ICF AND RAMSAR:
A Partnership That Gives Life to Cranes

By Jim Harris, Senior Vice President

Cranes standing with pine trees is a popular and ancient Asian art motif – a testament to the special significance cranes have held for millennia. Cranes and pine trees are both symbols of long life. Yet the life of cranes has little to do with pines. Most cranes cannot perch in trees. Cranes live only where they find the complex and fragile ecosystems that meet their needs for foraging, safety, and raising their young. Over the years, ICF has devoted major efforts to safeguarding the places essential to cranes, primarily wetlands where shallow waters and abundant nutrients lead to great biological productivity. Wetlands often support diverse assemblages of waterbirds and have also nurtured human civilization – the earliest cities grew up near or upon wetlands and to this day wetlands have extraordinary value for people.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (named for the city in Iran where the Convention began in 1971) now has 160 Contracting Parties that have committed to ensuring the conservation and wise use of the Ramsar Sites they designate, in order to maintain the full range of benefits that the continued on page 2

With over 2,000 sites now designated as Wetlands of International Importance, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is having significant impact even for those widespread species that cannot be protected through action at a few key sites. The Demoiselle Crane, for example, has sizable populations across Eurasia from the Ukraine to Inner Mongolia, yet the species is in decline in many regions. Ramsar designation strengthens government commitment and protection for dozens of sites on three continents important to this smallest of the cranes. Photo by Zhang Gangfang
ICF has been founded in 1973 by Ronald Sauey, Ph.D. It was created by the proposed hunting of Sandhills in our own backyard. These lessons will guide us as we seek to help them.

We live in a complex world, and there is no easy solution, no simple statement that will light the way forward. ICF is located in rural Wisconsin, and our community is steeped in Wisconsin’s rich cultural traditions, including hunting. I hope we can maintain the difficult but very real balance that allows ICF to continue to be a force for good in the world.

ICF Bugle is the quarterly newsletter for members of the International Crane Foundation. ICF was founded in 1973 by Ronald Sauey, Ph.D. (1916-1999) and George Andrist, Ph.D.

Editor: Betty Dlubach

If you would like to participate in public discussions on the subject, as experts in crane biology and as managers of a long-term database on an eastern U.S. Crane population, we can provide information and assessment relevant to such issues, as hunting and crop damage, considered by states as they make management decisions on Sandhill Cranes.

We recognize that these positions do not reflect the strong emotional and spiritual connection many of us feel towards cranes. Cranes have drawn us together as a family. Around the world, cranes have an ethereal, almost spiritual quality. We have an emotional and spiritual connection with them.

We recognize that these positions do not reflect the strong emotional and spiritual connection many of us feel towards cranes. Cranes have drawn us together as a family. Around the world, cranes have an ethereal, almost spiritual quality. We have an emotional and spiritual connection with them.

Despite the challenges that ICF faces, we are confident in our ability to continue to make a difference for cranes and their wetland habitats. We are committed to finding solutions that balance the needs of people and wildlife. ICF remains committed to working with stakeholders to find win-win solutions to these challenges.

We are committed to working with all stakeholders to find the right balance to ensure that our work continues to make a positive impact on the lives of cranes and their habitat.

Support ICF and join us in the fight to protect the future of cranes and their wetlands. Together, we can make a difference and ensure that our world is a better place for all species.

For more information, please visit www.icf.org.
Conserving Wintering Sandhill Cranes and their Habitats in California

By Gary Ivey, Western Crane Conservation Manager

A major threat to the Sandhill Cranes who migrate along North America's Pacific rim states appears to be loss of winter habitat to development and expansion of crop types that are incompatible with the way Sandhills use agricultural landscapes. Because Pacific flyway cranes only use a few discreet wintering sites, it is important to maintain quality crane habitat in these areas. California is host to wintering populations of both Greater Sandhill Cranes (Grus canadensis canadensis) and Lesser Sandhill Cranes (Grus canadensis tabida), with both subspecies identified by the state for conservation action. Because Greater Sandhill Cranes have threatened status, land development that destroys crane habitat cannot be done without mitigation measures. To develop effective mitigation measures, it is important to understand how cranes use their winter landscapes. My study, a partnership between ICF, Oregon State University and USGS Western Ecological Research Center, compared how the two Sandhill Crane subspecies moved around and used sites and croplands in the Sacramento Delta region of central California. Though both Greaters and Lessers returned to winter in the Delta year-to-year, the Greaters showed much stronger fidelity to specific areas and made significantly shorter flights between roost and foraging areas (averaging 2 km), while Lessers averaged 5-6 km. In contrast, 43% of the Lesser Sandhill Cranes in this area, a conservation radius of 10 km would be needed to encompass over 90% of their foraging flights. Attention also needs to be paid to changing agricultural practices that impact the availability of the wintering Sandhill Cranes' favorite foods. While most crane roost sites were on protected wildlife refuges and natural areas, much of their feeding is done on adjacent private farmlands. Cranes used both seasonally flooded wetlands and flooded crop fields. Though seasonal wetlands provide a greater diversity of foods to cranes than flooded croplands, flooded croplands are a more likely option for building crane habitat into a working farm. As with their movements, there were also differences in how the Greater and Lesser Sandhill Cranes used the various croplands and other habitat types available in the landscapes surrounding their roost sites. The Greater Sandhill Cranes focused on cereal grains (primarily corn and rice) while Lessers focused on corn, even where corn was much further from roost sites than rice. The Lessers also used alfalfa fields significantly more than the Greaters. The cranes were never located in orchards, vineyards, blueberry fields, turf farms, or nursery croplands even though these crops were common in the study area. Though crops such as alfalfa do not provide good habitat for the cranes are increasing within the landscape of the Delta, and this is cause for concern.

