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Birds
Cranes, UK's tallest bird, bred in higher numbers last summer than for centuries

At least 80 pairs recorded in 2023 after species began breeding again in 1979, having disappeared from UK in 16th century



📷 Cranes are difficult to spot in the breeding season as they often hide in reedbeds. Photograph: Adam Ihse/TT News Agency/AFP/Getty Images

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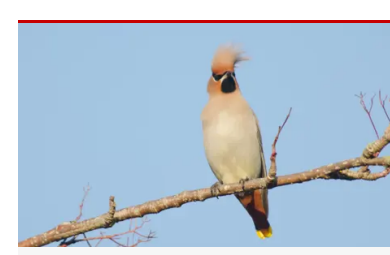


Britain's tallest bird, the spectacular, **wetland-loving crane** bred in higher numbers last summer than at any point since they disappeared from the UK in the 16th century.

At least 80 pairs of cranes were recorded in 2023, up from the previous high of 72 two years earlier. The birds, which make distinctive bugling calls but are surprisingly elusive in the breeding season, as they hide in reedbeds, successfully fledged at least 36 chicks.

The species, which performs elaborate mating dances each spring, **first returned from Scandinavia to breed in east Norfolk in 1979**. The population was kept secret for years and very slowly spread.

More recently it has been boosted by a reintroduction project where hand-reared cranes were **released on expanded wetlands in the Somerset Levels**.



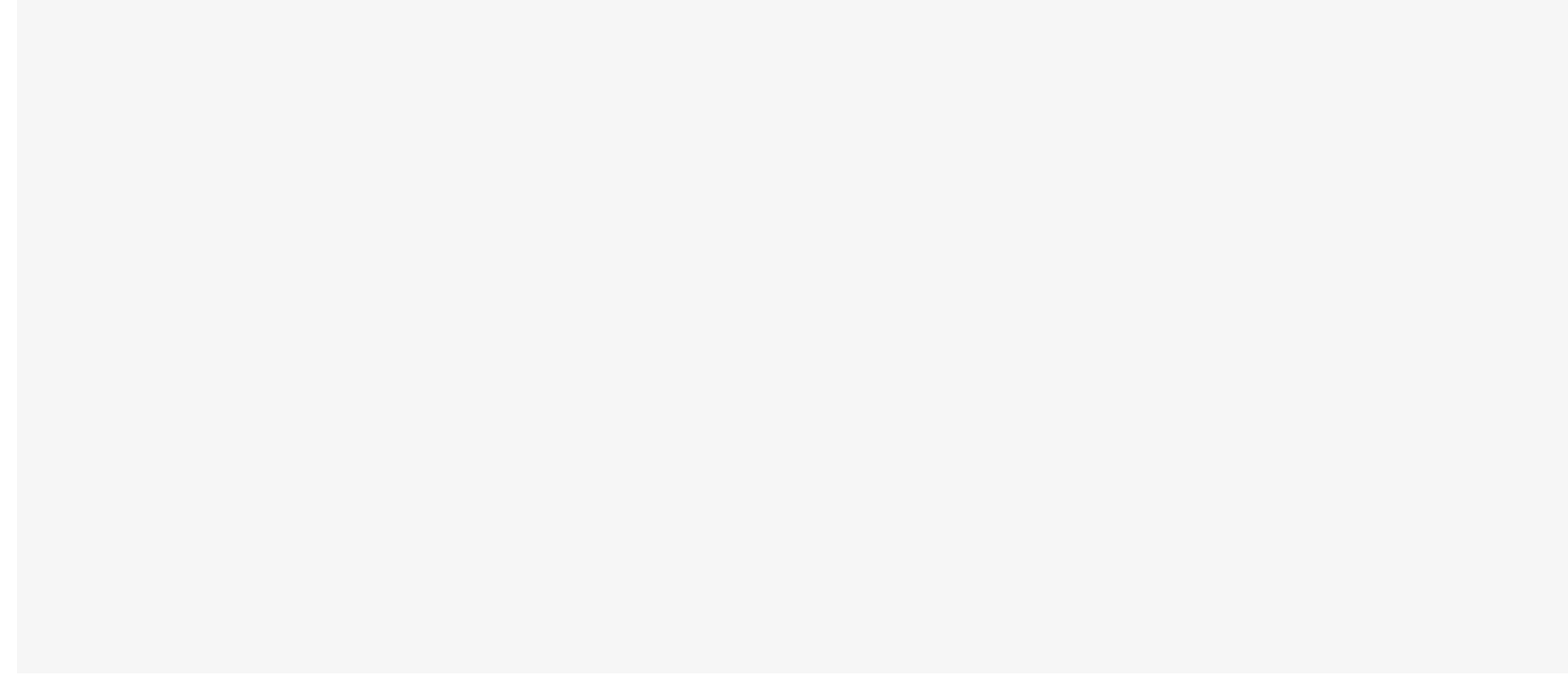
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Britain has drained, developed and destroyed **more than 75% of its marshland** but the recent restoration of some wetlands has helped the species recolonise Wales, Scotland and nature reserves across England, including in Lincolnshire.

