

HUEY D. JOHNSON

Saving cranes

I SPEND most of the year writing critically on the environmental errors of humanity's ways. I am bent out of shape at the kind of blindness to our debt to nature that led to the extinction of the passenger pigeon and other species.

However, I like to start each year by looking at at least one thing we can feel good about—helping the majestic whooping crane and its global cousins come back from the brink of extinction.

In 1921, there were about 21 whooping cranes in the U.S. Our new-found awareness of man's impact led to their rebound. This year, says Dr. George Archibald at the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin, there are 235 whoopers, and 141 of them are wild. These cranes fly 2,500 miles north to nest in Canada's Wood Buffalo Park from their wintering site on the Aransas Reserve in Texas, near the Gulf of Mexico.

Wintering cranes, including whoopers, can be seen at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, about two hours south of Albuquerque.

The lesser sandhill cranes, which are abundant, migrate slowly north by the thousands and put

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on a grand show along the Platte River in Nebraska in the fall. There is a threat to their habitat by development interests, but I predict that the National Audubon Society will win its fight to save enough water in the Platte for the cranes' needs.

You can see cranes, too. The greater sandhill crane winters out on the vast fields approximately 30 miles south of Sacramento on I-5, near Thornton. You can hear their bugling call, and even see them dance, all from the warmth of your car. Bring binoculars. The Nature Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited maintain a refuge on nearby Deamond Road. They even built an observation platform to encourage bird watching. The California Fish and Game Department has a refuge on Woodbridge Road just a few miles farther south.

I am particularly inspired by the crane—its size, grace and grandeur have inspired many cultures for centuries. Particularly in Asia, the crane is a symbol of peace, happiness and long life.

The Soviet Union's Siberian crane, like the whooper, is having a precarious recovery. This magnificently hearty bird migrates great distances. One route is over 5,000 miles, from Siberia, up and over the Himalaya Mountains to one particular marsh near the Taj Mahal in India.

The Indian government has always provided water in that marsh for those cranes. The resulting lush grasses have always appealed to cattle, but they have been kept away. Several years ago, villagers demanded the right to graze their cows in that marsh. Eventually, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sided with the cranes and called out the army to protect the wild marsh. Further demands by the villagers ended in bloody conflict but the marsh remains a refuge.

In Japan, it was long believed that the red crowned cranes were extinct by the turn of the century, but in 1924 a few were found. A marsh reserve was established for them in 1935. A few years ago, during a bitterly cold winter, Japanese farmers fed the starving cranes. That has become a widespread practice and key to the recovery of those birds. Now there are about 450 of them.

WE ARE saving the wonder of wildness in saving the crane, just as with the wolf, whale or salmon, the redwood, orchid or vast reaches of rain forest. All are gifts to humanity that are integral to the quality of our lives and our greatest link to past and future generations.

Their recovery and conservation confirm that it is possible to save ourselves from extinction.