Solving African Crane Mysteries

By Rich Bellius,
Africa Program Coordinator

The conservation of cranes in a continent as vast as Africa has long presented unique challenges. Understanding threats to cranes and to the ecological communities that serve as crane habitat, for example, often requires detailed information about the migratory movements of cranes between remote and inaccessible breeding, feeding, and wintering grounds. Often, these areas fall across national borders and demand international cooperation and commitment.

Recently, more than 20 crane researchers from 12 different African nations met at the Ninth Pan-African Ornithological Congress in Accra, Ghana to discuss crane conservation and research. Together, we unveiled a plan for solving some of the great crane mysteries of Africa.

In West Africa, the drastic decline of the Black Crowned Crane over the past three decades has puzzled scientists and conservationists. Once widespread across the region and particularly abundant in Nigeria, the cranes are now known to occur in only a few wetland areas and are nearly extinct from Nigeria. The Nature Conservation Research Center in Ghana, with ICF assistance, is coordinating a massive aerial and ground survey effort to assess the population status of the remaining Black Crowned Cranes and identify areas where protection of their habitats is most critical. The survey will involve colleagues from sixteen African countries from the Songa River valley to Lake Chad, and create a new force of conservationists dedicated to the survival of cranes and their wetland and savanna homes.

At the other end of the continent, the status of Wattled Cranes, largest and rarest of the African cranes, has remained a mystery because of the birds’ movements among the immense flood plains of southern Africa. Some of these flood plains have been so disturbed by large dams and water diversions that Wattled Cranes may no longer be successfully breeding. Researchers are now attempting to undertake simultaneous aerial surveys over the great wetland systems where Wattled Cranes occur: the Okavango Delta in Botswana; the Manywadi Flats of western Tanzania; the Kafue Flats, Bangweulu swamps, and Busanga Flats in Zambia; and the Zambezi Delta in Mozambique. We will obtain the first-ever assessment of the overall population of the birds and the number of chicks being produced.

This effort will identify areas where Wattled Cranes are in decline, and provide recommendations for the management of dams and wetlands to ensure their survival. Ultimately, efforts to track the cranes along their elusive migratory paths may well require monitoring from outer space. A regional center for Wattled Cranes research has been proposed for Zambia to study the migratory movement of the cranes between the wetlands using satellite transmitters, as has been effectively done for migratory cranes in Asia and North America.

Conservationists hope to understand the mysterious migratory movements of Wattled Cranes among African wetlands. Photo by Steve Transeing

A Future for China’s Cranes

by Jim Harris, Deputy Director

Eleven years ago, I camped beside a thousand Siberian Cranes at Poyang Lake. The tents perched on a bluff overlooking the vast marsh of Dahuchi, one of three lakes within Poyang Lake Nature Reserve. Through the night, the high pitched whistles of Siberian Cranes mingled with deeper notes of White-naped Cranes, almost equal in number. I will never forget that ancient sound, an abundance of two endangered cranes to be heard nowhere else on earth. Behind us slept a village, Biershan. Rural China felt timeless, changeless.

Since that night, even the remotest of China’s villages has been transformed. Today a road leads from the mainland across edges of Dahuchi within the heart of the nature reserve. Electric lines have been constructed. Televisions reveal for everyone the great transformations that have made much of eastern China rich.

In the midst of 1.2 billion people, many fragments of wilderness, and their cranes, have survived. Over 30 reserves protect habitats critical for China’s nine cranes, more species than any other country. Generally, these nature reserves occur in remote, marginal lands where local people eagerly await development. Conflicts over development are severe, despite the government’s commitment to conservation.

For crane lovers, China is critical. The next decade may secure a remarkable array of wild resources, or lose them. Fortunately, cranes have a unique role in Chinese culture. Cranes grace the walls and shelves from the smallest farmhouse to the newest five-star hotel. Universally admired, cranes can entice people into conservation action.

Beginning in 1979, the International Crane Foundation (ICF) was among the first conservation organizations to work in China. Yet the size of China dwarfs and humbles any organization. Our program focuses on a few model projects that address the threats to cranes, in the context of broader conservation issues.

Watershed and people at Cao Hai

Standing atop the headquarters of Cao Hai Nature Reserve (CNR), you can see and hear black-necked and Eastern Cranes. But the flocks—elegant in silhouette against the distant water—do not dominate the view. Most obvious are a hundred small fields, and the farmers at work on their land.

For the crane watcher, cranes are the heart of this landscape, but for everyone else cranes are wisps of wilderness in a battered landscape. Recent decades of population growth, deforestation, and erosion threaten the wetland and its inhabitants. Despite Cao Hai’s protected status, impoverished farmers in the late 1980s began reclaiming the wetlands.

It became obvious that people must be at the center of effective conservation. Beginning in 1992, ICF has worked with CNR and local communities to create alternative types of land-use. ICF has partnered with the MPUP (Multi-purpose Use Program) of New York, an organization specializing in poverty alleviation, while Guizhou Province Environmental Protection Bureau has coordinated our efforts.

Through MPUP, our project is distributed...
ICF's Crane Ambassador Camp—Every kid counts!

By Marshal Cane, Deputy Director

Entering new territory is not new to ICF. Working with young people on a one-to-one basis, however, is a new experience for many staff this summer. When you match up 20 young Chicago inner city youth with veteran scientists, educators, and research staff, new opportunities can produce quick results.

Getting suckt into the mud of a wetland is an experience as helpful with a vet check on a Silvanian Crane, especially if you are from the inner city of Chicago. Educational and fun experiences can happen at the same time when the mix and match occurs in the mentoring portion of the crane ambassador program.

