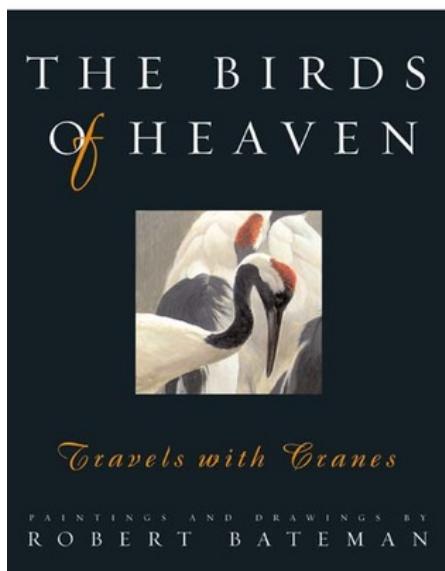


PETER MATTHIESSEN



The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes

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“You don’t have to be a ‘craniac’ . . . to appreciate [this book] . . . All you really need is a passion for prose as good as it gets.” —*Chicago Tribune*

In legend, cranes often figure as harbingers of heaven and omens of longevity and good fortune. And in nature, they are an “umbrella species” whose well-being assures that of the ecosystem at large. *The Birds of Heaven* chronicles Peter Matthiessen’s many journeys on five continents in search of the fifteen species of cranes. His telling captures the dilemmas of a planet in ecological crisis, and the deep loss to humankind if these beautiful and imposing creatures are allowed to disappear.

The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes Details

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Author : Peter Matthiessen

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From Reader Review The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes for online ebook

Tim Martin says

The Birds of Heaven by Peter Matthiessen is a well-written and informative account of the fifteen living species of crane. Matthiessen chronicled in the book his years of experience with these birds, traveling to Russia, China, Mongolia (where six species have been recorded), India, Bhutan, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Africa, England (where the Eurasian or common crane, extinct there since 1653, is at last a breeding species once more), Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Florida to study and write about the various species. Matthiessen's superb writing is accompanied by truly excellent artwork by artist Robert Bateman, who produced a number of black and white drawings and color paintings for the book.

Matthiessen did an excellent job of covering the biology of cranes in general and of each species individually. The crane family (Gruidae) we learn is found on every continent except South America and Antarctica and is comprised of three genera, *Grus* (to which all but five of the living species belong to and a group primarily found in Eurasia), *Anthropoides* (which includes the demoiselle crane as well as the blue crane of South Africa, which may be descended from it; Matthiessen discussed many theories of crane evolution), and *Balearica* (which includes two African species, the black crowned and gray crowned). Though sometimes called herons in some parts of the world (or more often herons are referred to as cranes), cranes differ from herons in that cranes fly with neck outstretched rather than curved back over the shoulder (they differ from storks in that storks display broad tails, which the cranes lack).

The several species of crane have subtly different breeding habitat and food preferences; for instance in the Amur Basin the white-naped crane probes for tubers while the red crowned crane hunts small animals and picks at vegetation. Not all cranes are restricted to wetlands; while for example all three of the rare white cranes are found only in marshes, the more widespread and abundant demoiselle, Eurasian, and sandhill cranes are generalized feeders able to succeed in a variety of terrains, with the demoiselle primarily an upland feeder.

Some cranes have rather unusual adaptations. Several species are "diggers" - feeding primarily on mud-buried tubers - and these species (the white-naped, sarus, brolga, Siberian, and wattled cranes) have naked, non-feathered skin on their head down to the bill, which is an adaptation analogous to the naked head and neck of vultures. The brolga crane, which is more often found in salt marshes than other species, has evolved specialized salt glands near the eyes through which it can secrete concentrated salts. Feather painting is also covered; some species daub their feathers with wet vegetation or mud during nesting season for camouflage.

