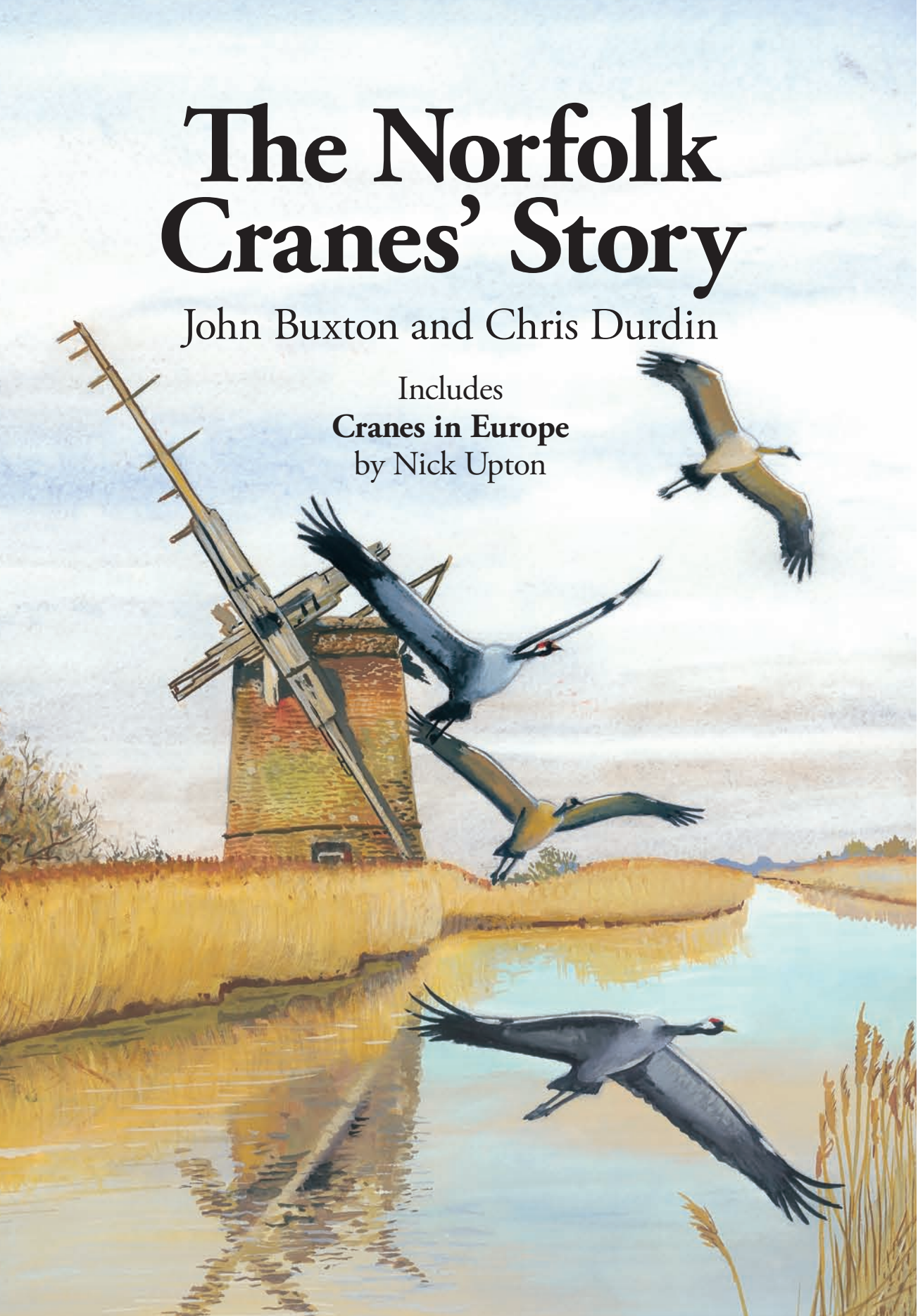
The Norfolk Cranes' Story

John Buxton and Chris Durdin

Includes
Cranes in Europe
by Nick Upton



Chapter 2
‘The biggest bloody herons’ 1979 – 1981

1979
Cranes appear at Hickling and Horsey

In September 1979, a tenant farmer who had some cattle grazing in the marshes rang me up with some excitement in his voice to say that he had “just seen the biggest bloody herons I have ever seen in my life,” in fact two of them.