Chicago Youth Centers and Camp Gray (10 minutes from ICF) are partners in the new program. The goal is to help awaken the interest in nature and spark some responsibility for cranes and crane habitat while assisting youth from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods to become responsible individuals who are able to live productively in society.

Thanks to the financial support of the Baraboo Rotary Club and the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation of Chicago, twenty Chicago youth, as well as ICF staff and volunteers, will be better prepared to meet the challenges with protection of cranes and crane habitat. And, since the crane ambassadors will be presenting slides show back home about ICF and the summer camp experience, the extension from Baraboo to Chicago will result in ripple education to thousands of other urban youth and their families.

SCHEDULE

Regular tours: 10:00 a.m., 1:00 & 3:00 p.m.
Special events for members & guests:
4:00-5:30 p.m.: "Into Their Eyes," paintings by Jay Jocham. Lower level of Ron Saulcy Memorial Library for Bird Conservation.
1:30 p.m.: Crane City Tour—a unique opportunity to see ICF's breeding facility. Otter, Restoration Tour—and ICF's prairie, oak, savannah, and wetland restorations.
5:30 p.m.: Hospitality Hour (cash bar) at Ramada Rain Time
6:30 p.m.: Annual Meeting Program at Ramada Rain Time starts with dinner followed by a slide presentation by George Archbill, focusing on highlights of 1997.
For hotel reservations at the Ramada Rain Time call 1-800-233-4845.

ICF members and their guests are invited to attend the annual meeting and dinner.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Please clip or copy, and mail to: ICF, P.O. Box 447, Baraboo, WI 53913-0447.

Reservation deadline: September 15.

Please make dinner/reservation requests for ______ people.
My check for $10.00 each is enclosed.

This will be my first time attending an ICF annual meeting.

I cannot attend the meeting, but please send me a copy of the annual report.

Name:
Address:

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Cracids & Cranes Unite

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A "Cracids Unite" conference was held in China to raise awareness and funding for conservation efforts.

At dawn, in the pleasant town of Tuanjie, Belgium, the soft crows and crows of the turkey-like cracids now mingle with the trumpets of cranes. The Cracid Breeding and Conservation Center (CBC) was formed through the combined efforts of three creative men—Geer Schoren, a special education teacher; Ernst Haarsch, a furniture designer; and Harry Gerts, a radio DJ. These men all share a devotion to cracids—shy forest birds of Southeast Asia.

As the conservation goals caught shape, Geer and his colleagues thought of ways to expand their mission. In 1992, Geer and aviculturist Frank Lehmann attended a crane conservation planning workshop in Canada. A crane workshop followed and a list of goals was compiled.

One of the initial goals was the protection of the black cranes found in the northeastern part of Europe. A group of European birders, under the leadership of Frank Lehmann, attended this workshop to learn about the black crane and its conservation needs.

In late October, Tibetan farmers breed their yellow barley into the air to separate the chaff. Each winter, about 4,000 of the world’s population of less than 1,000 Black-crested Cranes gather in the valleys of southeastern Tibet’s Hoh Xil Reserve to breed. It is an ancient and remarkable wildlife species living among people. CBC is working with the Tibetan Agriculture and Forestry Bureau to evolve strategies protecting cranes in far areas. As Tibetan agriculture grows, we hope to maintain the mix of activities necessary that cranes can find waste grain throughout the winter. The CBC Breeding and Conservation Center is now joining CBC efforts on behalf of black-crested and other cranes of China. Photo by Jim Harris.
Eyes on ICF
by Marshal Case, Deputy Director

The past ten months at ICF have been fertile ground for select film crews from around the world including representation from Japan, Germany, Great Britain, Russia and former Soviet Republics, and, of course, the United States. Japan has been represented by several film crews with Mr. Hata of "Mutsugoro & Pals" being the most widely known personality. Fuji television network produces this show viewed by millions of Japanese and Mr. Hata is admired far and wide as a jockey, businessman and television personality. He and his crew spent several days in Baraboo and incorporated the cranes and story of ICF with a travel series televised early in 1997.

Russia has always had pride in producing the biggest and best. As ICF friend Nikolai Drozdov—university professor, chief scientist and presenter of the Russian Public Television show, "World of Animals,"—recently told me—"Russia also has the biggest dwarfs and biggest microchips." Nikolai has probably produced the biggest and most positive results for the former Soviet Union, and now Russia, during the past 28 years. Two hundred million viewers watch the wildlife program he presents every Saturday, prime time. Joined by the director of the film series and the chief videographer, Nikolai spent ten days on the road with me as they filmed enough material for 13 programs in a new serial. ICF is featured in two of the programs, one has already been produced and broadcast in Russia and CIS. The serial highlights Russians and Americans working together to protect nature.

Sir David Attenborough, of BBC fame, truly has a worldwide audience. Sir David and his crew of four spent the better part of a week at ICF in June. The mission was to produce a program about ICF as part of a new series from the BBC Natural History Unit—"The Life of Birds." Cranes will be the focus of one of 10 programs in which the secrets of birds' great success will come to light. One of the biggest challenges at ICF was the strict control in working around endangered birds. Sir David's crew was not exempt from being in crane costume and putting the birds first in concern. Through great cooperation among ICF staff and the BBC crew, one more special film will be produced and eventually viewed by more millions of people!

Eyes on ICF indeed! A noble cause nurtures a noble following and, as a result, hundreds of millions of people around the world will get the message about cranes and crane habitat protection in 1997.