

Horsey cranes 2011 – 2013

The Norfolk Cranes' Story book tells the Horsey cranes' story until 2010. This account is to bring the story more up to date. John Buxton wrote brief accounts for 2011 and 2012 and these accounts are very much his words, though there isn't a field notebook to draw on, unlike the three decades covered by the book, so sometimes dates and other information are not precise. The information for 2013 is based on what John told me before he died in January 2014, which tallies with information sent to the UK Crane Working Group.

Preparing this also gives an opportunity to add a story from the early days that has come to light since the book was published. We start with 'Cranes? No, none here.'

Chris Durdin, August 2014

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Cranes? No, none here.

An additional story from the mid-1980s, told by Richard Hobbs to Chris Durdin in 2013.

Secrecy may have been the best way to safeguard the cranes in the early years, but they could be tricky birds to hide. This dilemma was illustrated by the visit of a group of conservation students to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Hickling nature reserve in about 1985. Richard Hobbs, then the Trust's Conservation Officer, was with them. John Buxton from Horsey was also there, with Christopher Cadbury from Hickling who was a generous benefactor of Hickling reserve and Horsey Estate's crane protection.

One of the students heard the sound of calling cranes coming from nearby Horsey. He pointed them out with some confidence as he came from Sweden and heard cranes there regularly. John and Christopher simply denied it, and the student looked perplexed. Richard, a leading figure in the local conservation scene, knew about the cranes' return to Horsey, and after John and Christopher departed confirmed to the student that he was right.

This recalls an account of John's where he was quizzed about cranes by a birdwatcher and he batted that away by talking about the mechanical cranes on the shoreline doing sea defence work. We don't know if that birdwatcher knew John was spinning a line or thought he was potty!



2011

Two pairs of cranes attempted to nest at Horsey, but no young were fledged.

One pair nested 50 metres from a nest of marsh harriers, the cranes' nest hidden in reed at least 100 metres from an open water pond. I made observations from an established hide, 200 metres from the nest. The marsh harriers frequently dipped over the cranes' nest, causing the crane incubating at the time to react and make a beak clicking noise, a normal reaction to this harassment.

This was the fifth season this pair of cranes had laid eggs. They had always failed to hatch in the past because the male bird rarely took a turn at incubating. In previous seasons, the eggs were frosted by cold spells during the incubation process because he was so lazy about his duties, rarely taking over from the female when she left the nest to feed.

This season, there was no frost in May and from my observations from the hide the eggs hatched on or near to 28th May. The adult cranes moved from the nest site hidden in the reeds towards the nearest open water.

However the eggs of the marsh harriers hatched at about the same date, only 60 metres from the cranes' nest. I saw the male harrier carrying a very small 'goldie' crane chick to its nest to feed its own chicks. I could not tell for certain whether the cranes had more than a single hatched chick but I suspect there was the brood of two chicks. If so, I don't know the fate of the second chick, but it certainly didn't grow to a size to be visible from the hide.

The second pair of cranes were in the fen in an area always difficult to reach and watch and were not followed closely. There were no young seen with these, so we presume they failed.

2012

Three pairs of cranes attempted to nest at Horsey, and a fourth pair courted until April, before moving away. One pair fledged two young.

The same pair of cranes as in 2011 remained in the vicinity through out the winter and were quite aggressive to any other cranes' presence. In April 2012, this pair began to show signs of nesting activity quite close to the site of the 2011 nest. I was again observing from the permanent hide 200 metres away. It was most disconcerting to also see that the same pair of marsh harriers was again nesting within 50 metres. So I was pessimistic about any success for the cranes this season as a repeat of last year seemed almost inevitable.



Again observing from some distance, there was a definite sign that the cranes had hatched in late April. This time the adults moved farther north after I'd seen the signs of hatching, presumably with their chicks, though they couldn't be seen at this stage, to a much safer site at least 400 metres away. They quickly established a new night roost at another pond in a reed marsh where cranes had successfully fledged young in past years. Doing this, they were able to avoid problem of the predatory marsh harriers.

Having previously considered this male crane to be a hopeless parent, I observed that he had become utterly transformed. Throughout the next three months or ten weeks both parent birds were model, attentive parents to twin chicks.

I made frequent visits to hides in sight of the crane family. At first this was to overlook the night roost platform when the twins were growing rapidly, and subsequently to watch the whole family as they fed daily on the adjacent grazing marshes. Neither parent was ever observed leaving the growing twins until 'final lift off' – successful fledging – in mid-July 2012. At last I have reconsidered my opinion of this male crane's ability, but why had it taken six years for him to acquire the conscientious instincts that are needed to be a successful parent remains a mystery.

Another pair of cranes was seen courting in a new area east of the Horsey to Somerton road. The activity ceased after April 2012, for no apparent reason. Two other pairs of cranes attempted nesting in the fen in April 2012 but gave up, possibly after marsh harrier disturbance and/or sedge cutting by human error in the wrong place at the wrong time. Steps have been taken so this should not happen again on the Horsey Estate.

November 2012. There had been infrequent sightings of pair of cranes that had successfully fledged twins throughout the autumn of 2012. On the 18th November (a co-ordinated crane count date organised by the UK Crane Working Group), at noon I observed the family of four birds feeding on the grazing marshes, some 300 metres south of the permanent hide.

The male was intermittently calling a rather pleading shout. I answered his call with my shout of "Grus grus, come and get it!" and, with him in the lead, the family began to walk quite purposefully towards the feeding site. When only at 70 metres distance from me and a mere 40 metres from the food, the family decided this was too close for comfort and gently stretched out their necks and took off, flying towards the north-west and eventually out of my site and into the distance. However they were back the next day and definitely feeding on the offerings I had put out for them. I shall be able to help the family of four to cope with whatever the 2012/13 winter brings for us.

Bridget Buxton and Daniel van de Bulk recalled, in February 2014, how the main pair of cranes that John followed seemed to recognise John's voice and his vehicle, a Subaru, and associate these with food. In that particular vehicle it was easy to approach them closely, but not so in any other vehicle.

2013

Four pairs of cranes at Horsey, with one pair walking off the estate with two young, one of which fledged.

John did not write an account for the Horsey cranes for 2013, but the above summarises what happened. The pair of cranes that walked off the Horsey Estate went to Heigham Holmes, from where one was seen to fledge successfully.

Crane picture by Mike Langman. Crane cut-outs converted to black and white from a photo by Nick Upton.

