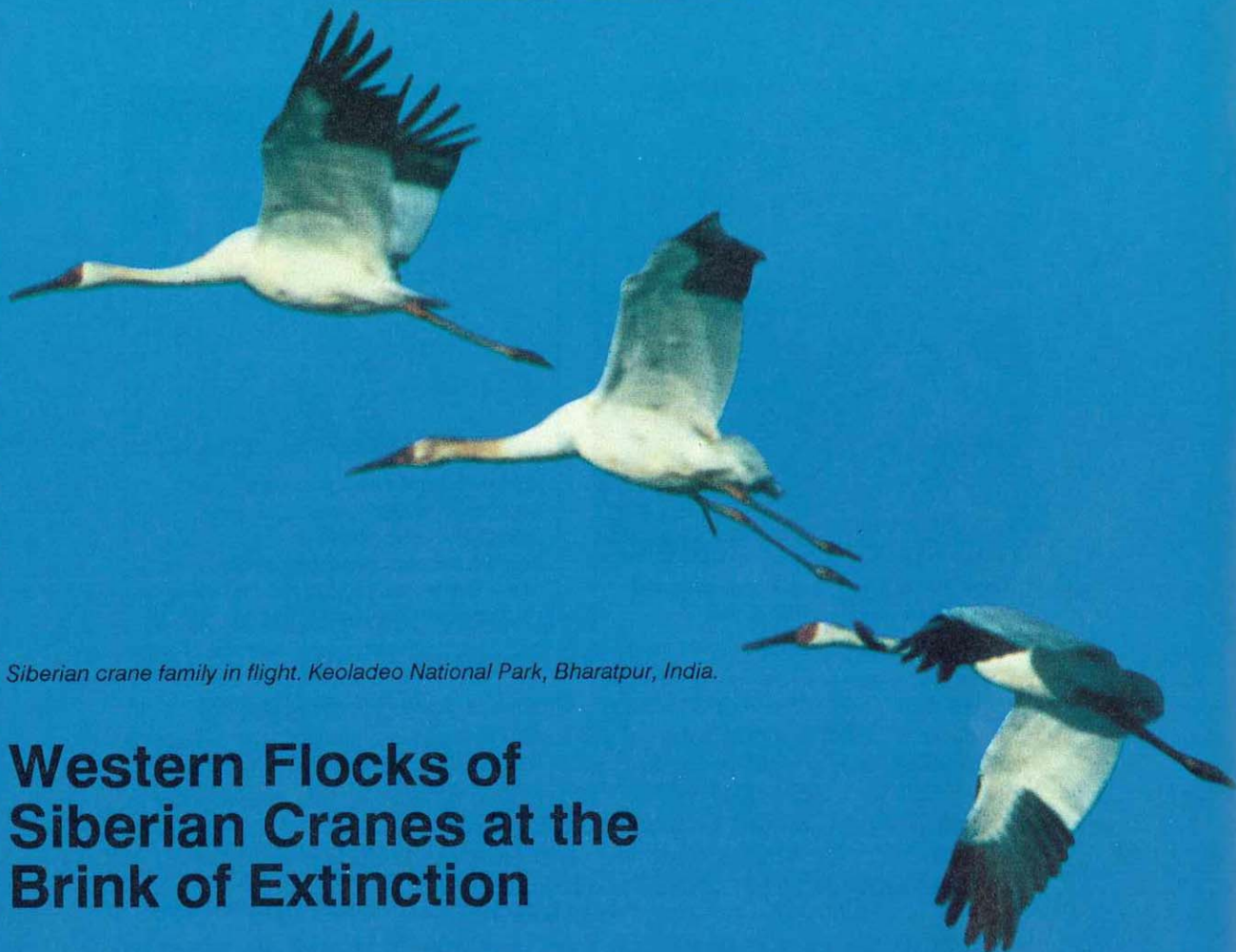


Dr. George Archibald / International Crane Foundation



*Siberian crane family in flight. Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, India.*

## Western Flocks of Siberian Cranes at the Brink of Extinction

Steven E. Landfried, Ph.D.

The two western flocks of Siberian cranes (*Grus leucogeranus*) stand at the brink of extinction. Only 10 birds arrived at Keoladeo National Park near Bharatpur, India, in late October — a drop of another six birds from the winter of 1989-90. Similarly, 10 Siberian cranes were observed near Feredookenar, Iran as recently as late February by veteran crane watcher, Ellen Travakoli.

Tragically, half of the Iran flock is thought to have been lost from the wild. At least 5 Siberian cranes disappeared during the evening of February 28th. to March 1st. under highly suspicious circumstances. Specifically, it is reported that four of the birds may have been captured for a

Teheran zoo and a couple were said to have been shot during the annual shoot-out by local hunters. This was particularly distressing to Travakoli who had thought the hunters would honour their promise to hold off on the shoot-out of geese, ducks, and other wildfowl until March 6th. (and the departure of the Siberian cranes for northern breeding grounds).

