As the sun begins to rise on a cold Nebraska morning, 
I can slowly make out the faces of my viewing-blind 
mates – men and women bundled in hats and scarves, 
some with camera lenses seemingly bigger than our blind, 
others, binoculars in hand, scanning the sandbars as tens of 
thousands of Sandhill Cranes stir from their roost. This hardy 
band of bird-watchers has gathered for the annual Sandhill 
Crane migration along the Platte River, celebrated in nearby 
Kearney at the Rivers and Wildlife Celebration, one of the 
nation's longest-running wildlife festivals. 
From the wilds of Alaska to coastal Texas, from the vineyards 
of California to Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge Continued on page 2

Every year, on the King of Bhutan's birthday, the Bhutanese 
celebrate a Crane Festival at the Gangteng Goenpa temple-
monastery overlooking the valley below where their beloved 
Black-necked Cranes live. The festival celebrates the cranes’ 
return from their breeding grounds in Tibet. The festival offers 
mornings filled with song and dance in the temple courtyard 
and afternoons of skill with archery, dart and stone throwing. 

See Page 7 for Details
in Tennessee, crane festivals are springing up across North America. Crane festivals bring people together to celebrate the stunning beauty, joyful dances, and dramatic migrations of cranes, and the deep cultural connections we share with them.

Increasingly, these festivals are valuable tools for educating the public about the conservation of cranes and the important (and beautiful) places they depend on. In Steamboat Springs, Colorado, ICF member Nancy Merritt started the Yampa Valley Crane Festival to raise awareness about the proposed hunting of Sandhill Cranes in Northwest Colorado. “Sandhill Cranes are an iconic species of our area. When a Sandhill Crane hunt was narrowly averted in 2012, a new organization, Colorado Crane Conservation, put together the inaugural Yampa Valley Crane Festival,” said Nancy. “We hope that our annual crane festival will educate people about this amazing species and inspire them to protect cranes and their habitat.”

The Whooping Crane Festival in Port Aransas, Texas showcases the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, winter home to the last remaining wild population of endangered Whooping Cranes. “The Festival partners with ICF to create awareness of the Whooping Crane’s plight, celebrate the recovery efforts in the whooping whooping Whooping Cranes’ flyway from their nesting grounds in Canada, to the Gulf Coast of Texas,” said Ann Vaughan, President and CEO, Port Aransas Chamber of Commerce. “Our partnership with ICF has been the key to the festival’s success over the past 17 years. We look forward to our continued collaboration.”

Crane festivals offer a variety of social, recreational, and educational activities, including guided tours, presentations, photography and birding workshops, art exhibits, children’s activities, and trade shows. Some festivals are one-day events, whereas others last for multiple days. In Steamboat Springs, Colorado, for example, the Steamboat & Hayden Crane Festival is held from January 31 to February 3.

Crane festivals are flourishing on the continent as well. Across the vast and diverse landscapes of North America, Europe and Asia, the Crane Working Group of Eurasia has inspired Crane Celebrations at more than 120 sites in nine countries. Through music, stories, art, and games, people of all ages gain a better understanding of the threats to cranes and the need for conservation measures. The Crane Celebrations are also celebrations of culture, and of people’s relationship to nature. Perhaps the most extraordinary crane festival occurs in the tiny Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Founded by Bhutan Heritage Tours, with support from the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature and ICF, the one-day Crane Festival celebrates the return of approximately 350 Black-necked Cranes to the wetlands and grasslands in the Phobjikha Valley. The festival is now the pride of the local people, who consider cranes important in Buddhist cultures, so it’s no coincidence that the Crane Festival coincides with the King’s birthday, and the inspiring arrival in early afternoon of flocks of Black-necked Cranes as they complete their astonishing migration at amazing altitudes over the mountains. As the performers progress through this commitment, the cranes circle overhead, lowering landing gear for their arrival to spend the winter on the wetlands below the temple. As ICF celebrates its 40th anniversary, we invite you to participate in these festivals and join us in celebrating the magic of cranes.

Each spring, over 600,000 Sandhill Cranes perform their dance in the Platte River in Nebraska as a “stop on their long journey north to breeding territories. This annual wildlife spectacle draws thousands of birders from around the world and is the basis for several crane celebrations. Photo by Tom Lynn

This May I had the pleasure of returning to Vietnam, a wonderful opportunity to re-connect with people and places I’ve loved for decades. But the real reason I wanted to go back was to visit special wetlands – Tram Chim and Phu My – where ICF’s long-term conservation commitment has made a real difference for cranes, many other species of wildlife, and the people of Vietnam.

