

SIBERIAN CRANE

Struggle For Survival

FOR CENTURIES, cranes have been held up as auspicious birds in many countries, serving as symbols of long life and happiness. Ironically, however, the graceful Siberian crane (*Grus leucogeranus*) is in grave danger of being reduced to total extinction—only around 250 of these birds exist world-wide today. The crane family, *Gruidae*, itself is the most endangered among birds today: of 15 species extant, seven are very close to extinction.

The Siberian crane is distinguished by black primary feathers on its wing-tips, bright yellow eyes, and a large patch of bare red skin on its forehead. Adult 'Sibes', as they are fondly known by conservationists, can stand 4.5 ft tall and have wing-spreads of 7 ft. Remarkably, after travelling more than 6,000 km from the icy wastes of Siberia, the Siberian crane settles down from mid-November to mid-March every year in its winter quarters at only one spot in India—the Keoladeo Ghana Bird Sanctuary near Bharatpur in Rajasthan.

Alarming Decline: This winter's population of Sibes at Bharatpur, conservationists have noted with alarm, numbers only 33 adults and five chicks, the lowest in the last five years. Over the last decade, ornithologists, conservationists and biologists from all over the world have cooperated to try and increase the bird's precarious numbers across the globe.

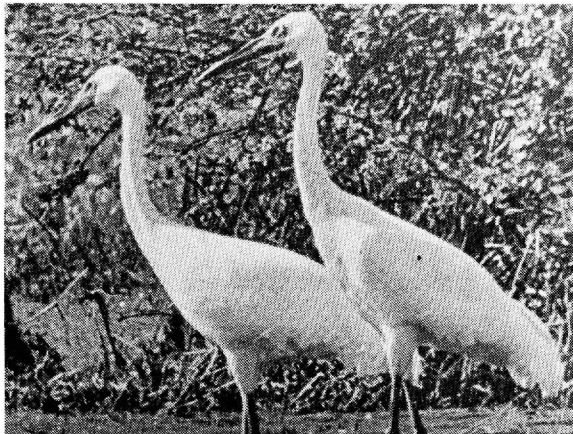
Situated 176 km from Delhi, the 29 sq km Keoladeo Ghana sanctuary attracts as many as 330 species of birds to its large stretches of fresh water, criss-crossed by dykes and fed by two rivers. A former shooting preserve of the Maharajas of Bharatpur, Keoladeo was taken over by the Forest Department in 1972. But an increasing salinity in the soil and nearby wells, as well as cattle-grazing, have led to a drop in migratory populations.

In 1976, Ronald Sauey of the International Crane Foundation (ICF), Shahid Ali from the Bombay Natural History Society and John McGough of Cornell University found that the Siberian cranes favour Bharatpur because they find their favourite food there—the hard black tuber of the sedge *Cyperus rotundus*, which grows underground in the watered areas of the sanctuary. The birds therefore spend all day digging into the mud, their heads, necks and legs completely sub-

merged in water, rooting for their food.

The Siberian crane breeds in the inhospitable Arctic tundra stretching from the Ural Mountains to Yakutia in eastern Siberia. Every winter, the larger of two migratory flocks travels east to the wet marshes of Lake Poyang bordering the lower reaches of the Yangtze river in China. The western flock, breeding near the lower reaches of the Ob river in Siberia, travels through Iran and Afghanistan before touching down at Bharatpur. Diligent tracking has shown that the Siberian cranes favour resting places at Lake Parishan in Iran's Caspian lowlands and Lake Ab-i-Estada in south-eastern Afghanistan.

Adverse Conditions: Wetland drainage, and hunting, have decimated Siberian cranes alarmingly—the cranes' sweetmeat is considered a delicacy in many countries—and the Islamic revolution in Iran



Siberian cranes in Bharatpur: dwindling numbers

and the turmoil that has gripped Afghanistan since the Soviet occupation have hindered conservation efforts. Monogamous birds that live as long as man, Siberian cranes take time to choose their mates; they need shallow wetland, and a breeding territory that the pair vigorously defends. But very few chicks survive.

Since 1973, the ICF at Baraboo in Wisconsin in the US has helped in nurturing the dwindling Siberian population. The ICF's efforts have also succeeded in raising the population of the whooping crane in the US and Canada, which numbered only 15 in 1941, to over 100 today, and of the red-crested crane in Japan, whose population had plummeted to 30 in 1952, to over 300 today.

In late 1977, Soviet biologists picked

up four Siberian crane eggs from nests in Yakutia and sent them on a 10,000 km journey to Wisconsin, where they all hatched. This experiment was repeated in 1978. In June 1981, Dushenka (little loved one in Russian) became the first Siberian crane chick hatched in captivity; the same year the Bharatpur sanctuary was declared a national park by the Government of India. In tribute to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's interest, ICF Director George Archibald named the second Sibe born in captivity Gandhi in May 1982.

Marathon Effort: "Siberian cranes are the most endangered of all migratory birds," says Archibald, "and they're being shot for food during the fighting in Afghanistan and Iran." In 1982, after years spent in 'mating' dances with a temperamental female whooping crane called Tex, Archibald finally witnessed the birth of her first chick, named Gee Whiz after Dr George Gee who had helped obtain the semen that inseminated Tex.

The Siberian crane's soft, fluting call has been gradually drowned out by the more raucous cries of the larger and aggressive Sarus crane in India. At Bharatpur in February, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, China and the USSR are slated to sign an agreement on conservation of this vanishing species. The ICF has meanwhile established a captive flock of 14 birds at Wisconsin; three years ago the Russians began building a crane breeding centre at the Oka Reserve near Moscow. Three more chicks have been born at the ICF in captivity last year.

India seems an appropriate venue for ensuring the species' survival—Ustad Mansur, a 17th century court painter for Mughal Emperor Jehangir, had painted a remarkable likeness of the Siberian crane a full century before it was scientifically identified by German ornithologist Peter S. Pallas. And now, with a full-fledged Department of Environment entrusted with the task of ensuring the survival of wildlife and its habitat, the Siberian crane promises to be as prolific as the tiger.

From February 7 to 10, Bharatpur will host an International Crane Workshop, sponsored by the Government of Rajasthan, the ICF, and the Department of Environment. Sixty-five delegates from 23 countries will meet to discuss plans for international cooperation in aiding migratory cranes that traverse thousands of kilometres and many countries in their annual winter journeys. The Siberian crane will occupy centre-stage in this crucial discussion.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG