

Nature Watch

Sarus Crane: On its Way to Extinction

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Figure 1(a) and (b) Sarus crane.

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India is the main abode of the world's tallest flying bird called the Sarus Crane. Their population, however, has shown a steady decline over the past few decades. Several factors are believed to be responsible for this. Alterations of the landscape to agriculture leading to habitat loss and other socio-ecological factors are the main reasons of this declination. This article will introduce some of these features and current status of this famous historical bird.

India has always been known for its rich natural and cultural heritage. The biodiversity is an incredible gift from nature. This article will describe the Sarus crane which is known for its immense cultural contribution. *Krauncha* is another name for the Sarus crane which is the tallest flying bird.

General Description

The scientific nomenclature of the Sarus Crane is *Grus antigone*. It is a member of the order Gruiformes. Its body is covered with white grey feathers. Its crown is covered with smooth green skin. The skin of its upper neck and head is red in color and slightly rough in texture. The sides of its ears have grey feathers. Its average weight is around 7.3 kg with a height of around 176 cm. (5.6 to 6 feet). It has a wing span of around 250 cm. (~8.5 feet).



Being the tallest flying bird on the earth gives it a royal personality. There are no clear distinguishing features between the male and the female except when they are together; the female being easily identifiable due to its slightly smaller size.

Distribution and Habitat

Fifteen species of the crane are found in different places of the world. Only Sarus crane permanently resides in India; black-necked crane breeds in Ladakh but migrates out in the winters. Demoiselle crane and Common crane are winter visitors. A fifth one, the Siberian crane became extinct in India in 2002. The total population of Sarus cranes in India is approximately between 8000 to 10000. These are distributed principally in the plains of the north, and few occur in the north-east, the north-west and the west of the country. Some can also be found in the water-logged areas of Nepal. The Gangetic plains appear to be their favorite place. The Sarus cranes are non-migratory in nature and prefer to live in the same geographical area. Some short-range migrations are reported in some species. They like to live in groups of around 2 to 5 in regions like wetlands, flood areas, ponds, lakes, canals, fallow and rice paddies. They form their nests around shallow water bodies where green shrubs, grasses and bushes are in abundance. Cranes are omnivorous and feed mainly on certain aquatic tubers, rhizomes, seeds and grains. They also eat prawns, insects, and small chordates and nonchordates.

Reproduction

Male and female mates tend to stay with one another. They normally prefer being in pairs all their lives and in the event of the death of one of them, the other remains alone. Rainy season is the main period for their reproduction. Courtship is initiated by dance. At the start of their dancing, they straighten their beaks and necks towards the sky and make peculiarly loud sounds. The first sound is made by the female and each subsequent loud sound by the male is followed by two comparatively smaller ones by the female. At the time of this sound production, males keep their beaks and necks towards the sky and flap their wings, while the

Figure 2 (left). Sarus duet.

Figure 3(right). Sarus and its chick.

Photo Courtesy:
K S Gopisunder/International Crane Foundation.



female keeps her neck and beak towards the sky without flapping her wings. They perform attractive courtship dance by flapping wings, jumping, running in small circles and throwing small pieces of wood and grass on one another. The female lays two to three eggs and these are hatched by both of them. The male Sarus is mainly protective in nature during this time. The chicks take around a month's time to come out. They are covered by soft brownish-grey feathers which become totally grey after about a year. The chicks are fed by small soft roots, insects, caterpillars and grains in the initial 4 to 5 weeks. They become ready for their first flight in about two months. The total life span of Sarus crane is around 18 years.

Social Status

The Sarus crane has always had a privileged social status in India. Many myths are associated with this bird. This bird is also known as the eternal symbol of unconditional love and devotion and good fortune. In some parts of India there is a tradition of having a newly-wed couple view a Sarus pair. It is believed that if one bird of the pair were to die, then the other follows the path towards starvation by refusing any food or water. It is clear that this bird has a special position in social folklores and this is reflected in its mention in some Indian folk stories and songs.

Conservation Status

The existence of this bird is under threat. According to a report of International Union of Conservation of Nature, this bird is classified as a vulnerable species (VUA2cde+3cde). This number denotes a global decline in its population. The species has already become extinct in Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. There are many causes which contribute towards its declining numbers. Some of them are the rapid increase in agricultural land area, dwindling wetlands, indiscriminate use of pesticides and other agents and increasing human population. Drastic climatic changes and pollution are some of the reasons. Apart from these causes, high tension electric wires are a main danger for them. These high tension poles are usually located everywhere in the landscape, and result in many deaths of Sarus Cranes each year. There is evidence of illegal trafficking of its chicks and eggs. Due to its size, adult birds face no threats from other predator birds like kites, crows, etc. Crows sometimes take their eggs and many predators including jackals and birds of prey (like Harriers) prey upon chicks but this happens only when the adults are away from their nests. The increasing population of feral and domestic dogs is causing higher mortality of Sarus chicks. It has been observed that the Sarus crane flourishes at those places which are away from urbanization and industrialization. Some tribes of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat hunt this bird. They are almost extinct in these areas.



Possibilities

For protecting this symbol of glory, we have to work at very broad levels. Actually there is no one reason of its threatening decline as we have seen, but all the causes are collectively responsible. For preventing it from becoming extinct, we have to take care of the whole ecosystem, besides just the Sarus crane and this cannot be achieved without a global awareness about nature and its conservation. Some national and international organizations are doing notable work in this area but any work can only be successful when every person contributes. It is also true that while nature has enough to fulfill the requirement of everyone, it has no place for greed. This Gandhian vision about nature is very true in the modern context.

We should remember that our culture has always asked us to be one with nature. The critical condition of the status of this bird, the Sarus crane indicates that somewhere we are overstepping the boundaries. The time has come to become aware, for otherwise tomorrow might be too late.

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Suggested Reading

- [1] A Guide to the Cranes of India by Prakash Gole. Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai.
Sarus Crane, Internet Resource Website, <http://www.savingcranes.org/saruscrane.html>

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