



The Aviculture of Cranes

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Introduction



Cranes have always held a special place in the heart of mankind. In medieval Europe and the Orient cranes symbolised nobility, and it was the sole right of the king and his court to hunt such birds. The crane has universally stood as a symbol of long life and happy marriage. As with the roof nesting storks of Europe, so it is with the [Sarur Crane](#) of India; it is held as a good omen to have a crane pair nest in one's rice field. Aviculturists are keenly interested in the maintenance and propagation of cranes, since cranes are spectacular avian specimens to display, adjust readily to captivity, are maintained on a relatively simple diet, and are reproductively prolific soon after they have psychologically acclimated.

Cranes are easily maintained and induced to breed in captivity if a few simple rules are followed. Wild caught birds soon acclimate to captivity if initially given a proper confine, diet, and a small area where they can escape visual contact with humans. Basically all that is needed to keep and breed cranes is a predator proof confine equipped with a grassy field, clean drinking water, commercial turkey breeder pellets, and in temperate latitudes, a small winter shelter with open door facing south (in the northern hemisphere). I have had several crane pairs successfully breed in confines measuring 30 to 60 feet. It is not imperative to have an open body of water; however, cranes do bathe and a small pool is recommended. All species, except the [West African crowned crane](#) (Black crowned crane) can endure the temperatures far below freezing provided with open water and/or a dry, draftless, open winter shelter. The aforementioned crowned cranes must be kept in a winger shelter whose temperature never reaches freezing. If the temperatures go below minus ten degrees foot freezing is eliminated if a small standing area in open water is maintained throughout the cold period. This is simply done in a small pool by maintaining steady water circulation. In larger shallow pools an aerator keeps a hole open in the ice.

Fencing

Properly pinioned birds are successfully held behind an eight foot fence. The fence should be buried six inches to minimise terrestrial predation. One inch mesh wire for the first foot followed by 2 x 4 inch from there on up is recommended. If birds pace the fence, burlap the wire. Wild caught birds frequently bruise their breasts and scrape their bills unless the wire is burlapped. If an aggressive individual can see an opponent it frequently scales its confine and attacks; this can result in damage to both attacker and opponent. Even if they don't get together, a pair may not breed due to visual contact with other birds. Once again, burlap solves the problem. Finally, be sure that there are no protruding nails or wire ends with which the birds might be injured.

Pinioning

[Fully pinion](#) all birds at the wrist via amputation or [tenotomy](#). If tenotomy is practised one must make certain the joint fluid is drained, at least one centimetre of the extensor tendon is removed and the wing is tied shut until the wound is completely healed. When amputating do not remove the wing finger ([alula](#)). The wound is continually opened as the bird strikes solid objects if the alula is removed. Frequently it is recommended to trim the secondaries of the pinioned wing. I have a West African crowned crane which can flap to fifty feet on a high wind and one and a half wings.

Note: NSW Guidelines for Pinioning of Birds (see regulations) <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/livestock/animal-welfare/codes/bird-pinioning>.

Aggressive Behaviour

Often several birds apparently live in peaceful coexistence when suddenly sharp antagonisms erupt. One must be on the constant watch for such happenings. Separate fighting birds immediately. In a coexistence with limited space, a subordinate bird cannot escape and is sometimes killed. Cranes are unpredictable; this aggression may erupt between members of a mated pair, between parents and their previous year's offspring, among and between individuals in a flock, and frequently between members of different species. I have had yearling [Sandhill Cranes](#) that apparently were not reproductively interested in any other bird (or human), but which had to be completely isolated for some months from all other cranes due to their malicious nature. Cranes are deceptive in their apparent peaceful disposition. Keepers should carefully guard against attack by birds that have lost fear of man. Serious wounds can be delivered to an unsuspecting keeper.

Diet and Feeding

Although some aviculturists advocate a complicated meat-mash diet for cranes, our birds thrive and reproduce on commercial turkey breeder pellets. Young are reared on nothing but clean water and turkey starter, followed at three weeks by turkey grower. Each afternoon I feed each bird exactly the amount it can consume until the next feeding. Birds quickly learn to associate their keeper as a positive attribute to their environment. This is a key to quickly taming wild caught birds. If an abundance of food is available at all times and if the cranes are wild they spend more time attempting to escape, and, less time foraging. If acclimated to keeper and confine, cranes become fat and perhaps lack fertility if their physiology parallels that of many other avian groups. Grit in the form of sand or crushed oyster shell is an important requisite for cranes.

