

Short communications

Overwintering of Crane, *Grus grus*, within the Alpine arch

Gianluca Rassati

Abstract - The first case of Common Crane overwintering within the eastern Alpine system is described. One individual was repeatedly observed in 2012 from January 14th to April 1st.

Key words: Common Crane, *Grus grus*, Alps, North-eastern Italy, Tagliamento River, overwintering.

Riassunto - *Svernamento di Gru in area alpina italiana.*

Nel periodo fra il 14 gennaio e il 1° aprile del 2012 una Gru ha sostato sul greto e nei boschi ripariali del fiume Tagliamento nel territorio di Enemonzo, nelle Alpi Carniche. Si tratta del primo caso di svernamento nelle Alpi orientali.

Parole chiave: Gru, *Grus grus*, Alpi, Italia Nord-orientale, Fiume Tagliamento, svernamento.

In Italy, the Common Crane, *Grus grus*, preferably overwinters in coastal and plain zones and vast protected marshland areas, next to pastures, meadows and cultivations (cf. e.g. Bricchetti & Fracasso, 2004). In the extreme eastern Alpine sector it is a regular migrant (Rassati, 2011) and, up until now, there have been no known cases of overwintering: the first one is reported in this note.

On 14-1-2012, an individual was observed on the bed of the Tagliamento River close to the village of Enemonzo (46°24' N 12°53' E; Carnic Alps) (Fig. 1). In the following period 2-3 visits per week were made, during which the position and the movements of the bird were observed, which were reported on a topographic map on a 1:5000 scale, in addition to general data. The last observation was made on 1-4-2012.

The frequented area (365-380 m a.s.l.), measured using the minimum convex polygon method, had an extension of 36 ha and was represented by a bed of coarse gravels alternating with finer gravels and small sandy areas, devoid of vegetation, from 250 to 400 m wide, dry due to upriver catchments, which included the confluence of a

small stream, the water of which penetrated into the river bed for 200-250 m, and by riparian woodlands (Scots pine, *Pinus sylvestris*, Norway spruce, *Picea abies*, Black Poplar, *Populus nigra*) in some zones preceded by a floodplain band, some tens of metres wide, with young stands of *Pinus sylvestris*, *Populus nigra*, Willows, *Salix* spp., Grey Alder, *Alnus incana*. There were vegetal remains on the river bed, among which there were also those of considerable size, accumulated during the floods.

As well as penetrating the inside of the banks, during daylight hours the Crane spent most of its time on the river bed, and especially in the zone affected by the water of the stream, where, in March, it was observed attempting to capture the Common Frog, *Rana temporaria*, which came into the site for breeding. Grassland zones located between the inhabited centre and the northern bank were not visited, probably because of the relatively high anthropic disturbance. The river bed was frequented, along its entire width, until the descent of darkness, after which the animal was sometimes observed entering into the riparian band. The bird was always seen moving on the ground, only flying when disturbed. The disturbance, mainly due to men and dogs left free to roam, was “dealt with” by moving about and especially by exploiting the width of the river bed or penetrating into the woodland, but the vegetal remains were also used as a visual barrier in an environment otherwise devoid of useful elements for this purpose. To confirm the vigilant behaviour of the species, a high escape distance was verified not less than 150m. On more than one occasion, “parade-march postures” were observed (Cramp & Simmons, 1980). The permanence for a few days of continuous snow cover of a few cm in height, as a result of a couple of snowfalls did not cause the abandonment of the site, nor did it cause appreciable behavioural changes.

The only noteworthy interspecific interaction with bird species took place on March 1, when approximately 40 Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*, individuals were observed, along with about ten Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*, individuals pestering the Crane, which was close to the stream, emitting calls and approaching it, also by means of fake attacks: after about two minutes the Crane reacted by emitting, in turn, a call (“Kraah”) and opening and closing its wings. This reaction, despite not causing the Crows to move away much, stopped the mobbing actions.

