

THE JAPANESE CRANE



CHARACTERISTICS

<i>Kingdom</i>	Animal
<i>Phylum</i>	Chordata
<i>Class</i>	Aves
<i>Order</i>	Gruiformes
<i>Family</i>	Gruidae
<i>Genus</i>	Grus
<i>Latin name</i>	Grus japonensis
<i>Weight</i>	950 g
<i>Size</i>	1.60 m
<i>Span</i>	2.40 m
<i>Sexual maturity age</i>	2 or 3 years
<i>Nesting season</i>	Spring / summer
<i>Age at first flight</i>	70 to 80 days
<i>Diet</i>	Omnivore
<i>Longevity</i>	30 years
<i>IUCN status</i>	Endangered

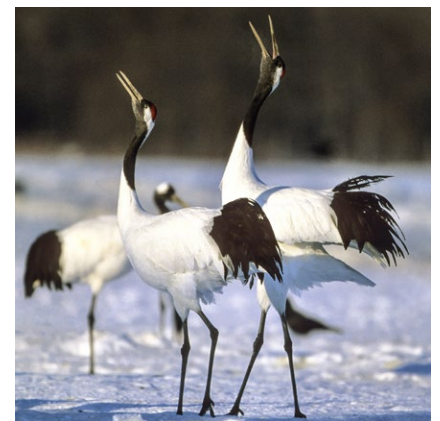
In Japan, it is a star. The Japanese crane appears on the reverse of 1 000-yen notes, and it is the origami (paper-folding) figure that is most reproduced in the country; legend assures us that you have to make 1 000 to have your wishes fulfilled! However, the fame of “Rancho” as it is called there, is in proportion to its rarity. The crane only lives in East Asia, between Southern Russia, Northern China, Mongolia, and on the island of Hokkaido in Japan. There remain no more than 2 750 individuals, of which just 1 650 are adults.



After mating, the pair work together to sit on the two eggs; generally, just one chick survives.

The population of this wader, which is one of the largest birds in the world, continues to fall, due in part to hunting and urbanisation. It can be recognised at first glance, with its fully white plumage, except the wingtips and the neck, which are black, like its feet. The Japanese crane maintains its plumage with care, smoothing it with its beak to spread a special oil secreted by a gland. To make sure of having identified it correctly, all you have to do is look for its “red hood”, a portion of brightly-coloured bare skin on the top of the skull. Another touch of colour comes from its long, yellow, pointed beak, which the crane uses as a

Japanese cranes are famed for their mating parade made up of bows, jumps, and head shaking.



harpoon – which leads to its fishing technique: immersed up to halfway up its body, it walks in the current in search of its prey, insects or small aquatic invertebrates. However, the bird – which weighs almost 10 kg – is omnivorous.

The Japanese crane’s diet is also made up of

LES ÉCODOCS

endangered species...

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fish, amphibians, and rodents, as well as grass, reeds, berries, etc. It lives mainly in humid areas: saltwater and freshwater marshes, rivers, and wet meadowland. Asia also has many ponds for aquaculture like paddy fields, where one can see the bird. However, those are fragile habitats. The worst threat against the Japanese crane is the destruction of its habitat; it is classed by the IUCN as being "in danger of extinction", because agriculture and industrial development dry out and take over those humid areas. Manchurian cranes (to use the bird's other name) live there in flocks. In springtime, which is the nesting season, comes the time for the mating parade. They are well known for the graceful dance ritual made up of bows, jumps, etc. Couples often remain together until one of them dies. That is how the Japanese crane has become the symbol of love and loyalty! Both parents work to build the nest, where the female lays two eggs, then they take it in turns to incubate the eggs, although in general, only one



Since 1952, Japanese people have made it a tradition to feed cranes at protected sites.

chick survives. During that time, they need drier land made up of grass and reeds, which are in turn threatened by fires and drought. In winter, the birds migrate (except those from Japan). They

These birds are the symbols of love and loyalty. They will remain together until one of them dies.



go mainly to the delta of the Yellow River (the second-longest river in China), which flows into the Yellow Sea. The cranes also go to the coast and to a demilitarised zone between North and South Korea. Some of those territories are near or within large oil fields, and have become dangerous for the waders; pollution has already caused several cases of poisoning. Japan is the only place where the population has become more or less stable at about one thousand individuals; there, it is the concentration of feeding station increases the risk of disease. The tradition of feeding cranes goes back to 1952, when there were just thirty-three on the whole island of Hokkaido. That winter saw record low temperatures, but farmers and school-children mobilised set out to feed the cranes, thus saving them.



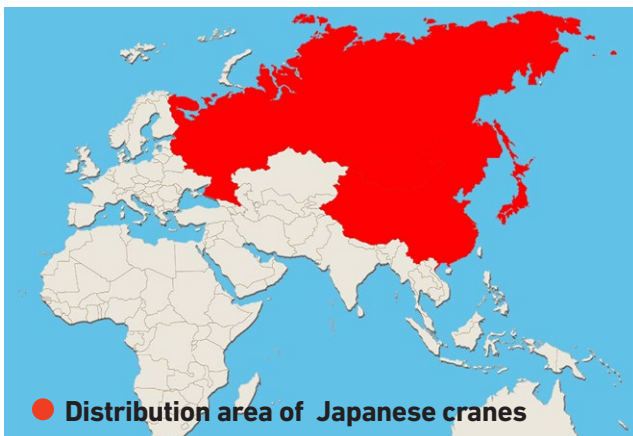
Above:
Japanese cranes are birds that live in clans until the arrival of spring and the nesting season.

Opposite:
The Japanese crane is a species classed as being in danger of extinction by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature).





The crane is one of the largest birds in the world, and it is the most popular animal in Japan.



Japanese cranes are used to that way of life, whereas they tend to flee human presence. Some re-introduction programmes have been put in place elsewhere, as in Russia. However, the main thrust of conservation actions is to preserve their habitats. Their fame transcends borders: China almost chose the crane as its bird, but the plan was abandoned because of the name in Latin: "Japanese crane"!



The mating dances of Japanese cranes are also used for communication between different members of a group.

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