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SPRING OBSERVATIONS ON CRANES IN FRESNO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS¹

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On March 13 and 14, 1929, the author with Mr. E. S. Cheney was making observations on the geese in the vicinity of Los Baños, when we became interested in the opportunity which there presented itself, of securing motion pictures as well as specimens of cranes (*Grus canadensis*). We started a search for these latter birds and finally found a large number of them on a ploughed field about four miles south of Firebaugh. "Gyp" corn had been planted there the year before and the birds were gleaning over the ploughed land searching out the heads of corn. The birds stalked about with a soldierly precision, and their rolling calls carried clearly over the field.

There were about 400 cranes in this field and they came to within 175 yards of the road. Every few moments a dance would take place. Two birds, sometimes three, would call vigorously *crrrr-uk-crrrr-uk*, then face each other, spread their wings, and start to prance, each bound into the air being higher than the one before, until a height of eight or ten feet was reached. The necks were stretched upward and forward, the bills pointing up at an angle of about 45 degrees. The birds struck forward with their feet while in the air. The calls given while this dance was in progress were quite loud.

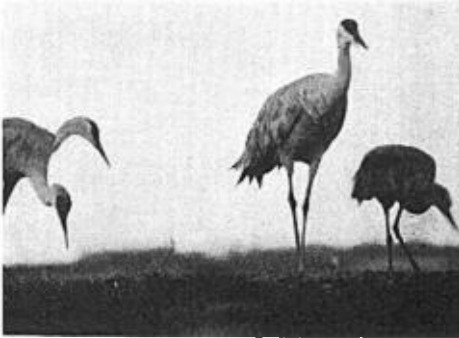
Occasionally, new birds would drop in, sailing gracefully down in a circle until within from forty to fifty feet of the ground. Then they would set their wings, dangle their legs and point the head and neck forward and slightly downward in an awkward position and drop down, each bird looking for all the world like an umbrella with the legs as a handle. As they began their final glide, they stretched both their feet and their heads forward and then started to back-pedal with their wings until nearly stopped, when they dropped to the ground, taking the jolt with bended legs. After landing, they generally looked about for a few moments and then started to feed. There was never a time but what some of the birds had their heads up gazing about watching for approaching danger. (See fig. 1.) As evening finally came, the flock took wing toward the southeast.

On March 18, 1929, we returned to the locality named above, but the birds were gone; so we went to a place south of Mendota, where we knew a flock had been located for some time. This piece of land was a large unfenced and un-

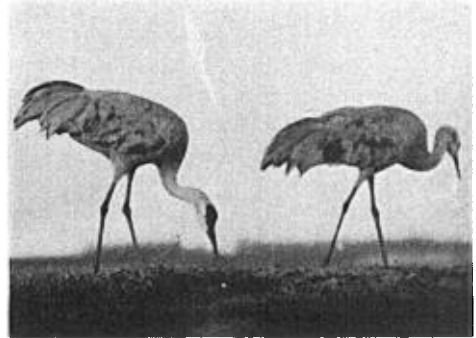
¹ By E. S. Cheney, courtesy of the California Division of Fish and Game.

plowed area, wet in spots, with scattered sage-bushes here and there over its surface. The grass was short, and in many places the ground was entirely bare with only a caked surface of dry alkali dust.

The work of digging blinds was undertaken by Mr. Cheney at night as that was the only time of the day in which the birds were sure to be absent from the field. Two blinds were installed, about a quarter of a mile apart. They were made to look like an ordinary sage-bush in size and form. The holes under the blinds were necessarily small, and a man could sit in one only by tucking his

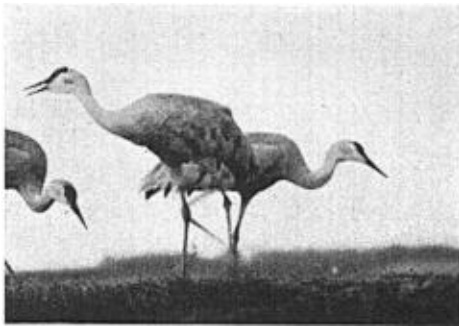


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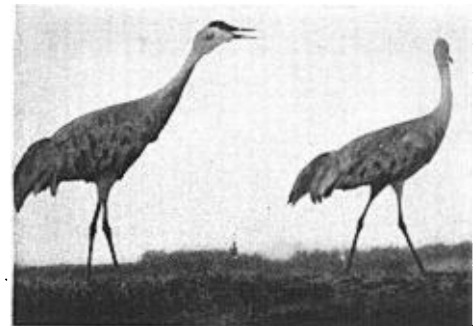


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Figs. 1 and 2. LITTLE BROWN CRANES (*Grus canadensis*) NEAR MENDOTA, FRESNO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, MARCH 19, 1929. THERE WERE ALWAYS SOME OF THE BIRDS WITH THEIR HEADS UP WATCHING FOR DANGER. SLOWLY THEY CAME TOWARD THE BLIND, PICKING UP THE SCATTERED CORN USED AS BAIT.



