

Noticeboard

Letter to the Editor: Sarus Cranes redux

In December *Wingspan* (Vol. 14 No. 4 pp. 16–19), John Grant asks the perennial question about the arrival date of the Sarus Crane in Australia—was it recent or historical? Given the subspecific difference between the Australian Sarus and eastern and western Sarus, he wonders if the Philippine Sarus could still be the source. He also mentions that there are no Aboriginal stories about the Sarus as evidence of an early arrival.

Sarus Cranes apparently were known to the Aboriginal people prior to the 1940s. In the early 1980s I spent time with several Wik language groups centred around Aurukun, far north Queensland. One man in his forties, the traditional owner of his people's Brolga dance, hunted the Sarus, as had his father as a young man in the 1940s, at which time it was a well established activity. They preferred the Sarus because it was fatter—but it was more wary and harder to catch—and looked for it in different habitat, particularly small rice-grass depressions.

The main names for the Sarus were 'Brolga that dipped its head in blood' and 'the red-legged Brolga'. Some people considered the Sarus to be a male Brolga, due to its larger size, but they were usually unfamiliar with the bird. The Sarus was part of only some language groups' area, and for others familiarity arose when the groups were brought together at settlements such as Aurukun. After much discussion by local men, an elder was to tell me a traditional story about the Sarus, which had to be done on a traditional telling area. Although I waited for several hours, he did not come. Eventually my good friend came to say that the story owner had a dream that something bad would occur if he told me. In a too often repeated occurrence, the man died a couple of years later without passing on the ownership of the story, as there were no initiated language men to receive it. Although some of the others had heard the story, they could not share it.

Sarus Cranes appear to prefer to nest in small, forested wetlands, or parts of larger wetlands approximating this. They do not usually nest in the more extensive areas of swamp per se, as will Brolgas, but seek a small spit of land nearly surrounded by water. They feed on dry land, on fallen seed during the dry season, not on bulkuru and similar wetland plants favoured by Brolgas. It would seem that breeding habitat suiting the Sarus Crane has increased due to the presence of cattle and more frequent burnings on the Cape, which would allow an increase in abundance. The Tinaroo-Mareeba Irrigation Scheme with its corn and peanut plantings may be more important: it provides a dry season food supply for Sarus. In extreme regions such as the wet/dry tropics it is often dry season resources which limit populations.

When visiting the Normanton area in 1996, Dr George Archibald and I checked the nest sites of both Brolgas and Sarus we had found 12 years earlier. Virtually without fail, the same sites were being used, by

the same species, in about the same numbers. We also saw no increase in hybrid ratio, although, as earlier, a few apparent hybrids were present.

A reasonable scenario is that a small population of Sarus exploited appropriate habitat in the Gulf region for a considerable amount of time. Their origin was most likely the eastern Sarus population from South-east Asia, which probably also provided the Philippine stock. As cattle raising increasingly altered the Gulf's habitat to favor the Sarus, the population grew and discovered the eastern feeding grounds, enabling a still greater increase, as breeding habitat was not a limiting factor. Brolgas migrate from Ayr to Ingham and it is easy to imagine some Sarus joining in and discovering the prime feeding grounds of the Atherton Tablelands.

Is the Philippine bird the same as the Australian one? Current shorebird and other winged migration suggest the direct route from South-east Asia provides no barriers, and local people in the Sarus' main habitat know the bird from prior to the proposed Luzon exodus. Nor can I recall any other instances of a species being extirpated in a region only to pop up elsewhere if there was no previous connection.

Mr Occam would suggest simplicity, which is that Sarus dispersed from South-east Asia tens of thousands of years ago and took up residence in the small areas of suitable habitat then available. Over time Australia changed to present more opportunity, allowing increase, meanwhile the reverse situation in the Philippines caused the Luzon population to disappear. I wonder whether the Sarus also historically occurred in the northern Merauke area of West Papua?

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JOHN GRANT *responds*: I think there is an interesting conservation-related issue pertaining to this discussion. If Sarus have indeed been around for a long time (as suggested by the small likelihood of recent colonisation, highlighted by Andrew), indications are that their population has remained precariously low, but still a significant contribution to the threatened global population. Until recently, the Australian population was widely perceived as increasing in numbers (based on numbers recorded wintering on the Atherton Tablelands, which built up from 1967 onwards). This supposed increase was in part responsible for their listing as 'Least Concern' in the *Action Plan for Australian Birds 2000*. Our current state of knowledge would suggest that 'Data Deficient' is more appropriate. Indeed the recent BANQG-organised counts reflect no obvious increase, and my recruitment data, gathered from 1997, are on the low end of the spectrum for cranes. The species' dependence on agricultural operations on the Tablelands and grazing lands on the Gulf country, and the sensitivity of cranes in general to landscape-level change, give some cause for concern, particularly if the Sarus is in fact a long-term resident.