

The ICF **Bugle**
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The Long Flight

Tracking White-naped Cranes from Mongolia to Poyang Lake in southern China

By Jim Harris, Senior Vice President



This past winter, Mongolian scientists came to Poyang to study White-naped Cranes. That visit, and plans for Poyang Lake National Nature Reserve staff to visit Mongolia this summer, led to this heartwarming note from Zhu Qi, Director of Poyang Lake NNR, to the Mongolian researchers:

It is not only our duty but also our honor to protect the migratory birds, including the White-naped Cranes, and their habitats, for the migratory birds are not only the key species to maintain the global biodiversity, but also the bridge and the link to maintain the friendship among the countries where the birds take as their habitats and stopover sites. Above all, the White-naped Cranes are the witness of the friendship between us.

We have deeply realized that we can't only depend on our own efforts to protect the global rare and endangered migratory birds. So we should enhance international project cooperation, and keep in touch and share information with the breeding habitats and stopover sites in the flyway.

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Those watching over the cranes of East Asia write often of the Siberian Crane, Critically Endangered and dependent in the winter on a single site, Poyang Lake in southeastern China. Until now, the Vulnerable White-naped Crane has received less attention although it shares the same flyways across eastern China. This photo comes from a migratory stopover site in Keshiketeng Qi, Inner Mongolia. Photo by Sun Shaohai



**Evening
with the
Cranes**

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On the vast shallows and meadows emerging from water during the winter dry season, the White-naped Cranes at Poyang Lake mix with Siberian Cranes. While numbers of the latter species have held steady, 10 years ago White-naped at Poyang numbered roughly 3,000 but now are half that number or less. We don't know precisely why.

Additional White-naped Cranes migrate through Korea, wintering mainly along the Demilitarized Zone and at Izumi in southern Japan. This eastern population has remained roughly stable, perhaps because wetlands have been less affected by drought than those along the western flyway.

For cranes with long migrations, their future depends on foraging habitats and safety all along the flyways. For this reason, ICF has been coordinating crane monitoring by a network of biologists, nature reserve managers, and citizen volunteers across eastern and northeastern China. Last summer we had the opportunity to work with Mongolia's Wildlife Science and Conservation Center and the U.S. Forest Service, to capture and mark six White-naped Cranes in the Khurkh River Valley of northeast Mongolia (see *The ICF Bugle*, November 2013 issue). Signals from telemetry units on some of these birds provided GPS locations via satellite or whenever the birds passed near cell towers. The Mongolians color banded an additional 35 birds. Of four cranes tracked south from Mongolia, one signal was lost a short distance north of Poyang (perhaps the equipment failed, or was the bird lost?). The other three arrived at Poyang for the winter along with other color-marked cranes.

We have suspected that the decline in White-naped was due in part to drying up of the wetlands since 2000 in the heart of the breeding range (Mongolia and adjacent parts of China and Russia). The last two breeding seasons have brought wetter conditions. Yet extremes of weather bring perils. At Muraviovka Park in Russia, for example, a record 25 pairs nested in 2013; yet severe flooding drowned nests or chicks for all but three pairs.

Poyang this past winter had severe drought, and some thought the low water conditions might threaten wintering birds, but the counts across the basin that ICF sponsored found 600,000 waterbirds, a very high number. ICF also supported a graduate student from Beijing Forestry University, Cheng Yachang, to track local movements of



the marked White-naped Cranes through the winter. The cranes stayed mostly in the northwest part of the lake, within or near Poyang Lake NNR, highlighting the significance of the sub lakes that separate from the main lake in autumn.

We invited Jiao Shengwu, Jia Yifei and a team of students from Beijing Forestry University to follow the cranes on fall and spring migration. As I write, the cranes are lingering in China where a characteristically chilly spring has arrived. The breeding grounds in Mongolia, at high elevations, have not yet thawed. Thus, we are learning that the migratory stopovers may be particularly important in spring. Duolun, a grassland in southern Inner Mongolia which the cranes used both fall and spring, will be an important area to protect.

We learn more from intensive tracking activities because of our active network of observers. Thanks to bird watchers from nearby Beijing, we know that Miyun Reservoir has also become a key migration site, with 1,330 White-naped Cranes

counted this March – the highest recent count anywhere in the flyway. Yet the cranes did not stay there long in fall 2013, apparently due to disturbance from farming activities nearby. All three of the tracked cranes stopped at Beidagang Reservoir in Tianjin, the site of a severe poisoning incident in fall 2012 which killed over 20 Oriental Storks; the Tianjin City Government shows strengthening commitment to effective management and bird protection for Beidagang. We will develop proposals for the other key stopover sites. Flyway monitoring also received support from ConocoPhillips and the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation.



