowned Cranes and now we found other nine species that are endangered found in this wetland.



We really always try to tell people, hey, if you have like disasters like a flood, who protects us? Wetlands, they save the water, they moderate floods. I always tell people like the Grey Crowned Crane, for example, is a symbol of a healthy ecosystem so in a wetland if you see cranes means wetlands are doing well but if they're absent you should be worried not only for the cranes but for you as well.

**Kate:** Olivier is a vet and a former gorilla doctor. But 10 years ago, he founded the Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association, changing the course of his life. But why did the cranes need protecting in the first place? Olivier explains why the popularity of the bird amongst Rwandans has contributed to its struggle.

**Olivier:** So many people really love them, and think they're a beautiful bird. what we found in my country, that love, that people wanted to even make a statement and bring them to their gardens, but without really knowing it's a big threat, it's causing a huge threat to the cranes. So when we found that people, they are not doing it to punish the crane or to hurt them, we used it as a strength telling Rwandans, hey, did you know that our beautiful cranes are in danger, and did you know that if you get a crane in captivity, maybe another three have died when they were trying to capture that one? During the transport, people bring them in a really not good way, and many died during the transport? And then we asked Rwandans, have they been able to breed in your garden?

They say no. So did you know that we might lose them because we have this population in captivity that is not breeding?

So really this moved people and made them think, oh, we didn't know and so this is how we've been able to actually stop the illegal trade in Rwanda by using this love as a strength.

**Kate:** Community engagement is vital, Olivier says.

**Olivier:** I find like when I was starting this work, I thought that was going to be the hardest way, the hardest thing that we're going to do. I could see it as a threat. What if people refuse? What would I do? Just a simple boy, like, from the village.

But actually, it ended up being the easiest.

Because we had the government support, like a really, a great government support. And the government understood that there are even laws, people could be prosecuted, but the government was not rushing in to prosecute people. So the government created an amnesty telling people, this is a time that you can do something positive. You are not going to be prosecuted by declaring you have a Grey Crowned Cranes.

And again, we also build the trust. We went on radios, television, put our own phone number, and we said, if you have a Grey Crowned Crane in captivity, and you really want to give them a second chance, go back to the wild, please call us. This really connected the people and they felt like it's positive. And throughout I would receive calls saying like, I was thinking of having cranes in captivity, but I'm stopping because I've heard of this message. My neighbour has cranes, you might come and talk to them. So we received all sorts of messages showing us how Rwandans wanted to be part of this initiative, this movement.

**Kate:** Cross-border cooperation has been a game -changer in expanding protections for the bird.



**Olivier:** Really, it's been quite a busy 10 years. But we've achieved a lot. When we started, there were less than 300 cranes remaining in the wild. But with all the efforts and really working together with the government of Rwanda and Rwandans, we've been able to increase the cranes' population to nearly 1,300 cranes. And really, this is a great achievement that would have not been possible without having communities on board. Throughout that we've learned a lot and we've seen cranes moving across the borders.

They don't know the borderlines. So this really showed us the next chapter of forging a relationship with other partners in the neighboring countries to form a transboundary collaboration project really that allows us to exchange information and really synchronize actions to protect cranes and other species in the same landscape.

**Kate:** And what does Olivier want to see over the next five years?

**Olivier:** Conservation evolves and we are learning and what I've been telling people is like we try to let the species be the guide, like we listen and we evolve and adapt our measures. I think the next five years is going to be like really about scaling up and working with others as well as really sustaining the organization, and having more people in charge, everywhere really to make sure what we are doing is sustainable.

**Edward:** Rwanda is changing so rapidly, it's astonishing to think that in so little time, the bird has gone from being captured and kept as pets, traded and shipped across borders, to being legally protected. Its numbers are now growing, and that's wonderful to hear.

**Kate:** It really is, and I think, Edward, the thing that always has such an impact on me when we hear these stories is that's one person, that's one person who started this and has, and I know Olivier would say, it's my team, it's my team. And of course he has an amazing team, but he's been the one that recognised what needed to be done and galvanised everybody.

And I just think people, People need to hear that it's not hopeless, that if you as an individual have an idea, have a burning desire to protect, to do something kind of against the odds, that's what I love about the Whitley stories, all of them. **And what I think is particularly wonderful about this story is that Olivier has also inspired the cross-border cooperation**, the fact that this is now moving away from Rwanda and having a broader **impact in all the crane's native territories**. So it's fantastic and clearly his work is far from over and it will be fascinating to see what he does next.

Sadly, that's all we have time for. But it's been an absolute pleasure to have you here with us for this trip to the wetlands of Rwanda.

Please do listen out for our next episode and check out our back catalogue too. And do like and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Many thanks from me, Kate Humble.

**Edward:** And from me, Edward Whitley.

**Kate:** We'll be back soon.