

Flock of Rare Siberian Cranes Is Dwindling in War-Torn Region

Only 23 are counted after trip across Afghanistan.

By BARBARA CROSSETTE

NEW DELHI

IS the war in Afghanistan endangering one of the few remaining flocks of the rare Siberian crane?

The cranes, which breed along the Ob River in the Soviet Union, have for centuries made an 1,800-mile trip to India every winter through Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the last few years, this flock has been declining drastically, according to ornithologists at India's Bharatpur bird sanctuary, where this winter's census has been completed. Only 23 cranes were counted this year, down from at least 100 in the 1960's and 200 or more a century ago.

The birds' migratory route to India passes through the Kandahar area of Afghanistan and territory along the Afghan-Pakistan border where guerrilla armies are based and refugees are sheltered. (Other flocks winter in Iran and China.)

Apart from having their feeding and rest stops disrupted by guerrilla war and heavy Soviet bombardment over the last year, the birds are apparently being shot for food, said D. A. Hussain, senior scientist at the Bombay Natural History Society, in a telephone interview. He is in charge of tracking all migratory birds in India under a program supported by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Both Pakistan and India are trying to stop the killing of the birds, but there is no way that remote areas can be adequately policed.

Dwindling Flock in Iran

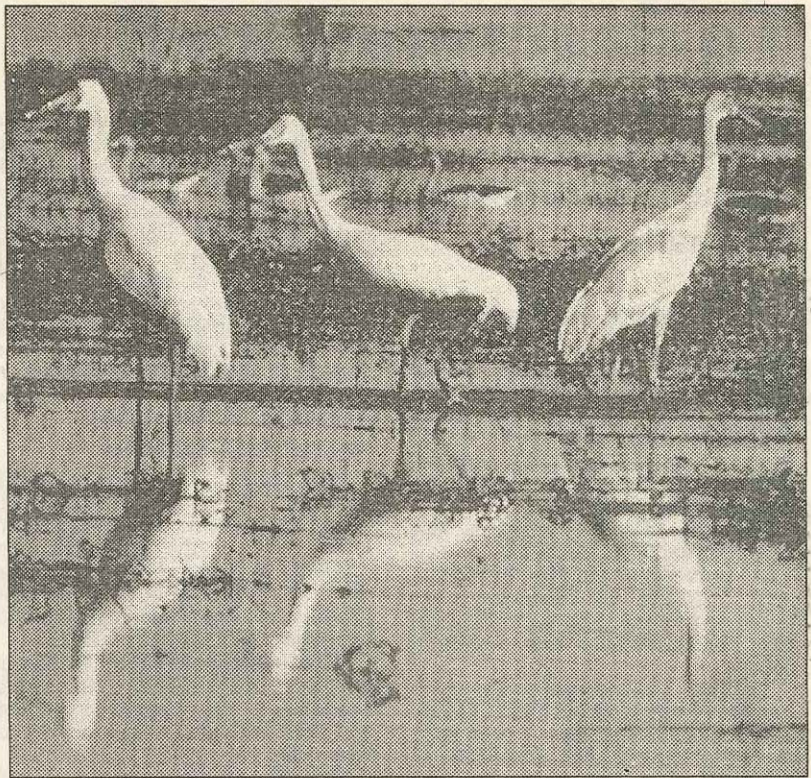
"There's very little we can do," said Dr. George W. Archibald, director of the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wis. "We hope the survivors will hold on. They possess something no other Siberian cranes have: the knowledge of the migration routes."

He said about 2,700 Siberian cranes survive in the wild. A flock that winters in Iran has dwindled to 15 birds, and 2,626 cranes were counted in a flock that winters at Poyang Lake, in Jiangxi Province, China.

The 5-foot-tall crane has a red face and a long heavy beak, and appears snowy white when its black-tipped wings are folded.

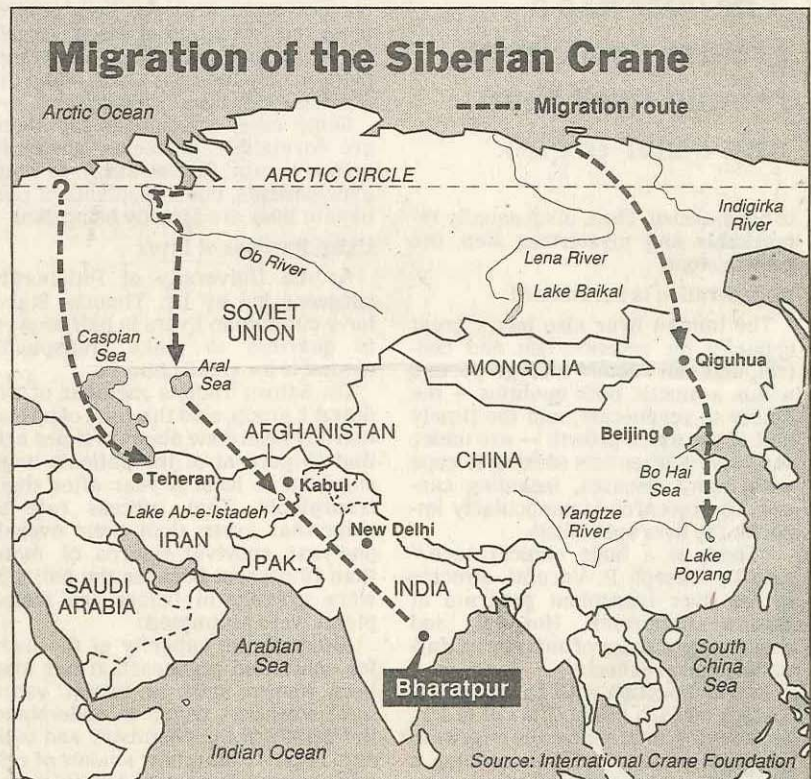
Mr. Hussain emphasized that inadequate information makes it impossible to be sure why so few Siberian cranes are wintering at Bharatpur, where record keeping is the best in the region.

"We have to find a strategy to monitor the Siberian crane," he said. "We want the Indian Government to talk to the Soviet Government this year about a joint study. We want to



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Siberian cranes wintering in India. The 23 that reached the bird sanctuary in Bharatpur followed one of three migration routes, below.



Source: International Crane Foundation

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send ornithologists to the Soviet Union to track the birds from there. Some may be going to other parts of India, where there is no monitoring."

Indian scientists hoping to learn more about the migratory habits of the crane before it is too late to save it from what appears to be a combina-

tion of dangers are looking forward to a meeting in the Soviet republic of Estonia in September.

"We need direct cooperation with the Soviet Union," Mr. Hussain said. Soviet experts have only recently begun to study the breeding patterns of the crane.

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