

HISTORICAL RECORDS OF THE SIBERIAN WHITE CRANE IN TURKEY

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The Siberian White Crane Grus leucogeranus was not accepted by Kumerloev (1961) for his avifauna of Turkey. Although he refers to an observation by Danford, he rejected the record without any comment. In a later check-list of the birds of Turkey (Kumerloev 1966), the same author included the species, but put a question mark by it. From another check-list of the birds of Turkey (Hollom et al 1971) the species was omitted completely. I believe Danford's record should be reconsidered as should another by Sandwich.

At the beginning of April 1879, Danford (1880) spent some days at Ankara. After mentioning some observations of the Partridge Perdix perdix and the Chukar Alectoris chukar, he writes: "We had also the rare opportunity of closely observing a large flock of Cranes Grus leucogeranus. While on an excursion down the river, a large flock of birds was seen wheeling about in a very unsettled way: we at first took them for Storks; but they presently came close enough to show their very distinctive markings, and further down the stream a flock was met with feeding on a field of sprouting corn. There must have been about a hundred, moving slowly and regularly in compact body. One of our party made a careful stalk to within a hundred and fifty yards; but the ball from the smooth-bore struck the ground just in advance of them, and so a fine chance was lost; nor did we encounter them again".

From Danford's description, the record should be beyond doubt, even though no specimen was collected. The Siberian White Crane is unmistakable at close range and the general appearance at any distance

resembles the White Stork Ciconia ciconia. I therefore believe that this record should be accepted.

Sandwich (1856) saw the species in the plain of Erzurum, at the marshes of the River Karasu, one of the tributaries of the River Euphrates. In September 1854, he saw a group of 4 or 5 birds and later on the same day another group of 20 individuals. Out of these, he shot one which weighed 15lbs. He describes the 'wild strange voice' of the birds which 'harmonizes with the wildness of the locality'. Local people were able to recognise the species by its voice alone and told Sandwich that it was impossible to hunt because of its shyness.

The species is referred to as 'Silberkranich' by Sandwich making a definite species identification and the weight of the shot specimen also fits. Sandwich continued his description of the plain of Erzurum with the Demoiselle Crane Anthropoides virgo of which, he said, "smaller, much more beautiful, exceeding fine taste and extremely rare".

The Siberian White Crane has a disjunct breeding range, with one breeding colony in north western Siberia and one in north eastern Siberia. The north western breeding area is confined to the area of the Lower Ob River. This population winters in Iran and perhaps in Transcaspia (see map in Dement'ev & Gladkov 1951). On the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, the species has been recorded several times, but only a few records are from this century (Schüz 1959). A population decline is reflected by the number of records in the winter quarters. This fact also can explain the Turkish situation: in former times the country was within the wintering range of the species, but the virtual extinction of the western population of the Siberian White Crane makes it unlikely to be recorded again in Turkey. Migration takes place mainly in April and September (Dement'ev & Gladkov 1951). The two records in Turkey fit well into this pattern: Sandwich's observation is from September, Danford's record from April.

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A WINTER ROOST OF PALLID SWIFTS IN CENTRAL CAIRO

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On 11th February 1987 I located a roost of Pallid Swifts Apus pallidus in central Cairo.

I had suspected the presence of this winter roost since 11 November 1978, when I saw about 400 swifts wheeling and rising rapidly over the same area at 0655: they rose out of sight (to the naked eye) within a few minutes. On the two succeeding mornings I saw similar departures; c.500 swifts at 0708 on 12 November and c.200 swifts at 0705 on 13 November 1978. I did not discover where the birds came from.

In December 1986 and January 1987 I again saw swifts in the same central area of Cairo, just south of Tahrir Square, on several occasions around dawn and dusk, the largest number being c.200 on the evening of 21st December. Each evening the swift numbers diminished rapidly at around 1700 but I could not tell where the birds were going. In the mornings, which were often cool and misty, single birds and small parties of 2-4 swifts, left the area, flying purposefully to the west, at irregular times between 0700 and 0815.

Only on the (very clear) evening of 21 December did I see any of these swifts well enough to be sure of the species: on that evening I saw seven birds close enough to be sure that they were all Pallid Swifts.

On the evening of 11 February I managed to be in the Tahrir Square area on foot and found c.70 swifts dashing low around the old Coptic church at the back of the Mogamma Building. I watched this area from 1730 onwards and at 1739 saw two swifts fly up into the tops of window openings on the Mogamma Building and vanish. By 1745 I had seen five swifts fly up into window openings and disappear: these openings were at various levels ranging from the 3rd to the 9th floor. I counted another 18 swifts going to roost in this manner during the next seven minutes.

By 1752 there were no swifts left in the air and I had counted 23 going to roost: many more must have done so uncounted because it was difficult to follow the movements of many birds during periods of rapid dashing flight close to the building. On the following morning I returned to the same place just after dawn, arriving at 0710. By then c.30 swifts were dashing around the Coptic church and c.50 more were over Tahrir Square. By 0716 there were few swifts flying nearby: between then and 0719 I saw two swifts leave the building silently. At 0720 a small party of swifts returned and flew close to the back of the Mogamma Building and I was able to identify three of them as Pallid Swifts. By