White-naped Cranes winter with Siberian Cranes at Poyang Lake, China. Photo by Luo Jianhong

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Editor: Betsy Didrickson

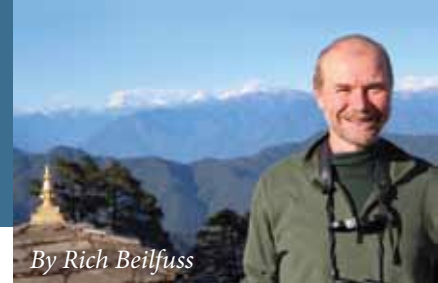
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Notes from the President

Picturing a Future for Whooping Cranes



By Rich Beilfuss

I would have failed photography school. Whenever I find myself in the exotic crane places of the world, I am flanked by photographers who are able to capture the elegance and excitement – the pure charisma – of cranes in the most breathtaking ways. My camera, however, tends to focus less on the dramatic beauty and more on the menacing threats to the crane world. A Blue Crane roosting under a big, ugly powerline – click! A Wattled Crane struggling to feed on a parched, dusty floodplain – snap!

In Texas, the “money shot” I’ve long sought is a Whooping Crane searching for blue crabs in a hyper-saline coastal marsh...against a backdrop of oil supertankers and petrochemical-laden barges traversing the inter-coastal waterway. To me, such photos – while disturbing – express the real story of cranes as symbols of the struggle to secure a future for wildlife, wild places, and people amidst the inexorable march of progress.

Last month, I traveled to Texas for further conversations about land and water management in the Guadalupe-San Antonio River basin. Some of the best minds in Texas are collaborating to find innovative solutions for getting water where it is desperately needed to sustain the Whooping Cranes’ estuarine wintering grounds and the communities who live along the coast. We applauded the efforts of San Antonio, which has some of the most effective water conservation practices in the country, while recognizing that such efforts alone are not sufficient to secure enough fresh water for the coast. We strategized how to reach senior water rights holders who might be sympathetic to downstream needs, and how we might purchase those waters but leave them in-stream. We explored strategies to divert waters to aquifer storage systems during times of excess, to be pumped back and “recovered” as stream flow during times of need. And we anxiously await the outcome of The Aransas Project lawsuit in hopes that it will mandate new opportunities for sharing waters upstream and downstream.

At the same time, ICF’s Whooping Crane Conservation Biologist Dr. Liz Smith was completing a major two-year study to determine how much more coastal habitat would be needed (especially with projected sea level rise) to support a goal of 1,000 cranes, including 250 pairs, on their wintering grounds around Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The study, which also looked at the needs of 22 other vulnerable bird

species in this region, will be used to prioritize opportunities for securing additional habitat along the Texas coast.

And just before my arrival, the 18th annual Port Aransas Whooping Crane Festival enjoyed resounding success, with more than 600 attendees from 28 states and 5 countries. The festival showcased the commitment of the local community to the future of Whooping Cranes in Texas, while participants from Wood Buffalo National Park in far northwest Canada reinforced the continental importance of the species.

Amidst this backdrop of optimism for the future of whoopers, water, and wetlands, came an event that many of us feared inevitable – another oil spill on the Texas coast. On March 22, an oil tanker collided with a petrochemical barge in Galveston Bay, spilling about 170,000 gallons of crude oil into the bay. As I write, we don’t fully understand how this story will play out. The collision is not as close to the crane wintering grounds as it could have been, the spill is not as large as the BP or Exxon Valdez spills, and, thanks to the quick action of the U.S. Coast Guard and other agencies, it was quickly contained. But heavy tar soils beaches on Matagorda Island adjacent to the crane wintering grounds and oil has drifted into the Gulf – where it may affect bay organisms that depend on Gulf waters to complete their life cycle, causing disruption to the food chain that sustains the only naturally-occurring flock of Whooping Cranes in the world. Just as concerning, the spill will impact countless seabirds, shorebirds, sea turtles, and other marine life, and harm the local fishing and tourism-based economy.

