



FESTIVAL OF FLIGHT



Each year, in Bhutan's remote Phobjikha Valley, thousands of people gather for the Black-Necked Crane Festival, a vibrant show of solidarity aimed at protecting the endangered dancing birds by providing a source of income for local farmers. And as **Julia Horton** reports, it has proved to be a soaring success for crane conservation





PREVIOUS SPREAD: dancers at the Black-necked Crane Festival perform in the courtyard of the historic Gangteng Gumpa in Bhutan's Phobjikha Valley. The festival aims to protect the cranes (*bottom right*) by providing education and an alternative income for local farmers; **LEFT:** the festival mixes traditional performances with messages about the need for conservation; **RIGHT:** locals watch a performance at the festival; **BELOW LEFT:** local farmer Dawazam tends the kitchen garden outside her home, which she recently opened up for homestays to tourists visiting for the festival; **BELOW RIGHT:** Phobjikha Valley hosts Bhutan's largest wetland and most important habitat for black-necked cranes, which return here from Tibet for the winter



A ripple of laughter passes through the crowd as a dozen or so curiously attired children scurry silently into the sunlit courtyard. Dressed in black and white, their appearance contrasts starkly with the vibrant yellow of Bhutan's famous masked dancers, who have just left the square after giving their latest dazzling performance.

Yet as the youngsters start to move, gleefully flapping their 'wings' and bobbing their 'beaked' heads, it's clear that these diminutive performers are stealing the show. Their energetic antics are choreographed to mimic the behaviour of the black-necked crane, Buddhists' beloved heavenly bird.

At first glance, it looks like just another ancient religious celebration in the deeply Buddhist Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. But this is a modern event, launched in 1998 by Bhutan's Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN) as an innovative way of helping to save the endangered birds and promoting conservation.

Like the renowned Atsara clowns, the real purpose of the schoolchildren's comedy capers isn't entertainment, but education. Their comic routine is the highlight of the Black-necked Crane Festival, which is held here in the

courtyard of the 16th-century Gangteng Gumpa in the Phobjikha Valley in central Bhutan each year.

'Initially, when the RSPN started conservation here, it was because of the black-necked crane, but we realised that you can't just focus on the conservation of one species,' explains Tshering Choki of the RSPN. 'The conservation of habitat for black-necked cranes will not work alone – a lot of local people depend on that habitat, too.'

'If the RSPN focuses on the black-necked crane only, the people will feel that they are being deprived of economic development,' she continues. 'So we started a project to provide alternative sources of income for people. We felt it would be good to start something different, so in 1998, we started the festival. It is really helping us spread more awareness of the black-necked cranes.'

DANCING BIRDS

Black-necked cranes were the last of the world's 15 crane species to be discovered, found in the remote Tibetan plateau in 1876 by the Russian naturalist Count Nikolai Przhevalsky. They are renowned for their 'dancing' behaviours – upon which the children's performance is based – which include bowing, jumping and wing flapping.

JULIA HORTON (2); WILLIAM CHUA (2)

These activities are associated with courtship and are also believed to strengthen the pair bonds that form between male and female birds.

The cranes, which reach a height of about 140 centimetres and have a 235-centimetre wingspan, are endemic to the plateau and neighbouring regions, breeding in high alpine wetlands during spring and summer before migrating to lower altitudes for the winter. For centuries, their arrival in Bhutan – which usually begins in late October – has marked the end of the harvest season and signalled time for farmers and their families to move to lower, warmer altitudes.

But changes in traditional farming practices and modern developments throughout the birds' range are threatening to destroy their habitat. These risks have resulted in them being placed on the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species; they are currently categorised as 'vulnerable'. Censuses carried out throughout the birds' range suggest that the total population could be as high as 11,000 or as low as 8,800.

About 500 cranes winter in Bhutan each year, mostly in Phobjikha, the kingdom's largest wetland and most important black-necked crane habitat. They come to feed on the residue of the



autumn harvest in the local agricultural fields, as well as on dwarf bamboos that grow in the valley's wetlands, which they supplement with seeds, earthworms, beetles and snails. In recognition of Phobjikha's importance to the birds, a conservation area was established in the valley in 2003.

WARM WELCOME

The conservation festival takes place in November, when the cranes return to Bhutan from Tibet for the winter. Its aim is partly to promote ecotourism to

provide the valley's farmers with an alternative income, in order to reduce the pressure on the birds' habitat. To this end, the 150 villagers who dance in the festival are paid 150 Ngultrums (£2) each for their performance. It may not sound like much, but with almost a quarter of the country living below the poverty line, it's welcome nonetheless.