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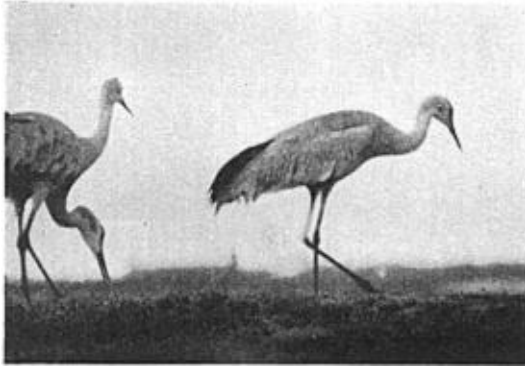
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Figs. 3 and 4. OCCASIONALLY THE CRANES WOULD CALL IN DEEP, ROLLING TONES. ONE OF THE BIRDS STARTED TO CALL, THE BILL WAS HELD OPEN AND AT EACH CALL THE WINGS WERE DRAWN AGAINST THE SIDES, SEEMING TO HELP FORCE OUT THE SOUND.

knees under his chin and folding up like a jackknife. Very small apertures were cut through the blind in order to allow the use of the camera lens. Through these small openings we watched the birds. Mr. Cheney secured some 450 to 500 feet of excellent movies, from which the accompanying views have been selected. I sat in the other blind and watched the birds.

Slowly the cranes worked toward the blind, picking up the scattered corn used as bait. Closer and closer they came. From a point close to the ground, as one

looked up at them, they appeared much taller than they actually were. (See figs. 2 and 3.) Occasionally they would call, in deep, rolling tones. They seemed to sense that something was amiss with the particular sage-bush in which the blind was located. But after moving almost entirely around the clump, at sixty or seventy feet distance, and being unable to see anything wrong, they began to come closer. I was watching eight or nine Little Brown Cranes slowly stepping toward me as they picked up the corn, when suddenly there was a terrific ear-splitting noise, which seemed to be directly over me. I almost jumped, it was so loud and startling. That would have been disastrous. I slowly turned my head and peered out through a hole to find that the bird which seemed to be on top of me was fully 20 feet away. The sight was becoming more and more exciting, as these great, wary birds came closer and closer to the blind. There were about ninety birds within 30 feet of the blind and perhaps a dozen or fifteen within 12 feet. Slowly, I turned my head, and there, directly behind, was a crane only about 8 feet distant. (See fig. 4.)



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Fig. 5. THE OBSERVER WAS IMPRESSED WITH THE HIGH GRACEFUL STEPS OF THE CRANES.
Fig. 6. IN THE ACT OF REACHING FOR A SMALL PLANT.

In a few moments, one of the cranes started to call; the bill was held open and at each call the wings were drawn against the sides and seemed to help force the sound out. Immediately following the call, a rush of air could be heard, as though the bird was refilling its lungs. Their calls were so loud that after a few minutes, my ears started to ring from the reverberations, until I was unable to hear very well. I jotted down some of the calls as follows: *kr-r-r*, *kr-r-r*, a rasping, guttural, vibrating call given mainly on the ground, but not so very loud. The sound may be imitated by pronouncing the first syllable and vibrating the tongue gutturally, forming the *r*'s. A *cronk*, *kruk* was only occasionally heard, while a *kr-luck kruk*, was a low contented clucking note given mostly when the birds were feeding or standing idly about; a *whee-ee whee-ee* was often heard especially during a slight bickering between two birds. For some time, I did not realize that this thin peculiar call came from the cranes. A flock of six came wheeling in and parachuted down directly over me. Then came the tremendously powerful call for which the birds are noted, *kr-r-r*, *kr-r-r kr-r-uk*, *kr-r-r-oo*, *kr-r-r-r-oo kruk*. I could have reached out of the top of the blind and grasped the nearest one by the legs, it was so close above me.

The feet of the birds were used nearly as much as the bills in fighting. They would raise their feet, flap their wings and strike forward and downward apparently with considerable force; for when a blow landed the feathers would fly. While feeding, one bird would often reach out with its bill and grasp another by a part of the wing or back, or sometimes a dagger-like stab would suffice. They seemed quite pugnacious. I suppose the approach of the breeding season had something to do with it.

