Sarus Crane in Northern Myanmar, Kachin State

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‘Status in E India and Myanmar uncertain . . .’ citation from birds of the world, 1990. It is always interesting to visit the ‘white spot’ on the map. For long time the northern parts of Myanmar (Burma) were difficult to visit, especially Kachin state. I am definitely not the correct person to give an overview of the weal and woe of the Sarus crane (Grus antigone sharpii) in the northern part of this country as my knowledge is only based on four winter visits. I agree, it is more than many others. In the Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan, The Cranes, IUCN 1996, the Sarus crane is not mentioned for Myanmar. Only for Pakistan-India-Nepal, G.a.antigone is mentioned. In a footnote the presence of the Sarus crane for Myanmar is mentioned without details as part of the population refound in Vietnam. It is in general agreed that the Myanmar birds belong to G.a.sharpii. In the most recent guide for the birds of SE Asia (C.Robson, 2001) the Sarus crane is mentioned as ‘Formerly resident N Myanmar (current status unknown)’.

From November till April it is dry season in Kachin state as in nearly all parts of the country. A good time to visit the area but not the best time to see Sarus crane. Each observation of Sarus crane in his country is of great interest. From several sources recent information was received about several flocks in the delta of the Chindwin and Ayeyarwady, south west of Yangon. These will be breeding birds from that region and from other parts of Myanmar. As no Sarus cranes are breeding anymore (?) in Bangladesh or east-India, no birds come from that region. In former times this Burmese delta could have been a good wintering place for these cranes. One has to bear in mind that this delta area is very large and difficult of access though it is possible to visit the area by boat and there are some roads.

A few birds are always observed in Inle' Lake and some other wetlands in central Myanmar. As far as we know there is no general overview of the breeding places in this part of this country.

In the wet season it seems that the Sarus crane is breeding in many paddy fields and other wet areas in Kachin state. However, this is a statement by many local people and not verified by ornithologists. No information is available about arriving time in the breeding season or departure at the end of the season. The large paddy field areas east and south of Myitkyina and south of Mogaung seem to be excellent areas for the Sarus cranes. Many people informed us about breeding Sarus east of Myitkyina. We are only sure that these birds, if breeding in these areas, do not stay there during the dry season. In all these vast open areas where Eurasian cranes (Grus grus) and Bar-headed geese (Anser indicus) are wintering in good numbers, we never found any Sarus cranes during winter time.

In all paddy fields in the north, in wetlands and in overgrown oxbows we were looking during these four winters for them. In Kachin state we never observed them. In the north western part of Kachin state we were looking around Tanai. On most maps one will find close to this village the name Makaw. The habitat looks not very suitable for Sarus and no birds were found. There are only a few wetlands but most of paddy fields are dried out in winter.

The flat areas around Putao, in the far north of

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Kachin state, are covered by paddy fields. They are dry in winter. There are no typical wetlands suitable for Sarus. (We also looked for Black-necked cranes. Many areas looked exactly like the wintering sites in Bhutan but these cranes were not observed. Local people informed us also that they never observed cranes.)

In the southern part of Kachin state, around Bhamo, there are several oxbows of the Irrawaddy and small lakes and marshes. We did not find any cranes in that area. Most wet areas are used for growing vegetables and there seems to be no place for the cranes.

In fact there is only one area left in Kachin state. In the southwest of this state is Indawgyi lake. It is a remnant of a large inland bay cut off from the sea long ago. It has an absolute unique Ichthyofauna of which little is known. Already in the British time introductions of commercial fish took place without any ecological study, without studying the consequences for the original Ichthyofauna and without a long-term vision what to do.

This is not an isolated case as everywhere else in the world such irreversible introductions were carried out in the same way.

In former times there were vast marshes around the lake but most of them are now used as paddy fields. Some marshes remain in the north-eastern parts above the lake. They are situated along the river outlet of the lake, the Chaung Wa. Nowadays they are part of the nature-reserve but their management till now is not impressive. The paddy fields are in winter completely dry. It really made our day when we found for the first time Sarus cranes in the wetlands around the lake.

In 2000 we did not see them; in 2001 we found seven birds; in 2002 we found eight birds and none in 2003. However, another ornithologist visited the lake in 2003 a few days later and found several Sarus cranes in the marshes. Among the birds we found two or three juveniles. They stay in families but not in one larger group. Single birds or a pair without juvenile(s) can be observed.

It is not always easy to find the cranes. When one is using the boat over the Chaung Wa, it is difficult to see the surrounding marshes. One should be lucky when the cranes are close to the stream. If they are deeper in the marshes and into the high vegetation, one will not see them. They are not very noisy in this time of the year.

Another favourite area of the cranes are the remaining marshes along this river after the village of the same name. The winding river flows north-east through an area with very high banks (upto 5 metres) and mainly agricultural (vegetable) fields. There are remaining wetlands fully overgrown and some open water where the cranes feed. We also found Sarus cranes in the dry paddy fields west of the lake. This only happened once and these areas are probably used in combination with other areas. There are several other areas around the lake where cranes were seen or just were flying over. There might be other feeding grounds not known by now.

In principle it might be possible that these cranes are breeding in wet areas within Kachin state and winter only in the lake. This is not logic as birds are observed here during the entire year. It is supposed that 2-4 pairs of Sarus are breeding in this area and the birds are non-migratory. There might be exchange among cranes in the wet season when other cranes will stay in the surroundings for breeding in areas mentioned above. For these cranes there is no need to migrate to the south as long as the numbers are small. It is urgently needed that next to the protection of Indawgyi lake itself, more attention will be given to the surrounding marshes. The agricultural uses of these areas is a serious threat for all breeding birds. Resting places for birds other than geese and duck are limited and not secure. In the winter period cranes have to share the limited areas with Lesser Adjutant (Leptoptilos javanicus), Open-billed stork (Anastomus oscitans), Painted stork (Mycteria leucocephala) and Spotbilled Pelicans (Pelecanus philippensis) and numerous herons next to attentive birds of prey, like White-tailed Sea Eagle (Haliaeetus albicilla) and Greater Spotted Eagle (Aquila clanga). As on many other places the Sarus cranes follow their own way and seem to be little disturbed. Till the date will come that they are suddenly disappeared because we disturbed them too much and neglected their modest desires.
North Myanmar
Kachin State

Rivers:
*Irr = Irrawaddy
*Nam = Namkawng
*Chi = Chindwinn