It was Frank Starling, father of Richard Starling, who is now warden for the Norfolk Wildlife Trust’s nature reserve at Martham and Starch Grass. I was away in Scotland at the time but from his description I suspected that they might be cranes, and there they were when I returned. I had seen cranes high flying over Horsey in the past, but this was the first time I’d seen any on the ground.

The first appearance of cranes was on 13th September when two birds came to Hickling. They were first seen on the afternoon by Stuart Linsell, then Norfolk Wildlife Trust warden at Hickling Broad, in a stubble field along Stubb Road, Hickling. Local bird recorder Peter Allard saw them on 15th September. A third bird joined them on 10th October, by which time they were moving between Hickling and Horsey. Another tenant farmer, Mr Ernie King, then near retirement, had a field of potatoes that he had not harvested, which the cranes seemed to find delectable. This is where they mostly fed, while roosting in various places in the marshes. I realised then that it was important that they were undisturbed, but I had several hides from which I could watch them without disturbance. Three birds overwintered here, and it later became apparent that they were a pair (hereafter called Pair A) plus a lone individual.

1980
Cranes stay at Horsey, but don’t breed

Farmer Michael Kittle had captured a fourth crane at Irstead Hall on 7th October 1979, an exhausted adult. It had either nylon or a rubber object tangled round its bill – I didn’t see it myself, and accounts vary. Hilary Scott records that it was kept ‘in a wildfowl refuge without restriction until spring 1980’, this probably accounting for the fourth bird that joined the original three from 21st March 1980, then present in the Horsey area for at least 11 days to the 31st March.

People said the cranes were bound to leave in the spring, which proved correct. They left Horsey

on 5th April, the event witnessed by Terry Boulton from Caister who noted that they circled up very high over Heigham Holmes at 10.50 am, calling frequently as they gained height, circling up to an estimated height of between 2,500 and 3,000 feet. Both Terry and Peter Allard worked for Bristow Helicopters for some 30 years each, so had some experience of estimating height. The cranes then slowly drifted west until they were lost to view, and re-appeared over Sheringham in north Norfolk at midday. Three cranes, presumably these, were seen at Scar House Reservoir, in Upper Nidderdale in Yorkshire on 6th April. They returned two and half weeks later on 22nd April. A later three-day exploratory flight led to sightings over Burton-on-Trent and, on 1st May, over Holyhead in Anglesey. These movements are likely to be an attempted migration back to Scandinavia, but deterred by the hazardous North Sea crossing.

The original group of three cranes, here feeding in a potato field on the Horsey Estate in February 1980.

If nothing else, these movements point strongly towards a wild origin for the three initial birds, contrary to some rumours that the birds were escapees from a collection. These rumours probably reduced interest in the birds' presence, and I didn't discourage this belief. But no information has come to light about cranes escaping from captivity and, by contrast, there are many records of migrants/vagrants in most parts of the UK in all months of the year.

The three cranes were showing clear signs of having become a pair plus a singleton, as these observations, recorded in the Estate's notebook on 30th April 1980, reveal:

> 'At 11 am, I saw them fly in near the Mere, having landed on a reed stubble [left after the reedbed was cut]. The larger male and female were together and the single, smaller male rather left out on his own. Their behaviour is more and more paired off plus one.'

Chapter 9
Observations on cranes

Choice of nest sites

The cranes' preference is to have open water on at least one side, which gives a clear view of the approach of any mammalian predators. The nests are not always on an island, which would give the best protection, but that may be due to a shortage of suitable sites at Horsey. Nests are not normally on the sides of dykes as they would be vulnerable here to foxes moving along the dyke edge. The sole exception was the one nest east of the Horsey-Somerton road, in 1989, which was in a narrow strip of reed between two ditches, but was deserted probably owing to disturbance from cattle.

