

November 2017

Summer and Autumn

## Research and monitoring:



Our research team is improving our understanding of habitat requirements for successful nesting and reasons of breeding failure of White-naped Cranes. We have made significant progress on habitat monitoring through partnerships.

## Capacity building:



Our monitoring program is yielding essential information on wetland and grassland ecosystems to guide habitat management. Success requires a team of well trained and dedicated staff. We are providing Mongolian specialists with hands-on training.

## Public awareness:



Our work would not be possible without vital support from herders and farmers living with nesting cranes in the Khurkh and Khuiten River Valleys (KKRV). During the breeding season we engage daily through awareness activities and face-to-face meetings.



## Mongolia hosts a meeting of crane experts from East Asia

East Asia is home to eight crane species, the most diverse of any region including the Vulnerable White-naped Crane. Our Mongolian White-naped Crane project aims to strengthen international cooperation, and hosts crane and wetland researchers from other range countries at our main project site in the Khurkh and Khuiten River Valleys. In August 2016, all six range countries in East Asia and leading international and local conservation organizations met together for the first time in Mongolia to discuss future crane conservation strategies for the region.

Over 55 people attended this workshop, entitled Strengthening Wetland Biodiversity Conservation in East Asia: Using the White-naped Crane as a Flagship Species, including 23 participants from Japan, North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, Mongolia, Germany, and the United States. It was valuable to have delegates from the North Korea that has several important stopover locations for cranes.

During the workshop, participants updated information on status and conservation priorities for the White-naped Cranes that were last published 20 years ago in the 1996 IUCN Crane Action Plan. This information will be distributed in 2018 as part of the updated IUCN Crane Conservation Strategy. Participants also revised a Species Assessment summarizing changes in distribution and status of key sites; population numbers and trends; threats for breeding, migratory stopover, and wintering areas; significant conservation and research efforts; and key changes since 1996.

The workshop provided a unique opportunity for our project to showcase our achievements on White-naped Crane conservation in Mongolia and welcome world famous crane experts to the beautiful valley. *by B.Nyambayar and C.Mirande*

This is a collaborative project between:



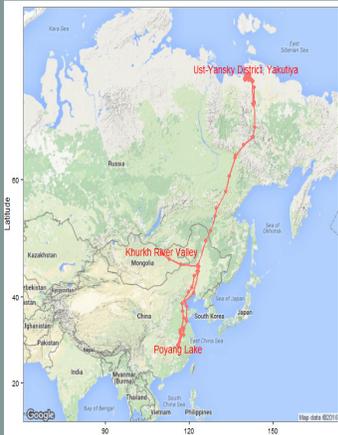
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## Oh, Mongol where are you?

We were all very excited when the first Siberian Crane, which we named 'Mongol', was safely captured and marked with a satellite transmitter in Mongolia in 2015. The transmitter is still working and we continue to follow this bird.

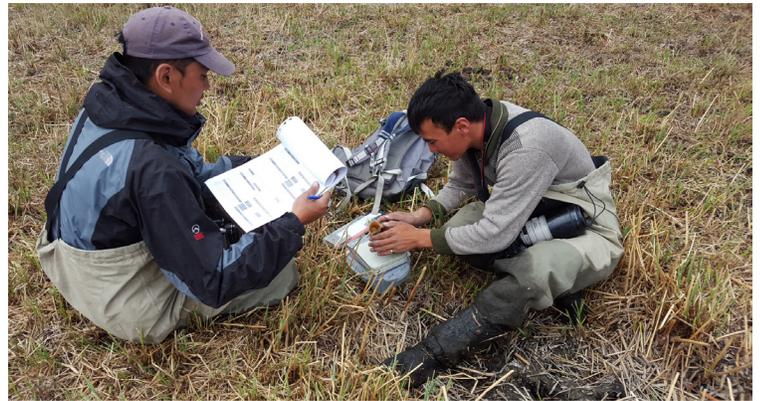
Mongol successfully wintered at Poyang Lake in Jiangxi Province, China for the last two years, along with almost all of the world's Siberian Cranes. He then travelled a daunting 5500 kms to summering habitat in arctic Russia close to where he hatched and where we hope he will find a mate and breed.



We were disappointed when he did not come back to Mongolia with the other non-breeding sub-adults. It would be nice to see him once again in our beautiful Khurkh River Valley. Perhaps, Mongol is now busy trying to find his own position within the Siberian crane community and in the future his offspring will come to Mongolia.



