

Further Comments on Raising Cranes

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following the article by Dayton Hyde on raising Sandhill Cranes at Yamsay Ranch, Oregon, printed in the last issue of the BLUE JAY (1957, 1:19-21), we are pleased to be able to add some further comments on this controversial subject, and to preserve some early records of raising cranes that might otherwise be lost.

Saving the Cranes

By H. H. PITTMAN,
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The attempts to save the Whooping Cranes are not having the results hoped for and the number of young ones seems to be smaller every year. Moreover, the adults are getting older and it is quite possible that some may have reached, or be approaching, the limit of their powers of reproduction so that, even in the most favourable circumstances, the presence of ten pairs of birds does not necessarily mean ten nests. With the possible breeding stock so reduced the probability of in-breeding has to be considered, too. This adds to the already insurmountable difficulties and problems. Although man is no longer an enemy of the crane but a would-be ally, the natural hazards remain practically the same as in the days when cranes were more numerous.

The apparent failure of our efforts to preserve the great birds seems to leave only one other course of action open. I believe the only possible way to save the birds now is to take any eggs that can be found and hatch them artificially. The hatching would be simple; the important and more difficult part would be the rearing of the chicks. My ideas about this are based largely upon conversations with people who raised the almost equally large Sandhill Cranes many years ago.

The care of the chicks should be in the hands of enthusiasts willing and able to devote practically all their time to the matter, for the young birds quickly learn to know their owners and follow them like little dogs. I have seen several that were being hand-raised and I remember one owner telling me that her bird enjoyed sitting on her lap and would often push its long bill



Photo by H. H. Pittman
LITTLE BROWN CRANE

down the front of her dress and her sleeves, apparently as a sign of affection. The young birds are intelligent and need affection so that putting them in an enclosure of any kind is out of the question. They can be made as much a part of the family as a cat or dog. The late Dr. Merriam Bailey once wrote an interesting account of a young crane raised by hand in the United States.

There are few birds that respond more readily to care and kindness in captivity than cranes. I can remember seeing some African cranes that had been hand-reared and reared that they were as tame and headstrong as domestic poultry. Admittedly I have never heard of Whooping Cranes being hand-raised and cannot say if they would react in the same way as other species. However, at the present time it seems obvious that to leave the chicks to the care of their parents exposes them to many dangers.

Naturally there are some drawbacks to such a suggestion as well as many dangers, but until some more effective means

aving these birds has been found believe we should seriously considering this. The first objection will be taking the eggs, so I suggest that eggs of a Sandhill Crane be substituted when this is done. This, of course, will require the co-operation of the wildlife departments in Canada and the United States.

do not think it will be difficult to find interested people with the means, time and space, willing to raise the young birds until they are able to fly. Then, when the migrant adults return in the autumn, the young can be transferred to the winter quarters of the wild birds. Or it might be considered advisable to trim the wings of the young ones and not give them complete freedom during their second year. Probably the greatest difficulty would be in finding nests; everything, of course, depends upon this.

have perhaps, emphasized the affection displayed by the young cranes more than the affection felt by the male for them. The affection is really mutual. I still remember hearing a farmer say some thirty or forty years ago that he planned to build an addition to his stable to house a crane if they succeeded in rearing it! If any eggs can be secured and hatched it will probably be wise to keep the chicks apart—two birds to one person—at least in the earlier stages.

H. H. Pittman.

My Experience With The Sandhill Crane

FRED S. BAINES, Kelowna, B.C.

In 1883 when I was eight years old we arrived in the Crescent Lake district 18 miles south of Yorkton, Saskatchewan, by the way, wasn't there at that time. The sky was yearly darkened by immense flocks of wild fowl migrating south and I have witnessed the passing of millions of swans, White Cranes, Sandhill Cranes, and many varieties, pelicans, ducks and snipe, owls, hawks and countless types of all lesser kinds of birds.

Once I picked up two young Sandhill Cranes (escorted by their parents). They were about a month

old. These I took home to my ranch and homestead. It took me several days to find a menu acceptable to these birds. I tried soaked bread, small frogs (of which there were thousands at the time), boiled eggs, chopped meat and soaked grain of different kinds and plenty of good fresh water. For nearly four years all they would eat was wheat. I filled a three pound baking powder tin with my best wheat and they would drive their long bills into it and gobble it like ducks or geese. I filled another similar tin with sand and gravel and a third receptacle with strictly fresh water.

During the summer they lived in a 6 by 14 foot pen with a shed at one end which they seldom used. I provided a shallow four foot wide pan which I daily replenished with cold, clear water. Every morning just as the sun peeped over the horizon they splashed and bathed for at least 10 minutes and then spent an hour or so performing an elaborate toilet.

These cranes and I became fast friends. The male bossed me around and whanged at me with his long sharp bill. He gave me to understand that he only just tolerated me because I fed and watered them. The female, about six inches smaller, treated me with respect and caution and never once struck at me. As I made my exit from the pen the male

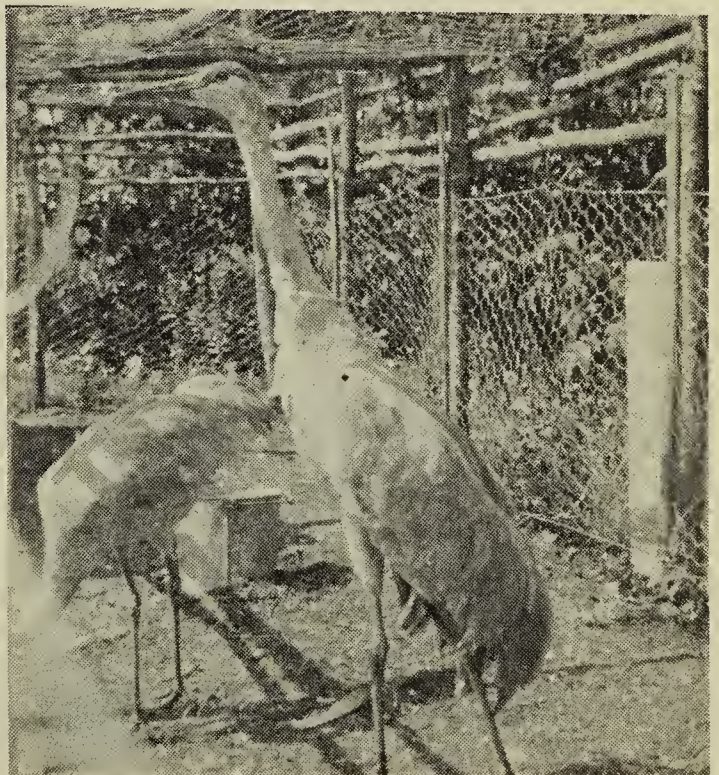


Photo by Fred S. Baines
SANDHILL CRANES, 1906