Since Chinese water deer became established they have produced paths through the reeds, paths that can easily be followed by a fox. Naturally no choice of nest site can protect the eggs and young from aerial predators such as harriers, bitterns or crows.

A cut strip makes it easier for cranes to walk from their nest to feeding areas.

Cranes also nest in thick saw-sedge, though this makes moving in and out of the nest area a challenge for the young. No nest has ever been on the edge of Horsey Mere: they are tucked away out of sight in smaller ponds in the fen or reed.

Because much of the feeding in spring and summer takes place on grazing marshes, nests are always within striking distance of these. Usually they are some 200-300 yards from a grazing marsh, but they may be up to half a mile. At Horsey, the Estate often cuts a wide track, well ahead of the breeding season, from potential nesting areas to the grazing marshes. This makes it easier for the cranes to walk through the vegetation along an open roadway from the nesting site to feeding areas in the grazing marshes. Usually, this cut is some 12 feet wide to reduce the risk of a fox ambushing a young crane on a narrow track.

Some areas of adjacent grazing marshes, in recent years, have had electric sheep netting, which bars the way for cranes walking with a youngster. The adult birds now choose to nest away from these fenced areas, apparently in response to the fences.

Camouflage

On several occasions, incubating female cranes have been seen putting muddy water onto their backs, causing the feathers to go brown. Turning grassland to deep-drained arable on the Thurne upstream from Horsey creates deposits of orange ochre; this is ferric hydroxide, released from soils once flooded by saline water, and has affected Horsey Mere for five decades. The colour of ochre means the effect of this on plumage is quite marked and reasonably obvious if the light is good as it is on the area exposed to view from above. It is a sure sign that they have started incubation.

> "I have never experienced any other bird which voluntarily carries out this camouflage technique. How have they learnt to do this? Has instinct taught them or is it proof of a very clever bird?" JJB

Incubation

Incubation of the eggs is between 28 and 31 days, typically 30 days. It is possible to judge when incubation has started when a single crane is at the feeding grounds for the first time, rather than the pair feeding together.

Both sexes share incubation, usually sitting for between 90 minutes and two hours before a changeover. In 1983, warden Sandra Anderson observed and recorded this in detail. Careful watching of the second nest of Pair A, daily for 14 hours, allowed information on the length of incubation shifts by the parents to be collected. Forty-nine counts of sitting times were logged, varying between 21 and 234 minutes, with an average of 102 minutes. Both male and female incubated, but it was not possible to tell if there was any difference between the lengths of incubation, as it was difficult to distinguish between them in flight as they came into or left the nest.

Some pairs share incubation fairly equally, though the female always broods on the nest overnight while the male stands on one leg a few feet away, usually in water. In some cases the male fails in his duties and does not incubate when his turn comes, leaving the female to do the bulk of the incubation. These pairs seem more likely to fail.

Common cranes incubate as soon as the first of the two eggs is laid. The interval between

What's in a name?
It's from cranes in flight that we hear their '*gru gru*' sound – from which comes the Latin *grus* and the scientific name of *Grus grus*. Other Latin-based languages are similar. The Spanish *grulla*, the Portuguese *grou*, the French *grue cindrée* and Italian *gru* come from this root. Curiously, in Romanian, another Latin-based language, crane is *cocorul-mare*. The mechanical crane on a building site is sometimes the same word (e.g. French) and sometimes different (e.g. *grúa* in Spanish).

The English name crane is plainly Anglo-Saxon in origin, being more similar to the German *kranich*, Norwegian/Danish *trane* or the Swedish *trana*. These crop up in place names, such as Cranwich and Tranmere.

In Greek, the crane is *γερανός* (geranos) – both bird and machine. Botanists and gardeners will recognise the link with *Geranium*, the large genus of both wild and cultivated cranesbills. The related red and pink pot plant often called geranium is strictly speaking *Pelargonium*, and though closely related to the true geraniums, its name comes from stork (pelargos); *Erodium*, storksbill, evokes the heron (erodios).

