

Saving the Siberian Crane

Steven Landfried, '66, reflects on his travels in India and Pakistan and his attempts to save a bird near extinction.

by Steven Landfried, '66

It's an unsettling, but exciting life—the life of a nomad.

I've learned about it first hand. An environmentalist, my itinerant wanderings have transformed me into a seasonal migrant like the rare birds I seek to protect.

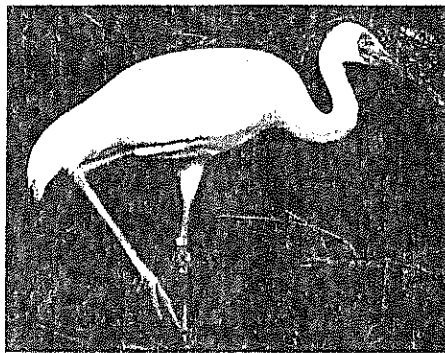
When I'm in the Subcontinent, I'm constantly on the move. From airport to city to village and back again. Twelve hours here. Twenty-four hours there. "Frenetic" is the word.

This nomadic style is a product of trying to accomplish as much as possible during breaks in my teaching duties in Wisconsin. Typically, these openings provide 10-14 days to get things done, including the two full days required to fly there and back. Things are a little better in the summer, but not much. Then you've got a monsoon to contend with.

At any rate it is a go, go, go existence.

My first trip was in 1980. You could see 33 Siberian cranes in India then; this winter you'll probably see 36. So maybe we're making progress.

This pair of Demoiselle cranes bred in a busy commercial compound in Lakki two months earlier than is normal in the wild. A newly hatched precocial chick can be seen at their feet.



An adult Siberian crane wades through the wetlands at the Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur, India—the final wintering ground for the last 36 Siberian cranes known to migrate to the Indian Subcontinent.

Many of my days start near the southern end of the legendary Khyber Pass. In Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Most of the Afghan refugees live nearby. Gunis are everywhere. It's like a town out of the Wild West.

An alarm clock is unnecessary in Peshawar. Three events announce the arrival of each day.

First, you hear the clip-clop of passing horses pulling people to pre-dawn duties. Then the irregular purring of noxious three-wheeled motor rickshaws. Finally, mind-jarring wails from a nearby mosque as an enthusiastic and over-amplified voice leads Allah's faithful in prayers unintelligible to foreign ears.

Peace and quiet. About the only place I get much of that is in

flight—usually in the skies over India and Pakistan. For 45 blessed minutes, there are no phones. No one to feel obliged to converse with. No typewriters or other business related temptations.

Unfortunately, the serenity is short-lived. Despite its age, the old Boeing 707 traverses the 250 or so miles of irrigated flatlands of the Punjab too quickly. Too soon we've arrived at Delhi.

A passage to contemporary India is not what it used to be. Arrivals no longer occur at the P&O docks in Karachi or Bombay. Instead there's an hour's worth of jostling in the "hurry up and wait" queues at Delhi's dull international arrival terminal.

Having finally cleared customs, the new arrival wheels his bulging baggage through two dirty swinging doors into what he thinks will be his first real glimpse of India.

Wrong. It's a small area with money changers and a sea of dark-skinned pariahs stumbling over each other for the opportunity to relieve me of my burden—and some money.

Luckily the Science Office has sent a driver from the U.S. Embassy and I escape quickly—thankful for not having to negotiate prices with the solicitous drivers of the ubiquitous taxis nearby.

Dodging wandering cattle, motor rickshaws, slow moving pedestrians and Indianapolis bound black and yellow taxis, we head for the decidedly grand and colonial Ashok Hotel.

After checking into a musty room, I lay down for a few minutes to rest up for a predictable ordeal—calling people on the Indian telephone system. My goal is simple: to confirm some meetings for the next morning and get ready for a dinner meeting with the man in charge of India's forests and wildlife.

But, no. This is India and things don't work that simply. Even when lucky enough to get an English speaking person on the other end of the line, I can barely hear him. Soon I am literally screaming at the top of my lungs in hope of somehow forcing the electrical impulses into an ear-drum less than ten miles away.

