

Status of Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) in Maharashtra

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Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) is found in the far eastern districts of Maharashtra, namely, Bhandara, Gondia and Chandrapur. The average rainfall in the Bhandara and Gondia districts is 1460mm. Bhandara and Gondia are having 52.21% of the land under forest cover. Bhandara has got 6,021 reservoirs and 'bodi's (small tanks) and Gondia has got 7,084 reservoirs and *bodi's*. The main crop in these three districts is paddy. Sarus Cranes are mainly found nesting along the Bawanthadi and the Pangoli river basins within three to 10 kilometers range from these two rivers. These two rivers also form the boundary between Gondia and Balaghat districts (Madhya Pradesh). Sarus cranes were found in abundance in this area till 1935 (D'Abreu, 1923 & 1935).

Remembering the golden days:

Mr. Narayandada Patil Dongarwar who is the son of famous *shikari*-turned-naturalist of the olden times Mr. Madhavrao Patil Dongarwar had seen 32 pairs of Sarus Cranes foraging in the marshy backwaters of Navegaon Bandh. Now Narayandada and his son Bhimsen Patil Dongarwar are struggling to save the avifauna and biodiversity of Navegaon National Park.

Sarus Cranes in Bhandara and Gondia

District: Advocate Sanjeev Gajbhiye located a nest of Sarus Cranes in 1998-99 at Kasarbodi in Tq. Tiroda in Gondia district. The circumference of the nest was eight feet. However he saw the two nesting cranes only

in 2000-2001. (N.B.: This pair was not counted in the Sarus count mentioned above).

One pair of Sarus Cranes was nesting at Navegaon Bandh National Park in Gondia district. It had laid two eggs and a forest guard was appointed to guard the nest and eggs. Unfortunately, this security also did not work and both the eggs were stolen on the day of 10th or 11th of October 2002, thus resulting into failure of the breeding attempt.

The members of the Gondia Nisarg Mandal are now monitoring the population of Sarus Cranes in Bhandara and Gondia districts. They found that there were at least 48 Sarus Cranes in the two districts in during the months of July to September in 2009.

Chandrapur District, 2002:

On 21st June 2002, a Sarus Crane count was done the birdwatchers all over India. Members of Green Pigeon Nature Society at Chandrapur also participated in this census. The Sarus Crane count was organised by International Crane Foundation (USA) and Wildlife Institute of India. Many birdwatchers including Mr. Atul Dhamankar, M.S.R. Shad and Latish Dekate participated in this census. The Census was done at Junona and Mohurli lakes which are adjacent to the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve and in Chandrapur district.

Sr. No.	Name of Village/Town	Habitat Type	No. of Sarus seen
1	Dasgaon	Paddyfield	5
2	Kati	Paddyfield	2
3	Zilmili	Reservoir	2
4	Ghat Temni	Tank (Bodi)	5
5	Panjra	Reservoir	4
6	Girola	Paddyfield	3
7	Dhapewada	Paddyfield	3
8	Tiroda	Paddyfield	4
9	Sawra	Tank (Bodi)	4
10	Lavani (M.P.)	Paddyfield	4
11	Futara (M.P.)	Tank (Bodi)	3
12	Ladcha (M.P.)	Paddyfield	3
13	Lohara	Paddyfield	2
14	Singar Bandh, Bondgaon (Surban)	Reservoir	2
15	Amgaon Bodi	Tank (Bodi)	2
Total	15 Sites		48

Table-1: Sarus Cranes in Eastern Maharashtra and bordering areas

During this census total eight Sarus Cranes were sighted by the birders. Six Sarus Cranes were sighted in Chandrapur district and the remaining two were sighted at Navegaon Bandh National Park in Gondia district.