This study of how the two subspecies of Sandhill Cranes are using their winter landscape helps wildlife managers who are working with farmers. Managers could provide incentives for crane-friendly practices such as production of grain crops, reduced or delayed tilling of waste grain into the soil, flooding of grain fields, and providing irrigation to some crop types to increase crane use. Working with farmers to encourage crane-friendly agriculture is crucial to keeping crane populations healthy in this wintering landscape.

Down to fewer than 20 birds in the 1940s, the Whooping Crane represents one of conservation’s greatest success stories. But despite enormous efforts and great accomplishments to achieve security for this species, nearly three-quarters of a century later Whooping Cranes remain endangered. Just 600 or so remain in the wild and in captivity. While efforts to save this species continue to expand, so do the threats along the cranes’ annual migration routes to and from wintering grounds in the southern United States. From overhead power lines to disappearing habitat, Whooping Cranes continue to face growing and new impediments, including increasing incidents of shooting and harassment.

To conserve Whooping Cranes and the ecosystems on which they depend, the International Crane Foundation (ICF), along with diverse partners, continues its major commitment to vital conservation programs: breeding and reintroducing Whooping Cranes along the eastern flyway from the upper Midwest to southeastern states, and protecting essential wintering habitat in Texas for the world’s last self-sustaining population. In eastern Texas, the ICF’s conducted extensive field research to understand how biting black flies are causing nest abandonment and to evaluate the Whooping Crane’s complex habitat needs. Based on results from that work, last summer ICF moved its Whooping Crane release location from Necedah National Wildlife Refuge to Horn Island National Wildlife Refuge. Many of the cranes released in 2011 have already returned to the upper Midwest this season, and the Wisconsin and Whooping Cranes’ nesting season has already begun. Captive breeding efforts are ongoing at ICF’s five cranes with plans to release 8 to 10 young cranes this fall, adding to the over 100 birds that now comprise the reintroduced population.

In Texas, at the close of 2011, ICF’s Dr. Liz Smith and I provided data and expert testimony in a court case examining whether or not Whooping Cranes have been harmed by the state’s over-allocation of fresh water permits in the Guadalupe River watershed. A verdict in this monumental case – seeking sustainable water management that balances needs of humans and wildlife - is anticipated this summer. A complete winter count of Whooping Cranes in the affected flock was not possible, but transect flights estimated lower than usual numbers at the Refuge. The unusually warm winter, following the worst drought in Texas history, seemed to encourage the birds to select alternate wetlands, and cranes were observed wintering in Oklahoma, Kansas, and even as far north as Nebraska. ICF is a partner in monitoring these birds as they migrate to breeding grounds in Canada, and we continue research and direct actions to help the cranes and their coastal habitats.

Adding to the challenges of patched habitat and a complex reintroduction, this past winter included more troubling incidents of Whooping Cranes being shot – at least seven birds have now been killed during the past two years in Indiana, Georgia, and Alabama. In addition to these concerns, ICF is dramatically expanding our education and outreach efforts for Whooping Cranes. We are partnering with Hamline University’s Center for Global Environmental Education to develop and launch an interactive, multimedia educational initiative targeting grades 4-8, families, hunters and the general public across the central and eastern flyways. Delivered live in classrooms, over the Internet and through mobile applications, the program will include teacher trainings and workshops; school, community and stakeholder presentations; and assessment and data-gathering to gauge users’ pre- and post-knowledge and attitudes toward Whooping Cranes and wetlands.

The goal of these efforts is to increase participant awareness, understanding and appreciation for Whooping Cranes – their beauty, history, threats, and opportunities for conservation – and to reduce obstacles for their recovery. With your help, we seek to fuel an educational “fire” for these birds, to spread awareness and concern across their flyways, to inspire and inform citizens and champions to actively protect the endangered Whooping Crane and the wetlands on which they – and so many species – depend. Because of your generosity, ICF is able to address challenges for Whooping Cranes through strong field conservation programs and now a major educational initiative that will help many more people make meaningful differences for North America’s tallest bird.

Advancing this work will be possible with your continued support. We ask you to consider making a special gift of any amount – $50, $100, $250, $500 – to help in the continued recovery and protection of Whooping Cranes. Please use the enclosed envelope to make a gift today, and thank you for your help to ICF and the cranes.

Warm wishes always,

George Archibald
Co-Founder, Senior Conservationist

P.S. – For a gift of $1,000 or more, we will recognize you as a Whooper Keeper, and as a token of our thanks, provide a recognition plaque bearing your special message affixed to a bench in ICF’s celebrated Whooping Crane exhibit on our campus in Wisconsin. Please use the enclosed envelope to craft your inscription.

