

# *Grus nigricollis*



**Common name:** Black-necked crane

**Local names:** Cha Thung-thung (Ladakh)

**Classification:**

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Gruiformes

Family: Gruidae

Genus: *Grus*

Species: *nigricollis*

**Profile:**

The black-necked crane, *Grus nigricollis*, also known as the Tibetan crane, is a tall lanky bird, around 135 cm long, with a wingspan of 2-2.5 m and a weight of 6-8 kg. It is a whitish-gray crane with black head, neck, and tail plumage. It has dark grey legs, a red crown patch, a white patch to the rear of the yellow eyes and very well developed secondaries. The primaries and secondaries are black, the feathers of the back are grayish yellow, and black and white feathers alternate on the neck. An adult crane is pale grey with a contrasting black head and a prominent reddish cap in the male. The young bird has yellow-brown feathers on its crown, and a gray abdomen. Males and females are virtually indistinguishable but the males tend to be slightly larger in size. The black-necked crane was the last of the crane species to be discovered. The bird is the natural predator of the pests attacking paddy fields, and thus, it destroys disease transmitting pests and yield reducing insects. Across most of its range, the black-necked crane is protected by the local religious beliefs.

**Lifespan:** 50-60 years

**Distribution:** The black-necked crane is a migratory species that breeds in the high altitude (2950-4900 m) freshwater wetlands of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau and the Ladakh region of India. They nest in high altitude freshwater wetlands, including alpine grassy marshlands, small ponds, sedge pond meadows, lakeshore marshes and riparian marshes. In Ladakh they can be spotted in Nuro Sumdo marshes (near Tso Moriri), Shey marshes, Trishul lake, Pang Gong Tso, Tso Moriri along with 11 other lakes and 8 marshes in Changthang region (Lam Tso, Phoksey, marshes in Chushul, Hanley, Parma), Puga lake and marshes, Chantau, Noorichan, Lingzi Tang, Changchenmo, and marshes in Nubra valley. Each winter, they fly several hundred km to lower elevation agricultural valleys in the Qinghai-Tibet and Yunnan-Guizhou plateaus in China, and in Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (Sangthi and Zemithang wetlands). The birds arrive at their wintering grounds in Arunachal between mid-October and early December and stay till the first indications of spring.

**Population:** 5,600-6,000 individuals (Figures are for wild population only)

**Behaviour:** The call of this bird is very distinctive, like that of a trumpet. It can be heard from a distance. Mated pairs perform a complex series of coordinated calls with their heads thrown back and the phenomenon is referred to as unison calling. Usually the females initiate this display and give two calls for every male call. The courtship dance of the black-necked crane is a magnificent sight involving bowing, jumping, running, tossing of sticks and grass, and wing flapping. The dance is also performed to relieve tension, thwart aggression, and strengthen the pair bond. The nest of the cranes is a large pad of dead aquatic vegetation like grass and sedges held together by mud constructed on small, pre-existing grassy islands or in the water. Black necked Cranes lay eggs in shallow water of about 60 cm depth. In both breeding and wintering areas, the cranes are quite tolerant of people and regularly feed near human settlements. The eggs are dull-white to brown in colour. Both male and female cranes incubate the eggs, changing roles as often as ten times a day. Generally, only one out of the two chicks survives. The cranes start swimming from the time they are a few hours old. Crane families usually remain together for around 9 months, and it is only when the next mating season begins that the young separate from their parents. They join other young birds and form a flock of their own and stay together till the end of the breeding season.

- **Diet:** Black-necked cranes are omnivorous and forage on plant roots and tubers, waste grains, gram, berries, small fruits, insects, snails, shrimp, fish, frogs, lizards, and voles.
- **Reproduction:** Breeding season: May-July; Incubation Period: 30-33 days; Clutch Size: 1-2 eggs; Fledging period: 90 days; Sexual Maturity: 3-5 years, rarely 2

**Current status:**

- **Status:**
  1. IUCN 2008: Vulnerable
  2. CITES 2008: Listed in Appendix I
- **Threats:**
  1. Illegal hunting of the species.
  2. Egg collecting by humans.
  3. Degradation and loss of habitat (This is severe in wintering areas where wetlands are extremely affected by human activity such as irrigation, agriculture, dam construction, draining and grazing pressure)
  4. Usage of nesting sites for developmental activities.
- **Conservation Practices:**
  1. International Crane Foundation (ICF), along with Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN), Bhutan, has worked to study and protect Black-necked Cranes and their habitat.
  2. ICF and RSPN have an annual crane festival in Phobjika Valley, Bhutan, in order to spread awareness related to cranes.