The role of cranes in myth and history is also discussed. The word crane comes from the old German word "Cranuh," which like the genus name *Grus* is a rendition of the bird's cry. The Yakuts people of Siberia revered the Siberian crane as a symbol of their various clans, a uniting symbol for their people. The sarus crane of India (at nearly six feet tall the tallest flying bird on earth) has been for centuries revered as a holy messenger of Vishnu, a Hindu deity, a reverence that has protected this crane from hunting (similarly a Buddhist reverence for life in general and often cranes in particular has helped kept cranes safe in such places as Bhutan). The red-crowned crane (or in Japanese "tancho;" the heaviest flying bird on earth) was revered as a messenger of death and symbol of eternal life to the Ainu and portrayed in Japanese robes, wedding kimonos, screens, scrolls, and other items for centuries. Revered also in Korea as "turumi," a companion to sages, scholars, and musicians, in both nations it was also regrettably hunted and eaten. More recently the peace symbol of the 1960s was originally a Hopi Indian sign derived from the footprint of a

crane.

One thing that surprised me was that some crane discoveries were made fairly recently. The whooping crane's breeding ground was found after nine years of searching in 1954. A large, breeding, unknown (though known to Aborigines) population of sarus cranes was discovered in 1961 in Australia. A non-migratory population of red-crowned cranes on Hokkaido wasn't confirmed until 1972. The breeding ground of the central Siberian population of the Siberian crane wasn't found until 1978. The black-necked or Tibetan crane was as late as 1987 thought to be rapidly vanishing, the second most endangered crane on earth, but surveys in the early 1990s in Tibet and Bhutan pegged the species at a much healthier count of 5,500 birds, showing that early estimates were way off.

Issues of crane conservation are well covered, with Matthiessen chronicling the dire straits faced by many of the species, the heroic efforts made by some to save them, and even their role as "umbrella species;" that when their habitats are preserved many other plants and animals benefit. The Amur Basin of Russia for instance - a vital crane habitat - is being threatened by massive deforestation, agricultural runoff, pollution from mining, and proposed dams. Attempts by such agencies as the International Crane Foundation to broker deals between those nations that share the Amur and its products - Russia, South Korea, China, and Japan - has been stymied by mutual mistrust (extending to ridiculous extremes; Chinese officials refusing for instance to refer to the red-crowned crane as the Japanese or Manchurian crane, both frequently used common names). Some successes exist; the Keoladeo Ghana Bird Reserve near Bharatpur, India, established to preserve wintering Siberian cranes is now also home to 364 bird species as well as pythons, nilgai antelope, and sambar deer (though the park is still threatened by the crush of humanity in crowded India).

In addition to being an excellent book on the history and natural history of cranes it is also a wonderful travel book, the author doing a great job of describing what it is like to travel in such exotic places as Bhutan and Mongolia.

David Ward says

The Birds Of Heaven: Travels With Cranes by Peter Matthiessen (North Point Press 2001)(598.32). Cranes are omens of longevity and good fortune in many cultures. Peter Matthiessen chronicles his journeys to five continents in search of the fifteen species of cranes. My rating: 7/10, finished 2007.

Daniel says

An amazing book! Although somewhat detailed and scientific in some parts, it is also awesome in the beauty and power of its descriptions. The author, Peter Matthiessen, is powerful in his abilities and in his journey to find and describe the habitats of these wonderful birds across five continents. Peter Matthiessen, recently passed away, however this book is a legacy to his intelligence and close association to these threatened animals. We can only hope they will continue to exist.

Dayna says

I wished I liked Matthiessen's non-fiction more because he invariably writes about topics which interest me.

Alas, I found this a slog, much like The Snow Leopard.

Jan says

Beautifully written book and interesting stories about all 15 of the world's cranes and their habitats.

Paul says

Port Rowen, Ontario, Canada

Purchased in Arizona with Mark Aspelin at the birding festival and signed

Sarahherold says

Must read for crane lovers... others might find it drags

Keith says

Beautifully written as all of Matthiessen's books...but not an easy book to read when so much of it deals with the declining numbers of the 15 remaining species of cranes worldwide.

