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X The lure of the Blue Hills

# M THE HINDU MAGAZINE

Magnificent sculpture

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Canadian King

**F**OR the first time in the living memory, Siberian Cranes, the lily of birds, failed to arrive at Bharatpur this year. As all the conservationists' concern in India was being cornered by the issue of the relentless poaching of the Royal Bengal Tiger, the India-wintering population of the ultra-rare Siberian Cranes slipped quietly into oblivion. These cranes birds became extinct even before the disappearance of the pink-headed duck in 1935, Blewitt's owl or the forest spotted owl in 1914, and the mountain quail in 1876.

The western race of Siberian Cranes winters only in the Caspian Lowlands of Iran and at the marshes of Bharatpur. The journey to Bharatpur brings them about 6,400 kms from their breeding grounds in Siberia. Only five Sibes had visited Bharatpur last year, so, this year everyone at Bharatpur was apprehensive about their arrival.

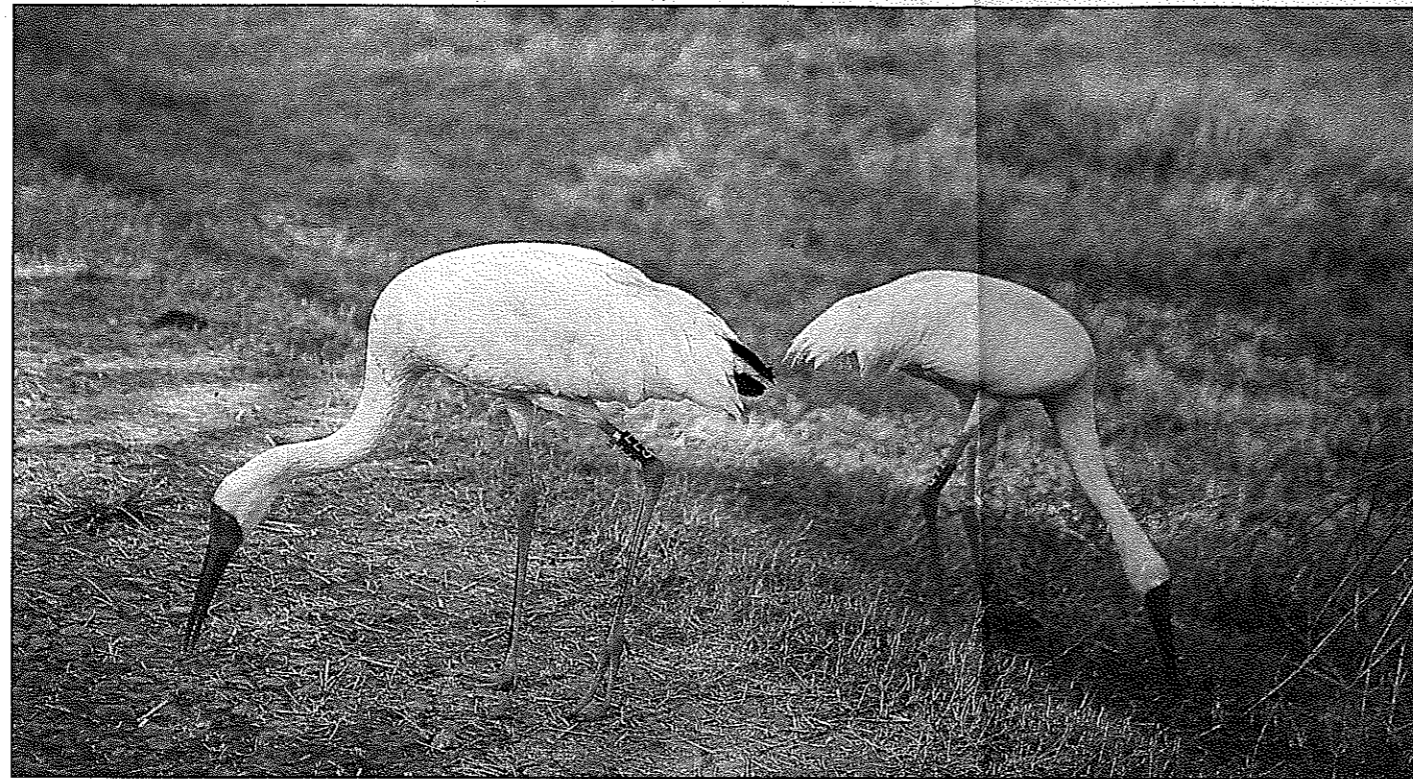
As time wore on, well past the February full-moon park officials and visiting scientists gave up all hope. Perhaps, Bharatpur was not to have anymore Sibes. Never again probably. Almost at a loss as to what to do was the American-Russian scientific team that was stationed at Bharatpur to introduce four juvenile and two sub-adult Sibes to the wilds as part of their experimental plan. I was there with them, and shared their exasperation. I visited the bird sanctuary half a dozen times this winter to record the "Siberian Crane population restoration" programme of the International Crane Foundation-ICF (Wisconsin, USA).

