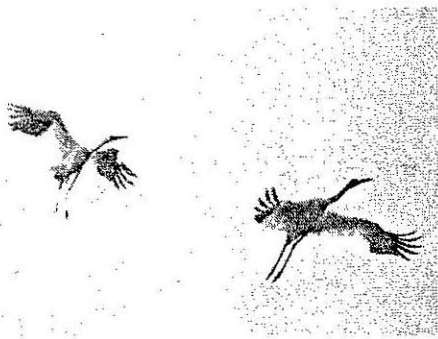


## PAKISTAN: NEW SIBERIAN CRANE DATA



by Steven Landfried

A fact unknown until recently was whether Siberian Cranes stopped in Pakistan during their bi-annual migration between the Soviet Union and India. Dr. Steven Landfried, a conservation education specialist went to Pakistan to find out. He also examined the extent to which Siberian cranes are subject to the same hunting pressures reportedly depleting wild populations of Demoiselle Cranes and Common Cranes migrating through both Pakistan and Afghanistan. He prepared the following report for the IUCN Bulletin:

One of Pakistan's leading conservationists, Tom Roberts, was waiting for me outside the customs office in Karachi. His important but little known article, *Crane Catchers of the Kurram Valley*, had suggested that the seasonal trapping of migrant cranes might warrant serious attention from conservation groups. He organized my exploratory visit to Pakistan which became a reality in 1981 with the support of the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

After a brief rest, I was taken to the provincial wildlife office where I met Mr. Khan Muhammad Khan, Deputy Conservator of Forests and Administrator of the Sind Wildlife Management Board. He introduced me to a retired military general who told me about his experiences catching cranes near the Afghan border. There 'fanatical hunters' reportedly left families and jobs to spend four weeks camping out and trapping cranes. Although these details essentially corroborated Roberts' article, I must admit being taken aback at the incredible enthusiasm displayed for the crane capture.

Later in Peshawar, the capital of the Northwest Frontier Province (a two hour drive from the Kurram Valley), I was soon hearing more tales of crane hunts.

My contact person this time was a local businessman, Haider Zaman. An avid hunter, he estimated the number of cranes taken to be at 1000-1200 per year. Most of these were Common Cranes and were eaten.

Since nobody as yet had seen the Siberian crane, I began to feel that perhaps I was wrong to contest the educated guess of various crane experts that the Siberian cranes overfly Pakistan and are not hunted there.

It was not long, however, before the moment of discovery did arrive. The

breakthrough occurred during a meeting with one of the crane catchers. I interviewed the man for nearly two hours. He impressed me greatly with the thought and detail he gave to his responses. His wealth of information came from thirty-five years of crane hunting when he was joined by a dozen friends and relatives all of whom pursued their prey with skills passed down to them by fathers and grandfathers.

The crane hunter told me that a key to catching cranes successfully is having a vocal pair of caged cranes whose incessant calls deceive migrating cranes into believing that all is well on the ground. Working under the cover of darkness, the catchers throw weighted sixty-foot strings high in the air to snag the unsuspecting cranes as they approach for landing. He confirmed that the Common and Demoiselle Cranes are caught in approximately equal numbers. Virtually all of the Common Cranes end up in the pot. The Demoiselle cranes are kept or sold as pets and have been known to reproduce in captivity after nine or ten years.

But what about the Siberian Cranes?

After the crane catcher was able to successfully describe *Grus leucogeranus* on his own, I became convinced that he had seen Siberian Cranes on previous occasions. Photographs of Siberian Cranes in flight and in wetland areas brought a smile of recognition and considerable information — some of it good to hear and some of it not.

As recently as last year, he saw several Siberian Cranes flying over the city of Bannu (North West-Pakistan). In 1979, he observed five of what he called 'the rare White Crane' on the ground near the village of Tank (approximately 100 km south of Bannu). A friend caught three of them in a single day in 1961 — and all were eaten. He had himself caught one in 1964.

I found the crane hunter to be a credible source of information. His reports paralleled those of Roberts and others. His observations of the behaviour of Demoiselle Cranes in captivity were very similar to those made at the International Crane Foundation. The mounting evidence left little doubt that continuation of age-old crane hunting practices has serious implications for Common and Demoiselle Cranes to say nothing of the critically endangered Siberian crane.

The accumulated insights of my conversations were the topic of lengthy discussions the next day when I met in Lahore with the Board of the World Wildlife Fund - Pakistan and with one of Pakistan's most famous conservationists — W.A. Kermani. Various intervention strategies were discussed which would involve educating conservationists, government agencies, the academic community and the crane hunters about the dangers of unrestricted depletion of the wild stock of all three crane species. While developing a wide range conservation plan will not be an easy task, there is no doubt that awareness of problems faced

by migrating cranes is increasing in Pakistan.

It is my hope that conservation organizations will soon work with conservationists in Pakistan to reduce short-term threats to Siberian Cranes, as well as long-term threats to Demoiselle and Common Cranes. □

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### Siberian Crane Update

There are fewer than 300 Siberian cranes left in the world. Their continued survival is at risk each year as they make the hazardous journey from their breeding grounds in Siberia to winter on the plains of India and China. IUCN/WWF have provided support to the International Crane Foundation in its effort to save the Siberian crane. As part of an IUCN/WWF project a 'species bank' for the birds was established at the Foundation's headquarters in Baraboo, Wisconsin (US).

There, in 1981, Dushenka became the first Siberian crane to hatch in captivity. Dushenka is now four and a half feet tall and weighs over 12 pounds. Just recently, two more Siberian cranes broke through their shells bringing the total number of captive bred cranes to three.

This breeding success may help prevent the extinction of the species and ultimately enable captive-bred birds to be re-introduced in the wild.

There are two relic populations of Siberian cranes known to survive. The western group breeds on Soviet tundra near the lower reaches of the Ob river. In autumn the cranes appear to diverge into a group of perhaps 12 birds that winters on a duck trapping compound near Feredunkenar on the Caspian lowlands of Iran. A second group migrates past the Aral Sea, over the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan then down to the northern plains of India. These cranes winter at the Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary near Bharatpur, about 180 kilometres south of New Delhi. En route they rest at Lake Ab-i-Estada, Afghanistan. Unfortunately, they are hunted. This factor may have contributed to their severe decline from 76 birds in 1972 to just 33 cranes in a recent tally.

In eastern Siberia a more substantial group of cranes breeds in the tundra between the Indigirka and Lena rivers. These cranes are presumed to winter somewhere on the Yangtze river basin in China. □