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Siberian crane: going, going...

Only thirty-three Siberian cranes - including three young — were spotted last December and January in their traditional wintering grounds at the Keoladeo Ghana in India fifty miles west of Agra. This disturbing figure represents a sixty percent decline in the Indian population — far less than the 77 birds reported during 1972.

A variety of recent developments have further complicated the slim survival prospects of the western population of the Siberian crane. The long 5,000 mile migration from western Siberia is normally made perilous by hunting pressures from nomadic tribes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unsettled political and economic conditions in the region have probably exacerbated the situation.

For the Siberian cranes that successfully ran the southbound gauntlet through Afghanistan and Pakistan in December, there was to be no respite. The failure of the 1979 monsoon produced the worst drought in Bharatpur in many decades. Lack of fresh water severely limited the growth of *Cyperus rotundus* — the primary source of nutrition for the birds. Highly selective vegetarians, the Siberian cranes were observed to search feverishly for the roots of the normally abundant sedge tuber and often flew off to unknown locations for alternative food sources. Letters of concern were sent to Mrs Indira Gandhi by Sir Peter Scott, SSC Chairman, and the International Crane Foundation. A longtime bird enthusiast, Mrs Gandhi wrote with news of Indian efforts "to facilitate the sustenance of the birds of Bharatpur". However, the failure of the monsoon had caught nearly everyone by surprise. Eventually two or three wells were dug to provide water to a

few areas of the parched sanctuary, although too late for adequate growth of the sedge tubers needed by the Siberian cranes. By the end of January, most of the birds had left the area — nearly five weeks ahead of their normal departure. Some crane watchers feared the birds might lack sufficient strength to successfully complete the lengthy migration. It may not be until next winter that the full toll of recent developments is known.

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