And then another entirely predictable, if not benevolent, event occurs. . . the line goes dead. I quickly redial, but the line is busy. Another attempt brings the same result.

Fortunately, a Hindi phrase—"Choddo Yaar"—pops into my beleaguered head. A former Indian Air Force pilot shared the phrase with me. He must have had plenty of experience with it because whenever he saw India getting the best of me, he'd say "Choddo yaar. . . forget it."

That day ended, finally. But not without another hitch. This time it is the air conditioning. As usual my choice is one extreme or the other: leave it on and I'm too cold; turn the darn thing off and the room becomes sultry in no time.

Choddo yaar.

Next morning I touch base with the American Embassy before heading to a meeting near Parliament at Krishi Bhavan—where I propose a ground survey designed to locate where the Siberian cranes stop during their passages to and from India. The idea is accepted in principle.

A few hours later and I'm on the road again. Only this time it's the railroad—the famous Bombay-bound Frontier Mail.

I'm headed for Bharatpur—in Rajasthan—to see whether several local groups will work together for the first time to conduct a count of the Sarus cranes at the reknowned Keoladeo National Park. I also want to learn details of the departure of the Siberian cranes from the park—their last known wintering ground in the Subcontinent.

Day Three finds me in Ranthambhor six train hours away, watching friends film tigers for a National Geographic special.

Next day it's Jaipur—the so-called Pink City—on the edge of the Great Indian Desert, and before another evening is done, an Indian Airlines



A group of five Pathan crane hunters demonstrate techniques for launching their head-weighted "soia" skyward at passing cranes. Crane camp near Bannu, NWFP. April 1983

737 has returned me to Delhi in preparation for the sunrise flight to Bombay—where meetings with India's premier ornithologist, Dr. Salimi Ali, and the head of the World Wildlife Fund-India await me.

At the end of the week I'm back at the Delhi Airport going through another security clearance for yet another journey to Pakistan.

By dinner, I'm sipping 7-Up (thank God for small favors) at the Lahore airport with the executive director of World Wildlife Fund-Pakistan. He's there to pick up an article I've written for *The Pakistan Times* about international efforts to protect the Siberian crane. A two engine Fokker Friendship waits to bounce me to Islamabad.

After the 15 mile freeway drive into Pakistan's growing new capital city, I arrive "home" for the night: the moderately priced Ambassador Hotel.

Next morning I meet with Pakistan's Inspector General of Forests to discuss potential new legislation designed to reduce hunting pressures that may be threatening Siberian cranes as they pass through north-central Pakistan.

A quick stop at the U.S. Information Service Office an hour later allows me to check the status of local dialect translations of a radio program about my project. The lively 14 minute documentary—"The Koonj-Ki-Judai"—warns people about the

serious implications of wide-spread crane catching for the Siberian cranes.

The consular office of the U.S. Embassy is also on my itinerary. I've used up all three entries on my Indian visa and I'm fearful that my next attempt to reach India will be thwarted by red tape. Getting my passport in the bureaucratic channels early may avoid hassles later.

Late in the afternoon PIA Flight 636 lands near the runway from which Francis Gary Powers took off on his ill-fated flight over the Soviet Union. It's Peshawar again. The

circle is unbroken.

By now you've gotten the idea. Life is always in flux for the modern day nomad. Well, almost. . .

Prices are always undeservedly high at Dean's—an aging, sprawling single-story hotel in Peshawar that has spent the last three decades living off its impeccable reputation from British colonial days (when it truly did offer the best public accommodations in the Frontier).

Then there's the tea. Tea, tea, tea. White tea, thank you. None of that barbaric black stuff they drink in America.

It's tea with the edge properly taken off by lots of milk or cream. . . in good, civilized British

ashion. Tea invariably doused with 3-4 heaping teaspoons of grainy brown sugar—unless, of course, one is able to intercept the pourer at the pass.

