

DISTRIBUTION AND NUMBER OF THE RED-CROWNED CRANE IN THE ARGUN RIVER VALLEY

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Summary

The study area is located in the transboundary Dauria steppe ecological region. The Argun is located between Inner Mongolia Province in China and Zabaikalsky Region in Russia. Part of the river about 150 km of length (from 49 32' N, 117 50' E to 50 20' N, 119 22' E) has international importance for Red-crowned Cranes and other waterbirds. The Argun River has there a very wide (6-10 km) valley covered by wet sedge and cereal meadows and reeds. Data about cranes on this part of the Argun River are presented in the article. During 2004-2009, I observed this area nine times and questioned in details more 260 local hunters, herders and fishermen. I observed all river valley (Russian and Chinese territories) and counted cranes here from top of high hills on the Russian site using a binocular (X8) and a telescope (X15-75). The Argun Valley is difficult for observation of waterbirds because of vast and high reeds hiding birds. Therefore, I was able to count from 20% to 60% of cranes sitting on both Russian and Chinese sites of the valley.

Level of water in lakes and rivers in Dauria Region significantly changes because of long-term climatic cycles (about 30-year duration) with interchange of wet and dry periods. It has great influence to condition of wetlands and status of population of cranes and other waterbirds. During 1982-1998 rainfall increased (1990th were very wet), since 1999 rainfall decreased (2000-2007 and first half of 2008 were extremely dry). In 2004 level of water in the Argun was medium and valley included spacious wetlands. During 2005-2008 level of water decreased fast, in May 2008 area of wetlands there was about 5% of 2004 and main part of crane habitats was dry.

First few Red-crowned Cranes pairs have appeared on the Argun River in about middle 1980th (before 1980th only one occasional visitor was recorded in Dauria in

beginning of XX century). Number of cranes slowly increased. In end of 1990th, 6-9 pairs were recorded there. Number of cranes increased very much in the Argun Valley during 2001-2002; during 2003-2004 number also increased but not so fast. In 2004, at least 30 territorial pairs have inhabited on the Argun (I know exact location of 30 pairs, but we were not able to find exact location of 6 pairs). 22-24 pairs were located on Russian territory and 10-12 – on Chinese sites of the valley. At least 15 families among them were breeding. Total number of cranes in 2004 was estimated as 45-70 territorial pairs (in Russian and Chinese territories together) and about 30 non-breedings (probably impuberal) birds staying in flocks. During 2005-2008 number of cranes decreased fast. In 2008, only 5-8 territorial pairs were recorded (2-3 in Russian side and 3-5 in Chinese side). Nesting habitats of only 4-5 families were more or less wet (I think they were wet enough for nesting of the cranes). Breeding sites of all other families were dry. Moreover, vegetation on about 80% of valley in Russia and 30% of valley in China were burned during grassfire in spring 2008. Because of these limiting factors, I think only 2-3 families on the Argun were able to breed and grow chicks in 2008. But I recorded only one nesting family in 2008. Total number of cranes in 2008 was estimated as 9-15 territorial pairs (on both Russian and Chinese territories).

Dynamic of crane number in the Argun River Valley is closely connected with long-term climatic cycles. Increasing of number of cranes on the Argun from middle 1980th to 2004 coincided with significant decreasing of rainfall and crane population on the Middle Amur River (very important breeding area of the Red-Crowned Crane are located there). The fast increasing of number of cranes on the Argun during 2001 and 2002 was coincided with worst condition of habitats and fast decreasing of crane population on the Middle Amur (because of significant reduce of area of wetlands on breeding grounds and numerous spring grass- and forest-fires there). I propose that because of this cranes moved from the middle Amur to the Argun Valley in Dauria. Because of strong drought in Dauria number of crane in the Argun have fast decreasing during 2005-2008 (in 2008, condition of habitats was worst, number of territorial pairs was about 17% of 2004).