

# The Cranes

## Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan

### *Executive Summary*

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The cranes are among the most ancient and distinctive families of birds on Earth. Their great size and beauty, unique calls, and complex behaviors have for centuries commanded the attention and respect of people on the five continents where they are found. Wary residents of wetlands and grasslands, cranes have also long symbolized natural grandeur and the special quality of wild places. Few groups of organisms have had so strong a claim upon the human mind, heart, and imagination.

Yet cranes are also among the world's most threatened groups of birds. Several of the family's fifteen species have neared the precipice of extinction; as many as eleven may now be globally threatened. Diverse threats, including habitat loss and degradation, pollution, exploitation, poisoning, and disturbance, beset the cranes. In South Africa, for example, planting of extensive tree plantations has wiped out large portions of the grassland ecosystems where the Blue Crane and a host of other endemic species once thrived. In the Hindu Kush valleys of the Indian subcontinent, hunting has been a leading factor behind the near extinction of the population of critically endangered Siberian Cranes that winters in India. In East Asia, extensive loss and degradation of wetlands, due in large part to rising human population pressures, threatens the region's endangered Siberian, White-naped, Hooded, and Red-crowned Cranes. In the southern United States, the remnant population of Mississippi Sandhill Cranes fails to reproduce at a level sufficient to sustain its numbers — possibly a response to chemical contamination and other factors affecting the quality of their habitat. These are only a few of the multiple threats facing the world's cranes and the ecosystems where they are found.

Yet in most cases cranes readily coexist with people if conservation measures are undertaken. In Japan and North America, for example, endangered cranes have been carefully studied and protected over the past half-century; their numbers are now increasing in these highly industrialized nations. In Germany and other portions of northern Europe, Eurasian Cranes are breeding again in areas from which they were long ago extirpated. For thousands of years the Hindu people of India have revered cranes. Today, in small wetlands amidst millions of rural farmers, thousands of Sarus Cranes still survive. Thus, there is substantial cause for hope for the cranes, if people care. And by conserving cranes we may also conserve the ecological health, biological diversity, and environmental quality of the ecosystems they inhabit — that they share with people.

Because the ranges and migration routes of cranes extend across the borders of many countries, international cooperation is key to crane conservation efforts. For decades Canada and the United States have collaborated closely on behalf of the Whooping Crane

— an important example to other nations working with other species. Over the last twenty-five years, international partnerships have emerged and grown in many other parts of the world. For example, scientists throughout East Asia have worked together, using satellite technology and other modern methods to track the migration routes and identify important habitats used by the region's endangered cranes. In 1995, representatives from the range states of the Siberian Crane met for the first time in Moscow to lay the groundwork for a coordinated species recovery plan. The Eurasian Crane, which occurs in some 90 countries (more than any other crane species), has brought together biologists and conservationists on three continents, especially in Western Europe, where the species is recovering after centuries of decline. In 1993, more than 100 representatives from 19 African countries met at a crane and wetland training workshop in Botswana, the first gathering of its kind on the continent. Through these and similar efforts around the world, the prospects for the cranes and their habitats have begun to improve, despite mounting pressures and of continued vulnerability.

The conservation of cranes is a global challenge and a global task. But in the long run success can be gained only through well coordinated actions at the local, regional, and international level. This document seeks to provide the “big picture” in which crane conservationists can direct their special contributions. This action plan has been developed with a 10- to 15-year horizon in mind. It brings together for the first time information relevant to conservation of all the world's cranes. The goals of the plan are: to review existing knowledge of the world's cranes and the habitats that sustain them; to use this information to assess the current status of the cranes and of efforts to conserve them; to identify high priority measures that may enhance the conservation of cranes and the wetland and grassland ecosystems in which they occur; and to recommend and rank specific conservation actions based on these needs. In many cases, this action plan builds upon existing national-level crane action plans. Conversely, this plan offers guidance for the preparation and updating of more detailed national-level plans.

The action plan is divided into three sections. Section 1 provides a basic overview of the conservation biology of cranes. Section 2 presents comprehensive, up-to-date accounts of each of the fifteen crane species. Each species account includes discussions of subspecies and populations; population numbers; conservation status; historic and present distribution; distribution by country; habitat and ecology; principal threats; and current conservation measures. Each account concludes with a list of priority conservation measures, including many detailed recommendations for action under various categories (e.g., protected areas, surveys and monitoring, research, education, etc.). Building on the species accounts, Section 3 provides, for the family as a whole and for each region of the world, a more general overview of the actions needed to help the cranes endure.

This action plan is aimed at the many players that are now or may potentially be involved in crane conservation, including conservation biologists and other scientists; agency officials and other decision-makers; conservation organizations and other non-governmental organizations working at all levels; international development agencies; political, civic, and business leaders; funding agencies, foundations, and other organizations that provide critical support for conservation work; educators interested in

the particular issues of crane conservation, as well as more general topics in environmental science and conservation biology; and members of the general public who wish to learn more about cranes, their status, and their future needs.

The state of the world's cranes and their habitats is precarious. Their fate will be determined in a large part by the daily actions and long-term aspirations of people on five continents, under widely varied circumstances. This action plan, through its combination of basic biological information, updated species status reports, and coordinated recommendations, seeks to provide direction in the global endeavor to ensure that these charismatic birds will find safe passage into and through the 21st century.