Louis says

It's hauntingly beautiful for a documentary on the messengers of heaven. It detailed the author's travel in following these elegant birds' migration, engaging us in humbling lucidity their struggle to find sustainable homes along the way, and to highlight the the existence of beautiful creatures, in this retreating wilderness, that surpass our common imagination.

Caroll Vrba says

Amazing travels to follow the cranes as they traveled and nested, counts and talks with locals, fewer are coming, but they're still honored in india, Mongolia and other places.

Marguerite says

I sought this out, figuring it's the closest I'll ever get to a crane outside of a zoo. I've read Peter Matthiessen before, and he's a fine writer and an impassioned advocate of wildlife and undisturbed nature. Even so, I

found this tedious going at times. The largest chunk I read at one sitting, about 70 pages, occurred when I was imprisoned in the dentist's chair for three hours for a root canal. That tells me something. I learned a lot about cranes, helped by the fact that I read maybe two-thirds of the 30 pages of footnotes. I thought the science of their evolution and migration was interesting. I liked the fact that Matthiessen included political/social dynamics as he moved from place to place (there was much less of that in the sections on Africa, Europe and the U.S., however). I liked how he placed the cranes within the cultures, showing natives' reverence for the birds. But at some point the level of detail about trachea structure became tedious. Robert Bateman's drawings and paintings are spectacular. More information in the captions would have been useful, as would references in the text to the various illustrations. (Am I seeing a courtship dance here or a threat display, fellas?) I also hate it when an author quotes himself, which Matthiessen does a couple of times here. It just comes across as self-serving.

Milt says

dbg

Gillian says

Well, I FINALLY finished this book, after picking it up and putting it down for about a year and a half (usually not a good sign). It was interesting, but seemed kind of disjointed (maybe that had more to do with my reading habits than his writing). I was disappointed that he did not spend more time on sandhill cranes, but found the saga of whooper crane recovery to be very interesting.

David says

An elegantly written tale of the cranes of the world, their history and their cultural significance, and one man's travels in search of their story.

Edward says

This is a wonderful book about a group of my favorite birds -- Cranes. Matthesien has access and information that few people do, and shows how many cultures revere these magnificent birds, and it is this respect that is fueling conservation efforts around the world to help them in their recovery.

Thomas says

A remarkable account of Peter Matthiessen's travels in China, Russia, Mongolia, India, Australia and Japan to assess populations of the planet's dozen or so species of cranes. Very lucid description of the

geography, ecology of the birds and humans who live in these areas. Some of his best non-fiction writing (and he has been writing for more than 50 years).

Leslie says

Read some, paged through most, had to return to the library and then traveled so I lost the thread, but clearly it is a very rich resource on cranes. My first real 'introduction' to cranes was Richard Powers brilliant 2006 novel, *The Echo Maker*. I have been interested in and drawn to them (and drawings or photos of them) ever since, but without any knowledge. This book is an excellent resource and I hope to get back to it.

Christian says

A thorough and impassioned study of cranes and their unique standing as a global species that requires large open spaces to thrive. Matthiessen employs cranes as exemplars of the need for global reconsideration of environmental practices, both ecological and political. Cranes, like environmental degradation, know no political borders. In short, their plight is ours too.

Although not the most poetic of Matthiessen's work, the book's central argument and moments of ecological and spiritual insight warrant a careful reading. If new to his writing, start with *The Snow Leopard*.

Donna says

This is a very well written detailed book looking at crane species around the world and the ornithologists who are studying them, protecting them and trying to re establish crane populations where they are declining. This is a great book for the serious birder or biologist as well as those who aspire to be biologists. A more casual reader may be either bored or overwhelmed by the wealth of bird and biology detail. This is a great book for the right kind of reader, the dedicated bird afficianado.

Jody Kuchar says

A beautiful book with wonderful photography by Michael (I can't remember his name YIKES). I was honored to meet Mr. Matthiessen at a book signing event with International Crane Foundation in Milwaukee WI when this book was first available.