No wonder insomnia was my constant companion during my first two trips to India and Pakistan.

The "roads" are another vestige of the colonial past. Six hours on the 105 mile drive from Peshawar to Bannu (home to most of Pakistan's crane hunters) never failed to immobilize me for several days.

One more constant: the hospitality. With rare exceptions, I have found the people of India and Pakistan extremely pleasant and hospitable.

Despite onerous impressions created by stories of Hindu wife burnings, rampaging Sikhs and marauding Moslems, I feel safer walking around the streets of Peshawar or Delhi at night than Chicago, New York or Washington.

An unwitting victim of the biases of western media, I am almost surprised when my hosts repeatedly reveal themselves to be among the most fascinating, generous and sensitive people I've ever met.

And it's not like I'm an easy person to please.

For example, I typically ask for eggs prepared with butter rather than grease (to minimize the likelihood of diarrhea.) People invariably do double takes when I refuse to allow carefully boiled water to be cooled with ice (made, of course, from un-boiled water).

I also tend to ask my drivers to stop for pictures of scenes they've seen a thousand times before (and think have little redeeming visual value).

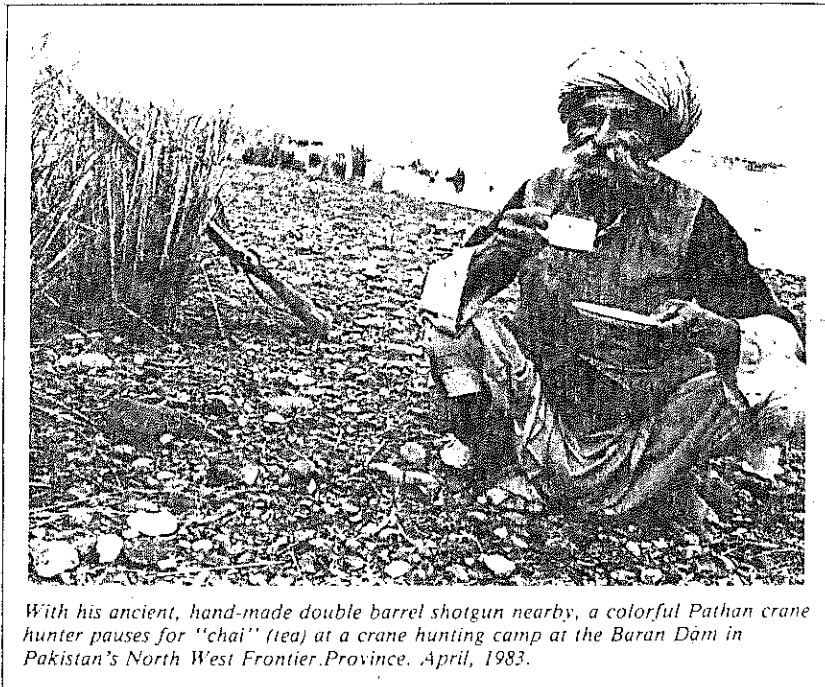
Nonetheless, my hosts usually respond with acts of kindness far beyond their financial means. The twinkle in their eyes is a terrific antidote to residual American ethnocentrism.

"W
hoa," you say.

"Why don't you tell us more about yourself and how you got to the Indian Subcontinent in the first place? What were you trying to accomplish with all this frenetic activity? What, if anything, did you achieve? And, pray tell, how did you get interested in cranes in the first place?"

Okay. Let's start with the cranes.

The origins of my predilection with the birds was either an accident or foreordination—depending on your perspective on the origin of events. At any rate, it was the product of a series of seemingly unrelated bends and turns in the river of my life.



With his ancient, hand-made double barrel shotgun nearby, a colorful Pathan crane hunter pauses for "chai" (tea) at a crane hunting camp at the Baran Dam in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. April, 1983.

Nothing in my formal academic training specifically triggered an interest in cranes, wildlife, wetlands or protecting the environment. Rather a combination of experiences prepared me for the day when opportunity finally knocked.

