

# THE CRANE CHASE

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Black-necked cranes flap their enormous wings, bob their heads and trumpet to the heavens. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Pankaj Chandan saw a pair of black-necked cranes on the first day of his first visit to eastern Ladakh. According to the Changpa pastoralists of the area, seeing these birds brings good luck. For more than an hour, he watched one incubating while its partner high-stepped through the Chushul marsh, searching with its piercing yellow eyes for edible roots or wriggling creatures. The experience instilled in him a resolve to study the species, which he has for almost two decades. Black-necked cranes are the only cranes to live in mountains. Since they inhabit remote areas of the Tibetan plateau, it was only in 1876 when the Russian military commander and explorer, Nikolay Przhevalsky, described them did they come under the scientific gaze. In late March, some fly for a week over the Himalaya to breed in the marshes adjoining rivers and lakes of Ladakh, the only crane species to migrate between winter and summer grounds.

## Dancing together

A pair claims ownership over a large tract of wetland, chasing away rival claimants. Then courtship begins when the male and female dance together, flapping their enormous grey and black wings, bobbing their red-crowned black heads, and trumpeting to the heavens.

“It’s a wonderful sight to see them dancing like humans in the snow,” says Chandan. Sometimes, they flick plants, stones, and dried yak dung in the air and catch them, “playing like kids.”

When the time comes, both adults choose an islet on which they pile aquatic vegetation and mud into mounds. They nest in the same spot every year, and Ladakh has only about 18 nesting sites. For 17 years, a crane, marked by another researcher with a green tag, bred at the same site. Then either the tag fell off or the bird died, as no crane bearing that identity marker appeared again.

The people of Chushul told Chandan that the species gives birth to bar-headed geese one year and to cranes in the next. There might be something to that tale. In 1996, Otto Pfister, a crane researcher, reported a unique event. Two cranes chased a pair of bar-headed geese off their nest and usurped it. It’s likely the geese had arrived earlier and had unwittingly chosen the cranes’ old nesting spot. The female crane added her ivory egg with green and brown blotches to the nest with two white geese eggs, and she and her mate took turns incubating. The yellow and black goslings hatched first, and the foster parents kept them warm under their wings. But when the precocious young entered the water, the adults grew alarmed and ordered them to return with “gorr-kro, gorr-kro” calls. Goslings graze on grass by themselves, unlike colts, as crane chicks are called, which are fed by their parents. A few days later, the goslings and colts followed their leggy four-foot-tall parents.

## Like the tiger

Brooding cranes can be touchy about intruders. Two adults spread their wings and chased Chandan and his colleagues for 200 m when they made the mistake of venturing too close. “They were ferocious like tigers,” he recalls. They even went after a yak that blundered into their territory. On another occasion, a pair sent a herd of Pashmina goats running as if from a

predator. The next day, the researchers spotted two orange colts, the cause of the adults' animosity. Although the cranes' diet includes everything from sedge tubers to small animals, Chandan was surprised when one snapped up a pika, smashed it on the ground, and gulped it down. By October, the young fly with their parents to their eastern winter range. Some land in Arunachal Pradesh's Sangti and Zemithang valleys. Now that their colts are grown, the adults relax their guard as they forage together in the fallow rice and potato fields.

They continue to occasionally dance and trumpet even out of the breeding season, but they don't consider dry dung as a toy anymore.

*Janaki Lenin is not a conservationista but many creatures share her home for reasons she is yet to discover.*

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