Herb Robert *Geranium robertianum*, a common species of cranesbill, grows outside the back door at Horsey Hall. Note: the crane-like head on the seedpod.

Crane displays

1) Threat display

A typical threat display is a resident pair responding to an intruder. The pair will make the

unison call; the male will raise his bustle, hold his head and beak high and do a stately walk with deliberate, elegant steps towards his rival. He may call and may run after the intruder, at which the intruder will probably fly or walk away. Rarely, the intruder competes by holding his ground.

Another threat display observed at Horsey involves pairs that are nesting close to each other, with a dyke forming a territorial boundary. In this case, the nests were about half a mile apart and the dyke in open grazing marsh appeared to be a mutually agreed boundary in the feeding area. The display involved birds standing some 10 or 12 feet apart across a dyke, calling (bugling) with heads and bustles held high for about 30 seconds, followed by a proud walk away with big steps, still with head held high and bustle partly raised, before being deflated. One male did so much of this territorial jousting that he failed to do his share of incubating on the nest about a quarter of a mile away. This nest failed at the egg stage, though how much the male's distraction caused this is unclear.

The dark patterning on the neck below the red patch may vary, helping us to recognise individual birds. On one bird the black is in a horseshoe shape, on another more like the loop shape on a tennis ball, or it may come to a point.

In winter, threatening behaviour is sometimes seen if there is an intrusion into what a pair regards as still its territory. Birds are then roosting as a loose group, with any family party around 20 yards from non-breeders. Naturally, threat display takes place mostly in the breeding season, with antagonistic behaviour seen from mid-March. This may encourage the dispersal of non-breeding birds, which usually move away from crane territories in early April, though this varies according to the weather.

In the threat posture, the red on the head shows strongly. Typically, the red patch seems quite dark but shows as a vivid red on a displaying male, if seen in good light.

Chapter 12
Following cranes from Scandinavia to Spain

Wildlife filmmaker Dr Nick Upton spent two years close to breeding and migrating cranes in several parts of Europe. He became very familiar with the habits and characters of both the birds and their enthusiastic human guardians from Norfolk to Somerset and from Poland to Spain, which is where his story begins.

We knew the cranes were coming. Tens of thousands of them if predictions were right, but I'd learnt to be wary of forecasts where cranes were concerned; the weather might close in again or they might decide to stop somewhere on the way, for another week or so, maybe ...

Cranes over village in Gascony, France; the Pyrenees are in the background.

After three weeks of waiting in the Spanish Pyrenees, in which time we'd only seen a few straggling lines of cranes flying by in the distance between bouts of heavy snow, strong southerly winds and thick fog, time was running out for us to see and film the great migration spectacle

we'd come for. We'd had false dawns before with predictions of major flights south proving false as the heaviest autumn snow for 40 years fell on the Pyrenees, and most of Europe's cranes were still feeding and resting further north. This time, though, I was more optimistic; two days earlier, while sheltering from another snow blizzard on a mountain ridge, I'd taken an excited call from Dr Martin Kraft, a dedicated German crane enthusiast, who announced "We have mass migration over Marburg!" and then held up his mobile phone. I heard the sound of a thousand crane voices as large flocks of migrants flew over him at the university and knew they were finally heading our way in big numbers, but would they really keep coming?

I've been lucky enough to work with the RSPB Film Unit over the last two years directing shoots with cameraman Toby Hough around Europe for two films about cranes, both of which feature their return to the UK. In early November 2008, we were based near the Lindux pass in the Pyrenees mountains, hoping to film one of Europe's greatest wildlife spectacles, the passage of crane flocks on their way from breeding sites across northern Europe to their wintering headquarters in central Spain and Portugal. Our shoot had begun well in early October at Lac du Der-Chantecoq in Champagne, France, to the east of Paris. Clear skies and gentle north-east winds had encouraged cranes to begin their great autumn migration south. We'd witnessed and filmed the numbers roosting on islands on the lake and feeding on agricultural fields in the area rise from around 500 to 4,000 in the week we spent there. These were just the advance guard of nearly 220,000 cranes that follow the western European flyway; they migrate southwest

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