Tram Chim (meaning “Bird Swamp”) was a local nature reserve when ICF first became involved 25 years ago in hopes of saving the now the only known population of Eastern Sandcranes. Tram Chim is now the pride of the local people. Photo by Tony Tang

As we traveled by small boat across the wetland, most of the 10 million acre delta would be converted to help feed the world’s largest rice bowl, and few wetlands would survive. Even more remarkable, he understood that the seasonal ebb and flow of water and other natural processes was the key to a healthy wetland ecosystem.

IFCi’s efforts then and now have focused on realizing Nguyen Xuan Truong’s vision for Tram Chim. There is much evidence today of the benefits of wetlands. But the real reason ICF is here is the hope that wetlands will be valued for their beauty, for their wildlife, for their potential to produce fish, for their irreplaceable natural resources.

T he Mekong Delta, for cranes and the millions of people who live there are the Provincial government, once opposed to the park, announced they would commit $10 million for park research and management. Tram Chim has aged as a fine place to appreciate the management of Vietnam’s protected lands. Phu My, the last remaining wetland of its kind in the Mekong Delta, follows a different but equally successful conservation path – people sustainably harvest the sedge Lepironia to weave into household products. We visited the factory where ICF has helped a site, with skills training and production equipment so that they can make fine, export-quality handicrafts from the Lepironia they harvest. We also help them market these beautiful handiwork, destined for the world – Japan, the Middle East, even Europe. Phu My is a model for how poor people can directly benefit from conservation, while supporting vital habitat for a threatened species. After seven years, daily income has more than doubled for the 400 people who participate in the project, and – remarkably – the number of Sarus Cranes using this wetland in the winter has grown from a few birds to nearly 300 over this same time period. This unique resilient wetland, once under tremendous pressure to be converted to rice, now enjoys strong community support and government protection. I want to give a shout-out to ICFs Tran Tran and Jolene Pham, and our entire team in Vietnam, who have worked so hard and so long in this region to make these wetlands what they are today. They demonstrate a sustainable future in the Mekong Delta, for cranes and the millions of people who share these lands. Tram Chim and Phu My are great examples of the good things that happen when we make long-term commitments to people and places.
When it comes right down to it, many environmental problems that we face today are caused by people. People, therefore, will be integral to any solution that we devise to address these same problems. At ICF, our approach to conservation leadership is to discover, nurture, promote and share experiences with the conservation leaders of today and tomorrow. The career paths of Nguyen Van Hung and Nguyen Huu Thien over the last two decades illustrate just how ICF works with our many colleagues to help them engage in solving conservation challenges.

Hung first came to what is now Vietnam’s Tram Chim National Park in 1991. Though he was trained in agricultural economics, Hung was hired as Tram Chim’s first biologist and his job was to focus on the parks trams, the Rear Mangrove that was painstakingly replanted in the mid-1980s. These trees were to drive many management actions at the park in the future. Though Hung spoke no English when he first came, he spoke a language of fascination and love for the ecology of Tram Chim that I clearly understood without translation. He was one of the few people we worked with who always wanted to be in the field more, not less. With his camera always at the ready, Hung has painstakingly documented the park’s rich avifauna.

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Thien also came to Tram Chim more than two decades ago, in 1990, as a young college graduate. After a tumultuous period while negotiating the first water management plan for Tram Chim, Thien was nominated for a graduate program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under an ICF scholarship. Academically, Thien was a strong candidate. He just didn’t speak English. When asked how this barrier would be overcome, Thien’s supervisors said he had 6 months to learn enough English to attend the University. Remarkably, he did! Once his MS was completed, however, Thien did not make the planned return to Tram Chim as a biologist. Instead, he struck out on his own to become a consulting ecologist. Though unorthodox, the route Thien chose ended up helping Tram Chim far more than if he had become an employee of Tram Chim National Park.

Thien coordinated an IUCN team (that included ICF) that revised the original management plan for Tram Chim and lead to the excellent conditions that occur today. Thien now engages with environmental issues that affect the entire Mekong basin such as hydropower development and climate change. These two men knew all along that the secret to Tram Chim was the water. Debates over the management of trams versus cranes at Tram Chim evolved over almost two decades while water levels were managed both too high and too low – and while cranes proliferated, declined and increased again. Though ICF could provide the facts necessary to achieve proper management of water to restore Tram Chim, it was Hung and Thien who breathed life into ICF’s recommendations. They were willing to commit themselves to the decades required for a land ethic at Tram Chim to evolve, and for the park to become the bird paradise that Rich Beilfuss describes on the previous page. It is conservation leadership that allowed these two gifted men, and their partners, to do the work that has resulted in the 2012 designation of Tram Chim as the 2000th Wetland of International Importance.

