

A Chorus of Cranes: The Cranes of North America and the World

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BOOK REVIEW

A Chorus of Cranes: The Cranes of North America and the World

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A Chorus of Cranes: The Cranes of North America and the World by Paul A. Johnsgard. 2015. University Press of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA. x + 208 pp., 38 color photographs, 41 figures. \$29.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-60732-436-2. \$23.95 (Ebook). ISBN 978-1-60732-436-9.

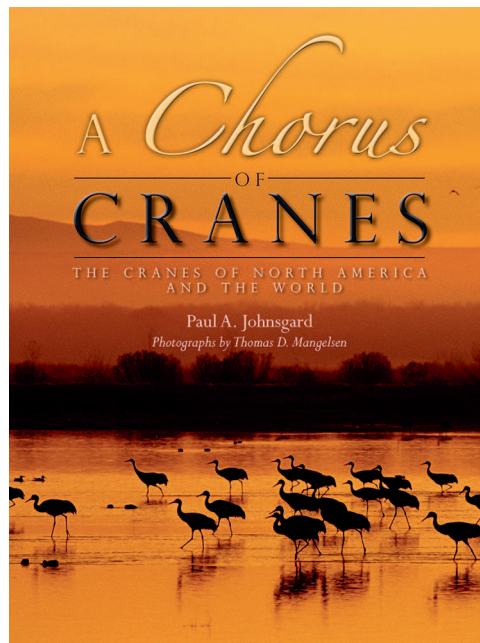
Cranes (Gruidae) are widely distributed throughout the world, have lived on Earth for several million years, and currently reside on five continents. Archaeological evidence and historical references suggest that humans have interacted with and been captivated by cranes for many thousands of years (e.g., Leslie 1988, Muellner 1990). A glimpse of our reverence for these birds can be found in *A Chorus of Cranes* by Paul A. Johnsgard, with photographs by Thomas D. Mangelsen. Many species of cranes are currently identified as threatened or endangered, and their future will likely rest in the hands of humans; this book presents their plight and some of the measures that have been taken to conserve them. Dr. Johnsgard, an emeritus professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is a prolific writer, having written more than 60 books in ornithology and other topics. This book serves as the latest update of previous efforts concerning crane biology, conservation, and management. A review without making comparisons to his past works is difficult, yet this assessment will primarily focus on the content of the current book, with little reference to past endeavors.

As the subtitle suggests, this book is first and foremost about North American cranes, with relatively abbreviated sections about other crane species found throughout the world. The book is organized into four sections. The first

may best be described as an abridged chronicle of all things crane; it includes extensive information on cranes and human culture, migration ecology, flight, vocalizations, behavior, breeding ecology, feather molt, popula-

tion growth, vital rates, causes of mortality, senescence, and conservation status. Some topics, such as senescence, are addressed by just one paragraph, whereas others include lengthy discussions that span multiple pages. Indeed, this section is a crash course in crane ecology and conservation. The second and lengthiest section of the book details the biology of two North American crane species, the Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis*) and Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*). Here Johnsgard presents, for each species, elements that are similar to those found in classic species accounts; the information is wide-ranging, including de-

scriptions of each species' annual cycle, organized by biologically meaningful seasons—summer, fall migration, winter, and spring migration. The chapter on Whooping Cranes includes an extensive account of past and current reintroduction efforts, which provides interesting history lessons and presents the current status of reintroduced populations. The third section of the book is a compilation of descriptions of the other 13 crane species of the world. These species descriptions are quite brief, generally one or two pages each, and thus should not be considered full species accounts. This section provides



readers an introduction to each species, and any further research could be initiated by inspecting the appendices, which provide sufficient resources and Internet links. An extensive, categorized reference section at the end of the book appears to have been updated to the time of printing and includes a reasonable selection from the literature on these species. Finally, an Epilogue briefly outlines the author's somewhat ominous perspective on the future of humans and cranes in the context of our complex and ever-changing world.

Line drawings and photographs are conspicuous and a highlight of the book. Johnsgard is credited with the numerous drawings, which are integrated with his prose. Many of these provide useful visual support to descriptions of anatomy, behaviors, and body postures. As for the photographs, Mangelsen is a world-renowned nature photographer who, like Johnsgard, has ties to Nebraska and a long-time interest in cranes and the Platte River. The majority of the photographs are provided in full-page or two-page format, accentuating their prominence throughout the book. Overall, they are of high quality and add to the interest and understanding of cranes and the places they live throughout the year. Unfortunately, and somewhat surprisingly given the title, the book lacks photographs of most crane species found outside of North America. The beauty of these cranes, which are likely less known to North American readers, would be instantly evident and best experienced with photographs of similar quality to those of the North American species.

The origins of this book, described in the Preface, suggest that it was written primarily for a general audience. Even considering a broad audience, Johnsgard provides some in-text citations and personal communications with practicing researchers, although at times somewhat inconsistently. This indiscriminate use of citations is somewhat peculiar, considering the lengthy list of references provided at the end of the book. Clearly, many of these references were used to create the text, yet in many instances it is difficult to identify the primary source of specific information. This unpredictability creates some problems in deciphering certain statements, considering the blending of information based on published works, information from unpublished or non-peer-reviewed sources, personal communications, speculations, and personal experiences and opinions of the author. Similarly, the style of the writing is not always consistent throughout; language seemingly intended for a wide audience is sometimes placed adjacent to more detailed language similar to that found in the results section of a research article. Moreover, some of these

details are included without much context or explanation, which likely would be required by a broad audience. An example is inclusion of specific estimates of average time present and daily movements of Sandhill Cranes at the Platte River, without context for why these values might be of interest—for example, how they might differ with time, with environmental conditions, or in comparison to other stopover sites.

Johnsgard's discussion of the hunting of Sandhill Cranes is one example where a mix of information, opinions, and advocacy is most evident and may not serve readers particularly well. This lengthy commentary, which can be found in similar forms in his past books (e.g., Johnsgard 2010), disparages legal hunting of Sandhill Cranes with arguments based partially on weak and incomplete analyses of population dynamics and economics. These arguments aside, the commentary may divide people with different but shared interests in cranes. Multiple groups of people find value in Sandhill Cranes, whether they are hunters, birdwatchers, or both. A more positive message on this subject might have embraced this rather unique situation. It seems reasonable that hunters and crane watchers (groups that are themselves not mutually exclusive) generally want the same thing—abundant and sustaining populations of Sandhill Cranes in North America. It would be unfortunate for a hunter to read this section and be turned off to crane conservation specifically or wildlife conservation in general. Conversely, birdwatchers naive to this topic might come away with a strongly negative view of hunting and of federal and state agencies tasked with managing Sandhill Cranes. An opportunity was missed to embrace passionate user groups and highlight their common interests.

Overall, this book provides a strong overview of the natural history, current population status, conservation history, and general descriptions of North American cranes, with a lighter touch on the other crane species of the world. The author's interest and knowledge are evident, and the sections related to conservation issues and natural history in Nebraska and on the Platte River are noticeably lengthy and detailed, likely due to the author's interest in issues within his home state. This book provides a good background and serves as a contemporary source of information on crane biology, but it does not necessarily replace more complete works by this and other authors (e.g., Walkinshaw 1973, Johnsgard 1983). Johnsgard's passion for cranes is evident and may inspire readers to seek out even more information about these species and the places they live. Moreover, readers may be inspired to visit places where

cranes traditionally congregate and see and hear the splendor of cranes for themselves.

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