



North America

In North America, cranes play an important role in the cultures of Native Americans, who have used crane bones and feathers for domestic and ceremonial purposes for hundreds of years and depict cranes in both ancient and modern art. Cranes are also symbols of tribal Clans, or extended family or kinship groups, and are important characters in many Native American myths.

In Chaco Canyon, an ancient Anasazi settlement in northwestern New Mexico, archaeologists have found crane bones that were cut and polished to form tools by the ancestors of the modern Pueblo people over one thousand years ago! These tools include awls, which were used to punch holes in leather and other materials, and hollow tubes that may have been used as beads or other ornamental items. The Crow and northern Cheyenne of Montana also modified crane bones, making small whistles, which they blew in preparation for battle, from the wing bones of sandhill cranes. Today, the Pueblo cultures of Arizona and New Mexico continue to use crane feathers in their religious ceremonies. In Arizona, the Navajo make medicine pouches from the heads of sandhill cranes and use crane bills as medicine spoons!

In the American Southwest, pictures of cranes are also found in rock art, ceremonial murals, and on ceramic vessels. In rock art, both petroglyphs and pictographs representing flying cranes, crane tracks (which are possibly Clan symbols), and standing cranes were painted and carved by Native Americans. The pictograph of flying cranes (in the figure to the right) is from the Nogales Cliff House in north central New Mexico. The settlement was occupied in the mid-13th century by members of the Gallina Culture.

For several Native American cultures, the crane is a Clan totem, or a symbol or emblem of a family or kinship group. For example, the Hopi Tribe of Arizona have a Crane Clan and the Sandhill Crane Clan is one of the many clans in the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico. The 'Ah-ji-awak,' or Crane, is also one of the original seven Clans of the Ojibway in the Great Lakes region in eastern North America. In the Ojibway culture, the Crane and Loon Clans traditionally serve as tribal leaders. Members of Crane Clans have an intimate relationship with cranes and often have many images of cranes in their homes.

Under the **American Indian Religious Freedom Act**

enacted in 1978, U.S. federal law protects the traditional rights of Native Americans to use crane feathers and other parts of these birds for religious purposes.

A **pictograph** is a picture or drawing painted on a rock, and a **petroglyph** is a picture that is carved on rock.

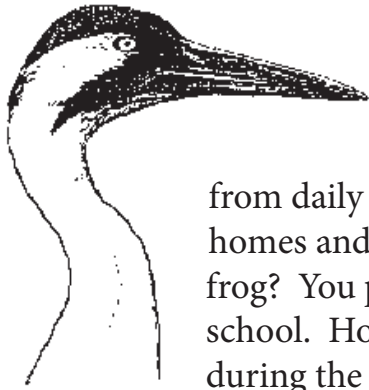


A pictograph of flying cranes
Nogales Cliff House,
New Mexico
courtesy of Stewart Peckham

Prehistoric **rock art** depicting cranes is also found in **Africa**, **Australia**, and **Europe**.



People and the Natural Environment



What do you know about the plants and animals around your home or school? Can you identify an aster or maybe a Sandhill Crane?

Our knowledge about our natural environment may be gained through reading and research in school, but it also develops from daily observations in our yards, city parks, and other natural areas near our homes and schools. For example, where did you learn about the life cycle of a frog? You probably have studied the life cycle of frogs in your science classes in school. However, you may have also collected tadpoles in a neighborhood creek during the summer and learned about the development of frogs through these direct observations.

The following excerpt is from an account by a member of the Cree Red Earth Band in western Canada on the history of Whooping Cranes near the Red Earth Indian Reserve in Saskatchewan. The Whooping Crane no longer breeds in this region today, but the birds still lived in the region when the reserve was created in mid-1800s. The individual's account describes observations of the Whooping Crane, or *waapichichaak* in Cree, made by himself when he was a young man in the early 1900s and by his grandfather, possibly in the late 1800s. Note that he describes the habitat where the crane lives, its nesting behavior, hunting of the Whooping Crane by the Cree, and the eventual disappearance of the Whooping Crane from the region.



Asters are native prairie plants in North America.

What does this account tell you about the relationship between the Cree and the natural environment? To answer this question, think about the observations made by the young man and his grandfather about the animals and plants near their home. What do they know about the natural resources on their land and how do they use these resources?

Drawing from information in the account, why do you think the Whooping Crane is no longer found in the area today?



Whooping Cranes in the Red Earth Region

By: Silas Head

“My grandfather saw Whooping Cranes here a long time ago in the spring. They were walking in the water on the edge of the marsh. That was before the willows grew up there. My grandfather, Okimawipimotew, tried to kill them but he couldn’t do it. He got very close but they flew before he shot. Miikwanaakeskam [another member of the Tribe] said he saw lots of white cranes out on the prairies before the white men came.