At that time of his capture, we thought Mongol would be only Siberian Crane we would ever capture and mark with a tracking device as they are very rare in Mongolia. To our surprise, we marked our second Siberian Crane in July 2016 and the third bird this year in June 2017, when Dr. George Archibald, the founder of International Crane Foundation (ICF) was with us in Mongolia. We were overjoyed! Siberian Cranes are notoriously difficult to capture and these birds are providing valuable data to support conservation efforts. *by B.Nyambayar*



## Update on White-naped crane monitoring

During the field season in 2017, our researchers started nest monitoring in early May and conducted 3 successive nest visits through the end of July to obtain estimates of nest survival covering all breeding sites in KKRVS.

In general, nest survival was relatively low during the last few years due to cold and windy spring seasons, and subsequent summers with low precipitation and dry conditions. 2016 was the worst with the hatching rate reaching its lowest level, down to 32.7%, producing only 22 chicks from 51 nesting attempts. In contrast, in 2017 we observed 46% hatching rate that produced 41 chicks from 61 nesting attempts.

At the end of each breeding season, we capture White-naped Crane chicks and mark them with color rings. In 2017, we marked a total of 39 chicks using 3 color combinations on the right leg and a single color ring on the left. Later in September we conducted crane counts in the KKRVS, and confirmed that at least 31 chicks from 21 nests had fledged. Since 2013, a total of 180 White-naped Cranes have been color marked through our project.

Through a careful monitoring program, we hope to be able to determine the main factors that are important for individual survival and changes of the breeding population at the KKRVS.

If you go to China, Korea, or Japan to watch cranes in winter, there is a very good chance that you might see our cranes. If you do see them, please let us know! *by G.Batbayar*

## Do you know how to make cranes dance?

'Togoruu' means crane in Mongolian language. In our traditions, when someone wants to see a crane dancing, you say these words to the cranes "Togoruu khoodhon, toodog muuhai. tsam harai, tsam harai" which literally means "Cranes are beautiful, and bastards are ugly, jump higher and rejoice higher". I remember, as a child, I used to say these words whenever we see the cranes. Indeed it is quite enjoyable. Sometimes it does not work, sometimes it works very well. When they dance, I danced with them. Next time, try and make crane dance for you! *By B.Sarangoo*



# A magical crane festival

What better way to celebrate a Crane Festival than with the cranes flying overhead. This is exactly what happened during this year's celebration. After four years of successfully organizing the Crane Festival, the Binder County administration decided to erect a monument dedicated to White-naped Cranes. Local artists swarmed in and worked on the project with great pride. Lack of funding delayed the project a bit, but did not stop the idea and determination of the people. After a month of construction, they completed the project. Now you can see the Mongolia's tallest crane monument, 4.1 meters in height, standing on



a small hill overseeing a steppe lake near Binder County. At first, it was only one giant White-naped Crane with six species of other cranes smaller in size, but later in July another White-naped Crane was added to make it a pair. The monument was officially opened during the crane festival with the local community members and visitors present.



During the opening ceremony something magical happened. After congratulatory speeches by several people, the silk cover wrapping of the monument was diligently removed. People cheered, fully enjoying the moment.

All of sudden 3 Siberian Cranes, 3 Demoiselle Cranes, and 2 Eurasian Spoonbills took off from a nearby lake, came and circled serenely above the crowd three times and then returned to the lake. People wondered at first, then cheered with joy. Many believed it was a good will sign from the Mother Nature. It was seen as a big thank you message from nature. Surely, it would be impossible to train these wild birds for this event.

In general, the Crane Festival was full of wonderful activities. One of the most joyful things that we saw was the sheer number of kids and students participating in the event performing dances and theatrical shows about cranes, threats, environmental issues, and importance of conservation. The children performed very well and what they have prepared was so interesting that it even made the locals skip watching their favorite wrestling game and horse racing events since everyone was so attracted to the performance!



In addition, there was a section that displayed hand-made crafts, art and paintings with the theme of wetland issues and crane conservation. The artworks were all made by local people and school children from the families living in KKRVs and neighboring counties. From their works, we can see increased understanding of critical environmental issues such as wetland and water conservation and their concerns among local people. That is a good sign because we really want to see everyone thinking and acting in same way towards wetland and crane conservation. Every year more people joining us through the Mongolian Crane Festival. This year the number of attendees was about 300, similar as last year. However there were more tourists from Ulaanbaatar and other countries.

Myself, Dr. Archibald, and his friends from ICF, and our project team witnessed the whole event. It was truly inspiring to see the dedication of local community and their spirited leadership. We are happy to be part of this wonderful celebration of harmony between the nature and people.