Damon Bridge, chair of the **UK Crane Working Group**, said: "The continued success of these amazing birds is showing us that conservation action works. We need to build on this foundation by safeguarding protected sites and creating larger, better-connected wetland areas

across the UK to fully reap the benefits this vital habitat can provide for nature and people."



Andrew Stanbury, an **RSPB conservation scientist**, welcomed recent government announcements to spend £16m on rewetting peatlands and its **Landscape Recovery Fund second round**, which supports net zero goals such as restoring marshland. Wetlands are effective carbon stores, as well as reservoirs of disappearing biodiversity.

"We must now go further and move faster, scaling up efforts to restore protected sites and landscapes by 2030 if wildlife and people are to thrive," said Stanbury.

Cranes are difficult to spot when breeding but in winter Britain's burgeoning population of 250 is often seen flocking and flying in groups to roost within reedbeds at dusk.

John Blackburn, the warden at Hickling, the **Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve** close to where the birds first reestablished themselves, said: "In addition to cranes breeding on a number of our sites in the Norfolk Broads each year, nothing rivals the sight of dozens of these majestic birds coming in to roost at twilight - **a real wildlife spectacle that visitors can enjoy** at our Hickling Broad nature reserve each winter."

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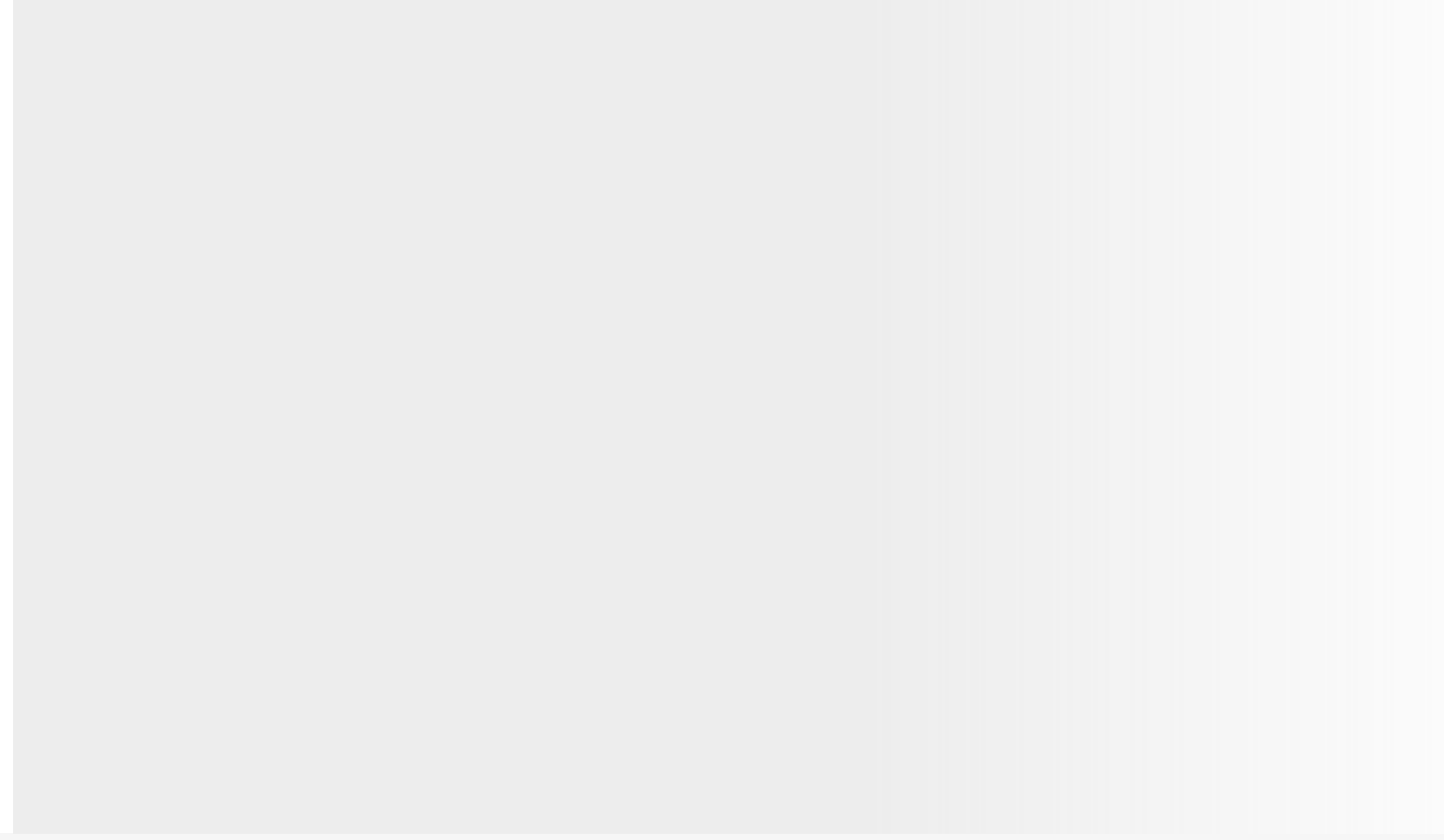
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