



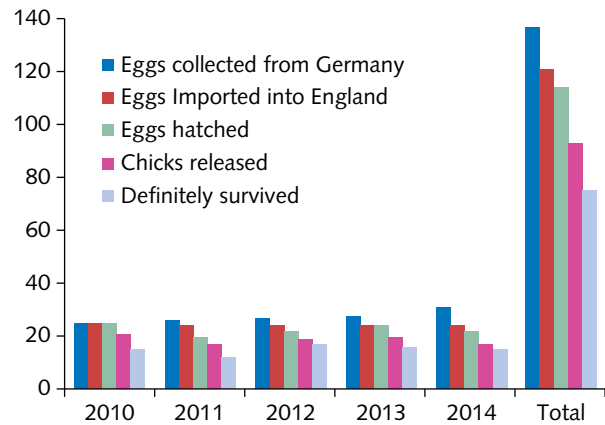
## Cranes in human foster care

The Great Crane Project was run in the UK between 2010 and 2015. The target was to reintroduce a once-common bird species—the common crane *Grus grus*—to southwest England. The species already occurred in low numbers in the east of the country, and the project aimed to increase the overall British population and double the number of separate populations in the country.

Cranes are common in continental Europe so **egg collection** was undertaken in the Schorfheide-Chorin Biosphere Reserve in Germany. Collection occurred early in the season, giving the German cranes time to lay a replacement clutch and go on to have a successful breeding season. Once removed, the eggs were taken to hatch at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire, England.

Hand-rearing can optimize survival, but can also lead to **imprinting**, especially in water birds. Chicks of species that are born mobile (so-called precocial young) often imprint on the first thing they see, which is usually the parent. This allows family groups to move together safely. The first thing that hand-reared chicks see is a human, and this causes behavioural issues, with chicks following and identifying with humans. To avoid this, the Great Crane Project used human carers dressed in crane suits to hide the human body shape from the cranes. Feeding was undertaken using litter-pickers decorated to look like crane heads (Figure A).

Once the chicks were bigger, they were taken to an enclosure at the release site using a **soft release** model. This was predator-proof and allowed the chicks to get used to the new environment safely. During this period the birds were taught how to react to ground **predators**, such as foxes, and to avoid human beings and vehicles. This was achieved by using a recording of adult crane alarm calls in conjunction with their human foster carers (still in costume)



Online Case Study 13 Figure B Successes and failures of The Great Crane Project.

Source: Authors' own artwork. Data from The Great Crane Project Annual Report 2014. [http://www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk/sites/default/files/2014-15%20Annual%20Report\\_GCP.pdf](http://www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk/sites/default/files/2014-15%20Annual%20Report_GCP.pdf)

reacting as an adult bird would to the presence of potential danger.

Once the birds reached about five months, the enclosure doors were opened so the birds could leave and return at will before leaving the enclosure for good. In total, over five years, 137 eggs were collected, 93 chicks were released, and 75 birds survived the release and acclimatization process (Figure B).

### FURTHER READING

**Overview of the Great Crane Project:** Available at: <http://www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk>

Online Case Study 13 Figure A The process of rearing and releasing common crane *Grus grus*. Here, a fake adult crane head with a teaspoon is used to feed a chick.

Source: Courtesy of James Lees / WWF.