Threats to Sarus Cranes:

1. The eggs of Sarus Cranes are stolen and eaten by unidentified persons.
2. Poaching of the birds for meat.
3. Lack of food for the birds.
4. Introduction of exotic fish: The fisheries

department promoted introduction of Common Carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) varieties of fish and these were introduced into the Navegaon Bandh reservoir, where the majority of Sarus Cranes used to breed. But now, even the number of migratory waterfowl, for which this reservoir was famous, has reduced.

5. Some people believe that the grass near the *bodi's* (small tanks) has been over-cropped or overgrazed.

6. Farmers are now using more of insecticides and pesticides for the agriculture. This could have resulted into nesting failure. But this needs substantiation.

People's drive to Protect Sarus Cranes:

Eight years back two-three pairs of Sarus Cranes used to breed at the Singar Bandh *bodi* near Bondagaon (Surban) village in Arjuni (Morgaon) tehsil of Gondia district. But then only one pair started coming for breeding. And the eggs were being stolen. A guard was appointed by the department of Forests to guard the nest. Still the eggs were stolen. At last, the forest department took the help of local people. And the things changed. Now every year the pair is raising chicks successfully.

A “*Saras Samrakshan Samiti*” (Sarus Conservation Committee) was formed in Bondagaon and is presided by a senior person, Mr. Parasram Hatwar. The people of Bondagaon take out a “*Saras-Gidhad Samrakshan Yatra*” (Sarus and Vulture Conservation Rally) during the Wildlife Week every year. And they are giving protection to one pair of Sarus Cranes in their village. The attempts of forest officers in Gothangaon to protect the nesting Sarus Cranes in their area also are appreciable.

Recommended conservation measures:

1. Public awareness: Non-governmental organisations and the forest department need

to do public awareness regarding the importance of Sarus Cranes in the area. The campaign should be concentrated in villages where the Sarus Cranes are nesting. The students should be the target of the campaign.

2. Managing the farmers:

Generally the Sarus Cranes nest in paddy fields or at the bank of small *bodi*'s (small tanks). The farmer in whose paddy fields the Sarus nests is unhappy because it takes nearly 20 sq. feet of his land during the season.

The farmers are needed be educated about the following things using some of these ideas:

- (a) He needs to be given some compensation;
- (b) He needs to be convinced of the benefits of the presence of Sarus Cranes in his field. We can tell them that Sarus eats the insects in the field and thus protects their paddy crop.
- (c) Sarus Cranes do not eat Paddy.
- (d) The farmers supporting the cause of Sarus Cranes need to be recognised and felicitated by the hands of Forest Officers.
- (e) These farmers can be felicitated as “*Sarus Mitra*” or “*Sarus Palak*” (Friends of Sarus or Guardians of Sarus) and certificates can be given.
- (f) The religious importance of Sarus should be emphasized among the people. Its mention in the epic Ramayana should be stressed.
- (g) During media coverage the farmers (and not the birdwatchers) should get importance as the guardians of Sarus.
- (h) When birders from outside visit the area to see Sarus, the farmers should be called and mentioned as the real protectors of the Sarus Cranes in front of them.
- (i) The farmers can be declared as 'guardians' of the nesting pairs during the nesting period. Thus, the farmers adopt the Sarus pair during the breeding season and looks after its well being.
- (j) The farmers need to know that it is an endangered species and is protected under

Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. And it is punishable to steal the eggs and kill the Sarus Cranes.

Acknowledgements:

The authors wish to thank Mr. Narayandada Dongarwar, Mr. Bhimsen Dongarwar and Mr. Nagpurkar (member of Envocare) and the villagers who are helping the Sarus Cranes. Thanks to Mr. Anil Badge (Range Forest Officer), Mr. Bopche (Round Officer) at Bondgaon for their initiative in the conservation of Sarus Cranes. Thanks to Advocate Sanjeev Gajbhiye for sharing his information.

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Recommended citation:

Dhurve, M., Gautan, I., Akare, S. and Kasambe, R. (2010): Status of Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) in Maharashtra. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. Vol. 50(6): 81-82.