

Return of the lost cranes

Sanjay Kumar, Bharatpur

CONSERVATIONISTS in India are rejoicing at the unexpected arrival of four Siberian cranes at the Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur. When they didn't turn up for two winters in a row everyone thought the cranes had died en route from Siberia.

But the cranes' return caught scientists by surprise. Just days after they obtained permission from the Indian government to fit one of them with a transmitter to track its flight back north the birds flew away.

The Siberian crane (*Grus leucogeranus*) is one of the world's most endangered migratory birds. In the 1960s nearly 100 spent the winter at Keoladeo. By the early 1990s only 5 made it to the park. In an attempt to bolster their numbers scientists from India, the US and Russia released several captive-bred chicks in the park, hoping they would mingle with the wild birds and follow them back to Siberia. But not a single crane returned to Bharatpur in the winter of 1993/94. Most of the captive-bred birds have since died or flown elsewhere.

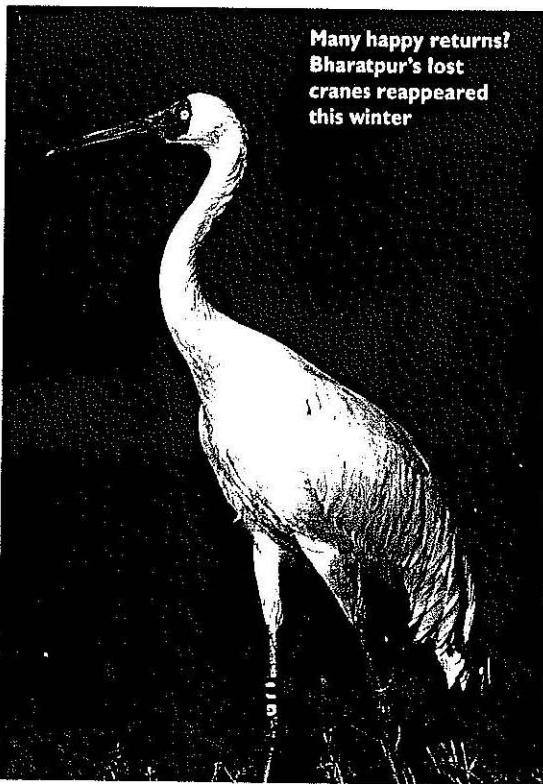
One of the cranes which turned up this winter was a young chick with a plastic identification ring on its leg. This was an added bonus for the scientists who had travelled from Russia to study the cranes. They were able to trace the chick's birthplace to the Kunovat river basin in Siberia. Aleksander Sorokin, head of the Laboratory of Endangered Animals at the Institute of Nature Conservation in Moscow, confirmed that the ring was put on by a colleague of his last August near their Siberian field camp. "Now we know for sure where these birds in Bharatpur come from—something nobody knew earlier."

However, the scientists did not get the chance to attach a transmitter to one of the cranes in Keoladeo earlier this month as they had planned. India's environment ministry has come under heavy criticism for dragging its feet over granting permission. The Russian scientists wanted at least two weeks to study the birds' behaviour so that they could fit a transmitter without disturbing the breeding pair. But red tape within the Russian and Indian governments delayed the scientists and the cranes flew off before they were able to act.

There are just two populations of Siberian cranes left in the wild. The four birds which arrived in Bharatpur this winter are part of the tiny western flock, which breeds

east of the Urals and is believed to fly south across Afghanistan and Pakistan to its winter haunts in Bharatpur and Iran. Sorokin says this flock has shrunk from 12 breeding pairs in 1987 to just 10 birds today. The other population—about 3000-strong—breeds in eastern Siberia and winters in the Lake Poyang area in China.

Experts claim that the winter habitat of the eastern population is under serious threat. George Archibald, director of the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin, says: "During two of the past three



Many happy returns? Bharatpur's lost cranes reappeared this winter

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winters the local people inside Poyang Nature Reserve have drained the lakes to capture and then sell the fish." He is afraid that the cranes may now be spending the winters outside the reserve, where they are vulnerable to hunters.

The reasons for the decline of the eastern population are not understood, although poaching along the migratory route in Afghanistan or Pakistan may be partly responsible. To boost numbers of this population, scientists have tried placing Siberian crane eggs in the nests of common cranes in the hope that they will eventually migrate with the common cranes to Keoladeo.

Mystery surrounds what happened to the cranes during the years they did not appear at Keoladeo. They may have gone somewhere else in India. The scientists hope that they will return to their traditional feeding grounds in Bharatpur next year, and stay long enough for them to carry out their research.

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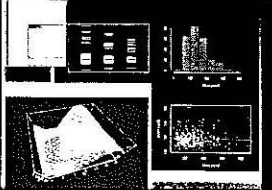
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