Recently, a group of entrepreneurial farmers have also begun offering homestays, charging tourists around Nu1,280 per person for dinner, bed and breakfast. I'm greeted warmly when I arrive

to spend two days living with Dawazam and her children. Dawazam, who hosted her first guests a month ago, uses the homestay income to help pay tenants to work two of her three acres (1.2 hectares) of land, while she works the final acre and her large kitchen garden. 'I really enjoy meeting foreign people through the homestay, and it's helping me and my family,' she tells me.

As one of the main organisers of the event, Dawazam is among the most enlightened of the villagers, who now run the festival themselves. 'My farm is organic, and although some people use chemicals, thanks to the festival, everyone here is very well informed [about the fact] that if they don't harm the crane, we will have lots of people coming here,' she says.

After cooking for me, my guide and driver, and her family, Dawazam sets to work preparing a feast for invited guests at tomorrow's festival. Her task is made easier by the recent arrival of electricity, delivered to the valley via a cable that was buried in order to reduce the impact on the cranes' habitat.

SPECIAL BLESSING

While livelihoods are important, the festival isn't just about helping people to make money. It's also aimed at strengthening traditional celebrations to help increase villagers' awareness of the birds' importance – and the threats to their existence.

Known as *thrung thrung karm*, the cranes symbolise longevity to the Bhutanese and are deemed holy. Locals believe that the circling of the cranes as they come in to land confers a special blessing, and the winter wheat isn't sown until after the fields have been blessed by the arriving cranes.

'Local people have a respect for the black-necked crane that is related to their culture,' says Choki. 'People would never eat these birds, but what they don't understand is that they can damage their habitat indirectly. There are more and more settlements with people wanting more agriculture. Our main concern is about the use of agrochemicals [such as chemical fertilisers]. If we're not careful and don't educate people, there is a chance that they could have an impact on the birds' feeding area.'

In the past, Choki explains, neighbours would help to work each others'



When to go

The annual Black-necked Crane Festival takes place on 11 November, during the winter. Days are usually sunny, with temperatures of up to 26°C in places, but nights can drop below 0°C, so take a warm coat and proper winter gear for trekking.

Getting there

Flights from London to Kathmandu, Nepal, (from £500 return) are offered by several airlines. Daily onward flights to Paro in Bhutan with Druk Air cost about £300 return, followed by a six-hour drive to Gangtey, where the crane festival is held.

Further information

The RSPN website (www.rspnbhutan.org) provides information on conservation efforts, including the crane festival. To book a trip, contact Bhutan-travel specialist Druk Asia (www.drukasia.com; +65 6 338 9909; email info@drukasia.com).

land, but now, they often have to pay people to be labourers. Simply using agrochemicals to improve yields is easier and cheaper.

Changing land use has also threatened the cranes' wintering grounds. About 30 years ago, the government of Bhutan began distributing public land in the valley near the birds' habitat to landless locals so that they could start growing potatoes to supplement the traditional wheat crop. There was also talk of draining the wetlands and turning them over to potatoes.

Soon after, the process was stopped when the RSPN intervened, pointing

out the importance of the land for crane conservation. By then, however, large swaths of ground had already become private property.

Ironically, while the festival aims to attract foreign visitors to support conservation, there are fears that tourism businesses keen for a share of action will destroy the very thing that draws people here. 'Once land becomes private, you never know what will happen,' Choki says. 'We're worried because there are some people from outside this area of Bhutan who want to invest in tourism here, by building lodges, for example. That will also increase the population even more, bringing more people from other parts of Bhutan looking for jobs in the lodges.'

HAUNTING CRIES

Away from the vibrant celebrations outside the monastery, the season's first pairs of cranes can be seen through a telescope at the RSPN's information centre. As evening falls, they are but distant shadows, their haunting cries carrying through the still air as they gather in the failing light.

Crane numbers in the Phobjikha Valley were already rising before the festival was launched, up from around 100 in 1991–92 to 240 during the winter of 1998–99. The population peaked at 353 in 2005–06 before settling around the 300 mark; last winter, 294 birds were recorded.

The RSPN now hopes to use the festival as a blueprint for successful crane conservation nationwide, with plans to set up a similar event in Bomdeling, in eastern Bhutan, the kingdom's second most important crane habitat.

The Bhutanese government has hailed the festival as an example of the success of its gross national happiness (GNH) philosophy, which puts well-being at the heart of all policy decisions. 'It shows that these two [conservation and farming] don't always have to be in opposition,' says GNH secretary Karma Tshiteem. 'It gives back something to families who would otherwise feel that they are making sacrifices [for no reward].'

And back in the courtyard at Gangteng Gumpa, the smiles on the faces of those watching the capering 'cranes' make it abundantly clear that the festival is helping to improve Bhutan's GNH in more ways than one. **G**