

# THE EUROPEAN CRANE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN IN 1985

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## Historical

Old records show that the "Common Crane" (*Grus grus*) was a resident British bird in reasonable numbers in the British Isles previous to the 16th century. I have sometimes wondered why in U.K. We call this splendid bird "Common" because that is one thing it certainly is not in that country.

The significance of this "Common" adjective is possible some proof of its former numerical presence in U.K.

There were well authenticated reports of breeding as well as migrating birds in England and they were predominantly in the lower eastern areas of the country.

As with so many areas of extensive wetlands the possible habitats have been reduced in modern times but much of the early disappearance of these birds was caused by human activities. Guns became more universal. Agriculture became more intensive and was worth extending into previously untouchable places in the marshes. There is also evidence that a Crane was considered to be a delicacy for eating and records exist of their being an important part or indeed a complete course at banquets.

There is likely to have been some confusion between Cranes and Herons in early reports. They obviously can be confused by local people and as they share similar requirements of habitat and location there must have been some duplication of the one species with the other. Falconry was a form of sport which certainly favoured both cranes and herons as quarry.

Guns for sport and hunting for more than merely acquiring one for the pot became more widespread. By the 1650's it seems that the "Common Crane" ceased successful breeding in Britain completely all accounts.

## Current distribution in the U.K.

Up to about 1962 from the beginning of the 20th Century the European Crane records show this bird to have been described as a rare vagrant in Gt. Britain as a whole. Most of the sightings were on migration and the numbers low. However there were records from almost every county in the British Isles including Scotland as well. There seem to have been no complete over winterings or breeding reports at all at that time. Since the 1960's the numbers of sightings have increased and although they tend to have been in the east and south it seems that more European Cranes have chosen to visit the country. The overwintering seems to have become more frequent too. There has of course been an enormous increase in general interest in birds in U.K. as elsewhere and this fact may well have produced better recordings and more pairs of human eyes to note these things more effectively.



## To start the present situation in U.K.

In September 1979 a pair of European Cranes arrived in the Broadland area of East Norfolk. They were first seen by a local farmer who had no great knowledge of birds but was used to certain species seen in the course of his daily work in the marshes including Herons. He came to me with some excitement in his voice to describe that he had seen "two of the biggest bloody herons I have ever seen in my life". The sequence followed on from this report which was on land near my home and although I did not see these two birds till a few days afterwards they were undoubtedly the same creatures which persisted off and on in the area till the present time. Hence in fact my presence here at this conference.

If it had not been for that pair of Cranes to drop in one September day in 1979 near my base I would not only have missed a wonderful trip to India with the I.C.F. in 1983 also no doubt would have missed the chance to enjoy this present get together in Hungary so I am extremely grateful to all concerned from *George Archibald* and the I.C.F. to *Drs. Joost van der Ven*, and our hosts here plus of course that pair of Cranes which stirred my special interests in the field.

The area which these birds have chosen to reside is technically perfect in crane sense. There are large areas of open marsh with summer grazing of cattle which is mostly grass still with intercutting of drainage ditches we call dykes. There are numerous areas of lake and swamp country locally known as Broads, and the largest industry in the district is farming which provides a variety of food crops—which a crane happily feeds upon.

The climate is reasonable in crane terms too although some winters since 1979 must have caused this particular pair some anxious times.

Except for the occasional sortie away at various times this pair of Cranes has remained in the area ever since. There have been other individuals who have joined the pair at times, and the number has varied between the two up to six at one moment in the district.

I said that the choice of location was technically perfect in crane terms but there are many snags to the area as well in the same sense. The various human pressures are considerable from straight farming activities to sheer over enthusiasm by bird watchers, and coupled with the fact that the Norfolk Broads is a very popular holiday area for a great number of people on foot, in boats and for all sorts of other reason.

## The status from 1980 till the present time

There has been much discussion in ornithological circles about why these particular cranes chose to stay in the district which they have. A possible reason was shortly after the first pair were seen a third single crane arrived and soon after a fourth. One of these extra birds was found by someone partly entangled by some nylon near a ditch, and was taken to a local wildfowl reserve for treatment. This bird eventually recovered and was released back into the wild where it re-joined its friends during the late winter of 1980. Owing to this injury and loss of a companion the other extra crane stayed about with main pair for all that first winter and may have partly created a local flock sense which gave the three of them security in an otherwise new surrounding.

