

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

CRANES

By Clive E. Goodwin

Cranes. There are birds, and then there are the cranes: primeval creatures, from an ancient lineage, their images etched in Paleolithic caves and on Egyptian pyramids. Cranes are special, with their bugling calls perhaps even today stirring some remote shadowy racial memory; born of millennia of contact, as predator and prey, from African savannas to the vast taigas of Asia.

Cranes are a small family – only 15 species, and most of those declining, with some among the most critically endangered of birds, as man presses inexorably into the wild lands where they live. I've been fortunate enough over my life to see six of them, and those six yielded some memorable experiences, from Crowned Cranes in the wetlands near Entebbe airport, welcoming the plane as it landed on my first visit to Africa; to a pair of Sandhill Cranes flying over the wide expanses of the Hudson Bay Lowlands, seen from the train to Moosonee.

But in Northumberland I've been far less lucky. The first didn't come until the spring of 1998, when I got a 'phone call saying there were two young birds in St. Peter's cemetery in Cobourg. We drove up, and there they were, wandering among the grave markers, perhaps searching for some long-lost relative. They were being followed at a respectful distance by a little pack of birders, and the cranes looked vaguely bewildered, as though they couldn't decide whether to fly away calling loudly, as any self-respecting adult crane would do; or whether to come over and look for handouts after the fashion of the ducks in the harbour. It turned out that they had been trained to follow an ultra-light aircraft on their flight south, and had become thoroughly conditioned to mankind in the process. On their return they had been turning up in parks and school playgrounds; no wonder they looked bewildered, they were probably expecting us to haul out an ultra-light! It all seemed slightly banal, but they were cranes, and I was satisfied – or at least, so I said.

Another dry spell followed, punctuated only by a couple of 'heard only' events at Presqu'île, when the wild bugling of cranes passed overhead while we were in the depths of a woodlot, to be long gone by the time we'd hurriedly extracted ourselves from cover. Then came 2009, not a good birding year for me, but in October John Geale reported a young crane on private property near Chub Point, and kindly arranged with the landowner for birder access. We went over, and there it was, standing preening at a suitably wild distance on the far side of a large field of sear grasses. It seemed that on John's visit the bird had wandered across the road in front of his car, but we didn't pursue that thought, reminiscent as it was of 1998.

But 2009 had more in store for us. On December 17, I was sitting in the dining room when I noticed five large birds flying west. Their measured wing beats were punctuated by long glides, quite unlike that of the other large species we see in flight. They could

only be cranes! And cranes they were; but stately flight notwithstanding they proved to be moving remarkably fast. Joy barely had a chance to see them before they vanished, and although they seemed headed towards Margaret Bain's garden a hurried call to her, and Margaret's subsequent heroic efforts all proved useless. They were gone.

Prior to our recent good fortune, everyone seemed to be seeing cranes. It wasn't true, of course; we only have 69 records all together, but fully half of those have been in the past 5 years, so in fact more cranes are being seen. The database yielded another statistic that I found rather surprising: our first cranes were only recorded in 1981! It seems clear that Sandhill Cranes did not occur at all in Northumberland in the 1800's, although the species was much commoner at that time than it was a century later. A large, conspicuous – and huntable – bird like the crane would hardly have escaped the notice of the earlier naturalists of the day, even if it only occurred infrequently.

In fact, the species apparently used to breed in the huge marshes of Walpole Island on Lake St. Clair, with young recorded there as late as 1862, but these birds were extirpated. The main range was northwestern then as indeed it is today. In the late 1970's probably the most accessible place to see cranes in Ontario was along the North Channel of Lake Huron. It seems that the northern Ontario birds have always migrated on a route well west of here.

It by no means as clear that the birds were equally rare westwards along the lower Lakes. There are scattered sightings reported for south-western Ontario, but the first record I have of a bird further east is one from Oshawa in the spring of 1955. The compiler of the day [Jim Baillie, the leading authority on bird distribution in the Province at the time] noted 'extreme rarity along Lake Ontario'.

The difference today has been an expansion of cranes into southern Ontario. This has largely occurred between the two Breeding Bird Atlases. Only three locations in the south recorded cranes breeding on the first atlas; the Parry Sound district, the northern Bruce Peninsula, and Rondeau on Lake Erie, and these areas were also the ones that yielded an increasing number of sightings from southern Ontario. As our growing number of records suggest, that expansion has continued and now the birds are nesting east to the Rideau Lakes area, and in the vicinity of Alfred bog in extreme eastern Ontario. In Northumberland we recorded cranes in breeding habitat in four squares, with confirmation in one, all of them along the Trent River system.

It's not at all certain where this expansion originated; two different races are known to nest in the Province, one mainly in the Hudson Bay lowlands, and the other the birds that nest in the Sault Ste. Marie area and eastwards towards Sudbury. These are thought to be the ones expanding into the south, but the cause of the expansion seems unclear. One idea proposed is that the birds are simply reoccupying range vacated due to past hunting pressure, but the absence of earlier records from eastern Ontario do not seem to support that suggestion.

In any event, it seems we now have a very charismatic new species appearing in the county, and we can all look forward to more encounters in the future.