

Egg laying in Sarus Crane

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I am writing this article just to share my experiences with my friends in the field.

Every time I traveled from Kanpur to Lucknow on official visits (between 2000 and 2003 monthly once at least) I noticed a pair of Sarus cranes in the fields between Jajmau Ganga bridge and Unnao railway crossing (20km stretch). This was in 2001. Somehow I always managed to see them in the fields, feeding, chasing each other, at times even in flight. They always fascinated me. By 2002 I saw they had become 3 in number.

The Sarus cranes in Kanpur zoo were two in number. "A pair" informed the head keeper. I held a very special place for the aviary in the zoo, my favorite being the non-glamorous red jungle fowl.

My day was never complete without visiting the aviary at least once. I wondered when my pair would have a baby. The vet, Dr. Tripathi and I even made some changes in the quality of feed being fed to birds eliminating the commercial bird feed all together. I really marveled at the majestic height of both our birds (I am only 5.1").

On 22 August 2003 one egg was laid in the aviary in the evening. The bird was reportedly sitting peacefully on the egg. Nothing seemed unusual. The regular keeper of the aviary was absent that day and the daily wagger on duty did not think it to be an important enough event to let me or the vet know.

The next morning I was informed that on day break (7:00 am) that the Sarus was in the pond half swimming and half drowning and fully battered. We immediately opened the aviary and rushed inside. Sure enough, the head was fully battered, the breathing was slow. It seemed its very life was slipping away. The veterinary college students from Mathura were in the zoo that day. The vet tried his best. There was another egg near the first one under the bamboo clump. We separated the male ("husband") sarus crane and let the female ("wife") remain in the original enclosure keeping a continuous watch on her. By evening she was no more. I even spoke to many people asking if cranes in captivity could fight so viciously. For a zoo director every death is like a slap on the face. I do not know if this happens to all, but every time an animal died I found it difficult to hold back my tears (in private) and could never have my dinner that night. A sentimental fool maybe but that is the way I am.

I spoke to the then Chief Wildlife Warden and took permission to keep the eggs in an incubator in Lucknow. If the eggs were fertile probably success could be ours. I rushed to Lucknow the same night and got the eggs to an incubator. On my way back from Lucknow I felt happy to see the family of three enjoying as usual in the fields. I wondered where I had gone wrong. I was determined to get my family going once again.

"Wife battering in zoo" screamed the newspapers next morning!

On the morning of 25th august 2003 another egg was found in the enclosure! The mystery was solved. Both Sarus cranes in the enclosure were female! They were never male and female.

I wish I had known earlier. I rang up the person with the incubator and before I could speak he told me the eggs were infertile.

My trips to Lucknow continued. I never missed my sarus family on route. I spent the next few months approaching other zoo directors for a male Sarus crane. Chandigarh zoo was kind enough to spare one for me. My Sarus crane arrived from Chattbir Zoo on 2nd February 2004.

I had gone to Lucknow on 3rd Feb to attend a vet conference. The same day I was transferred from Kanpur Zoo. On my way back I noticed my Sarus family again. I hope 2004 will be lucky for my family of Sarus at the zoo.



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