



WLI information sheet No.3: Crane School

Introduction

Crane School was run for 3 years at the visitor centre at WWT Slimbridge and was one of the preliminary stages of the Great Crane Project (GCP), a 5-year reintroduction project in the UK for the Common Crane *Grus grus*. The project allowed us to use the Crane School birds that were to remain in a captive population as a great way to educate and enthuse visitors about this particular species, and other wetlands conservation projects at the same time.

Running the project at WWT

The eggs were hatched and reared at Slimbridge but not on display until the chicks were about 1.5-2 weeks old. This enabled us to determine if any had health problems and also allowed imprinting on the puppet head models to take place without too much disturbance. After this period they were taken down to the dedicated 'crane school' facilities within the visitor area.

Health checks, weighing and feeding take place away from the public, then at about 10am the public could view the chicks and see them being exercised from behind a screen. In the afternoon the chicks were exercised again whilst a 30-minute talk about the project was given. Members of the public were chosen to dress up in crane rearing suits (fig. 1) and help the aviculturist exercise one of the birds. These suits prevent the chicks from recognising human beings, to avoid habituation on release into the wild. As the chicks get older we included supplementary feed and predator awareness training, which can be set up so that it coincides with the daily talk to allow people to watch this process as well.

Benefits

The project gave us the opportunity to learn more about crane rearing techniques and behaviour, which in turn benefits management of the species in the future. Crane School offered daily talks, alongside interpretation boards to explain the process and aims of the project. Visitors were given the

opportunity to interact personally with the chicks with expert supervision, which increased enthusiasm about cranes, and enhanced their education experience. The development of the individual birds was available during repeat visits and on the website too.



Figure 1 Children feeding cranes

This successful public engagement approach, and the rearing techniques developed, meant funding was granted for the GCP and the 5-year release programme. Creating positive support for this project is one of the most important aspects for the birds' future success and crane school played a



Figure 2 - Crane exercise area

large part in this, inspiring people who visited the WWT project to go to nearby Somerset to see the released birds.

Plans and funding:

The set-up and three years of running crane school cost around £20,000 including staff pay. We initially visited other similar projects already running to form a proposal for building requirements and rearing techniques. The project was self-funded by WWT and we converted an area in the visitor park into suitable coop area and exercise enclosure.

Staff resource:

One full time crane aviculturist was employed to care of up to eight cranes for a four-month period, with support from the wider aviculture team. Volunteers from the centre helped deliver a daily public talk whilst the member of staff worked with the birds and people entering the enclosure in the 'crane suits' (see fig. 1).

Results for public engagement and conservation of the species:

WWT Slimbridge now has a visitor attraction based on species reintroductions, with daily talks about crane school and the GCP, continuing to promote the work. The introduction of the birds into the wild has been received very positively, partly due to experiences such as Crane School. The released Cranes are being monitored and are doing well, with visitor numbers to the reserve increasing. Art projects and school projects ran alongside the release and local businesses have also benefited. The arrival of the cranes has meant landowners interested in the project are now looking into joining agri-environment schemes to develop breeding sites for the cranes, benefiting other wetland species too.

Future projects:

This set up could be used for other *Gruidae* species and birds such as Corncrakes, *Crex crex*, and Great Bustard, *Otis tarda*. Sufficient space is required for the chicks to get enough exercise as they get older. Provision of extra enclosures or other centres that can take the birds once they are fully grown is needed to allow chicks to be reared the following year. It is a good idea to rest the enclosure and change the substrate in the individual runs each year to reduce the risk of disease build up, particularly if there is crane-specific coccidium in the area. An area away from the public to house any birds which may get sick or stressed is also important. Screening for disease must be carried out, particularly if linked to a wild release programme.

Further resources

Cranes: their biology, husbandry and conservation. David H. Ellis, George F. Gee & Claire M. Mirande (eds) (1996).
www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk
www.savingcranes.org

Glossary

Aviculture – the practice of rearing and caring for birds.
Crane-specific coccidium – a disease caused by a microscopic organism living in the gut.
GCP – Great Crane Project, a reintroduction project run in the South West of England.
Gruidae – collective term for large, long-legged long-necked birds that includes 15 species of cranes.



WLI is recognised as a key implementer of the Ramsar CEPA programme