

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Crane

BY JOHN MCEWEN * ILLUSTRATED BY CARRY AKROYD

The crane (*Grus grus*) ceased to breed in Britain from the 17th century. But herons were colloquially called 'cranes', as John Clare's 19th-century – but appropriate – lines show:

*While far above the solitary crane
Swings lonely to unfrozen dykes
again
Cranking a jarring melancholy cry
Thro the wild journey of the
cheerless sky*

From *March*

That cranes were widespread is testified by cranberries, cranesbill – and many place names such as Cranbrook (Kent), Cranborne (Dorset), Cranfield (Bedfordshire) and Cran Hill (Aberdeenshire). Once the 'noblest quarry' in falconry, they and their eggs were a prized meal and propelled the drive to extinction.

East-coast Scotland and England, particularly Norfolk, harbour continental vagrants, not least cranes.

John Buxton, a wildlife film-maker, and his family lived at Horsey Hall, in the Norfolk Broads. Horsey forms part of the Thurne Broads, adjacent to the North Sea.

One day in September 1979, Frank Starling, a tenant farmer at Horsey, excitedly rang Buxton: 'Just seen the biggest bloody herons I've ever seen in my life!' he exclaimed.

It heralded the British crane renaissance. Buxton knew at once they were cranes. He had seen occasional migrating vagrants flying high over Horsey. It transpired that a pair of cranes were feeding on an unharvested potato field – potatoes are a favourite food – and roosting in the surrounding marshes. A third crane joined them in October and the three overwintered, moving between Hickling and Horsey. Buxton had not seen cranes on the ground before.

The cranes remained at Horsey and in 1982 fledged a chick, the first in England for 400 years. At least one pair of nesting



cranes was annually recorded from then until Buxton's death in 2014. In that time, four successful fledgings happened twice, as recounted in John Buxton's *The Norfolk Cranes' Story*.

On my visit to Horsey in 2010, only one of three pairs was visible: 4ft tall with a 7ft wingspan. It was easy to see why these stately and elegant birds, Britain's largest, provoke astonishment.

It was also understandable why Buxton, a self-described 'craniac', so tirelessly guarded (aided by his wife Bridget and wardens) these shy birds. Foxes had a taste for crane eggs and professional egg-stealers still exist. Private land meant visits were confined to invited guests.

Inspired by the Horsey colony, from

2010 to 2014 the Great Crane Project, a conservation partnership including the WWT and RSPB, imported crane eggs from Germany and released the fledged birds in the Somerset Levels. There are now 30 British breeding pairs and 145 residents, with offshoot colonies in Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire. A small colony in north-east Scotland is the only one to migrate.

One March day at Verdun, when I was visiting the Douaumont Ossuary and Fleury-devant-Douaumont National Necropolis, commemorating the 230,000 French and German soldiers killed in the battle, there was a wailing of many voices, as if from an associated soundtrack. It was the passing of a thousand migrating cranes. 