Dissuaded in various ways, including recurrent death threats, Travakoli and the Iranian Department of the Environment staff were understandably reluctant to enter the area prior to the shoot-out. Suspicious when she saw none of the Siberian crane

families in their usual feeding areas near the south end of the Caspian sea on March 2nd., Travakoli investigated the situation at some risk to herself. In due course she obtained information which suggested that 4 of the Siberian cranes were captured (reportedly for a Teheran zoo) and that another couple were shot. As a result, she estimates no more than 4 to 5 birds were able to migrate north. Whether the captured cranes can be found and/or brought back from their capturers, remains to be seen.

Meanwhile in India, the 1990-91 migration season marked the fourth straight year in which the Indo-Soviet flock of Siberian cranes suffered severe declines in numbers. After reaching a decade high of a total of 41 birds during the winter of 1984-85, the group has declined precipitously ever since.

Drought, environmental pollution and disturbances within Keoladeo National Park have made India less than an entirely secure haven for birds — and may explain the growing unfaithfulness of the birds to the sanctuary. For example, last year 7 of the 17 birds left the sanctuary early in December — one of which was later seen at Talab-e-Shahi near Dholpur. According to Dr. Lolitha Vijayan of the Bombay Natural History Society, 2 of the 10 birds to arrive at Bharatpur this year left the park on December 31st. despite the abundance of water — never to return. The remaining birds displayed pre-migration behaviors and all but 1 bird left Bharatpur on February 26th. — one of the earliest departures on record.

Unlike last year, no aerial surveys were conducted to determine whether Siberian cranes had gone to alternate wintering sites. Interestingly, a credible birdwatcher, Dhanraj Malik, reported seeing a Siberian crane nearly 700 km away at the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat — a place they have not been seen in recent history. Unfortunately, no photographic evidence was provided to document his observations.

### Siberian Crane Arrivals Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, India

Winter	Birds
1969-70	76
1979-80	33
1986-87	38
1987-88	31
1988-89	23
1989-90	17
1990-91	10

Compiled from various sources by  
Dr. Lolitha Vijayan,  
V. S. Vijayan and S. E. Landfried.

Increasing hunting pressures in Pakistan and Afghanistan, accentuated by the arrival of large numbers of powerful automatic weapons in the region, are believed to have exacerbated problems for the Siberian cranes — who must already adapt to growing habitat destruction along the flyway. Genetic problems associated with small populations are also thought likely to plague the small remnant flock.

Crane hunting in Baluchistan and Punjab provinces of Pakistan has increased considerably in the last 5 years. Unlike the traditional live crane catching of Common and Demoiselle cranes done with lead-weighted cords called "sooia" and decoy cranes along the Kurram river valley of the North West Frontier Province, this hunting is particularly problematic for Siberian cranes because it occurs along what is believed to be their migration route between Bharatpur and a traditional stop-over point at Lake Abi-Estada in Afghanistan.

Long time crane hunters along the Kurram have begun to voice concern about numbers of hunters in tribal areas (autonomous districts over which the government has little control) who shoot with rifles and automatic weapons. Indeed,

some of the older hunters have begun to display growing agitation that certain provincial authorities continue to request — and get — permission for their friends and constituents from the Bannu area exempted from the ban on crane hunting in neighbouring provinces. As one hunter told me last December during my annual hunter education project to the NWFP: "Many captive cranes are coming from Punjab and Baluchistan and it would help much if the governments of those provinces will institute a total ban on crane catching."

Wildlife staff in the NWFP, also have expressed frustration at having to patrol vast areas largely on foot or bicycles because few vehicles and little petrol are available to them. They are also demoralised by the fact that local magistrates typically give minimal fines to hunters cited for hunting violations.

Information received recently from knowledgeable observers in Afghanistan substantiate the belief that rapid decline of the Indo-Soviet flock in recent years may be tied to extensive hunting there. It is a situation described by a United Nations field worker as "a massacre of wildlife".

A long time hunter, Mr. Jawshan, from Parwan province (along the flyway north of Kabul) told me in March that the onset of heavy wildfowl migration brings out hunters in droves — many of whom now have high-powered automatic weapons rather than the old "powder guns" that were commonplace until recently. According to Jawshan: "It is just like a battlefield for birds who come into the Parwan valley after crossing the Hindu Kush mountains." Concerned about the implications of this hunting for Siberian cranes, he has promised to support efforts to get researchers into Afghanistan to see whether Siberian cranes still visit Lake Abi-Estada and to commence hunter education programs.



Steven E. Landfried.

*Dushenka — first Siberian crane bred in captivity.*

Scant information is available on the magnitude of crane hunting in Kazakhstan and threats it may pose to the Siberian cranes. The status of the larger flock of approximately 2,000 birds is somewhat in doubt as well as visitors to Lake Poyang reporting heavy population pressures in the area and a growing incidence of hunting in the area. For the short term, however, the group is not believed to be in any serious jeopardy.

Once there were hundreds of what A. O. Hume called the "lily of birds" in the western flocks of Siberian cranes. Now there are less than 20 in both remnant populations. Whether any survive to return to wintering grounds in India or Iran remains to be seen. ■