Another very important factor in that first winter was food. It so happened that there was an abundance of un-harvested potatoes on one particular farm in the area



and the cranes found ample food by digging at these even in quite hard frost condition. There was also a good start to their winter feeding in a late harvest of grain in some fields with plenty of loose grain about and unburnt straw which the birds spent much time turning about for grain and worms beneath.

The human disturbance factor started at a reasonably low key because these cranes had luckily chosen to live on a place which does not encourage ad lib public access. Inevitably word gets round of rarities among the Twitcher brigade in U.K. as I am sure it does everywhere nowadays. However very careful control of access in the area was maintained, and on the whole the birds had sufficient privacy to feel secure enough to stay throughout the winter of 1980.

So there they were from September round to March reasonably undisturbed for both feeding and roosting and not flying much further than a three mile radius in that time. Sometimes there were four together sometimes three and occasionally just the one extra alone. Luckily the individuals were easy to recognise and the main pair were most distinct with the male showing a big black bussel, and the female a pale grey one with flecks of black along its side. The extra birds were less obvious but different again in their bussels. The term bussel may not be a correct one for that part of the cranes feathered anatomy but it serves a most useful identity feature for my descriptions of individuals.

Interested people in the area accepted that these birds stayed over the winter but they said—"You wait till the March migration times. They will be off". Well March did come and they stayed on with intermittent flights around the area. I was worried they might go away I must admit but was rather attached by now and sincerely hoped they would not try too hard to migrate that 1980 spring. I had organised a warden by then to help keep an eye on the birds, and felt reasonably able to do a minimigration myself with my family for two weeks away in early April. I telephoned home the first evening from away, and was told that the cranes had gone: "Seen flying out over the coast towards Holland very high and calling as they went". Oh dear, how sad, I thought. I returned home two weeks later, and the cranes (original pair only this time) came back the following day! There were some interesting activities during that first summer and the pair of cranes covered the area similar to their winter habits. The large number of summer human holidaymakers and attendant extra noises and general disturbance kept the birds moving about more than in the previous months. However time went on, and with careful wardening already an important factor in the district through the summer season, the cranes stayed on.

I had heard vague reports of a single crane being sighted at other places sometimes many miles away that season but one day in the autumn suddenly there was one of the extra birds feeding with the pair on the marshes again. It had not been near them, and not in the immediate area since late March. The three remained all winter and though it was usually obvious by grouping that the pair were closest together, the 'odd man out' as he became known was often very much part of the group.

The human Twitcher disturbances became a real problem that winter as more people became aware of the birds. Even though there were times in harder weather when they were dependent on a limited food supply in a particular field site it was depressing to frequently have to persuade people to leave the cranes in peace. There are recognised public access paths and routes through all this area but there are also necessarily certain parts which are not open to public access. For the security of these birds it is vital to have safe undisturbed places for them to feed and roost.

Much the same pattern has followed since those first years, and the birds have



found a slightly increased territory depending on food sources and roosts in winter and quiet seclusion for feeding and living in summer.

There have been various attempts at breeding over the years the cranes have been in the territory. There has been a constant predator problem in the form of foxes. In normal conditions the cranes are well able to cope with foxes, and have been seen actually flying along and dipping over a galloping fox which itself was undoubtedly very frightened by the situation. I once managed to film with a cine camera from a vehicle at a safe distance for disturbance the pair of cranes walking about in long grass near a fox which was also manouvering about in the grass within twenty meters of each other. However at nesting time things are different and one particular year a fox stole the eggs from the nest only eight days prior to hatching. The birds did not re-lay and quickly resorted to normal feeding together again. Another year fox was seen close to the pair when they had a three week old chick with them and suddenly the parent birds were seen to fly away and call in unison, and few hours later they again reverted to normal feeding together in another place where no possibility existed of the chick being with them. I have organised with other wardening operation to control foxes but it is difficult to cover all points over a long vulnerable fledgling period of ten weeks.

