

First record of Eurasian Crane (*Grus grus*) for British Columbia.
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Introduction and Distribution

The Eurasian Crane (*Grus grus*), also known as the Common Crane, is a Eurasian species found breeding from Scandinavia across northern Europe to as far east as northeastern Siberia (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). Eurasian Cranes migrate in the fall from the northern breeding grounds to winter across Eurasia from Iberia and North Africa in the western part of their range to areas such as India in the eastern part of their range (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). The eastern subspecies of Eurasian Crane is (*Grus grus lilfordi*) and it is this subspecies that is responsible for most western North American records (ABA 2011). The eastern subspecies of Eurasian Crane is found in eastern Asia and breeds in taiga swamps as far north as the Lena River and the Kolyma Rivers in Siberian Russia with a population of birds also breeding in northeastern China (Brazil 2009). Most Eurasian Cranes from the Asian population migrate to the northern half of Indian subcontinent, including Pakistan (Birdlife International 2013). Very small numbers will winter in Burma, Vietnam and Thailand (Birdlife International 2013). Some Eurasian Cranes end up spending the winter in eastern and northern China, Korea and Japan with the odd bird wintering in Taiwan (Brazil 2009). In North America Eurasian Crane is a casual vagrant that is almost always found in migrating flocks of Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*). It is very likely that Sandhill Cranes seen in North America that have the odd Eurasian Crane amongst them originated from a large breeding population found in far eastern Siberia (Brazil 2009, Swick 2013). Since Eurasian Cranes migrate northeast in the spring it is likely that this is when this species overshoots into northern Siberia allowing birds to mix with Sandhill Cranes. In turn these Sandhill Cranes migrate back to winter on the Great Plains of North America (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Brazil 2009). This could explain why Eurasian Cranes are almost always found in flocks of Sandhill Cranes and the reason why there are so many records on the central flyway of North America where it is believed Sandhill Cranes from Siberia go to spend the winter (Brazil 2009). Records of Eurasian Cranes in North America are scattered with birds being mostly recorded along the central interior flyway from central Alaska, Indiana, Kansas, New Mexico and Nebraska (West 2008, ABA 2011). In the western states there are no records for Washington State or Oregon but there are 2 recent records for California and 1 record for Nevada (Wahl *et al.* 2005, ABA 2011, OFO 2011, Fowler 2012, WBRC 2012, Red Rock Audubon Society 2013). There are other records for Western Canada that follow the central flyway with at 3 records from Alberta and 1 from Saskatchewan (Godfrey 1986, ABA 2011). West Coast records have been of the Asian subspecies which is logical given the closest breeding areas for this species are found in Far Eastern Russia (Brazil 2009). Birds that have been found in eastern areas of North America are of questionable origin (ABA 2011). Birds seen in Indiana and Nebraska have been paired off with a Sandhill Crane and even have had hybrid offspring (ABA 2011). Given

that Eurasian Crane tends to wander into North America it is possible this species will occur in British Columbia again in the future.

Identification and Similar Species

The Eurasian Crane is well represented in many modern standard field guides. Adult plumage is distinctive and obvious compared to Sandhill Crane. The Eurasian Crane is similar in size to the larger Sandhill Cranes found in British Columbia. The face is black with black extending up the forehead down to the back of the upper neck (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The top of the crown has a red patch that breaks up the black on the head (Brazil 2009). The throat is also black down the neck to where it meets the top of the breast (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a distinct white stripe in the face as white runs from behind the eye in the middle of the black on the back of the neck the lower neck (Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Brazil 2009). This stripe runs down the neck until it meets the upper side of the chest (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). On the Siberian subspecies the eyes are yellow not red as in the nominate subspecies found in Europe (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Brazil 2009). The bill color on an adult Eurasian Crane is yellow (Brazil 2009). Adults are light gray in color on the wings, breast and back but have variable brown patches on the gray back (Jonsson 1992). On sitting birds there are dark loose tertials or “bustle feathers” that look like a plume at the back of adult birds (Brazil 2009). In flight Eurasian Cranes have dark black primaries and on the underside of the open wings have distinct dark secondary feathers with light gray axillaries (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs are dark in coloration (Jonsson 1992). Juvenile Eurasian Cranes are gray bodied with some brown markings on the scapulars and coverts (Brazil 2009). Young birds also have gray tertiaries lacking the black of adult birds (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). The head and neck of juvenile birds lacks the black of adults down the throat and back of the head and instead have pale faces with yellow eyes and bill (Brazil 2009). This juvenile plumage is held into the first winter when these young birds start to acquire adult plumage (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). In flight Eurasian Crane has a straight flight style with deep leisurely wing strokes with both the feet and neck being held straight out and parallel to the body (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). When encountered in flocks or in groups the Eurasian Crane flies in a V formation like the Sandhill Cranes does in North America (Brazil 2009).

