



Mongolia Crane Project Update

October 2015

Summer and Autumn

Research and monitoring:



Since spring our team has monitored over 70 White-naped Crane, 80 Demoiselle Crane, and eight Eurasian Crane nests in the Khurkh and Khuiten River Valleys (KKV). However, it was a bad year for cranes and many other birds due to a cold, windy spring and dry early summer.

Capacity building:



Training our next generation of young biologists and ecologists in crane and wetland conservation is a vital part of our project and key to our future successes. This year with support from the US Forest Service and the Trust for Mutual Understanding, we were able to organize two important training sessions in Mongolia.

Public awareness:



The second Mongolian Crane Festival organized in June was another success story for us. It helped us get closer to the local community and strengthen our collaboration to promote crane and wetland conservation.



We are hopeful that critical wetland habitats will receive government protection

The wetland and water birds community where we focus our activities in Mongolia represents rare and unique habitat in Asia.

The Khurkh and Khuiten River Valleys (KKV) were first discovered in mid 1970s by Mongolia's foremost experts in ornithology Drs. Bold Ayurzana and Tsevenmyadag Natsagdorj from the Institute of Biology at Mongolian Academy of Sciences (MAS). Since then the significance of the sites have been well documented and they received several international and local recognitions for their importance for wetland ecosystem and waterbirds with designation as a Ramsar Site, East Asia-Austral Asian Flyway Network Site, Northeast Asian Crane Site, and Northeast Asian Anatidae Site.

The importance of this area for the conservation of threatened species of Asian cranes is unquestionable. Also there are very few sites in the world where you can see five species of cranes within one field view of the spotting scope. That is why we are collaborating with government and non-government conservation organizations such as WWF and TNC to secure the protection for this site.

This is a collaborative project between:



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Two delegates from the Poyang Lake National Nature Reserve in China visited KKV in July 2015. It was the first time that Chinese partners officially visited the project site and learned about our work.

Oh, Mongol where are you?

In July, our team deployed a satellite tracking device on a subadult Siberian crane at Khurkh River Valley, near our research camp. The bird was named “Mongol” because it was the first Siberian Crane ever captured and marked in the country.

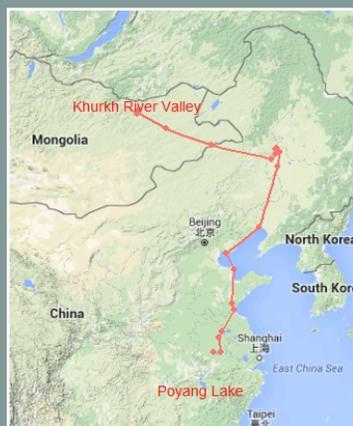
Since then we have been following this bird via satellite hoping to learn much useful information about the life history of a subadult Siberian Cranes.

In late August, we saw Mongol with four other Siberian cranes feeding on wet grassland in Mongolia.

Mongol started its migration on September 8 flying southeast and made its first stop at a tiny lake in Inner Mongolia just across the border with China. Here we hope our young crane may have joined with other Siberian Cranes coming from northern Siberia.

Currently Mongol is at the Chaohu Lake area in Anhui Province, China.

We hope this crane will improve our limited knowledge about movements of young adult Siberian Cranes and threats they face along flyway.



(Continued)

In mid-October, we participated in a meeting held at the Ministry of Environment, Green Development, and Tourism of Mongolia (MEGDT). During this meeting, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) presented its project results on identifying potential sites to expand Mongolia’s protected areas network. The Wildlife Science and Conservation Center (WSSC) of Mongolia actively participated and proposed inclusion of the KKV in the list of sites to be submitted for consideration to the Mongolian Parliament session in spring 2016. If the proposal gets approved it will be a major achievement for crane conservation in Mongolia.

An important step for Russian and Mongolian collaboration for crane conservation in the Daurian Transboundary Protected Area

Lack of precipitation and many years of dry conditions have caused the once famous Torey Lake wetland complex to suffer from low water levels and consequently caused many cranes to breed further north along the Borzya River. Although largely believed to be a natural cycle; it is important to understand how such long-term drought conditions impact threatened crane and waterbird species.

