



# You Need To Know This

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Old or new, these are MUST READ (or must watch) pieces of media. Books, video, radio and other media featured here are items we consider essential to your knowledge about our forests, our environment, and the humans who influence each of them. Stay informed about the environment. And tell us about "Must Knows" you find.

## ***Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes***

by Peter Matthiessen & Robert Bateman  
North Point Press, 2001, 350 pages.

*Review by Wayne Jenkins*

Perhaps our most accomplished nature writer delivers one of his finest efforts in this wonderful book. Like the magnificent avian species grus, Matthiessen's "Travels" stitches continents together and spans our evershrinking planet. This prolific author, (be sure to read *Wildlife in America*, *Snow Leopard* and *Sand Rivers*), followed all fifteen crane species in their natural habitats, including both the wintering and breeding grounds. His research included visits to Siberia, Mongolia, Korea, China, Japan, India, Bhutan, South Africa, Australia, England, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and the Gulf Coast of North America. Detailed, yet lightly poetic descriptions of his travels, the landscapes, people he meets and the various species encountered are accompanied by beautiful images of cranes by painter Robert Bateman, making "Travels" a perfectly balanced and satisfying read.

The plight of the world's fifteen crane species is no happy tale. Eleven species are threatened with extinction by habitat loss and human activities. This ancient species requires expansive wetlands and prairies, and in most cases travels great distance between nesting and wintering grounds, which are continually in danger of being usurped for human agriculture and city building. Increasingly, it seems we will only retain those species for which we actively choose to provide the necessary habitat and to protect. The many crane champions ("craniacs"), sprinkled across many continents, devoted to the hard work of observing, studying and working to save this fascinating bird comprise the good news.

Foremost among these is the founder and past president of The International Crane Foundation (ICF), Dr. George Archibald, who plays a key role in global crane conservation. ICF's research and education center, in Baraboo Wisconsin, cares for, studies and breeds captive crane species for reintroduction around the world. The center's famous and innovative work on bringing the endangered Whooping Crane from the precipice of extinction (1 population and 35 birds in the 1940's) to four wild populations and one captive in North America, total count at 534 birds in 2009 is a wonderful example of concerted efforts by citizens, scientists and government agencies working together for this remarkable recovery. [www.savingcranes.org](http://www.savingcranes.org)

The superlatives describing this species pepper the story throughout. They sing (complex vocalizations - songs), they perform courtship dances, leaping, bowing and wing flapping straight up into the air. Some species migrate cross the Himalaya above 32,000 feet, and some have little fear of man and will attack at will. All are beautiful. Be sure to study the color plates of the African Crowned Cranes. Probably my favorite parts of Matthiessen's book are the descriptive passages about the cranes and their habitats. This example from the author's visit to the Bharatpur marshlands of India, to catch sight of the threatened Siberian cranes, serves well:

*"Beyond the bright-headed Tibetan geese, not eighty yards away in the open marsh, stand two white cranes with startling red faces and red bills, fresh as roses in the light of the new sun. Like most cranes, G. leucogeranus prefers open areas with unobstructed views, and since it is wary, I am scared I might flare the first snow wreaths I have ever seen, or cause them to move farther from the bank. I sink to my knees behind a bush, watching in relief as they resume feeding: they probe wet gleaming bills through the bronze duckweed or immerse red faces to the eyes to grasp sedge tubers and tug them from the mud. Between probes, they glare with livid eyes – the iris is a strange pale yellow – yet they do not take alarm at my close presence but on the contrary seem curious and confiding."*

This is conservation writing at its best. Matthiessen's passion and love for these birds, keen observation and great story-telling make this book a pure joy to read and will make you a lover of this splendid species. Get it, read it and share it.

If you become a "craniac", you will enjoy a visit to the Tennessee Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge, north of Birchwood, Tennessee. This managed wintering and stopover site for Eastern Sandhill Cranes provides the opportunity to witness up to 10,000 Sandhills in January and February, part of a flock that had around 700 birds in the 1970's and now contains over 65,000. Occasionally one may also see a few larger pure white members of the famous experimental eastern migrating Whooping Cranes.

[More info on the Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge.](#)

Sound interesting? Get the book from Amazon.com with [this link](#).

**Want to give us feedback or have a suggestion for something we should see? Call our office at 706-635-8733, or send an e-mail to [info at gafw.org](mailto:info@gafw.org).**