

The first Siberian White Cranes in Jordan

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On 2 February 2001, Nashat A. Hamidan, Jihad Ahmad, Mahdi Qatrameezaq and Dr. Zuhair Amr were visiting Qa' Khanna - a seasonally-flooded mudflat 35 km north-west of Azraq in the Eastern Desert of Jordan.

Whilst driving along the edge of the flooded mudflat, NAH and JA saw three large birds roosting alone in shallow water near the edge of the qa'. They were clearly cranes, but they were white, not grey!

Through 8x binoculars at a range of c.200 m, they were quickly identified as cranes, rather than Spoonbills and subsequent observations allowed them to be identified as adult Siberian White Cranes *Grus leucogeranus*.

Description: huge birds, larger than Common Crane *Grus grus*, with which the observers were familiar. The bill was dark red in colour. The face was red and this red colour extended to cover two-thirds of the face. The legs were also red. No rings were observed.

After 10 minutes, the observers approached to c.100m, when the group took flight without calling. In flight, the wingtips (the primaries) were seen to be black and the upper third of the chest was rusty coloured on all of them,. There were no other markings on the white bodies. The birds flew away and were not seen again.

Although this is the first authenticated record of Siberian White Crane in Jordan (accepted by the Jordan Bird Records Committee), there is evidence to suggest that they used to occur irregularly at Qa' al Azraq in the past. One of the observers, Jihad Ahmad, a ranger with the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature from Azraq, had the chance to see white cranes, known by the common Arabic name 'hermel' in the 1970s, but not since.

The western population of Siberian White Cranes is classed as 'critically endangered' with at most 14 individuals wintering at Fereidoonkenar and Esbaran on the southern Caspian Sea coast (Iran) in the period since they were 'officially discovered' in 1978 (Sadeghi-Zadegan 1999). In 2000/01, there were 2 (or possibly 3) groups of three Siberian White Cranes in Iran. These birds also use the Volga Delta as a stopover on spring (late March to mid-April) and autumn (August-September, sometimes later) migration (Russanov et al, 1998), as the wildfowl that winter in Azraq are also thought to do (Nelson 1973).

References:

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