When I was a young man there were a few Whooping Cranes around Kennedy Creek to the north of here. We saw them just about every summer. One time, long ago, I was with a hunting party that was after moose on Kennedy Creek. One of the old men, Samuel Nawakayas, knew that we were there and he left Red Earth to come and join us. On his way he noticed some Whooping Cranes, two of them, and he went over to have a closer look, not able to shoot either of them. While he was there he found their nest. It was not a very good nest, just a few sticks on the ground in the swamp. He found three* eggs in the nest and he took them to be eaten. When he found us at Kennedy Creek, he told us about the cranes and the eggs.

In the 1930s there was a big forest fire, which burned throughout the whole territory to the north of Red Earth. It came from the west, from the farming settlement, and it burned across Kennedy Creek and as far east as the Sipanok Channel. After the fire we didn’t see the Whooping Cranes anymore.”

*Commenting on the number of eggs found in the nest, the authors note that normally Whooping Cranes lay only two eggs. However, they also note that there have been recorded reports of Whooping Crane nests that contain three eggs.

Reprinted with permission from “Indian Bird Identification and Whooping Cranes at Red Earth, Saskatchewan,” *Blue Jay* 32(3), 1974 by David Myer, Silas Head, and Donald McKay.

ACTIVITY 1:

Write an account from your personal observations of an animal or plant near your home or school. You might choose to describe the activities of a cardinal or other bird at your family’s birdfeeder, or describe how a squirrel collects and stores nuts in preparation for the winter in your backyard. Do you live near wild cranes? If so, describe their daily activities that you have observed, such as where they roost, or sleep at night, where they feed during the day, or how they raise their young.

ACTIVITY 2:

Interview your grandparents or another older relative or family friend about an animal that they observed as children. Where and when did they see the animal? Do the animals still live in the areas where they remember seeing them as children? If not, why do you think the animals are no longer found in these areas?



Do A Crane Dance

Did you know that cranes dance? Cranes dance to express happiness, to relieve stress, and as part of their courtship behavior. All species of cranes dance, and both unmated cranes and pairs dance. The dance consists of a series of coordinated leaps, bows, wing flapping, and tossing small sticks, feathers, or other objects into the air.

Many cultures throughout the world have also incorporated dances that copy the graceful movements of cranes into their traditional ceremonies and dances. Crane dances are performed by cultures in North America, the Mediterranean, China, Siberia, Japan, and Australia.

People have been performing crane dances for thousands of years. For example, people in western Sweden painted pictographs of dancers performing a crane dance over 5,000 years ago! In Australia, the Aboriginal people have incorporated crane dances into their *corroborees*, or traditional ceremonies that reenact the history of tribes. In one Aboriginal tribe in Australia, only the men perform the “Dance of the Brolga.” The men paint their bodies with traditional designs and wear a headdress made of bird feathers. As they dance, they mimic the calls of the crane and copy the movements of the bird using their bodies. In contrast, among the Ainu of Japan, the women perform the crane dance. The Ainu women hold their shawls around themselves to look like the wings of a crane and, like the Aboriginal people, copy the calls of the crane as they dance.



Whooping Cranes dancing



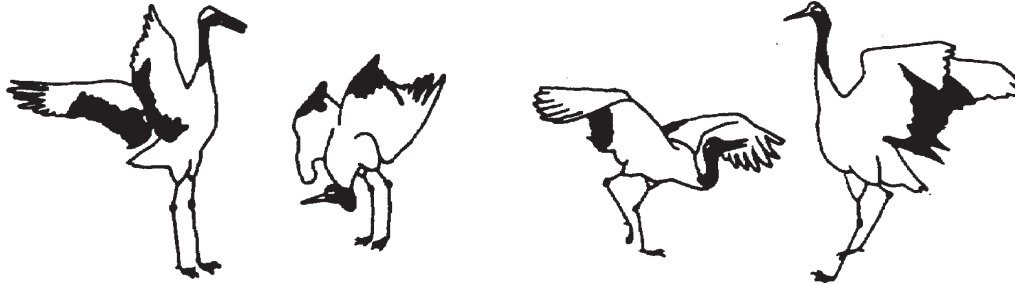
Wattled Cranes leaping (above)
and bowing (right)



Using the figures of cranes dancing provided on the next page as examples, develop your own crane dance with your class. You may dance alone, with another student, or in a large group. How do you feel while you are dancing? Why do you think so many people have incorporated the crane dance into their cultures?



Crane Dances



head bobbing



wing flapping

jumping



bowing



twig tossing