Biologists from Mongolia visited the Daurian State Nature Reserve in early August and collaborated with Russian partners to study and mark White-naped Cranes with tracking devices.

Every morning the team surveyed the Borzya River Valley to locate breeding pairs and decide which pairs to capture for further studies. The joint team captured three juvenile White-naped Cranes during four days of work and documented habitat characteristic of the area.





2015 Mongolian Crane festival was warmly applauded again

When we organized the first Mongolia Crane Festival in June 2014, we were uncertain how the festival would be received by local community. At festivals where people accustomed to enjoying displays of archery, horse racing, and wrestling, getting together for cranes was something quite unusual for nomadic Mongolian herders! Nevertheless everything went well beyond our expectations and was truly well received. It was great to see so many herders and visitors from the countryside and nearby towns making their way to Binder Sum of Khentii Aimag to experience the Crane Festival first-hand. We hope they returned home with abundant knowledge and appreciation of cranes and wetlands in their hearts and enjoyment and inspiration in their souls.

The 2015 Mongolia Crane Festival was another great success and drew in over 300 people from all over northern Khentii Aimag, neighboring provinces, the capital city, and foreign tourists. We greatly appreciate the creativity and energy of everyone who collaborated with us to make the event such a success, especially the administrators of the Binder Sum who provided much needed logistical support.

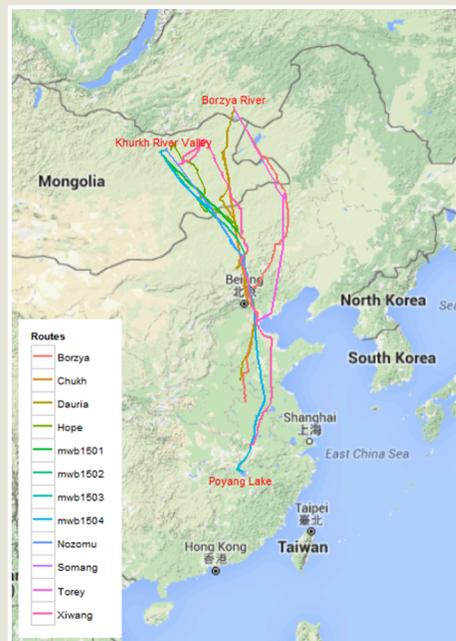
For those who want to visit Mongolia and enjoy the cranes and people, we will be waiting for you under the blue sky of Mongolia with the cranes next summer!

Henson's puppets on the Mongolian steppe

Ms. Heather Henson, the creative director of IBEX Puppetry, performed during the first crane festival and kids acted in her performance. Through a Whooping Crane story she brought the North American crane saga to Asia showing how cranes connect diverse cultures and teach us to value our precious earth.



Latest Migration Update



With the wildlife satellite and cellular tracking technological advances we have been able to follow migrations of White-naped Cranes from Mongolia. As of late October some cranes are already reached the winter home at Poyang Lake and others are still in the midst of their long and arduous journey.

Children's art displayed at the Crane Festival



It is always fascinating to see how children express their understanding and love for nature and animals through paints and drawings. Children's art portraying cranes and their beautiful habitats made the festival a wonderful visit for children and people of all ages. This year, there was a specific section for children arts from Russia and Japan.

ICF experts train Mongolian wetland managers in GIS and RS

A Trust for Mutual Understanding grant with support from the Protected Areas Administration of the MEGDT helped us to organize a workshop to train Mongolian wetland managers and researchers from



universities, academic institutes, and protected areas with important crane and wetland habitats. Two instructors Mr. James Burnham from Wisconsin and

Dr. Mimi Kessler from Missouri traveled to Mongolia in mid August and successfully completed a two-week course. Participants learned about the use of Remote Sensing (RS) and Geographical Information System technologies (GIS) in their work.

Half of the training was conducted at the crane research camp and used data collected over many years. Participants became able to download and process freely distributed satellite images from US Geological Survey websites and carry out simple processes and data analysis.

