



Current crane population centres in the UK



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## WHAT DO CRANES NEED?

### BREEDING HABITAT

Cranes' principal requirement is a wetland (eg. reedbed, fen, lowland bog, grazing marsh) that offers seclusion from disturbance and protection from mammalian predators. In the UK to date, they have used large sites greater than 100 hectares.

Cranes make a nest in open water, often in emergent vegetation. After the eggs hatch, the family typically forage close to the wetland nest site for several weeks, but as the chicks get older, they roam further afield. In Britain, semi-natural habitats like grazing marshes, hay meadows, and rough grasslands appear to be particularly important habitats. Field margins and arable fields, such as beetroot, fallows, sugar-beet, potatoes and maize are also used.

### NON-BREEDING HABITAT

Cranes tend to form flocks outside the breeding season. In the winter they rely more on arable land, taking advantage of waste potatoes, maize, stubbles and newly-drilled cereal crops; however, they also continue to forage in their breeding habitats.

### DIET

Cranes are omnivores taking a range of invertebrates, small vertebrates, and plant seeds, roots and shoots. Large invertebrates, such as earthworms, beetles, caterpillars, grasshoppers, and snails appear to be particularly important during the chick-rearing period. The young are fed by their parents until they gradually become self sufficient at three months.

Cranes returned to the Norfolk Broads in 1979 and started breeding two years later. For the first 15 years, progress was very slow, but since the late 1990s breeding success has improved and numbers have steadily increased. Other Crane concentrations are now found in the East Anglian Fens and south Yorkshire. In addition, since 2010 the Great Crane Project has been reintroducing cranes to the Somerset Levels and Moors.

The Common Crane remains a rare breeder in Britain with around 20 pairs each year, but given recent trends it seems likely that other wetlands across the UK may be colonised in the near future.

ANNUAL LIFECYCLE OF A CRANE	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Post-breeding flocks												
Pairs disperse to breeding sites												
Protracted egg-laying period												
Chick-rearing and moulting												
Continental cranes migrate through Britain												

## HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE CRANES?

### BREEDING HABITAT

- Provide suitable nesting sites: open pools of various sizes (minimum of 100m<sup>2</sup>) and water depths (5-50cms) with emergent vegetation such as reed, sedge or rush.
- Maintain consistent water-levels throughout the incubation period to stop nest sites either drying out or becoming flooded.
- Deep perimeter ditches, over one and a half metres in depth, and/or full height reed fringes over five metres wide should surround nest sites to discourage mammalian predators.
- Shallow open pools should be available throughout the breeding season to provide secure roost sites.

### FORAGING HABITAT

- The nest-site should be within 500 metres of insect-rich habitat. In lowland Britain, this may be five to ten hectares of hay-meadow, rough grassland, fen or grazing-marsh. In upland regions, larger areas of moorland or bog may be required.
- Cranes tend to avoid cattle during the breeding season, so livestock should either be excluded from favoured nesting and foraging areas or managed in rotation until young have fledged.

- The use of stock-netting should be avoided as it can act as a barrier to un-fledged young.

### HUMAN DISTURBANCE

- Cranes are prone to human disturbance year round, but this can be particularly critical while they are selecting nest sites, during incubation and once they have unfledged young. Avoid human activity in nesting, foraging and roosting areas from mid-February.
- If summer management is carried out (eg sedge-cutting), or if visitors have access to the site, at least 200 metres should be left around nesting and foraging areas in tall-vegetation habitats (eg reed) and at least 500 metres in short-vegetation habitats (eg sedge or rush).

- Establish 'disturbance free zones' in existing wetlands and future creation schemes.

### AVOIDING COLLISIONS

- Cranes can be prone to collision with power-lines. The collision risk can be reduced through fitting markers or removing the earth wires.
- Any habitat created for Cranes should be away from areas with a high density of flight hazards.

### WINTER FOOD

- Artificial feeding, either through sacrificial maize and potatoes crops, or feeding stations, have been successful in bolstering crane populations on the continent.

### PREDATOR CONTROL

- Predation of nests and chicks by fox is a significant issue for cranes. Preference should be given to mitigating these impacts through habitat manipulation, but if predation remains a serious issue, consideration should be given to controlling foxes. The most efficient strategy for reducing fox numbers during the breeding season is to use a concentrated period of control from January to March.

### VIEWING CRANES

- Large concentrations of migrating and wintering cranes create impressive wildlife spectacles. Elsewhere these have helped capture the public's imagination and attract large numbers of visitors. The Common Crane can be a useful 'flagship' species to raise public awareness and support for wetland conservation.
- Any events showing cranes to the public should be done outside the breeding season (March to August). Breeding crane can be very secretive and don't lend themselves to public viewing at this time of year.

## KEY POINTS

### CRANES REQUIRE:

- **Seclusion during the breeding season, so limit human disturbance and establish 'disturbance free zones' in wetlands.**
- **Shallow pools with emergent vegetation for nesting. Mitigate predator impacts through maintaining consistent water-levels, wet fences and the provision of shallow roost pools throughout the breeding season. Undertake fox control if necessary.**
- **Semi-natural foraging habitat, that provide ideal structure for high numbers of large invertebrates, within close proximity to nest sites.**

### See also RSPB advisory sheets on:

- **Managing water levels to benefit birds**
- **Wader scrape creation for wildlife**
- **Reedbeds for Bitterns**

### Handbooks:

- **The Reedbed Management Handbook**
- **The Wet Grassland Guide**

For further information and contact details please see the following websites:



[www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)



<http://sites.google.com/site/ukcraneworkinggroup>



[www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk](http://www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk)