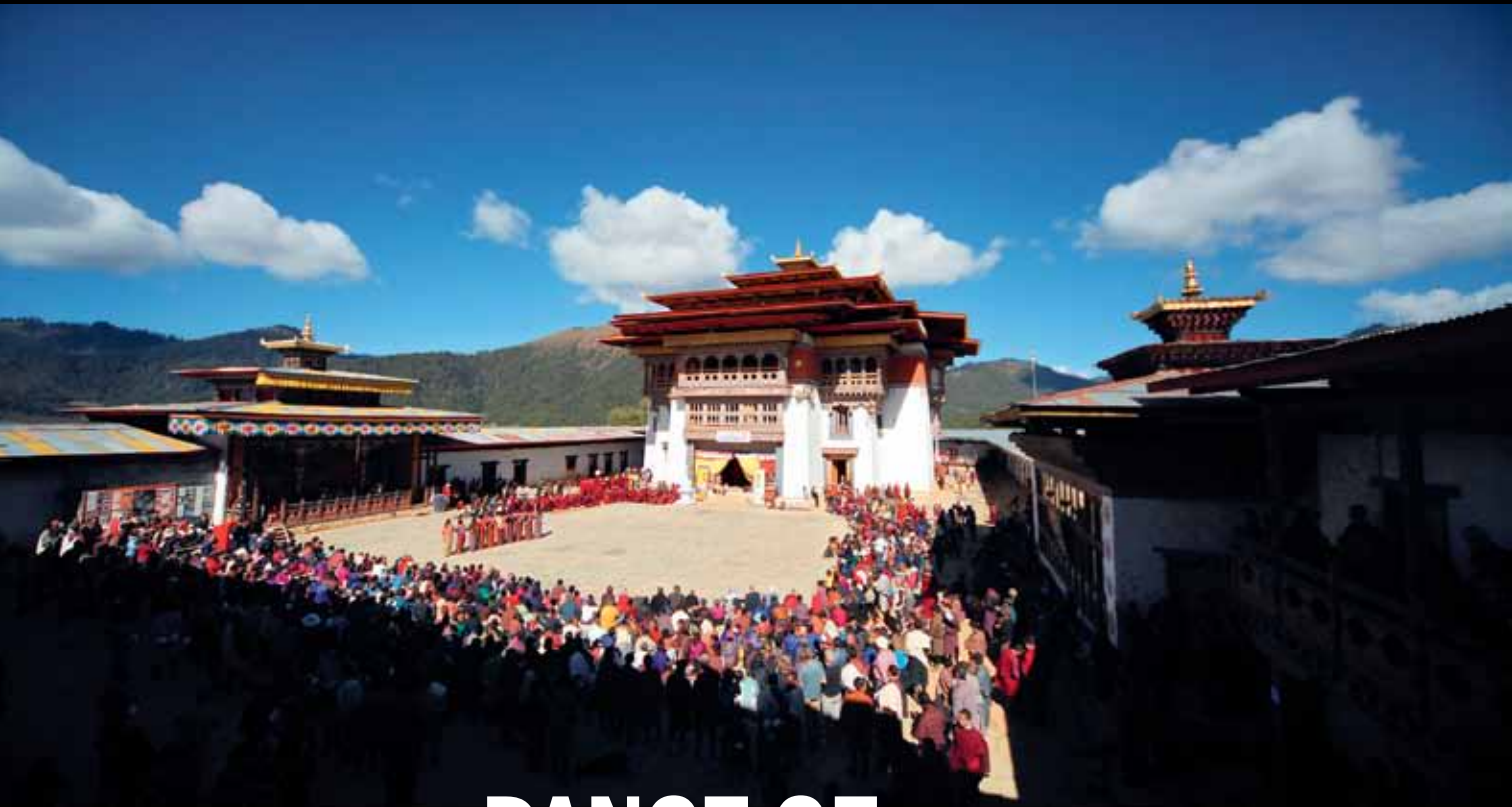


text JULIA HORTON
 photos WILLIAM CHUA



DANCE OF THE CRANE

Environmental enlightenment



► A welcome dance.

▲ Gantey Goenpa: The stage is set for the Black-necked crane festival.

► *Shazam chham*: This dance is performed by dancers wearing knee-length silk skirts and stag masks.

▼ Children wearing crane costumes perform choreographed crane dances.



A familiar flash of yellow and the traditional beating of drums herald the latest arrival of Bhutan's famous masked dancers. Leaping out of the monastery and into the courtyard, their costumes dazzle in the bright winter sun, a blur of swirling skirts as they spin barefoot, so fast, they appear to be almost flying.

Their talent is undeniable. These men and others like them throughout the kingdom have impressed untold crowds, from home and abroad, for many years.

Today, the audience is itself a kaleidoscope of colour with dozens of Buddhist monks dressed in sumptuous robes of deep claret sitting alongside villagers in traditional brightly hued national dress.

By comparison, the black and white attire of the diminutive performers who next scurry into the sunshine appears a little sombre at first – until they begin to move. Bobbing their “beaked” heads and flapping their “wings” with glee, these schoolchildren energetically mimic the antics of the black-necked crane, Buddhists’ beloved heavenly bird.

Ripples of laughter pass through the watching crowd of tourists and villagers as the young performers dash about. Their comic routine is the highlight of the Black-Necked Crane Festival (BNC) in the Phobjikha Valley. Yet, the real purpose of these comedy capers is enlightenment.

This is not just another ancient religious celebration; it is a modern event mixing old and new, launched in the spirit of conservation. It was established in 1998 by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN) as an innovative way of helping to save the endangered cranes.

The last of the world's 15 crane species to be discovered, black-necked cranes were first found in the remote Tibetan plateau in 1876 by a Russian naturalist called Prjezhwalsky. They are renowned for their “dancing” behaviours – upon which the children's performance is based – including bowing, jumping and wing flapping.

Country: Bhutan
Festival: BLACK-NECKED CRANE FESTIVAL
When: November 11
Where: Phobjikha Valley
Did you know: RSPN and WWF are the major non-government organisations in Bhutan working to protect the environment.

Although such activities are associated with courtship, they are believed to be a normal part of the birds’ motor development, which also helps reduce tension and aggression and strengthens pair bonding.

The cranes are endemic to the plateau and surrounding regions, breeding in high alpine wetlands during spring and summer and migrating to lower altitudes for the winter. For centuries their arrival in Bhutan, starting from late October, has marked the end of the harvest season and the time for farmers and their families to move to lower, warmer altitudes. But changes in traditional farming

► Monks enjoying the festival and taking some shelter from the sun.

►▼ A dance performance on environment and religion.



The festival is educating people about the need to protect these birds.



▲ Kids and adults hide behind the black-necked crane image while enjoying the show.

▲▲ Shazam chham: Of knee length silk skirts and stag masks.

◀ Children perform choreographed crane dances.

practices and modern development are threatening to destroy the birds' habitat.

These risks coupled with the birds' limited geographical range have reduced their chances of survival to such a degree that in 2007, they were officially listed as "vulnerable". At that time, there were thought to be only 11,000 black-necked cranes worldwide. Around 500 of those wintered in Bhutan each year, mostly in Phobjikha, the kingdom's largest wetland and most important black-necked crane habitat.

The conservation festival takes place in November, when the cranes return to Bhutan from Tibet for the winter. Its aim is partly to give farmers in this valley an alternative income through ecotourism and to help discourage them

from cutting costs by using chemical fertilisers, which are harmful to the environment.

To this end, villagers who dance in the festival are paid for their performances and farming families can earn extra money by charging tourists to stay in their homes during the event. Equally, if not more importantly, the festival is educating people about the need to protect these birds.

Half the battle is already won, as the cranes are deemed heavenly in Buddhism and no one would intentionally harm them. The festival is improving people's understanding of the impact of their actions to such a degree that it is now set to be replicated elsewhere in Bhutan. Such efforts, it is hoped, will save both cranes and communities for generations to come. **AG**



UK journalist **Julia Horton** covers travel, international development and conservation, writing for media including British newspaper, *The Guardian*, and Asian travel website, *cnngo.com*.

William Chua is an international award-winning photographer based in Singapore. He left his career in the banking industry in 2006 to pursue his passion in photography full time and has not looked back since. William has been conferred a number of international awards, including 16 honourable mentions at the International Photography Awards 2010 (a sister effort of the Lucie Foundation).