This training was partially an extension of the GIS database built for the Mongolia crane project by Liz Schnackenberg of USFS, Iderbat Damba of Institute of Biology, MAS, and Ruth Armbruster who was an intern of the Geological Society of America.



We welcomed researchers from South Korea to join us to unravel the mysteries of White-naped Crane migration. In the photo Korean and Mongolian researchers just before the release of three subadult White-Naped cranes at KKV in July 2015.

South Koreans donate GPS trackers and join in the project

Ornithologists used metal leg bands (rings) to investigate the movement and migration of birds for the past 100 years. It used to take many years of constant efforts for researchers collect enough data to make some meaningful analysis.

In recent years, various telemetry devices that use satellite and mobile phone (GSM) systems, are used extensively by researchers worldwide because of little time required to obtain high quality and large quantities of data related to animal movements.

A South Korean company, KoEco Inc, that manufactures GPS GSM transmitters agreed to donate over 30 units for WSCC's waterbird research activities in Mongolia. Four of these units were deployed on subadult White-naped Cranes this summer using backpack attachment methods. Molting cranes were captured at KKV. Transmitters will collect one location every two hours throughout the year.

As of mid-October 2015 data from these units show that subadult cranes move faster during southbound migration and arrive earlier at the wintering sites. With these additional transmitters, we have learned something little known before about the migratory behavior of non-breeding White-naped Cranes.



Instructor Mimi Kessler explains how to extract vegetation values from remote sensing images downloaded and processed a few days earlier in Ulaanbaatar, August 2015.



Information sharing at international meeting



Tseveen and Nyamba participated in the 4th Meeting of the Crane Working Group of Eurasia, which was held in Daurky State Nature Reserve in southern Russia from 1-4 September. Two presentations, about Siberian Crane records in Mongolia and the White-naped Crane project activities, were presented by Mongolian biologists. Also Nyamba gave a presentation about crane capture methods and marking experiences based on the project involving other conference participants.

Habitat monitoring gets boost from US Forest Service expertise

Since 2013, the U.S. Forest Service International Program is providing important hydrology and rangeland expertise to the project by sending their experts and enabling them to work with Mongolian biologists and ecologists at KKV. The primary purpose of the USFS expert work in 2015 was to provide training in long-term vegetation monitoring and wetland assessment techniques for the Mongolia crane project team and its partners from the National University of Mongolia and the Institute of General and Experimental Biology, MAS.

In 2015, the team jointly selected two 0.5 ha sites for rangeland monitoring and to study climate change and livestock grazing impacts on the wetland ecosystem in KKV. The team collected baseline vegetation data, which is a vital part of wetland ecosystem monitoring before the exclosures was built, and will monitor for recovery of the native plants over time with reduced grazing.

Training in rangeland monitoring and inventory techniques and wetland assessment was completed every day with weather permitting. The primary range methodology taught was the cover-frequency transect also known as the Daubenmire method which is the primary rangeland inventory method utilized by the USFS. We hope this work will greatly enhance our ability to conduct science based habitat monitoring over the long-term.



Thank you for your support!

We are grateful for all our supporters of the Mongolia White-naped Crane Project. All ICF members who travelled with Dr. George Archibald made significant contribution through ICF. Our special thanks goes to USFS International Program for providing necessary funding for fieldwork. We thank USFS experts Jennifer Smith, Robert Skorkowsky, Liz Schnackenberg, Josh Voorhis, and Joe Gurreri. Our 2015 work would not have been possible without support of George Archibald, Claire Mirande, Jim Harris, Dorn Moore, and James Burnham of ICF. We thank German Crane Conservancy and Gunther Nowald for providing free color bands for White-naped Cranes. Additional funding was provided by UN North-East Asian Subregional Programme of Environmental Cooperation, Heather Henson, Mongol Khan Expeditions, and KoEco Inc.

Sipping milk tea with Mongolian nomads

One of the best experiences for our international experts has been to visit local herder families and share their stories about livestock herding experiences and learn about their culture and lifestyle.