Ensuring a Future for Whooping Cranes

When ICF took flight in 1973, the United States was swelling with political, economic, and cultural activity. The nation ended its involvement in the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal erupted, and an energy crisis took root around the world. We celebrated the opening of the World Trade Center in New York City and the first handheld mobile phone call was placed. And in 1973, the country passed the Endangered Species Act, a piece of legislation that helped prevent the Whooping Crane and many other species from becoming mere pages in our history books.

Many years, we’ve believed there will be a place for Whooping Cranes in our wetlands and skies a century from now. We’ve worked hard to make that happen – and you are a significant part of this bird’s remarkable story. With your help, ICF’s dedication and commitment to Whooping Cranes now covers a comprehensive range of conservation and reintroduction efforts to ensure a future for this endangered species. But habitat degradation, energy development, and illegal shootings pose growing threats to Whooping Crane survival.

Our work in Texas, where the last naturally occurring population migrates for winter, is helping identify more sustainable water management practices to ensure the needs of both wildlife and people are met in coastal communities, especially during periods of drought. We are also working with partners to guide critical land protection measures to safeguard suitable habitat for Whooping Cranes for many years to come. In addition, ICF and partners are assessing potential health issues, critical habitat use, and key threats for Whooping Cranes along their 2,500-mile migration route.

Photo by John Ford

Become a Whooper Keeper – guardians who contribute $1,400 or more for vital conservation efforts for the Whooping Crane. All Whooper Keeper donors are recognized with a customized plaque displayed in our celebrated Whooping Crane exhibit at our headquarters in Wisconsin.

Through your tremendous support, ICF and partners also continue the reintroduction of migratory Whooping Cranes east of the Mississippi River. Our dedicated aviculture team is tirelessly raising young cranes for release into the wild, and we plan to add as many as 10 young Whooping Cranes to the eastern migratory population this year by Direct Autumn Release. We also continue to lead field research focused on environmental factors that may be impacting breeding success in the reintroduced population. A third, non-migratory Whooping Crane population is being established by our colleagues at the White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area in Louisiana. ICF also provides eggs for this reintroduction.

In support of our comprehensive efforts to save the Whooping Crane, ICF is engaged in a nationwide education initiative to raise awareness, understanding, and appreciation for these birds among K-12 students, teachers, outdoor enthusiasts, and the general public. Over the coming years, these educational tools will cover the entire range of threats to Whooping Cranes across their North American range. Our ultimate goal is to reduce all challenges facing Whooping Cranes and to inspire additional champions for their protection.

You can help secure a future for Whooping Cranes – for all cranes – and their ecosystems worldwide. Please use the enclosed envelope to make a special gift today. Together, we can work to ensure these birds remain part of our natural legacy now and for generations to come.

Photo by Tom Lynn

Becoming a Guardian of the Whooping Crane Habitat

With your help, ICF’s work to save the Whooping Crane has brought acclimated cranes to the closed breeding grounds at Tres Amigos Island in Louisiana’s Atchafalaya Basin. But habitat degradation, energy development, and illegal shootings pose growing threats to Whooping Crane survival.

Through your tremendous support, ICF and partners also continue the reintroduction of migratory Whooping Cranes east of the Mississippi River. Our dedicated aviculture team is tirelessly raising young cranes for release into the wild, and we plan to add as many as 10 young Whooping Cranes to the eastern migratory population this year by Direct Autumn Release. We also continue to lead field research focused on environmental factors that may be impacting breeding success in the reintroduced population. A third, non-migratory Whooping Crane population is being established by our colleagues at the White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area in Louisiana. ICF also provides eggs for this reintroduction.

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Watershed Planning in Far Eastern Russia

By Sammy L. King, U.S. Geological Survey, Louisiana Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit

The Amur River floodplain supports an amazing diversity of plants and animals.

Dr. Durelle Scott of Virginia Tech University evaluates a water quality sample from a local reservoir along with Sergei Smirenski and other Russian scientists.

Drinking water containers are necessary in some villages due to groundwater contamination which is heavily polluted. Consequently, large 55 gallon drums were set at the end of each driveway to be filled with drinking water by a tanker truck.
Hatch to Release:

A PHOTO JOURNAL

In keeping with the celebration of our 40th anniversary, our chick naming theme this year is “television sitcoms and characters from the 1970s.” This little chick’s name is Fonzy, and he was photographed recently by photographer Tom Lynn. Tom is chronicling our Whooping Crane reintroduction this summer. His photo project, Hatch to Release, documents our Whooping Crane chicks from hatching and their first wobbly steps, to their eventual release in Wisconsin this fall. View Tom’s photos at:

www.savingcranes.org/hatch-to-release.html