There has been success however and gradually these birds will learn how best to cope provided that there are not too many pressures put on them by human or other more natural forms of predation. They will need much help however but they are getting that, and I consider myself extremely lucky to be involved in such an endeavour.

### **Habitat and general requirements in U.K. European Cranes**

The fact that cranes have come to U.K. now as an apparently permanent fixture is surely an encouraging situation. They are not truly a flock in normal crane terms but a start has been established, and it is hoped that the presence of the small nucleus may decoy others to join the party. Since September 1979 the original pair plus various other individuals have remained without total migration.

Reports over these years have indicated that the single birds which have not been attached to a mate in breeding terms have tended to migrate around the U.K. rather than make a complete break. Reports of a single crane of this species have come from as far spread as Fair Isle in the very north of Scotland right down to the south coast of England with other locations as far east and west as is practical in between.

There have been visits from other groups too including 114 in October/November 1982 as reported in *British Birds* at that time.

The larger groups seem to be proper migrating parties which have chosen a route through the British Isles for various reasons and sometimes they have stayed a few days and fed satisfactorily, and roosted without undue disturbance.

Unfortunately it is the regular known group which tend to incite the most disturbance with human nature being what it is. This group or in particular the main pair have learnt to shun human beings quickly, and having originally tolerated a human upright figure at two hundred metres are quickly in flight with alarm at less than 400 meters. They are more tolerant of vehicles and farmtractors are apparently not a worry at much closer range.

The original pair are extremely competitive to new-comers of their kind but will tolerate a persistently keen companion after a few days trying to join the party. This



applies in normal Autumn thru Winter to early Spring conditions but they become most intolerant again in the breeding time from mid March onward.

An offspring seems to be tolerated round the year to the following March but no later. The time of this toleration ending seems to co-incide with the juvenile's voice breaking. — To put it in rather unscientific terms. — The BREAK being the change from an intermittant peeping call to the full voiced loud cry or yelp of the adult.

The intolerance of particularly the male of this or iginal pair is carried to an extreme sometimes. I watched horrified last late spring at a distance of 1/2 a mile through my binoculars as the male adult Crane chased a young pair for some twenty minutes ferociously diving at them high in the sky, and eventually causing the pair to break up and not rejoin for some days on the normal feeding location. At one stage later in the season the younger pair were not seen in the area as a pair for some weeks with an intermittent showing of the young female on her own.

This high degree of intolerance by the original male bird seems to suggest that there is not much hope of more than the one pair becoming truly resident in the area.

The actual size of the suitable district is probably large enough for two or three pairs of cranes to live and breed in harmony. However possibly due to the fact that this particular male has had it all his own way for now six years he has become less tolerant at breeding time than is normal in wild cranes. I have watched him literally hunting out the other cranes during feeding periods, and then veary earnestly and effectively driving them out of the area up to two or three miles away. The normally accepted area these birds occupy is an area of approximately three miles by two and is largely determined by location of available marsh country mixed with suitable arable and other farmland.

The feeding requirements seem fairly easy to accommodate in the area they have chosen with normal farming activities over arable land an grass marshes with reed beds between them and some open water as well. They have been seen feeding on potatoes as most favoured crop and they like them best when the tuber is still in the ground rather than having an easy picking on the surface. They have very powerful necks and dig energetically in quite hard soil to peck out the vegetable. In hard weather I have seen them walking about on frosty mornings pecking at odd seeds and small pieces of vegetation. They move about considerable distances as they feed. I watched the pair once in July walking along the edge of almost mature barley, and the female stopped to select a single stalk of Rye Grass outside the barley crop. She plucked off the whole stalk of the Grass and placed it under her foot on the ground and then proceeded to peck of each of the seed heads individually.

In summer grazing marshes they walk about feeding among the grass and sometimes catching frogs and insects but often digging hard for worms and earth bound insects below the turf surface. They eat a great deal of seeds of grasses.