On migration the call notes given by Eurasian Crane are interpreted as a deep trumpeting “*krraw*” or a deep rattling, “*kururuu-kururuu*” or “*a-k-d-d-dew*” call that are low pitched and is short in length (Brazil 2009). Some lone adult birds give a wooden knocking sound while younger birds give a plaintive whistled “*peerp-peerp*” (Brazil 2009).

Any age of the Eurasian Crane, either an adult or an immature, would stand out amongst a group of Sandhill Cranes if found in British Columbia. Sandhill Cranes vary in size due to the

different subspecies found in North America, and British Columbia, but all adults are pale blue-gray in color with variable amounts of brown on the back and wings (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tertial “bustle feathers” are gray in color as is the neck (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The head has a red crown with white on the back of the face and red eyes (Sibley 2003). The bill is dark as are the legs (Sibley 2003). In flight adult Sandhill Cranes have dark primaries on the underside of the wing (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Immatures are also blue-gray in color but are more heavily edged in brown edges on the back and scapulars. The neck and head is all brown in color and the bill is paler than the adult (Sibley 2000). The calls of Sandhill Cranes give a high pitched “gar-oo-oo” which is loud and can be heard for miles (Dun and Alderfer 2011). Younger birds often give a high “cricket like” call that is different to the adults (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The calls are different enough that if a Eurasian Crane was calling a small flock of Sandhill Cranes it should be noticeable by their lower pitched vocalizations from the higher pitched Sandhill Cranes (Brazil 2009).

Occurrence and Documentation

British Columbia’s first Eurasian Crane was found by Martin Williams on July 3, 2011. The bird was located with 18 Sandhill Cranes in the Masset Wildlife Sanctuary which is in the town of Masset on the Queen Charlotte Islands (also called Haida Gwaii). It was only seen that first day and was later on same day photographed by Margo Hearne and Peter Hamel. The group of Sandhill Cranes the Eurasian Crane was travelling with disappeared the next day. The same bird reappeared with almost the exact same number of Sandhill Cranes on the Masset Golf Course on August 23, 2011 when it was photographed a second time by Margo Hearne. It was seen only twice afterwards on September 7 and 9 despite heavy scrutiny given to the area. This species does wander into Alaska from Siberia on occasion and the origin of this bird seems highly likely to be of natural origins. Coincidentally on May 5-7, 2011 an adult Eurasian Crane of the Asian subspecies was found and photographed in northern California at Lake Earl in Crescent City, in Del Norte County in the company of Sandhill Cranes (ABA 2011). It is believed by the authors that this is the same bird that was found later that year in Masset on the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia. Incredibly an adult Eurasian Crane was found on December 27, 2012 at the Modoc National Wildlife Refuge in Modoc southern California with Sandhill Cranes (Fowler 2012). Either it or another bird was found after the California bird disappeared in nearby Overton National Wildlife Refuge which is east of Las Vegas in Nevada from January 16 to at least February 1, 2013 (Red Rock Audubon Society 2013, Swick 2013). It is highly likely that all these records are dealing with the same bird. Observers are encouraged to carefully scrutinize migrant flocks of Sandhill Cranes in the near future as this bird could be found again. The pattern of vagrancy for Eurasian Crane has been more consistent with the central flyway of the Great Plains where thousands of migrating Sandhill Cranes are seen on migration and throughout the winter. There is a large migration of Sandhill Cranes that pass

through British Columbia in the month of April (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). This is a well-established migration of Sandhill Cranes that travel to Northern British Columbia and Alaska and it seems highly probable future discoveries of Eurasian Crane in British Columbia are possible at this time of year. It is also just as likely a Eurasian Crane could be found in the fall as there is a large migration of Sandhill Cranes occurs in the month of September throughout British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). Even though the numbers of birds that are encountered can be smaller and flocks of birds more drawn out observers should watch for Eurasian Crane mixed into any flock of Sandhill Cranes as it is a distinct possibility.



Figure 1 & 2: Record #1: Eurasian Crane adult July 3, 2011 at Delkatla Nature Reserve, Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands. Photos © Margo Hearne.



Figure 3: Record #1: Eurasian Crane adult (right bird) August 23, 2011 at Masset Golf Course, Queen Charlotte Islands. Photo © Margo Hearne.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Paul Levesque and Rose Klinkenberg for reviewing the manuscript. All photographs are used with permission of the photographer and are protected by copyright law.

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