With almost a blind faith in the hospitality and protection of Bharatpur the Siberian Cranes used to come back year after year and soon became the piece-de-resistance of the entire winter avifauna at Bharatpur. Just like the tigers in the Indian jungles, the Siberians stole the show at Bharatpur. Though the cranes have always been protected by Indian folklore which extolls their conjugal fidelity, ironically however, the folk tradition does not shun the reclamation of the wetland habitat for agrarian purposes. Continued loss of prime wetland habitat over a period resulted in shrinking the once spread-out winter-destination location of the Siberian Cranes almost exclusively to the confines of the marshes of Bharatpur. As a natural corollary of such a loss of habitat, flocks visiting India thinned out substantially too.

Observations made at Bharatpur helped the International Crane Foundation to take crucial steps towards saving the Sibes. The foundation's concern has been the welfare of cranes the world over, and its scientists were naturally alarmed at the constantly declining population of the India-wintering Sibes: While in 1967-68 as many as 100 cranes arrived, the number tumbled down to just five birds in 1992-93; the writing was on the wall - none arrived in 1993-94. The inevitable had happened. The worst fears of ICF had proven true - jeopardising its worldwide endeavours to bolster this population of Sibes. Is this population already extinct from the Indian subcontinent? It would indeed be difficult to honestly deny such a stark poser.

The decimation of Indian-wintering Sibes had been expected. The long migration route was too perilous; biologically all was not well at the breeding grounds in Siberia - with possible inbreeding, low reproductive potential, and the natural sibling rivalry.

En route their wintering grounds in India,



## Will the wild Sibes ever come?

*The Siberian Cranes seem to be on the verge of extinction. They had indeed been precariously poised for well over two decades - their dwindling population eventually proved totally inviable, caving in against overwhelming odds. Have we failed somewhere? Or is it the vagaries of nature that have played havoc, bringing to nought all human endeavour to restock the wild Sibes? P. KUMAR brings to light the painstaking efforts of the ICF, that were to prove futile a second time in two years.*

The Siberians stop in war-torn Afghanistan. The Sibes there used to rest among the flamingoes of the Dashte Nawar and Ab-i Estada salt lakes in the eastern highlands. However, the abrupt cessation of all conservation activities (meagre as they were) in Afghanistan in 1979 (because of the conflict within the country and the fringe areas). Also, all of India's migratory crane species are at risk to nomadic crane-hunters of Pakistan, who sling lead-weighted cords at passing migrant Sibes during their to and fro journeys. Crane-hunting has been an old tradition of these folk,

and certainly one of the more definitive reasons for the decimation of the India-wintering Siberians.

The Crane Foundation had apprehended this calamity quite sometime ago, and launched its massive multinational endeavour to augment the India-wintering population of the Siberian cranes during 1991-93 in Siberia, and subsequently in 1993 at Bharatpur. This experiment was to come to fruition at Bharatpur around March 1994. Alas, the wild Sibes never appeared this year. Has Bharatpur, the long-cherished wintering ground of these

majestic, snowy birds of the tundra land, perhaps lost them forever?