The "knock" was a telephone call. A call that changed my life.

Elizabeth Link, a nationally known peace activist and the mother of a former student at Middleton, called to ask: "Do you want to go with Paul and me to tour this funky little place in Baraboo called the International Crane Foundation (ICF)?"

In all honesty, my first images were of the yellow industrial cranes I had worked under in France with Henry Kaiser ('66) and Chris Isely ('66) during the summer of 1964.

It didn't take long, however, before Mrs. Link clarified that these cranes were the feathered kind. And that Dr. George Archibald was the chap who would explain how ICF was getting endangered species to breed in captivity.

My first reaction was hardly enthusiastic. In fact, I stalled for time—hoping something else would come up.

Fortunately, nothing else did.

It took George Archibald, co-founder of the ICF, about two minutes to pique my curiosity in the organization's work. We hit it off immediately.

Pausing at the various crane breeding pens, I was awed particularly by the imposing appearance of white cranes from Asia: the Red-crowned cranes and the Siberian cranes. ICF's efforts to get India, China and the Soviet Union to work together to save the Sibes were very intriguing.

That cold, grey, icy day left me with a sense of excitement. Who could have dreamed what would come of it?

Seven months later I was working for ICF part-time as its public affairs officer—charged with improving ICF's relations with the media and expanding world-wide awareness of the

foundation's crane conservation mission.

Eighteen months later I was in India.

W
hy India?

In April, 1980, Dave Ferguson of the International Affairs Office of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service broached the possibility of my making a crane presentation at an international environmental educational conference in Bangalore, India. He also wanted me to consider publicizing the plight of the Siberian cranes at the then Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary in

atpur. Formerly
the haven for the birds,
the sanctity of the sanctu-
ary was seriously
threatened by the graz-
ing of 6,000 cattle from
nearby villages.

The invitation was ac-
cepted. Success followed
and soon key members
of the Indian govern-
ment (including Mrs.
Gandhi), the conserva-
tion movement and the
media were mobilized to
protect the world's most
critically endangered
large migrating bird. By
1981, the sanctuary had
been nationalized and
the cattle removed.

As time passed, I
became increasingly
disturbed that no one
was making any effort
to determine the route
whereby the Sibes got
from Bharatpur to a
migration stopover at
Lake Abi-Estaba in
Afghanistan—675 miles
away. Before long I was
an amateur ornitho-
logical sleuth as well as
an environmental
publicist.

Pretty soon I was
tracking down every
lead possible. With the
encouragement of the
Bombay Natural
History Society, I focus-
ed attention on
Pakistan. Of course, the
Russian invasion of
Afghanistan and the
availability of PL-480 funds in
Pakistan made the choice con-
siderably easier.

One of my first letters struck gold.
A letter to Karachi undercovered the
author of an obscure article—"Crane
Catchers of the Kurram Valley"—
which detailed specifics of live crane
catching by Wazir and Mashoud
tribesmen in the NWFP. A look at a
map of the Subcontinent made clear
that this hunting was more or less in
the path of potential Siberian crane
migration routes. My response to
Tom Robert's letter was a quick
one—and by Christmas, 1981, I was
bound for Pakistan.



His turban tightly wound around his head, a weathered old Pathan gazes upon a market scene in a small village in northern Pakistan.

Things happened in rapid fire suc-
cession after that. Tom and I visited
the Kurram Valley in October, 1982,
and found crane hunting to be a
much greater problem than an-
ticipated.

I took an unpaid leave of absence
from teaching in the spring of 1983 to
tackle the problem head-on. During
this period I helped train wildlife
staff to write, administer and inter-
pret the results of a questionnaire
designed to ascertain the hunter's
methods and motivations for crane
catching.

After considerable effort, we
learned that few hunters catch cranes
for food. Rather, they keep them for
friends. Indeed, as many as 6,700

Demoiselle and common
cranes are in captivity in
the NWFP.

Once aware of the
magnitude of the prob-
lem, our next step was
to develop strategies to
reduce the hunting on
these two species and to
help the hunters and
wildlife staff to
distinguish Siberian
cranes from them.

