

## NOTES, NEWS & COMMENTS

### Are Cranes 'Dancing on the Brink'?

Cranes are in crisis! Has the environment of our Indian subcontinent become so degraded that it attracted only 5 Siberian Cranes (*Grus leucogeranus*) (Fig. 1) during the latest winter? Concern for the cranes is due also in the Commonwealth countries and elsewhere, as they face an uncertain future. Their plight is closely linked with dwindling wetland habitats. Even more widely, we cannot close our eyes to the alarming threats to The Biosphere, our human and Nature's only life-support system.

Of the 15 species of cranes documented in the world, 7 are threatened with extinction. Some of the reasons for this alarming situation are habitat destruction, hunting, pollution, and the cranes' low reproductive-rate.

There is an urgent need to save the 6 *endangered* species of cranes recognized in Asia, namely Siberian, Hooded (*Grus monacha*), White-naped (*G. vipio*), Red-crowned (*G. japonensis*), Black-necked (*G. nigricollis*), and Eastern Sarus (*G. antigone*). The Indian Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) is not endangered, although it is declining. The count of the Black-necked Crane in India was 6 during 1989–90, primarily found on the Tibetan plateau.

#### *Siberian Cranes' Drastic Decline*

The western breeding group of Siberian Cranes winters at the Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur, but their arrival numbers have declined alarmingly during the last 20 years — from 77 birds in AD 1972 to only 17 during the winter of 1989–90. On the authority of Dr Steven Landfried, a leading crane conservationist, by early January of 1993 only 23, at most, had arrived — 8 fewer than in 1987–88 and 177 fewer than in 1964, the year when the annual count commenced. The 1992–93 winter accorded shelter to just 5 Siberian Cranes elsewhere in India.

This drastic decline could be accounted for by the combined pressures of severe droughts in India in the recent past and hunting in war-torn Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan. The war in the environs of Iran also posed a threat to the handful of wintering birds. The arrival numbers of Siberian Cranes in Iran were 11–14 in 1988–89 and 8–10 in 1989–90.

Faithful to its mate until death, eating mainly freshwater tubers, and migrating over war zones *en route* from Russia to India, the Siberian Crane seems to court extinction.

#### *Harbingers of Peace and Fidelity*

Cranes are symbolic of peace, prosperity, and good fortune. They mate for life and represent symbols of fidelity. Sadly, they are unable to replace population losses from hunting, toxic chemicals, and collisions with power-lines. Mankind has the unfortunate distinction of destroying their wetland homes, turning them into farms, villages, and roads.

The presence of cranes in any area is an indication of a healthy environment for people. Cranes travel thousands of kilometres, undergoing hazardous conditions, as they migrate across borders that are apt to be closed to humans. They are graceful symbols of our hopes for international peaceful coexistence. The Author's cherished desire is to see that the beautiful cranes 'adorn our skies with colour and music', becoming 'effective ambassadors for global peace and goodwill for human survival'.

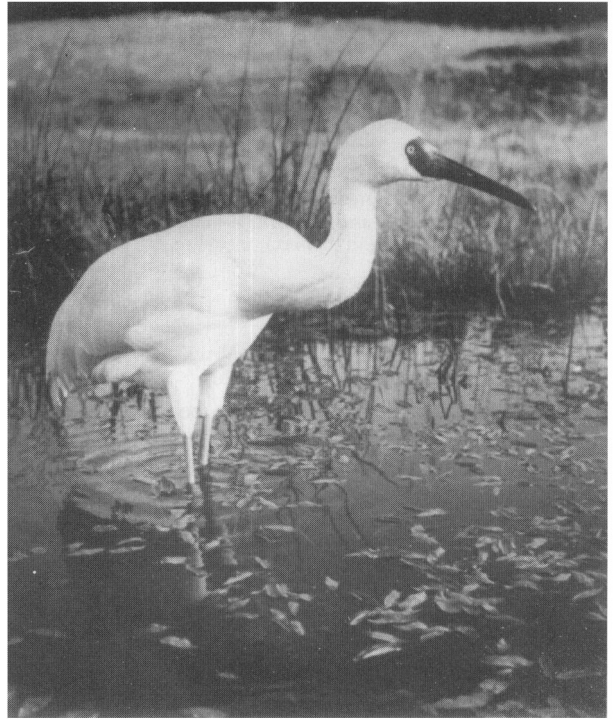


FIG. 1. *Siberian Crane* (*Grus leucogeranus*). Photo: George Archibald.

#### *Rays of Hope with Due Action*

What remains to be done is to launch a satellite-tracking project, which would go a long way towards helping to establish the precise routes that cranes undertake on their migrations (Oza, 1990). Meanwhile the paramount services rendered by Dr George Archibald, Director of the International Crane Foundation (ICF), need to be appreciated. ICF — a small, private NGO based on Baraboo, Wisconsin, USA — has brought increased attention to the enormous dangers facing the survival of the cranes.

A ray of hope is that ICF's captive breeding programme will meet with success, as it has a captive-species bank representing all of the 15 crane species. Its aims include restocking regions where cranes have become extinct, habitat conservation, and imparting education to people.

ICF has the benefit of cooperation with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature-International (WWF). Hence, ICF hopes to combine research and captive breeding with a global educational effort aimed at convincing scientists, businessmen, farmers, decision-makers, and the general public, about the vital role of wetlands in the life-cycle of the cranes. Crane conservation should indeed turn into a global endeavour.

#### REFERENCE

OZA, G.M. (1990). Cranes in crisis! *Environmental Awareness*, 13(4), 101–4, fig.

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