

Problems in Raising Young Sandhill Cranes

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Four of the young which we raised on our ranch last year (1956) migrated in the fall, appearing on December 2 near Santa Rosa, California. There they were afraid of dogs as cranes would be in the wild, but they let people approach. This did not surprise us, as we had not tried to make them wary of people, since we were concerned merely with developing flight and intended to pinion the birds for the breeding flock. The four cranes were fed during the winter at an Air Base, which they left and returned to at will. Eventually they were trapped and taken to the Fleishacker Zoo in San Francisco. After eight months' absence from the ranch, they went wild with excitement when I appeared in the crowd at the zoo and gave them a low food call. I brought them home by auto where they immediately dashed for the spot where their parents spend most of their time.

Obviously, any Whooping Crane management programme would fail if birds raised in captivity could not be returned to the wild. I am not worried any more about flight powers or ability to feed in the wild. I think that we have solved the problem of developing these. The real stickler is to raise young cranes so that they don't regard Man as a benefactor, so that they become truly wild. This year we raised two young without their ever seeing man—behind panels which gave them a one-way view over the meadows and marshes. We developed a method of feeding eliminating hand feeding, which I didn't dream was possible since even the wild parents feed the young with their beaks.

All went well until the third week, when the older and larger of the two turned on the other and almost killed him. After hours under a heat lamp, the younger crane regained consciousness, but it still shows the effects of the beating, having developed pneumonia. We are caring for it by hand and once more it is

growing fast. Because this little crane remains as wild as any in the field, I suspect that, once the time of imprinting is past, it is hard to condition a young crane to regard Man as his benefactor as did my hand-raised cranes of last year. I hope to determine the exact length of time of imprinting. If we find this time to be only a short interval, it would simplify my programme and methods.

I have spent many hours in the field this year trying to determine just why the wild Sandhills usually raise only one young. In the Bly valley of southern Oregon I checked five pair with two young, one with one young. Two young ran with each pair from a week to a month, longer than my previous records. In a late survey by helicopter we found that none of the pairs had more than one young left, although all had one. This loss is difficult to explain in terms of predation. The pilots of two helicopters became very interested in our cranes and since they spent many days over the nesting areas, they checked every pair they found. I went with them on several flights and found their observations correct—only one chick with each pair.

When I have seen two young birds with a pair, the general pattern seems to be this, that the male takes one chick and the female the other, generally feeding from one to two hundred feet apart. If an alien crane intrudes, the male flies up and drives the intruder out of the territory. The chick leaves the male to go to its mother, but when the male comes back from his flight, the chick joins its father again. Perhaps this observation will prove of use if Whooping Cranes are raised in captivity. One chick might be removed and given to the second parent, without depriving them of sight contact with each other, at least during the daylight hours. Crane research is a slow, laborious process and there is still much to be learned.