We want to express our deep gratitude to Heather Henson who made a special contribution towards this year's Crane Festival. With her generous support and inspiration, we were able to help teachers and students acquire materials to make costumes and practice dance routines, and to provide transportation costs to bring a bigger group to the festival. We are very grateful for her vision and long term support! *by B.Nyambayar*



## Camera trap reveals horses trampling crane nest

We deployed automatic camera traps in the vicinity of White-naped Crane nests to see if there are any nest disturbances by the predators and livestock. The camera takes photographs after its motion sensor gets triggered. Any movement by an animal in front its camera will get its photos taken immediately. After three weeks, we collected the traps back and inspected the photos collected over this time.

Horses were the most common visitor to White-naped Crane nest sites. Every day they came to the wetland site to drink water during the 17 days of camera deployment. As a result, the nest was unfortunately abandoned two weeks after we started recording pictures. Photos on the left shows the horse trampling events in the order they occurred.

This presents one of the greatest challenges for us since Mongolian horses are not kept in corrals and they roam freely across the steppe. What should we do to stop them destroying crane nests? *by N.Tseveenmyadag*



## Revealing the future peatland and permafrost

What conditions can help make wetlands like those in the KKRVs last longer? This is one of our biggest research questions. KKRVs has many lakes and wetlands that are supported by moist rich peat soil layers and frozen soil lying beneath the peat. They are very fragile to disturbances from livestock trampling the soil, destruction by tractors, excessive removal of grass cover, and climate change.

Many lakes have already disappeared in the last several years due to drought and livestock grazing. Thus we want to know the rate of wetland loss due to overgrazing and climate warming. To obtain this data, we have established two experimental plots with an artificial warming chamber and grazing simulation. Eleven boreholes have been dug in the two valleys to study soil layers and their relationship to wetland functions and stability. Using these plots we will be monitoring the condition of our wetlands and crane habitat over the long term. *by B.Nyambayar*

## Training on wetland assessment and monitoring

We organized our second wetland workshop in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and USFS from August 17-18, 2017. The goal of the workshop on Conservation of wetland and aquatic resources through monitoring, assessment, restoration, and collaborative management was to develop an understanding of the function and role of wetlands, and to introduce assessment, monitoring, and restoration approaches among participants.



A total of 75 participants from 49 organizations including university students and lecturers, biologists, protected area specialists, environmental inspectors, and environmental consulting companies received lessons from two wetland and hydrology experts Dr. Liz Schnackenberg and Dr. Kate Dwire, from the USFS.

Participants learned techniques for wetland assessment and water, soil, vegetation sampling on first day of classroom training. On the next day, participants visited Khunt Lake, an artificial pond near Ulaanbaatar, to practice field exercises.

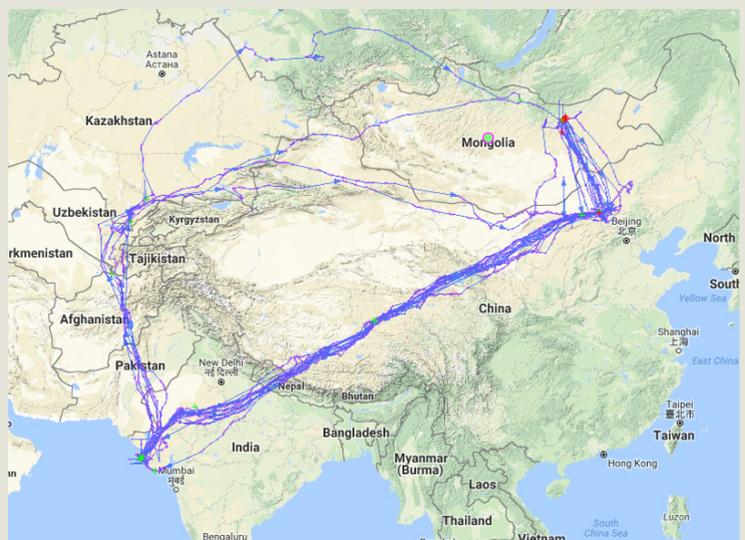
We are deeply grateful to the Leiden Conservation Foundation for support of a three year wetland research and training program. We will write more in our next newsletter! *by G. Batbayar*



## Following demoiselle cranes to their wintering ground

The Demoiselle Crane was the first crane species to be studied using state-of-the-art animal tracking technology in the early 1990s. An international team of researchers led by Japanese ornithologists tracked several Demoiselle Cranes from Russia and Mongolia to their wintering sites in India. Although the tracking technologies were limited compared to today's technological advances, the project was a huge success story.