The current crane conservation project was pioneered by the late Ronald Sauey (who studied the Siberians at Bharatpur during his doctoral work); and, by Dr. George Archibald, who too studied Japanese cranes for his doctoral research at Cornell. These two amalgamated their interests and conservation priorities with the founding of the Wisconsin foundation in 1973.

The unique experiment of releasing the Sibes' captive-reared juveniles/sub-adults

attempted by the ICF in 1993-94 (with the close cooperation of Russia, Germany, Japan and India) at Bharatpur was the last ditch effort to save them from sure extinction. The ICF's experiment these two years (1993-94) attempted to introduce to the Bharatpur marshes six juvenile cranes from ICF so that they could mix with the wild flock. The idea was to exploit the basic instinct of the Siberian Cranes to migrate back to their breeding grounds. ICF's experiment had an inauspicious beginning, when in its very first year (1993), precious time was lost because of bureaucratic delay in releasing the two ICF chicks into the wilds. To make matters worse, the wild Sibes' flock took off for Siberia without the "introduced" birds.

The first experiment of releasing captive-reared Sibes was in 1991 near the floodplain of the River Ob. However, that time the wild flock

**Snow-wreath - the fabulous and endangered Siberian cranes, which were brought to Bharatpur in January 1993.**

**A scientist-volunteer in her crane conservation outfit.**



left the area just three days after the release of the young ones. Then, in 1992 a wild chick was implanted with a transmitter but it perished somewhere along the perilous route. The experiment at Bharatpur, this year, was a natural corollary of the ICF's/ and Russian scientists' experiment in Siberia during May-September, '93, which in turn was prompted by the failure of the experiment at Bharatpur in March, '93.

Boris, Gorb, Billy and Bushy are the names of four juvenile Sibes that arrived in the second week of January this year. They were actually "winged-in" about Lufthansa and Aeroflot. They joined their two sub-adult cousins (Bugle and White, both male) flown to Bharatpur last January and kept at the Jaipur Zoo for the summer and monsoon seasons, after they failed to fly back to Siberia with the wild flock last year. Only the Russian-bred "White" was available for public viewing, while the U.S.-

bred "Bugle," which grew up amid crane-costumed experts, was considered wild, and, therefore, kept out of the public's sight. On November 6, 1993, however, they were both transported back to Bharatpur.

Bugle and White (bearing blue identification rings with nos. G71 and G77 inscribed in yellow) have been the piece-de-resistance this winter season at Bharatpur in the absence of wild Sibes. They attracted crowds (at times hostile, but mostly eager and appreciative) in whichever part of the park they were in. Incidentally, Bugle and White have become the first ever individuals of their species to have spent the longest time ever in India - more than a year already, and may be a couple of months to go still. Both Bugle and White have spent over two years in India now, but there does not seem to be any possibility (at least the scientists concerned do not think so) of their establishing a permanent residency here.

Boris and Gorb (both female, from the U.S.) were hatched last summer and raised by their parents in isolation from humans. So, they are still considered wild. Both Billy and Bushy (both female, from Russia), now eight months old, were hatched at ICF laboratories. While about one month old they were translocated to

Siberia, where they stayed in the wild for about two and a half months. Boris, Gorb, Billy and Bushy landed at Bharatpur during January 10-14 this year, accompanied by their foster parents: Dr. Alexander Sorokin (Sasha to his colleagues; from the Russian Research Institute for Nature Conservation, under the Ministry of Environment Protection and Nature Resources) and Dr. Meenakshi Nagendran (Mini - an India-born scientist with ICF). Both were here last year too when Bugle and White were brought in from ICF as the first-ever Siberian Crane juveniles to be released in the Indian wilds. Accompanying these two scientists in the field is Ms. Katherine Richter (Katie, this being her first trip to India), an ICF research associate. Another field researcher from Russia, Yuri Markin, joined the "action team" in early February. The ICF veterinarian,

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