

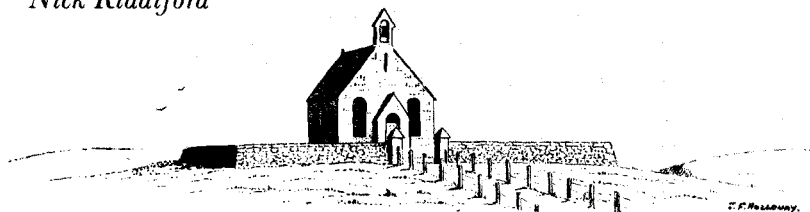
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Sandhill Crane: new to Britain



Nick Riddiford



There was little sign of any migrant activity on Fair Isle, Shetland, early on the morning of 26th April 1981. The light northwest wind had brought nothing but a series of snow flurries, falling from a leaden sky. But, at 10.00 GMT, D. G. Borton reported seeing a crane flying over Ward Hill, though in poor weather conditions he had been unable to ascertain which species.

An hour later, the bird appeared over the Observatory building. At this stage, we assumed that it would be a common Crane *Grus grus*. Even when directly under it, however, we strained unsuccessfully, in driving snow and poor visibility, to see the expected striped neck pattern. Indeed, the initial impressions of I. S. Robertson and C. D. Rowley were that the entire plumage, including neck and face, was uniform grey with red on the forepart of the head, apparently reaching the base of the bill. Having gathered this puzzling information, we were left to ponder, for the bird disappeared northwards.

At lunch-time, ISR, familiar with the species in Texas, suggested the possibility of Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*, but no-one was prepared to consider this seriously until better views of the bird had been obtained. As if on cue, the clouds rolled back, the sun came out, and shortly afterwards the crane reappeared, soaring against a blue sky over Landberg. Lunch ended suddenly.

During the next four hours, the bird circled continuously over the island.

For long periods, it spiralled over Field and Busta. This allowed us to position ourselves to best advantage and we were at last able to obtain accurate details of its plumage. We soon realised that we were indeed looking at a Sandhill Crane: a pale sandy and grey crane with uniform sandy neck apart from a red patch running from the forepart of the crown to the base of the bill and a narrow whitish fan over the ear-coverts. It was a large, rakish-looking bird, how large we came to appreciate when it was joined in its spiral by a Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: the crane was considerably bigger.

It was not until 19.00 hours that we saw the bird on the ground. It was extremely wary, but nevertheless everyone at the Observatory had good views from 150m as it stood in Homisdale. It roosted at Easter Lother Water and was still present the following morning, until the 09.30 plane arrived and put it up. Competition from this larger aerial beast apparently proved too much, as the crane flapped and sailed steadily northeastwards until lost from view.

During the day, we noted the following details:

GENERAL APPEARANCE Clearly a crane, but with very thin neck and thin legs momentarily suggesting flamingo *Phoenicopterus* in outline, though wings broad and fingered. Generally held wings straight when circling and gliding, and, with well-demarcated and equal fingers, wings seemed rectangular as in Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*. Neck jutted out in front, and legs extended as far behind. Head not very much thicker than neck, and this, with dagger-shaped bill, emphasised thinness of the protruding parts.

HEAD Forehead, surrounds of eye, and upper half of lores red. In some lights, shade of red over eye appeared darker and deeper than on forehead, and at times 'eye patch' appeared virtually black, presumably effect of shadow. 'Face' (i.e. lower part of lores, ear-coverts and up towards nape) very pale off-white, this area being fan-shaped, and broadest at upper and hind margins of ear-coverts. Off-white face contrasted markedly with rest of head and neck.

NECK Long, thin neck held outstretched at all times in flight. On the ground, it was held upright and straight, and was kept straight even when preening. Uniform beige-buff, apart from entire hindneck which was mid-grey.

UPPERPARTS Appeared beige to sandy buff throughout, but in good light it became evident that the 'saddle' (mantle, back and scapulars) was mottled grey. In flight, saddle contrasted as darker than wing-coverts and appeared to have longways mottling or diffuse streaking. On the ground, saddle appeared mottled grey on beige background, with grey predominant (a pale to mid grey, similar in tone and coloration to the hindneck). Grey did not appear to extend to rump/uppertail-coverts. Short, fanned tail appeared in flight to be sandy buff above with indistinct dark terminal border. On the ground, tail hidden by long tertial and tertial-covert plumes.

UPPERWING Secondaries and primaries, including 'fingers', dark, dull grey-black, forming relatively narrow borders to trailing edge and tip of wing. Rest of upperwing, comprising all the wing-coverts, appeared uniform sandy buff. On the ground, primaries and secondaries completely covered by tuft of downcurving feathers (plumes): elongated tertial-coverts and perhaps tertials. Thus, on the ground, visible part of wing was sandy buff, contrasting with grey of saddle.

UNDERPARTS: Whole underparts from chin to undertail-coverts appeared sandy buff, with suggestion of cinnamon wash to breast and belly. Tail from below (seen when bird in flight) pale, with more marked dark terminal border than from above.

