

Mumtaz Malik

Two species of cranes namely, Common crane (Grus grus) and Demoiselle crane (Anthropoides virgo) commonly fly through the North West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P.) during their Spring and Fall migrations between breeding grounds in Siberia and wintering grounds in lower Sindh and India. Another species, Siberian crane (Grus leucogeranus), which is extremely endangered, is also thought to migrate through the province occasionally. Kurram, Gomal, Tochi and Indus river are the major migration routes followed by the cranes.

People in southern districts of N.W.F.P. including Karak, Bannu and D.I.Khan have a well established tradition of hunting cranes. The hunters establish camps along the known migration routes. Each camp may have as many as 20 hunters and an equal number of pairs of pet decoy cranes. During night the migrating cranes are lured down with the help of decoys. On reaching an accessible height from the ground, they are caught by throwing a lead weighted string called "Sooya", which gets wrapped round the wings or neck of the bird. Under favourable conditions hunters in a camp may catch 100-200 cranes in hunting season. Average annual catch of both the species of cranes i.e. Common crane and Demoiselle crane is estimated at 2000 birds in NWFP. The birds so caught may be either kept as pets, sold or gifted.

Whereas live catching offers a greater challenge and is practiced during night, shooting during the day time when the cranes are flying low or roosting on the ground, poses another threat to these birds. Proliferation of arms, particularly Kalashankove rifles, with their cheap ammunition, is responsible for a considerable loss of birds due to indiscriminate and desperate shooting.

Rapid growth of human population has resulted in the establishment of human settlements all along the streams and rivers. Wetlands have also been exploited for agriculture, fuel wood, thatching material, grazing, fishing and irrigation. Construction of barrages and dams on the rivers has significantly changed the down stream ecosystem. Use of insecticides and fertilizers in the agriculture

fields enroute crane migration has further deteriorated habitat conditions. All these factors along high density of hunting camps has made the habitat insecure, unfit, unattractive and too small for the cranes.

Heavy hunting pressure on cranes, their extremely low rate of reproduction and continuous loss of habitat have necessitated immediate conservation measures for these birds. The probability of adoption of the same migratory path by endangered Siberian crane and potential hunting threat to its precariously surviving population has further augmented the need for an effective conservation programme. The government of NWFP has taken following measures in this respect:-

- i. Siberian crane, has been declared "Protected" and its hunting killing and capturing has been completely banned.
- ii. Hunting, killing and capturing of cranes by means of fire arms or any other device, except traditional method of live catching, has been prohibited.
- iiii Dealing in cranes and their trophies as profession, trade or business is now illegal.
- iv. Crane catching seasons have been precisely defined and a fee of Rs.500/- per camp per annum has been levied to regulate hunting.
- v. Prohibitive fee of Rs.500/- and Rs. 2000/- per crane is charged for export of crane from the province for destinations within the country and outside the country respectively.

Hunters in Bannu have succeeded in breeding cranes in captivity. Successful captive breeding of cranes on a large scale can not only meet the requirements of the local people but can also reduce hunting pressure on wild cranes considerably. It will also safeguard against elimination of the species through hunting. In order to encourage breeding of cranes in captivity the government has exempted the cranes hatched in captivity, from possession licence fee. Training of hunters in artificial insemination of cranes is also under consideration.

The Government has also declared an area of 810 Km² of Indus river in D.I.Khan District as a Crane Reserve. Hunting in this reserve is only allowed on realization of a fee of Rs.200/- per hunter per day. This prohibitive fee has resulted in great reduction in hunting pressure along the Indus river.

A Crane Refuge is being established over an area of 20 Km² of prime crane habitat at the confluence of Kurram and Gambaela rivers in Lakki Tehsil of Bannu district. This will be an intensively protected hunting free zone. Live decoys will be used to attract wild cranes to this refuge in the initial stages. Habitat improvement will also be carried out in and around the refuge besides providing supplemental food to the wild cranes.

Another refuge for waterfowl is being established over an area of 20 Km² in D.I.Khan district alongside the new Indus river bridge. The refuge though primarily aimed for waterfowl, will offer suitable staging site for the cranes as well.

The NWFP Wildlife Department is pursuing a conservation education programme. A number of lectures and presentations using audio visuals have been given to the hunters particularly during crane catching season. A large number of leaflets and brochures were prepared and circulated among the hunters. Frequent informal meetings with individual crane hunters and the staff of the Wildlife Department are arranged to emphasize the need for crane conservation. Special significance is attached to bring home to the hunters the need to protect the Siberian crane. It is also planned to organize Wildlife Clubs in the schools to create conservation awareness among the students.