In summer 2016, we captured 12 fledglings and 9 adult Demoiselle Cranes in the Khurkh River Valley and deployed GPS GSM transmitters donated by the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Germany to investigate migration ecology of this remarkable bird.



Migration started in early September. The Demoiselles flew south east and spent approximately 10 days at stopover sites on arable lands near Ulanqab, Inner Mongolia. Then they continued their longest journey to the southwest flying over the Himalayan Mountains. Fourteen cranes safely reached to their winter home in Gujarat Province in western India by early November.

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The northbound migration began by the end of March. Most interestingly, they did not follow the same route as during the southbound migration. Instead they took a longer route flying around western end of the Himalayan Mountains. It took on average 30 days for them to arrive on the breeding grounds in the KKRVs. Once again they demonstrated their amazing migration ability and migratory behavior.

This time, we have obtained complete information on the migration circle of this population which was not possible in the first study in the 1990s. Currently only two trackers are transmitting the location data and both have again arrived at the wintering ground. *by G.Batbayar*

## Meeting to establish a managing board for KKRV

In 2017, the White-naped Crane project organized two stakeholders meetings in collaboration with WWF Mongolia. During the second meeting held in Khurkh town in August 2017, a managing board was established for the KKRV. It was an important step for the project because it brings the stakeholders much closer.

During the meeting Dr. Nyambayar Batbayar of WSCC gave a detailed presentation about the White-naped Crane project activities, the international value of KKRV for wetland and crane conservation,



and the need to have better management policy and implementation. Next Mrs. Munkhchuluun Basan from WWF Mongolia gave a presentation about the contribution of local protected areas to nature conservation in Mongolia, and experiences from collaborative management actions

from other regions. She provided examples of possible structures and work schemes based on WWF Mongolia's extensive experiences in Mongolia.

The new managing board needed guidelines to regulate its decision making process, so participants discussed this carefully and draft By-laws for the KKRV Management Board were prepared by the end of meeting. They are now in the process of review and approval by the provincial government.



After the meeting, the participants took a tour around key wetland areas in KKRV and enjoyed watching a number of White-naped, Demoiselle, Eurasian, and Siberian Cranes including color marked individuals. *by A.Baljinnyam, Onon-Balj NP*

## Crane costume for Mongolian crane festival

It has arrived! Thanks to the support of Heather Henson, we now have a White-naped Crane mascot to enliven for our educational activities. The costume was inspired by the Hope, the Whooping Crane mascot created for ICF. Although our mascot does not have a name yet, the kids loved it! They were hugging it and asking to have their photos taken with it. We are confident that this mascot will strengthen our educational activities in Mongolia. The costume was designed and hand-made by Mrs. Zulaa, who works for the Snow Leopard Conservation Foundation, a conservation organization based in Ulaanbaatar.



## Thank you

To our staff and volunteers for their hard work and dedication; ICF staff (George Archibald, Claire Mirande, Jim Harris, Karen Becker, Elena Smirenski); US Forest Service (Jennifer Smith, Robert Skorkowski, Liz Schnackenberg, Josh Voorhis, Joe Gurrieri, and Kate Dwire); ICF supporters (Becky Abel, Robert Allday, Steve Becker, Susan Carnahan, Betty Cartwright, William Cox, Elizabeth Wake-man Henderson Foundation (Barbara & Hardy Eshbaugh), Heather Henson, Frances Ann Hitchcock, Robert Hoguet, Karen Ireland, Jeffrey Holmes, Heidi Kiesler, Paul King, Lawrence Kueter, David and Hilda Kuter, Ruth Legge, Tom and Kathy Leiden, Leiden Conservation Foundation, Makray Family Foundation (Carol Donahoe), Lois Mansfield, John and Nancy Merrill), Andrew Raddatz, Mary Jo Veverka; Dr. Tatiana Minaeva (Care for Ecosystem Fund for work on peatlands); Dr. Günter Nowald (German Crane Conservancy for free color bands since 2013); Dr. Martin Wikelski (Max Planck Institute of Ornithology for tracking of Demoiselle Cranes); Dr. Hansoo Lee (Korean Institute of Environmental Ecology for tracking of White-naped cranes), and Dr. Cao Lei (Chinese Academy of Sciences for tracking of White-naped cranes); Dr. Sangmin Nam (UN NEASPEC for transboundary study); WWF Mongolia; Mongol Khan Expeditions; and GeoEx.

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