UNDERWING Secondaries and primaries, including 'fingers', dark but not as intense as on upperwing, and border to trailing edge becoming far less distinct on inner wing. Five or six 'fingers' (tricky to count). Underwing-coverts sandy buff, but dark tips to one set of coverts, probably median underwing-coverts, produced indistinct diagonal line from near wing tip towards axillaries. No contrast apparent between sandy buff of underwing-coverts and underparts.



43. First-summer Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*, Shetland, April 1981 (J. F. Holloway)

BARE PARTS Bill dagger-shaped, looking pale yellow-brown in some lights, particularly distal two-thirds, but in fact dull grey (trick of the light). Similarly, legs appeared in some lights, particularly when bird airborne, as dull orangy brown, but on ground were dull grey-green. In flight, feet visible as 'clenched fists' or 'bunch of grapes' attached to thin, straight legs.

CALL Heard on a number of occasions: honking, rolling 'carr-rooo', reminiscent in tone of Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*.

Discussion

The main features which identified the bird as a Sandhill Crane were the pale sandy buff plumage, the uniformly marked neck, the off-white fan-shaped face patch, and the red forecrown, forehead, eye and lores patch. It appeared to be in first-summer plumage: on adults the red patch extends farther on to the crown, and the plumage is more extensively grey. This bird had red extending to the forecrown and only just behind the eye, and was predominantly a beige or sandy buff colour, with the 'adult' grey apparent only on the hindneck, mantle, back and scapulars, where the grey appeared as mottling, perhaps suggesting a mixture of adult and first-year feathers (see Cramp & Simmons 1979).

Whenever a large and exotic bird appears in any part of Britain, the first question is whether it is an escape from captivity. Several factors are against the Fair Isle individual having been an escape. First the species is rare in captivity in Britain and, if a first-summer bird, would either have been imported in the last year or have been bred in captivity. Secondly, Fair Isle is remote from any exotic bird collection and this individual would have had to approach the island against northwesterly headwinds to reach it from mainland Britain. Thirdly, the bird was wild and wary, flying the length of the island time and time again for six hours before it chose to land;

on the ground, it would not allow approach nearer than 150m.

The weather conditions would have assisted the crane on a transatlantic flight. It may have been swept out into the Atlantic by strong westerly winds south of a deepening depression which developed over Newfoundland on 22nd and 23rd April 1981. Assuming direct transatlantic passage, the bird may have left the American mainland on either of those days. Once it had outridden the influence of the depression, it would have found itself in an area of slack air associated with an anticyclone in mid Atlantic and, at about 50°N, would have encountered light westerlies on 23rd and 24th backing southwest on 25th as the anticyclone changed to a ridge of high pressure. Southwesterly winds on 25th would have allowed the bird a downwind movement to about 60°N, where a northwesterly airstream awaited it. This northwest wind was blowing on Fair Isle on 26th, the day of the bird's arrival.

Thus, it is possible to map out an itinerary for the crane, with following winds for the entire passage. This, however, raises two interesting points. First, the species is rare in eastern Canada, and migration is mainly to the west of the Great Lakes (Godfrey 1966); this bird must therefore have either undertaken misorientated movement from well inland when under the influence of the Newfoundland depression or must previously have been displaced towards the east coast of America. Secondly, for displacement to have occurred under inclement conditions, the bird must have left the American coast on 22nd or 23rd April, entailing a three- or four-day transatlantic flight: a quite considerable feat of endurance, particularly as the bird did not immediately land on Fair Isle and quickly moved on again the following morning. Alternatively, the bird may have come to Fair Isle following previous transatlantic displacement, perhaps to Iceland, the Faeroes or Shetland. From any of these localities, a downwind flight on the northerly to northwesterly winds of 25th/26th April could have brought it to Fair Isle. If, however, the bird had undertaken a direct Atlantic crossing, it may well have shown a marked northeasterly orientation throughout its movement: this would have taken it into the adverse weather of the Newfoundland depression; then, re-directed northeastward movement in the slack area of mid Atlantic would have brought it to 60° latitudes. A steady northeasterly heading was taken upon its departure from Fair Isle on the morning of 27th April.

Distribution and previous western Palearctic records

Migratory races breed in northeast Siberia, northern Alaska and central Canada east to Ontario. Migratory and resident races occur from northern California across southern and central USA to Alabama and Georgia and south to Florida and Cuba. The migratory populations winter in the southern states of the USA, with some penetrating as far as central Mexico (Cramp & Simmons 1979; Godfrey 1966). The species is a vagrant to eastern Canada and the Atlantic States of the USA (Cramp & Simmons 1979).

The Fair Isle bird has been accepted by the BOU Records Committee for inclusion in category A of the British and Irish list and constitutes the first

record for Britain, though not for the British Isles. A bird of the nominate race which was shot in Co. Cork, Ireland, on 14th September 1905 was placed in category B (BOU 1972) and is the only other western Palearctic record.

Acknowledgments

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Summary

A Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*, probably a first-summer, was identified at Fair Isle, Shetland, on 26th and 27th April 1981. The bird is described, its origin and means of reaching Fair Isle are discussed, and the species' range is given. The only previous west Palearctic occurrence was in Ireland in September 1905.

References

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Nick Riddiford, Bird Observatory, Fair Isle, Shetland