
Cranes of Japan: Their Species, Characteristics, and Connections with the Japanese

The crane has long been associated with good luck in Japan and is a favorite bird even in modern Japan. Hisai Atsuyo is an associate professor at Hokkaido University's Graduate School of Humanity and Human Sciences engaging in research on the theme of the history of relationships between cranes and humans. We interviewed her about the types of cranes found in Japan and the places where they live, as well as how Japanese people view and perceive cranes, including historical background.

What types of cranes live in Japan, and where are their main habitats found?

There are 15 species of cranes in the world, in the family Gruidae. Of these, seven are found in Japan: the red-crowned crane, white-naped crane, hooded crane, common crane, Siberian crane, sand-hill crane, and demoiselle crane. The red-crowned crane is the largest of the species that have been documented in Japan, with a height of around 150 cm. With their wings spread, they can measure more than 2m across. Regarding their habitats, the red-crowned crane is found mainly on the east side of Hokkaido in sites including the Kushiro Marsh year-round.



Cranes perform a mating dance.



Hisai Atsuyo
An associate professor at
Hokkaido University's
Graduate School of Humanity
and Human Sciences

Meanwhile, the white-naped crane and hooded crane migrate to Japan from abroad. They will spend the spring and summer in the marshes of southeastern

Russia, Siberia, and northeastern China, then come to the Izumi Plain in Kagoshima Prefecture for the winter.

I have been conducting surveys and research on the history of cranes, based mainly on reference materials from around the 16th century onward. At that time, even the red-crowned cranes that live in Hokkaido today were seen in places including mainland Honshu and Kyushu, and it is thought that they may have been migrating between there and other locations in Japan, as well as overseas. More recently, with increasing habitat

loss in addition to the impact of more active hunting in the 19th century, there was even a time when they were thought to have possibly gone extinct. In 1924, however, dozen of the birds were discovered in the Kushiro Marsh. Today, with the help of conservation activities, their numbers have increased to around 1,800.

Red-crowned cranes are omnivores, they eat rice or grains they find in fields, catch fish in rivers, and other forms of marine life and insects found in paddy fields and wetlands. Increasing development and growing human populations left less and less red-crowned crane habitat in Honshu. You might even say that these environmental changes left the red-crowned crane nowhere to live but Hokkaido. In this way, researching and understanding the past conditions of wild animals and birds provide suggestions for considering issues concerning relationships between wildlife and humans in the present day.

Among the different species of cranes, the red-crowned crane is particularly well known and familiar to the people of Japan. Could you tell us about the life and habits of this bird?

Distribution map of Japanese cranes put together by associate professor Hisai Atsuyo

Photo: Hisai Atsuyo



Red-crowned crane:
One of the largest
birds in Japan



Sandhill crane: Mainly living in
North America, with only a small
number visiting Japan



Common crane: Has been known to
cross-breed with the hooded
crane



English name is hooded crane,
and called Nabezuru in Japanese,
literally "cooking pot crane,"
with its coloration likened to the
darkened bottom of a pot



White-naped crane: Characterized
by a red patch of exposed skin
around its eyes



Demoiselle crane: The smallest of
all cranes



Siberian crane: Reveals black wing
feathers when spreading them
open

The red-crowned crane is known as the *tancho* in Japanese, written in kanji characters as 丹頂. Just as in the English name, 丹 (*tan*) means red, and 頂 (*cho*) refers to the "crown" of the head. These cranes lack feathers on the tops of their heads, leaving the skin exposed, which appears red from the color of blood beneath it.

Once red-crowned cranes find mates, they stay paired with their partners for life. At the beginning of spring, they build nests and lay eggs. Generally, they will hatch a couple chicks at a time. During the summer, they raise their young in breeding grounds, like wetland locations, and live together in individual family units. After traveling to their wintering location

from the breeding grounds, the cranes live together in flocks. At this part of the yearly cycle, the parents give their young independence. The cranes' lifespans are somewhere around 10 years in the wild.

One thing red-crowned cranes are famous for is their mating dance. The way they move their necks up and down with extravagant movements and jump around with their wings spread out is compared to dancing. Not only males perform these dances, either. Males and females might both approach potential mates. Not only this, but they perform the dances alone, in pairs, and even in groups. It is thought to be part of what might be called their way of playing. (See page 10)



Photo: Hasei Akiyoko

Red-crowned cranes flock together on feeding grounds in wintertime

Cranes have been loved by the people of Japan as birds associated with good luck. What can you tell us about the historical or cultural background of this view?

Cranes' associations with long life and good fortune have origins in ancient China. An ancient Chinese book on philosophy entitled the *Huainanzi* ("The Huainan Masters"), thought to have been put together during the former Han dynasty around the 2nd century BC, contains a chapter called *Shuolin* ("Discourse on Forests") with a passage saying, "The crane lives for a thousand years." As such idea was further connection with the Shenxian(xian) thought,¹ and thought to have given rise to the crane's association with long life. From around the 8th century to the 12th century, this thought made its way to Japan, and cranes began to appear in paintings and patterns with this association. If we take a look at the *Manyoshu* ("Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves"), Japan's oldest collection of *waka* poetry, which was compiled earlier, around the



Photo: Suma Junichi

A crane chick rests partially hidden in the feathers of its parent's back for protection from the cold and predators.

mid-8th century, cranes appear merely as part of landscapes, particularly together with seaside scenes as a set. It can be said that there is no expression that was conscious of it as an auspicious animal.