At times like these, our commitment to establishing a separate flock of Whooping Cranes in the eastern United States, where the pressures on land and water are somewhat less, feels all the more important. But the story in Texas is much bigger than Whooping Cranes. Whooping Cranes are a flagship for the many species of less-known and less-appreciated waterbirds, and for the way of life that people on the Gulf Coast have appreciated for decades. I look forward to the day when our photographs reveal nothing more than 1,000 Whooping Cranes on the Texas coast, feeding on abundant crabs among the lush, green marshes, with a backdrop of fishing boats and Whooper Watch cruises.

Whooping Cranes Face Significant Bumps on Their

Road to Recovery

Recent distressing reports of Whooping Cranes being shot in Kentucky and Louisiana reflect a frightening trend of illegal shootings across the United States. Over the past five years, at least 18 Whooping Cranes have been shot and killed. These disturbing acts of violence have seriously affected all three Whooping Crane populations – from breeding grounds in Wisconsin, to wintering habitat in Texas, and all along the cranes' flyways. For the population re-introduced in the eastern migratory flyway, nearly 20% of all crane deaths have resulted from illegal shootings.

The Whooping Crane is the rarest of the world's crane species. Only about 600 Whooping Cranes exist in the world today. Their historic decline, near extinction, and gradual but fragile recovery is among conservation's best known success stories. Since 1973, ICF and partners have made great strides in the protection and reintroduction of these birds, but the road to recovery is far from finished. As the Whooping Crane population grows, threats to the species increase – some new and emerging, some ongoing – as the birds embark on their demanding annual migrations, braving many obstacles along the way.

The only self-sustaining wild flock of Whooping Cranes includes approximately 300 birds that migrate between breeding grounds in northern Canada to wintering habitat in south Texas. To ensure that the fate of the species is not dependent on just this one flock, ICF and partners are reintroducing a second population of Whooping Cranes that migrates between central Wisconsin and southeastern states. Additionally, a third non-migratory flock is being reintroduced in Louisiana. Tragically, one of the cranes recently shot and killed was the first successful breeding female of the reintroduced migratory flock.

In an effort to mitigate the shooting risks for Whooping Cranes, ICF is pushing forward with our **Keeping Whooping Cranes Safe** program, an effort to better understand and reduce the hazards these birds face.

With partners across the country, ICF will:

- Expand our education initiatives to engage children and communities to protect Whooping Cranes.
- Inspire citizens and decision-makers across the nation for successful prosecution and stiffer penalties in Whooping Crane shooting cases.
- Organize community "Whooper Watch" groups in areas where Whooping Cranes share the landscapes.
- Collaborate with resource agencies, hunting groups, and outdoor businesses to educate hunters along the Whooping Cranes' flyways to identify the birds on the ground and in flight, and how to distinguish them from other birds that can be legally hunted.

With these efforts and many others, ICF is committed to ensuring the Whooping Crane's future. This iconic species needs our help more than ever on the road to recovery. Please make a gift today to help us protect Whooping Cranes and their habitats.

ICF is deeply troubled by the deaths of these Whooping Cranes. With this imperiled species, every crane counts toward recovery. Our education and outreach efforts along the flyway are focused on the responsible stewardship of Whooping Cranes, and our commitment to the future of these magnificent birds remains as strong as ever.

— Rich Beilfuss, ICF President & CEO

What Can You Do to Help?

Cranes inspire everyone in different ways. However they inspire you – you can make a difference by **supporting the International Crane Foundation** with a gift directed toward Whooping Crane conservation.

- Share the video *Help Us Save the Whooping Crane* to spread the word that disturbing, harassing or killing Whooping Cranes is a crime (<http://youtu.be/gvSBkApblr4>).
- Consider joining the **Whooper Keepers** – guardians who contribute \$1,000 or more for vital conservation efforts. As a *Whooper Keeper*, you will be recognized with a plaque, bearing your special message, for display in ICF's celebrated Whooping Crane exhibit at the headquarters in Wisconsin.

Whooping Cranes nos. 33-07 and 05-09, seen here at their summer territory in Wisconsin, were shot in Kentucky in November, 2013. Whooping Cranes are protected under two federal laws: the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. *Photo by Ted Thousand*

Tsurui Ito Tancho Sanctuary in Japan. *Photo by John M. Wright*

Travel with George Archibald and Rich Beilfuss on a December 2014 tour of Asia:

CHINA, SOUTH KOREA, AND JAPAN!