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Fig. 1 - Gravel bed of the Tagliamento River close to the confluence of the small stream (Photo G. Rassati). / Greto del Fiume Tagliamento in corrispondenza della confluenza del piccolo rio (Foto G. Rassati).

It was ascertained that, unlike the recent past, when an act of poaching was very likely, as reported for other localities (Presicci, 1987; Stival, 1996), despite this risk not yet having been averted, in this case it was not verified. This was very probably also due to the reduced hunting pressure compared to the past, to the period in concomitance with the end of the hunting activity, to the ease of confusion with the Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*, a species not usually affected by poaching acts, and to the reduced interest in wildlife.

On the basis of what was reported by Brichetti & Fracasso (2004), the case described is the first overwintering within the eastern Alpine system and refers to a particular environment (gravel river bed), which was preferred to nearby agricultural areas, a habitat usually frequented by the species during overwintering in coastal and lowland zones (cf. e.g. Presicci, 1987; Stival, 1996; Tinarelli *et al.*, 2010). The reduced extent of the frequented zone in relation to the type of environment should also be noted, seemingly scarce in trophic resources

As already in the past (Rassati, 2004, 2006), it has been possible to verify the importance of the Tagliamento river system which, although severely compromised in the stretch which has been reported, due to the lack of water, captured and exploited for the production of electric energy, and leaving again several kilometres away, allows the particular ecological requirements of some species to be satisfied, even in montane zones, especially in areas that include confluences of streams. Indeed, in the case described, the stream has represented a “surrogate” for the wetlands, usually reported as a fundamental element of the habitat used during overwintering. In particular, the *taxa* that seek open or semi-open areas, which are constantly being reduced, especially in the valley floors where the countryside is “eaten” by urban and infrastructural expansion, find a fundamental resource in the water courses and relative

habitats. In the light of the scientific evidence, it is therefore necessary to reverse the current trend to give up new and numerous water catchments and put back in place what Nature has provided: water in the river bed.

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Short communications

Prima nidificazione accertata di assiolo *Otus scops* in provincia di Varese

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Abstract - *First nesting of the Scops owl in Varese province.*

During 2010 and 2011, the breeding of one pair of Scops owl has been ascertained on the eastern shore of Lake Maggiore, close to the town of Angera.

Key-word: Scops owl, *Otus scops*, Italy, Varese.

Riassunto - Nel 2010 e 2011 è stata accertata la nidificazione dell'Assiolo nel territorio di Angera, in provincia di Varese, sulla sponda orientale del Lago Maggiore.

Parole chiave: Assiolo, *Otus scops*, Italia, Varese.

Il 28 aprile 2010, nel territorio del comune di Angera, sulla sponda orientale del Verbano, è stato trovato un nido di Assiolo ubicato in una cavità di un tronco morto di Salice bianco a circa tre metri di altezza, con la presenza di almeno un giovane. Anche nel 2011 la nidificazione si è ripetuta, sempre nella stessa località, con la presenza di almeno due giovani. L'ultima segnalazione di presenza di giovani nel nido è stata accertata l'11 luglio; due giorni dopo, a causa di un violento nubifragio, il tronco del Salice è stato spezzato proprio all'altezza della cavità. Nel 2012 è stata accertata la presenza di almeno due individui senza prove di nidificazione.

Si tratta della prima nidificazione accertata per la Provincia di Varese. Infatti, in ambedue gli Atlanti provinciali (Guenzani, 1988 e Gagliardi, 2007) la specie non era compresa nell'elenco delle specie nidificanti. In bibliografia, Bianchi *et al.* 1973, la indicano come specie genericamente presente, mentre Realini (1982), nonostante indagini mirate, non fornisce prove della presenza.

Molto più recentemente, nel 2009, un individuo è stato seguito per tutta la stagione riproduttiva all'interno del parco del Rugareto in comune di Marnate, nella parte meridionale della provincia, ma non è stato possibile trovarne il nido (Abramo Giusto com. per.).

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