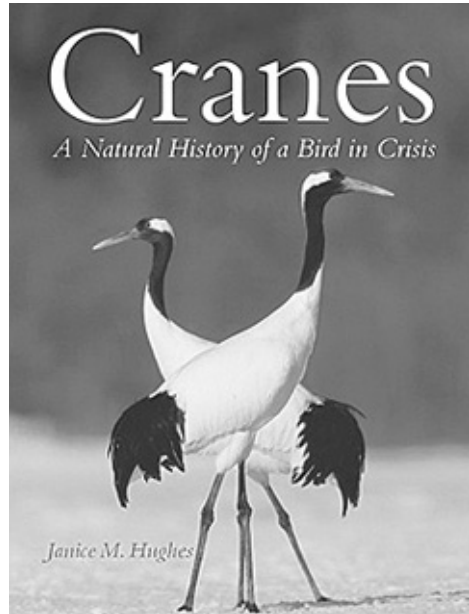


## BOOK REVIEWS

***Cranes: A Natural History of a Bird in Crisis*** by Janice M. Hughes. 2008. 254 pages. 22 x 29 cms. About 100 black-and-white and colour illustrations and photographs. Distribution maps. List of further reading. Firefly Books, 66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 1H1. \$45.00 Can. Hardcover with wrappers. *Reviewed by Chris Siddle.*

Dr. Janice Hughes is associate professor of biology, and curator of vertebrate collections, at Lakehead University, ON. She is the author of two recent general bird books for Firefly Books: *The Migration of Birds* and this volume. *Cranes: A Natural History of a Bird in Crisis* gives general natural history about the world's cranes in the first and last chapters, but the strength of the volume resides in the four chapters between. In these long chapters, Dr. Hughes tells the remarkable story of North America's Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*) from the comparative solitude of their pre-Caucasian existence around prairie wetlands to the socio-political complexity of their lives in the mid-2000s where fewer than 300 birds existed as a handful of wild and captive flocks that were more or less dependent upon human good will. What a narrative it is!

Pioneer conservationists, especially the energetic and creative Robert Porter Allen, helped most Canadians and Americans identify Whooping Crane as THE classic endangered species in North America. Twice a year, it undertook a perilous long migration between its Texas coastal wintering grounds and its breeding ground, which was eventually discovered to be Wood Buffalo National Park. To survive, the species now required co-operation of two nations. In spite of a massive campaign to educate the citizenry, cranes continued to be shot, especially by Saskatchewan grain farmers who did not want the huge birds gobbling their field crops during month-long stays in autumn. Eventually, everyone seemed to get the conservation message that Whooping Cranes were protected.



Hughes explains how, for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Whooping Crane inhabited the shadow land where its numbers were still too low, and its wintering grounds too small, to ensure the bird's future. In her history of the crane's recovery from the edge of extinction, the principal players like Robert Allen, come alive. Even minor villains, like the politically appointed director of the New Orleans zoo are highlighted. This individual refused to allow the zoo's captive crane to breed with captives elsewhere and tried to pass himself off as a crane expert on plumages. What keeps the reader hooked is Hughes' recounting that time after time, just as the bird's protectors seemed poised to make a breakthrough, the cranes would confound the experts as individual cranes died. I won't spoil the ending, but let me say that to this day Whooping Crane remains true to type. It isn't out of the woods yet. *Cranes: A Natural History of a Bird in Crisis* is an entertaining and informative book. Highly recommended.

***Wing Nut: Passions of a Bird Photographer*** by Laure Wilson Neish. 2010. 119 pages. 25 x 21 cms. Blurb publications, Calgary, AB. Soft cover. About \$39.00 Can. *Reviewed by Chris Siddle.*

Laure Wilson Neish is a bird photographer who lives with her husband, Gordon, in Penticton. Her latest collection of photographs is a cause for celebration. The composition and arresting quality of so many of Neish's images makes *Wing Nut* a joy to review, and a must-have publication for anyone interested in British Columbia's birds.

Her narrative, written in a clever and informative style, is episodic, occasionally covering special bird excursions to places like Denali National Park in Alaska, and rarity searches like her quest for a Northern Hawk Owl. However, the book is mostly about birds encountered around the southern Okanagan Valley. Eighty species are shown, many having several images. Of particular note to viewers interested in bird behavior are the series on the California Quail which show chicks at several

ages, American Dippers squabbling over territory, American Coots rafting on open water in response to an overhead Bald Eagle, two male Northern Flickers displaying at each other (until one literally gets the upper hand), a male Bufflehead in display, and an intimate portrait of a Cliff Swallow feeding its nestling. Like all professional photographers, Neish has mastered light, using her lens to take the viewer into a world of detail most birders haven't glimpsed before. For this reason alone the book is worth its modest purchase price. A bonus is that the photos, almost without exception, are also very appealing. For instance, check the images of fledgling Canyon Wrens, Virginia Rail sliding between the cattails, a Spotted Sandpiper frozen in feather-perfect detail in a distraction display, a Willow Flycatcher, and a Clay-coloured Sparrow with a beak full of nesting material. *Wing Nuts* can be ordered on-line from Blurb publications at <http://www.blurb.com/bookstore/detail/1563819>. Highly recommended.