Join ICF Co-founder George Archibald and CEO Rich Beilfuss in early December 2014 to experience two of the most important spots for cranes in East Asia. The first will be Poyang Lake in China where almost all the world's Critically Endangered Siberian Cranes spend the winter. The second important visit will be the Korean DMZ where more than half of the mainland Red-crowned Cranes winter and more than two-thirds of the world's White-naped Cranes rest during migration or remain through winter. These amazing wetlands support some of the biggest concentrations, and some of the rarest waterbirds in Asia! The journey will conclude with a stay in beautiful Hokkaido, Japan, where as many as 1,500 Red-crowned Cranes perform their graceful dances on the snowy landscape. For more information about this adventure, please call Jen Stewart at (608) 356-9462 ext.119, or email travel@savingcranes.org.



An Evening with the Cranes

Saturday, June 21, 2014 from 5 – 8 pm
ICF Headquarters
E11376 Shady Lane Road, Baraboo, WI

Tickets are \$50 for members and \$60 for non-members. Tickets and information are available online at savingcranes.org or by calling 608-356-9462 ext. 116. We look forward to seeing you on June 21st!

Photos by Deb Johnson



Crane and Turtle Porcelain Tea Cup Set

This elegant set of porcelain tea cups is decorated with two auspicious symbols of long life. The Crane, who, according to folklore, lives one thousand years, and the Turtle, who lives ten thousand years. One cup is slightly larger than the other, and the finely detailed design is accented in gold. The set comes in a sturdy wooden box to protect these beautiful cups

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CRANE NEWS From Around The World

Eurasian Cranes Breed in Scotland!

By Hywel Maggs, Conservation Officer, North East Scotland, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Old records, artifacts and place names indicate an historical familiarity with cranes in Scotland, but definitive evidence of breeding is hard to come by – until recently. We have anticipated the re-colonization of Scotland by breeding Eurasian Cranes for some years now. The pattern of movement and breeding colonization by cranes across north-west Europe over the past two decades



indicated that occupation of Scottish breeding sites was pretty much inevitable. The re-colonization of the United Kingdom (UK) began in England during the late 1970's in Norfolk. Since the 1990's numbers have increased and new English sites have increased. In 2012, the UK population stood at 22 pairs.

A pair of Eurasian Cranes was suspected to have unsuccessfully bred in Caithness, Scotland in 1997, but it was not until 2012 that breeding was confirmed in North East Scotland. This is the first confirmed breeding in Scotland in modern times, with a single chick fledging in 2012 and 2013. The cranes are extremely susceptible to disturbance, so the site location is being kept confidential. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Scotland has been coordinating monitoring of breeding activity and disturbance through a Crane Conservation Group, made up of a small group of RSPB staff, volunteers and local landowners. The mixed farming system in the area appears to be benefitting the cranes, and we would like to thank all the farmers who are helping the cranes gain a breeding foothold in Scotland. The local community is aware of the birds' presence. They understand the disturbance issue and are generally supportive of actions to protect the cranes.

Now Published! Study on Persistent Organic Pollutants in Mekong River Basin

In 2010, the International Crane Foundation was contacted by the U.S. Department of State with a request to survey Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) in the Mekong River Basin and to study the possible impact of POPs on human health and the environment. Within a year, and with the help of eight Southeast Asian Universities, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the United States Geological Survey, 531 samples were collected and analyzed for 21 POPs from 450 wetlands across Southeast Asia. The overall results of the POPs study provide a strong baseline for future research and conservation efforts. The full report is now published and can be viewed and downloaded at: pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2013/5196/.

ICF Field Ecology Director Jeb Barzen and ICF Southeast Asia Program Director Dr. Tran Triet, have worked in the Mekong River Basin since 1988, coordinating community projects, long-term wetland restoration activities, and training a new generation



of wetland managers. Working with eight founding institutions, ICF facilitated the establishment of a University Network in Southeast Asia to start a training program in wetland ecology and management for students and professionals in the Mekong Basin. Never before has such an extensive survey been collected within such a short time period. Engaging the University Network to study and assess the magnitude and distribution of POPs across wetlands of the Mekong Basin will help form the basis for describing and mapping wetlands and their characteristics throughout the region. This work, in turn, will lead to a better ability to assess changes this diverse region will face in the next few decades.