Breeding

If a crane pair is observed calling together, if they are defensive of their confine, and have other reproductive tendencies such as frequent dancing and nest building, remove all elements that distract the birds. Burlap the wire if any outside factor is distracting the birds. Do not enter the confine unless absolutely necessary. Just leave the birds alone. There is nothing but harm done if a keeper distracts the potentially breeding pair. After an active courtship and mating period of about two weeks the birds build a nest and lay. Both sexes incubate and defend the nesting area. When the chicks hatch be certain the food and water dishes are such that they are not trapped or drowned. Turkey starter crumbles, available in a shallow pan, is the only food required for the first three weeks at which time switch to turkey grower pellets.

The colts (crane chicks) are easily pinioned at one week by removal of one wing's hand at the wrist with a pair of dull scissors ([see Government Guidelines below](#)). Care must be taken not to remove the alula or to miss an area from which a single primary feather might grow. Remove immatures from their parents at six to eight months.

Note: NSW Guidelines for Pinioning of Birds ([see regulations](#)). "4.5 Pinioning of a bird over three days of age via the amputation method must only be performed by a registered veterinarian. The bird must be anaesthetised while being pinioned."

It is the contention of several crane authorities that hand-reared chicks are behavioural dead-ends, in that sexual imprinting is directed to humans with whom they attempt pair bond formation in later life. Cranes reared in visual and auditory contact with other young cranes form pair bonds with conspecifics in adulthood. It is he who has never seen another crane that thinks he's a people!

Removal of eggs induces adults to lay subsequent clutches; there are reports of captive cranes laying six to ten fertile eggs annually. Eggs are easily hatched by domestic chickens and ducks if care is taken to turn the eggs twice daily and to sprinkle them once daily with luke warm water. Young are taken from their foster parent upon drying and placed in a clean 2 x 2 x 2 foot brooder at 90 to 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Chicks of the genus [Grus](#) must be reared in individual brooders from the time of hatching until they fledge. It is a good idea to have brooder constructed and situated so that they can see other crane chicks. It takes the chick 36 hours to digest yolk after hatching. Feeding before this sometimes kills the birds.

Chicks are interested in moving and/or contrasting objects. Form small pellets from dampened turkey starter and move these brown pellets with the shiny, mercury tip of a thermometer in a white saucer. They strike at the shiny object, get some food by mistake and are soon eating. Always keep a fresh water supply in a shallow container. Clean the brooder daily. Reduce heat to 75 degrees Fahrenheit at three weeks and move the chicks to 6 x 4 x 3 foot growing pens. This pen is a wooden frame wired with wire screen on all sides and one inch mesh on the roof. The bottom is left open. In this way the pen may be placed on fresh areas of short grass during warm days. Be certain that there is always shade available. Do not leave the birds in the rain. The confine is easily removed to a brooder house at night. The chicks may be placed together in their permanent outdoor confine at nine weeks.

The greatest mortality observed among chicks is attributed to leg problems as a consequence of injury and diet. To ensure that chicks exercise and do not become overweight, feed the birds all they can eat for a fifteen minute period four times daily for the first three weeks, and three times daily from then until fledging. Fast growing legs are soon weakened if the bird is overweight. It is a hopeless situation if the [tarsus](#) bends distally from the knee; as the crane gains weight, the joint is progressively deflected until the chick dies from stress. Upon first notice of weakening of the knee joint, reduce food intake, add vitamin drops to the drinking water, and be certain that the floor of the brooder is burlapped to give the chick sure footing. Crooked toes are easily rectified by delicately wrapping the digit with adhesive tape for two days.

An important tip in handling cranes and in particular crane chicks, is never to pick up a crane by the legs. Tender, fast growing knee tissues of the chicks are easily injured if tendons are strained. Always lift a crane by placing one hand under the breast and the other on the back. Raise the bird allowing the legs to thrash about in space without striking a solid object. The importance of this rule cannot be overstressed. Grasp adult cranes at the base of the wings. Care must be taken that the head and neck are kept in an upright position such that the bird does not lacerate itself by kicking. Never fold a crane's leg as circulation is obstructed and the use of the leg may be permanently lost. Thus it is critical to ship cranes in a crate in which they can stand upright.

This is a superficial outline to the rearing and care of captive cranes. For additional information readers are referred to: Griswold, John A., 1962. Proven Methods of Keeping and Rearing Cranes in Captivity. A special report of the International Wild Waterfowl Association Inc., Allen Publishing Co., 1328 Allen Park Drive, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA.

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