For the entire spring
semester of 1983, I
traded one classroom
for another. Instead of
the tan walls of Room
21 at Stoughton High
School, my classrooms
had become government
offices, flat open-air
roofs of dirty brick
buildings, roadsides and
village compounds.

It was literally a
classroom on wheels.
Giving talks. Showing
slides. Interviewing
people—from cabinet-
level ministers to old
men who'd been throw-
ing lead-weighted cords
at cranes for over 50
years. Fortunately, the
residual effects of
British India found vir-
tually all officials con-
versant in English (and
more than willing to
translate things into
Pashtu or Urdu when
necessary).

Asking, learning,
teaching.

What a thrill. . . and
even more so when the effort started
to pay dividends.

By the time I returned to Pakistan
in April, 1984, the government of the
NWFP had imposed new restrictions
on crane hunting and was enforcing
new laws over the vocal protests of
some of the hunters. In addition, it
was cooperating with my educational
and publicity initiatives.

Financial incentives also were being
provided to the hunters to provide
captured cranes for immediate release
under a banding program designed to
learn more about crane migrations
through the Subcontinent.

The neighboring government of Baluchistan had gotten into the act, too, by interdicting crane hunters trying to export their sport to that province. Crane hunting or catching was banned altogether in the Punjab.

The program also seems to be serving as a catalyst throughout the country for better understanding of the wetland habitats upon which the cranes... and man... ultimately depend.

In short, crane conservation has taken a giant step forward. Moreover, it has spawned an interest in preserving other forms of wildlife and their habitats.

The task now, of course, is to sus-

tain the momentum and to convince the hunters that crane conservation is in their best interest.

The Kurram Valley is a fairly barren area in which a tragic consequence of over-population has been extensive denuding of the land and forests. It is a land of arranged marriages and few recreational options. For decades—if not centuries—crane hunting has provided men with an opportunity to get away from it all. Trying to get them to change will be about as difficult as convincing someone from the Fox Valley to give up drinking beer.

But if we give up or fail, the cranes are almost surely doomed. And what a loss that will be!

Choddo yaar? Not for a minute. □

Author's note: This article was completed before the tragic death of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. An avid nature enthusiast since childhood, the former prime minister was a long time champion of Indian wildlife and nature conservation. Her determination to maintain a balance between man and other creatures was well known by the general public, and, perhaps more importantly, by all levels of Indian bureaucracy.

In recent years, Mrs. Gandhi developed an interest in cranes. Her leadership was essential to the nationalization and full protection of the Siberian crane's last known wintering grounds in the Subcontinent. An indication of her concern also was shown when her busy agenda for the Third World Summit in Delhi included an appeal to President Zia for his assistance in assuring the safety of Siberian cranes and wetland habitats crucial to their safe migration through Pakistan.

Her untimely death comes at a critical juncture for Siberian crane conservation. One can only hope that the people in the conservation infrastructure that Mrs. Gandhi worked so hard to build will not be frustrated by inaction, indecisiveness and lack of determination on the part of future heads of state.

Aside from the incredible larger implications of her death for wildlife, I feel a personal loss. Mrs. Gandhi had taken a personal interest in my work and had written me on several occasions to express her appreciation for the progress being made. In addition, several top level officials indicated to me that she read everything I sent her about crane conservation activities.

Despite our correspondence, fate dogged our efforts to meet. Ironically, I was on my way to an anticipated meeting with her in 1980 when I learned of the death of her son Sanjay. In fact, had I accepted an invitation to attend a polo practice that morning, I would have witnessed that plane crash and have been among the first to arrive on the scene. Plans to have Mrs. Gandhi introduce my audio-visual program on cranes were being formulated at the time of her death. I had hoped to meet her then.



Wearing a richly embroidered vest, Landfried holds a centuries old sword shown to him by Khani Gul, 85 (second from right). Gul is believed to be the oldest active crane hunter in Pakistan.