Without the network it would have cost ten times the amount and taken twice as long to complete this important project. The cooperation and effort displayed by these students with such diverse backgrounds was inspiring. —Jeb Barzen



Photo by Phillip Vasseur

Eggstra Special News from Louisiana

By Betsy Didrickson

Recently, a Whooping Crane nest with two eggs was confirmed in Louisiana – making it the first nest with eggs in that state for 75 years. We might call this “breaking news” but we don't want to jinx the historic hatch of the eggs produced by a reintroduced pair. The hatch is estimated to occur after this issue goes to press. It is unknown if the eggs are fertile, but Sara Zimorski, a biologist with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries said that, “it is encouraging so early in the project to have a pair of birds mate, build a nest and give such careful attention to protecting the clutch of eggs, even hunkering down over the nest during a recent hail storm.”

During the 19th century, the Whooping Crane's range in North America decreased dramatically and by the late 1930's, only two populations of wild Whooping Cranes remained; a small non-migratory population near White Lake in southwestern Louisiana, and the migratory population that summers in Canada and winters in coastal Texas. Louisiana Whooping Cranes last nested in the wild in 1939. In 1940, a hurricane on August 7th devastated a twenty-mile swath of southwest Louisiana. The hurricane ravaged the small population of Whooping Cranes reducing its numbers from thirteen birds to only six individuals. By 1950, only one bird remained of the six birds that survived the storm. That last Louisiana whooper was captured and taken to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, where it perished six months later.

Sixty years later, 50 Whooping Cranes have been reintroduced at White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area in Louisiana. Since the reintroduction began in 2011, approximately 30 birds have survived. One pair began nest-building last year, but this is the first occurrence of reproduction. In light of the recent shooting deaths of Whooping Cranes in Louisiana, this is indeed promising news for this recovering species.

Largest Protected Environment in South Africa Declared at Chrissiesmeer

By Ursula Franke, Senior Field Officer, Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT)

A major milestone for the conservation of South Africa's grasslands was reached in January when approximately 150,000 acres of South Africa's Lakes District, Chrissiesmeer, was proclaimed a Protected Environment. This declaration will add significantly to the conservation of key habitat for all three of South Africa's crane species – the Blue Crane, Grey Crowned Crane and Wattled Crane. This new protection status is a legal safeguard against prevalent unsustainable development in the area, while working toward economically-viable livestock production and tourism, water security, improved veld condition, and biodiversity conservation. This momentous achievement was made possible through the collaborative efforts of the ICF/EWT partnership, Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA), the South African National Biodiversity Institute, and World and BirdLife South Africa.

One of the key objectives in the ICF/EWT Africa Program is to secure areas important to cranes, in collaboration with local communities and other relevant stakeholders. Local communities still have the use of their land for their livelihoods, but in a way that ensures the ecological integrity of the site. The Chrissiesmeer Lakes District is a proposed Ramsar site (Wetlands of International Importance) and provides critical habitat for numerous threatened species. These range from South Africa's national bird, the Blue Crane, to African Grass Owls and the Golden Mole. An entirely new freshwater crab species, apparently preferring peat wetlands, has also recently been discovered in Chrissiesmeer. Formally protecting these critical habitat areas, which are all under immense pressure from unsustainable development, is of great importance both for the charismatic species we know and love, as well as for the lesser known and completely unknown species that are still being discovered.

In partnership with MTPA and with funding from the World Wildlife Fund Nedbank Green Trust and Millstream, the ICF/EWT partnership spearheaded landowner engagements in Chrissiesmeer, that culminated in the declaration of the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment. For Chrissiesmeer this is only Phase 1, and once the management plan is completed and being implemented by the 60 landowners currently involved, Phase 2 will commence where we aim to include the remaining 50,000 acres so that the entire Chrissiesmeer catchment can be formally protected. Each July, local residents and Endangered Wildlife Trust staff organize the Chrissiesmeer Crane Festival to celebrate the area's cranes – and this year especially, we have a lot to celebrate!

Lesser Flamingoes on Lake Chrissie, the largest natural freshwater lake in South Africa. Photo by Ursula Franke





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Archie's Adventures

Stay tuned as Archie the Whooping Crane travels around the world to ICF's priority crane areas to showcase the work that's being done to protect cranes and their habitats. You can follow Archie's adventures on our Facebook page, Twitter feed and in our e-newsletter, *The Contact Call*. We are sending Archie out into the world soon and we're excited to see where he ends up. If you would like to follow Archie, please visit our website at www.savingcranes.org/travels-with-archie.html where you will find instructions on the different ways you can see Archie in action. If you would like your own Archie - visit www.craneshop.org and look for a special promotion!

