

New Western Breeding Limits for Siberian Cranes and Sandhill Cranes in Yakutia

Crane researchers Gary Krapu of the USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center at Jamestown, North Dakota, and Inga Bysykatova of the Institute of Biological Problems of the Permafrost Zone at Yakutsk, Russia led an expedition to the Ust-Yana region near the Laptev Sea in northern Yakutia in July/August 2009 to assess the status of sandhill cranes and Siberian cranes in this region. The surveys were carried out along a route of about 520 km starting at the village of Tumat and continuing north to Sellyahskaya Bay on the Laptev Sea and east to Soluntakh Lake and the return to Tumat following a different route.

A total of 140 Siberian cranes and 6 sandhill cranes, mostly pairs, were tallied during the surveys. Local reindeer herders, hunters, and fisherman encountered during the surveys were interviewed to gain additional insight into current and past distribution of cranes and other wildlife populations inhabiting this region. The surveys confirmed that sandhill cranes now breed across this region but at low densities. Natives indicated sandhill cranes began to occupy lands lying to the east of the Yana Delta in the 1990s although infrequent sightings occurred earlier and they noted that breeding activity has become more frequent in recent years. Siberian cranes unexpectedly ranked among the most common water birds seen during surveys, due in part to being highly visible, but also as a result of their relative abundance. Siberian cranes were common in the brackish wetlands bordering Sellyahskaya Bay which are located 20-25 km beyond the currently designated western boundary of their breeding range in this region. Also, high densities of Siberian cranes were located on lands previously thought to be peripheral to the core breeding area previously identified west of the Khroma River. Results from the 2009 surveys suggest that the Khroma River core breeding area may need to be enlarged taking into account the new information.

Residents of the region consistently noted that Siberian cranes are not hunted in contrast to waterfowl and several other water birds which likely has contributed to Siberian crane abundance. None of the lands through which surveys were conducted to date have been designated as nature reserves for Siberian cranes or other wildlife. With the breeding range of the Siberian crane now largely limited to northern Yakutia and given the endangered status of this species, the high density of pairs observed in the Ust-Yana region takes on added significance. The surveys also revealed the region is an important breeding area for several species of waterfowl and shorebirds.

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