Participate in the 2012 Bird-a-thon!

See enclosed envelope for details or visit: www.savingcranes.org/bird-a-thon.html
CF is launching a new Crane Chick Cam this spring! The web cam will provide a behind-the-scenes look into the lives of Whooping Crane chicks as they are raised at our facility in Baraboo for reintroduction into the wild. The web cam will follow our Whooping Crane chicks as they are cared for by costumed staff at ICF’s Chick Rearing Facility. We will first view the young cranes in their runs, where they are kept warm and safe with heat lamps and a brood model to snuggle up to for security. As the chicks get older, we will follow the chicks to their outdoor enclosure, or “chick yard,” where they strengthen their leg and flight muscles, learn about wetlands, and maybe even encounter their first grasshopper or two! These months of dedication prepare the chicks for release on the wetlands of central Wisconsin, to join other cranes through our Direct Autumn Release (DAR) program.

We have been working through the winter with local contractors to design and install the video system, which integrates with Ustream.com and our website to bring this exclusive video to you. We expect our first chicks to hatch by late May, but of course the chicks will determine this schedule and use crane hand puppets to feed and interact with the chicks. Illustration by Darcy Love

Escape to Africa with George Archibald!

January 20 – February 5, 2013

Join ICF Co-founder George Archibald on an expedition to South Africa and Botswana to experience both the Big Five (elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion, leopard) and the Big Three (Blue, Wattled and Grey Crowned Cranes) and the glorious wild flowers of the southern African summer. There will be four major stops: a big game park, the grasslands of the Karoo, Cape Town in South Africa and the Okavango Delta in Botswana. For information contact Jen Stewart at 608-356-9462 ext. 119 or email: info@savingcranes.org.

Dress for Success

“Its time to dress for success!” Researchers raising young Whooping Cranes at ICF wear full-length crane costumes to disguise the human form and use crane hand puppets to feed and interact with the chicks. Illustration by Darcy Love

Crane Duet

What happens when 15 of the world’s most charismatic birds meet the memory game Concentration? Crane Duet happens! 24 pairs of picture cards are printed on sturdy cardboard. English and German language booklet is included with information about each photo and instructions for playing two levels of Crane Duet. For 2-6 players; ages 5 and over. Price: $19.99. Shop online at www.craneshop.org, email Giftshop@savingcranes.org or call 608-356-9462 ext. 116.

NEW GIFT SHOP ITEM!

P rofessional photographer, Tom Lynn, has been photographing acres of magnificent native plants and panoramas at ICF since May of last year. He is a storyteller with a lens — helping us tell the story of ICF’s connection to ecosystem restoration — efforts that began back in 1979 to restore prairie, savanna, wetland, and woodland communities at our headquarters site in Wisconsin. It is a landscape perched near the terminal moraine of the last glaciation where decades of arduous work have resulted in over 100 acres of native beauty. Tom’s captivating photos will be on exhibit at ICF’s Donnelley Family Education Center from June 23 to October 31, 2012. Join us for the official opening on Saturday June 23rd from 3:00 to 3:30. View the exhibit, meet Tom, and walk our beautiful trails. And then, after a day with the prairie – you can spend an “Evening with the Cranes” receive free admission to our site both Saturday, June 23rd and Sunday, June 24th, 2012!

An Evening with the Cranes

As a special thank you for your support, all attendees to An Evening with the Cranes receive free admission to our site both Saturday, June 23rd and Sunday, June 24th, 2012!

For more information or to purchase tickets by phone please call 608-356-9462 ext. 121, or purchase online at www.craneshop.org. This event is rain or shine. All proceeds benefit ICF’s global conservation programs.

Photos by Christina Beam
Within a flock of Siberian Cranes at Dahuchi, a sub-lake of Poyang Lake in China, one crane had a blue band on her right leg. After several tries during misty February weather, photographer Yu Huigong finally got pictures that show the number “08” clearly on the band. The excited photographer and birder passed the news to friends and posted the picture on the Internet. These days, more and more Chinese photographers post gorgeous bird photographs online. People commented on the photo – who banded the crane, and where? Nikolai Germogenov at the Institute of Biological Problems of Cryolithozone in Yakutia (northeast Siberia) replied to the query. The Institute had banded this crane as a chick on the tundra in 1993 – nearly 19 years ago. People rejoiced to see the bird healthy with her mate and chick after so many years. This is the 19th trip she has made to Poyang Lake from the tundra and each trip she has flown nearly 3,000 miles!

Every migration, the critically endangered Siberian Crane crosses eastern China where human pressures on wetlands are intense. ICF has long been committed to the conservation of these vital stopover locations. We are grateful to the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation for a generous three-year grant that will allow us to expand activities on behalf of Siberian and other cranes and their wetland habitats. This new funding marks major growth in our China program, which is in turn a significant priority of ICF’s newly adopted Strategic Plan. Please look to future issues of The ICF Bugle and our website for updates on China, and news on the ICF Strategic Plan.