Consider that, long ago, cranes were familiar birds living near where people lived all throughout Japan. Their habits were well known to people, such as the way they remained paired with their partners for life and lived together in family units. This must be one of the factors that endeared them to the people of Japan as birds fitting to be associated with wedding ceremonies, for instance.

What are some characteristic features concerning the way cranes are viewed in Japan?

Folklore concerning rice cultivation claiming that the practice was brought to Japan by cranes is found in regions throughout Japan. This is one characteristic of the way cranes are thought of in Japan. While folklore involving rice plants being brought from the heavens by birds is common to Japan, Korea, China, and other parts of Southeast Asia, Japanese folklore most often identifies these "birds" as cranes. The origins of this can be traced back as far as the times of the *Kojiki* ("Records of Ancient Matters") and *Nihon Shoki* ("The Chronicles of Japan")². As the practice of rice cultivation spread throughout Japan, cranes would sometimes be seen flying in to the paddy fields and engaging in behaviors like pecking at rice plants, picking grass or leaves up with their beaks and tossing them around, and such. I think it is possible that such scenes may have given appearances as if the cranes were bringing ears of rice with them, leading to their associations with rice cultivation folklore.

Can you recommend any particular works of art or literature involving cranes to our readers?

A couple of the most famous Japanese stories featuring cranes are *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* ("The Gratitude of the Crane"; see page 12) and *Tsuru Nyobo* ("The Crane Wife"). Both of these stories involve a crane returning a favor after being helped by a human, becoming their wife, and weaving fine fabric for them in return. It seems that there are versions featuring an Oriental stork in place of a crane, due to the way the bill-clattering³ of storks resembles the *clack clack* of a weaving loom. Besides these, there is also a book called *Kesorap no Kami - Tan-*

cho-zuru no Kami (“The Kesorap Deity and the Red-Crowned Crane Deity”) featuring cranes as viewed by the native Ainu people of Hokkaido. The book includes descriptions of a crane in a courageous form called the Sarorun Kamuy (God of the Marshes) that even takes on fights with bears.

One painting that I think captures cranes particularly well is the *Gunkaku Zu Byobu* (“Cranes”) folding screen painted by Ishida Yutei⁴. This flock of cranes he painted features not only the commonly seen red-crowned crane, but five species in all, including even the particularly rare demoiselle crane. It was so exciting to me to see that! Even viewing a work of art like this, my attention goes first to the cranes themselves.

What are some good places for visitors from outside Japan to view cranes, and when would be the best times to visit?

The fact that the red-crowned crane is found nowhere but Northeast Asia, such as in Japan and Russia, makes it an especially appealing species to bird-watchers around the world. The Japanese government Ministry of the Environment provides food at three major feeding grounds: the Tsurumidai feeding ground and Tsurui-Ito Tancho Sanctuary in Tsurui Village, and the Akan feeding ground in Akan, Kushiro City, all on Hokkaido. These are great places for taking in the beautiful sight of red-crowned cranes amid snowy winter landscapes. Another site that attracts many sightseers who hope to photograph red-crowned cranes is the Otowabashi Bridge that spans the Setsuri River, one of the places where the cranes stay in the winter, also in Hokkaido.

Outside Hokkaido, there is a site called Arasaki with land left undeveloped where hooded cranes and white-naped cranes begin to arrive in mid-October. This is located on the Izumi Plain in Kagoshima Prefecture. In the peak season from around December to January, flocks of over 10,000 cranes can be seen. Arasaki is one of the best locations in the world to see these species, and one of the largest wintering grounds for cranes in all of Japan. Over 90% of the hooded



Photo: Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art



Gunkaku Zu Byobu (“Group of Cranes”) by Ishida Yutei

While appearing to feature a single type at first glance, the painting actually incorporates five different crane species. A particularly rare instance of the Siberian crane and demoiselle crane being included.

cranes and over 60% of the white-naped cranes in the world spend winters there. This is a truly impressive sight. I highly recommend you visit there if you get the chance. 📷



Photo: PIXTA

Morning on the Setsuri River. The golden glow of river mist illuminated by the morning sun creates lovely scenery.

1. Ancient Chinese thought. The elements of this ideology were the existence of immortal hermits and the desire of people to become immortals themselves. It is said to have become one of the basic ideas of Taoism.
2. Ancient Japanese historical works. The *Kojiki* was compiled in 712; *Nihon Shoki* in 720.
3. A habit of Oriental storks, where the birds rapidly and noisily open and shut their bills (beaks), making sounds to threaten others or attract mates.
4. A painter who was active in Kyoto in the 18th century. His style features vividly realistic representations and beautifully decorative qualities. He was the teacher of Maruyama Okyo, a representative Japanese painter of the early modern period.