



# Sandhill Crane Fact Sheet



## Fast Facts

**Genus/Species:** *Grus canadensis*

**Height:** 3-5 ft.

**Wing Span:** 5-6 ft.

**Weight:** 6.5-14 lbs.

**Number of Eggs:** 1-2

**Mate:** For life

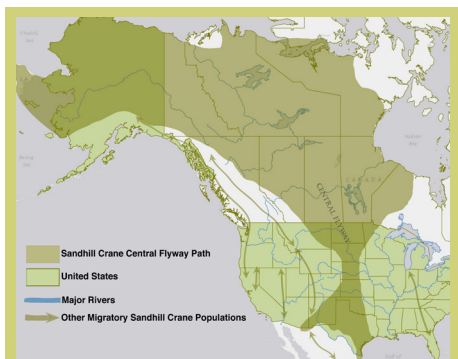
**Longevity:** 20 years

**Migration:** >5,000 miles/migration

**Young Cranes:** "colts"

**Adult Female Cranes:** "mares"

**Adult Male Cranes:** "roans"



More than 500,000 migrating sandhill cranes converge on a narrow stretch of the Platte River each year to feed, rest and put on as much as 15% of their body weight before moving on to breeding grounds in the north—a 5,000 mile journey for some. Map made by: Ross McLean



***National Geographic calls the annual migration of sandhill cranes one of North America's greatest wildlife phenomena.***

Each spring, more than 500,000 sandhill cranes gather in the Platte River Valley during their northward migration. They've been making this migration annually for thousands of years. However, cranes have been a part of the Nebraska landscape for millions of years; fossil beds in several parts of Nebraska contain the remains of prehistoric cranes from ten million year ago.

The Platte is a "staging" area where sandhill cranes stop to rest and replenish energy reserves before continuing on to their nesting grounds in Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. It is the only major staging area on the sandhill cranes' northward migration. Approximately 80% of all the sandhill cranes come to the Platte every spring—and concentrations here are the greatest of anywhere in the world.

## Two Different Subspecies Converge on the Platte

The majority of cranes coming through the central flyway are lesser sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis canadensis*); although some greater sandhill cranes (*G. canadensis tabida*) also converge on the Platte. The subspecies differ in height and weight, but they intermingle while along the Platte and can be difficult to distinguish in the field. The lesser sandhill crane, which has the longest wingspan proportionate to its body size and weight, migrates furthest; crossing the Bering Strait to nest as far as Siberia.

Sandhill cranes migrate in individual family groups, but here along the Platte, the birds are social and gregarious—and numerous families gather in large flocks while feeding and resting. A single meadow may contain as many as 100,000 birds. The cranes begin arriving at the Platte in mid-February and spend 4-6 weeks here each spring.

The number of cranes along the Platte peaks during the last half of March, though some birds remain here until mid-April. Unlike songbirds and waterfowl, sandhill cranes migrate primarily during daylight, but will migrate rarely at night. Highly efficient in their flight, they are very adept at using thermal updrafts to rise thousands of feet in the air to then glide on a slight downward trajectory for miles until they catch another thermal and repeat the process. The average flight speed is approximately 45-50 miles per hour.

## A Mixed Diet is Essential for Reproduction and Survival

While on the Platte, cranes spend their days in the fields and meadows near the river, feeding on a variety of invertebrates and plant tubers in wet meadows and grasslands along with waste corn in harvested fields. The cranes build up their fat reserves, increasing their weight by 15-20% during their time here. They obtain the vast majority of their energy from corn (>95%), but corn is not a complete diet. Sandhill cranes need specific mineral nutrients and proteins for successful reproduction that corn cannot provide. Invertebrates—primarily snails, earthworms, and insects—provide those essential nutrients. While animal prey is a minor portion of the modern crane's total caloric intake (<5%) the select nutrients they provide are essential for successful reproduction. As a result, the cranes spend almost half of their time searching the grasslands, wetlands, and alfalfa fields along the Platte.

## Birds Roost on the River Safe from Predation

Late in the afternoon, sandhill cranes gather in open fields adjacent to the Platte. As dusk approaches, they fly to the river and roost where shallow water covers the sandbars in the middle of channels. The wide, open, braided channels of the Platte provide ideal roost sites for the large concentrations of sandhill cranes.

At the height of the migration, 50,000-100,000 cranes will pack into the most heavily used reaches. Bird concentrations as high as 10,000 birds per half mile of river are not uncommon. Some liken the cacophony of birds to being in a crowded football stadium. The cranes quiet somewhat when they go to roost. At dawn, they awaken and disperse again to nearby feeding areas.

A naturally wary bird, the sandhill crane is also a formidable adversary wielding its long, pointed bill as if it were a sword. Cranes can use this tool, along with their feet, to protect themselves and their young from predators or other threats.

## Habitat Helps Ensure a Stable Population

The Platte River region provides the combination of habitat components in close proximity to each other that the sandhill cranes



A bird's-eye-view of the perfect roosting site. Natural floodwaters once scoured vegetation from the river's sandbars, producing ideal habitat for roosting. Today, much of it must be cleared by mechanical means.



The cranes concentrate on roosting sites in the open, shallow parts of the river at night, where they can see—and hear—danger coming. Photo by B. Mellema.

need: wetlands and grasslands that provide critical nutrients and secure roosting sites and crop fields that cranes have recently learned to utilize. This critical habitat can no longer be sustained by the river itself or natural forces and must be actively managed by the Crane Trust and other conservation groups through restoration and sound management practices including burning, grazing, re-seeding and rest.

The cranes are surveyed annually while they are here, and the mid-continent population has been stable or increasing during the past ten years. Recruitment into the population is balanced by mortality due to predation and other factors. During the fall, sandhill cranes are hunted in all states and provinces along their migration route—except Nebraska, where staging takes place.

## Nebraska's River Dance and Crimson Crown

Sandhill cranes have developed a fascinating and extensive system of body language to communicate arousal, recruit others to dance, establish dominance, protect breeding territory, bond with their mates, and more. The bow, ground-stab, jump, and stab-grab-wave are just a few of the dance steps a crane will use to facilitate bonding and allow rivals to size up one another—and their possible mates.

Another part of their body language is the “crown”—a patch of reddish skin on the crane's forehead. This exposed area contracts when the crane is relaxed and it expands when the bird is alert or excited. Depending on the bird's state of excitement, the crown also varies in color as the blood flow to the area changes, ranging from bright excited crimson red to a dull relaxed reddish gray.

Sub-adult cranes practice dancing for years to perfect their moves, which is necessary for success as an adult. Cranes reach sexual maturity in 3-5 years and mate for life. Mated pairs engage in “unison calling”, wherein the cranes stand close together, calling in a complex, synchronized duet. The female makes two calls for every single call of the male.



Photo by Rick Rasmussen.