As the birds were walking about near the blind, one large bird spied some movement on my part and stood eyeing the aperture out of which I was peering for a minute or so. It would look with first one eye and then the other, turning its head at right angles to me each time. Every few moments, it would call softly, a questioning *kruk, kruk*, and finally, after convincing itself that nothing was amiss, it went on feeding.

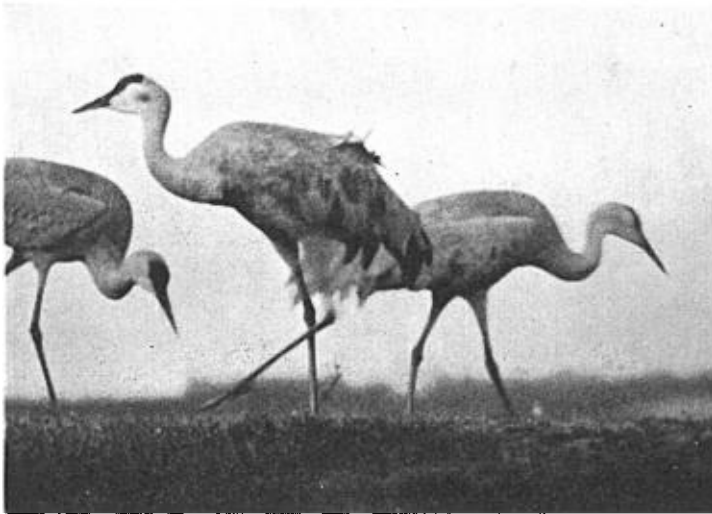


Fig. 7. A CRANE WOULD PREEN ITS FEATHERS, WHICH WERE IMMEDIATELY RUFFLED AGAIN BY THE STRONG WIND.

A small blue-bellied lizard preferred my sage-bush to any other and was determined to get on my back. I do not mind lizards, but in such close quarters and under such conditions, I can not say that I like to have them crawling on me. I finally chased it out and it headed for the next sage-bush about 80 feet away. It went too close to some cranes and one of them nabbed it and swallowed it almost before I could see what was happening. (See fig. 5.)

I was impressed by the high, graceful steps of the cranes. They stalked about with the precision of soldiers on guard. Occasionally, when one of the birds discovered some rich morsel, some of the others would trot toward it. When feeding on the roots of plants, a bird would secure a firm grip with the bill and start to pull, quivering all over as it strained. (See fig. 6.) Finally the plant would give way, but instantly the bird would resume its composure. There seemed to be no loss of balance as the plant came up.

Sometimes a bird would stand preening its feathers, which were immediately ruffled again by the strong wind which was blowing at the time. (See fig. 7.)

There was one bird which I suppose was a Sandhill Crane, for it was taller and larger, with a longer bill, than any of the other birds. When this bird approached, it was on the opposite side of the blind from which my gun was protruding. The blind was so small that in order to turn the gun around, I was forced to slide the muzzle in very carefully, take off the forepiece and the breech, draw the muzzle all the way in and push it through another aperture slowly and reassemble the gun. All of this took time, as everything had to be done slowly. By the time I got the gun turned around, the bird had moved and I kept up this shifting until the bird finally got on the dark side of the blind and stayed there so I could not see him. Finally, he moved off to a considerable distance and became mixed in among the rest of the flock. I was extremely worried for fear one of the birds would come and actually look into the blind, but I soon discovered that they did not come very close to any of the bushes in their movements about the field.



Fig. 8. THE CRANES GATHERED AND MOVED OFF TOWARD THE SOUTHEAST.

At 5:30 p. m., the prearranged time for me to collect my specimens, I opened fire at the biggest male bird that I could see and then dropped the female that had been with him as she leaped into the air. All was bedlam at the first report of the gun. Cranes bounded into the air on every side. The rush of wings and all the voices sounded as a roar. (See fig. 8.) The cranes gathered and moved off to the southeast. Some that were some distance away were slow in taking off, but at the first movement of the blind they were on their way. The larger part of the flock came down in a field some two miles farther south, only to take off again and disappear.

Mr. Cheney remained over the next day and he said the birds on coming back into the field did not come nearer than a quarter of a mile to the blind in which I had been located. They gave it a wide berth and continually watched it

from wherever they were located. This shows the extreme wariness with which these birds are endowed.

Apparently this species of crane does a major part of its courting and display antics before it departs for the north. The birds pass over the Sierra Nevada of Mariposa and Tuolumne counties on their way north, generally between the last week of March and the middle of April, and thence turn almost north across Nevada. On April 29, no cranes were seen or heard of in the San Joaquin Valley, so it was taken for granted they had all departed. The last that were seen by people living near Firebaugh was a flock of ten on April 20.

Division of Fish and Game, San Francisco, California, August 26, 1929.