Their normal roosting requirements are a pond or lake with about a foot to two feet depth of open water in which they stand, and go to sleep on one leg. They often call in unison on arrival at the night roost, and quickly settle down to sleep. Their roost begins a little earlier than the normal mallard arrival time at an evening flight location. They leave it at first light, and never seem to stay in daylight where they have roosted unless disturbed at feeding. They are wonderfully well equipped to see out for danger, and spend a lot of time with head well up looking out around them. They like to be in a place with long wiews, and tend to avoid areas with thick cover unless it is a nesting situation.

They are quite playful and love to dance like all cranes at times. They sometimes seem to enjoy chasing other birds such as ducks on arrival at the night roost. And I have seen one of them leap in the air after succesfully pushing off other fowl they had run through shallow water after.



## Conclusion

Whether the present situation will be maintained for the future depends on the habitat remaining suitable. There is every chance that there will not be dramatic changes in the chosen area but human interests do alter and it is difficult to forecast. Provided that the human pressures can be sustained, and that the farming programmes do not alter too much there will be sufficient food for the cranes.

Disturbance is always a real problem and requires control particularly at a nesting stage, and is vitally important for well being.

The two biggest problem factors in this situation have become the overenthusiasm of birdwatchers resulting from the enormous increase in interest in birds in general and rarities in particular. People have more time and more leisure, and need more open spaces to accommodate these trends.

There must be places where wildlife can be secure without human interference, and these places are becoming scarce in a country like the United Kingdom.

The other big problem is natural predators such as foxes. Control is limited, and often very difficult to achieve in the big marshes and wetlands of the region. Disturbance by the wardening operations themselves can only be judged at the time a particular situation arises. Cranes are apparently very intolerant of disturbance as well, and quickly able to alter their habits to fit a disturbance factor.

They are also an extremely difficult bird to hide if one is trying to help them in their daily existence.

I feel I have grown much older in the last few years, and possibly I hope wiser but find considerable satisfaction in the fact that these birds are still around.

I recall a particular incident last spring on a lovely sunny day with blue sky spaced with high white clouds. I suddenly heard a crane call up there somewhere, and at last saw two tiny black figures straight above me at a great height.

They were moving with set wings very slowly out over the coast eastward, and after a few minutes had disappeared behind a cloud, and I still heard an occasional sharp yodelling cry as I wondered if that was the end of an interesting association between us. Two days later there they were back on one of their favourite marshes feeding happily as I watched from a vehicle through my telescope. Perhaps they became a little home sick after all or perhaps they simply did not know where else to go but home again. After all it is their choice, and all we can do is try to make the situation attractive for them in the place they know best.

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## A daru Nagy-Britanniában 1985-ben

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Nagy-Britannia

Történelmi időkben a daru elég gyakori lehetett a Brit-szigeteken. Nemcsak a konyhára, hanem sport céljából is vadászták, és az 1650-es években szűnt meg a faj sikeres költése a szigetországban. A XX. század elejétől 1962-ig csak ritkán kóborló egyedek jelentek meg; gyakorlatilag az ország



egész területén. Azóta egyre több alkalommal figyelnek meg darvakat, s az áttelelések száma is megnőtt. 1979-ben egy pár megtelepedett az East Norfolkban fekvő Broadland nevű mocsaras területen, amely kitűnő élőhelyet biztosít. A megtelepedett párhoz időszakosan néhány más egyed is csatlakozik, de ezek nem maradnak meg. A darvak előszeretettel táplálkoznak a betakarítatlan burgonya-földeken. Vonulási időben rövid időre el-eltávoznak, de eddig mindig visszatértek. Az emberi zavarás komoly veszélyt jelent a darvakra mezőgazdasági munkák, kirándulók és túlbuzgó madarászok formájában. Az elmúlt évek során a pár többször próbált költetni. A rókák két alkalommal is kifosztották fészüket, de volt sikeres költés is. A jelentésekből úgy tűnik, hogy párba nem állott egyedek kóborolnak az országban. A megtelepedett pár körül talán kialakulhat egy költőterület annak ellenére, hogy a pár — különösen a hím — elég ellenségesen viselkedik az új jövevényekkel szemben. A terület nagysága 2—3 pár fészkelését tudná biztosítani.