



Sandhill Cranes



FACTS ABOUT CRANES AND THE GREAT MIGRATION

Genus/Species:

Antigone canadensis

Height: 3–4 ft

Wingspan: 5–6 ft

Weight: 6–14 lbs

Number of Eggs: 1 or 2

Mate for life

Lifespan: 20 years

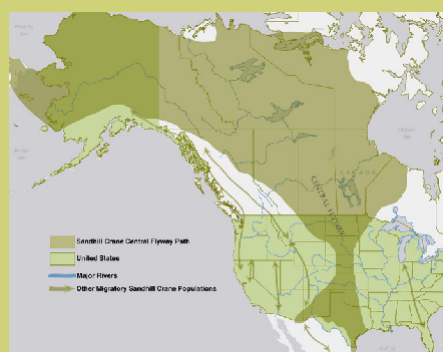
Migration Distance: >5,000 miles

Flight Speed: 40 – 50 mph

Young Cranes: colts

Adult Females: mares

Adult Males: roans



1.25 million migrating Sandhill Cranes converge on a narrow stretch of the Platte River each year to feed, rest and put on as much as 20% of their body weight before moving on to breeding grounds in the north.

Map: Ross McLean



National Geographic calls the annual migration of the Sandhill Cranes one of North America's greatest wildlife phenomena. Each spring, nearly one million Sandhill Cranes gather in the Central and North Platte River Valleys during their northward migration. They have made this migration annually for thousands of years, but 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 years ago.

The Platte is the only major staging area on the Sandhill Cranes' northward migration route. They stop here to rest and replenish energy reserves before continuing to their nesting grounds in Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. Approximately 80% of all Sandhill Cranes come to the Platte every spring to form the largest gathering of cranes in the world!

Two Different Subspecies Converge on the Platte

Approximately 60% of cranes coming through the central flyway are Lesser Sandhill Cranes (*Antigone canadensis canadensis*) and about 40% are Greater Sandhill Cranes (*A. canadensis tabia*). 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 away as Siberia.

Sandhill Cranes migrate in individual family groups, and numerous families gather in large flocks while feeding and resting but here along the Platte. Groups spend about four weeks here each spring, and a single meadow may contain as many as 100,000 cranes.

Sandhill cranes usually begin to arrive on the Big Bend stretch of the Platte River in mid-February. Numbers of cranes peaks in mid-March, and some birds remain here into April. Generally, the Greater Sandhill Cranes arrive and depart slightly earlier than the Lesser Sandhill Cranes (*Krapu et al. 2014*). Unlike songbirds and waterfowl, sandhill cranes migrate primarily during daylight. Highly efficient in their flight, they are adept at using thermal updrafts to rise thousands of feet in the air, then glide on a slight downward trajectory for miles until catching another thermal.

A Mixed Diet is Essential for Reproduction and Survival

During their stay on the Platte, the cranes will increase their body weight by 15 – 20% to prepare for the long journey north. While a large portion of their diet is waste grains, their primary nutritional needs are met throughout the adjacent wet meadows and prairie. A vital part of their diet is plant tubers, small mammals, snails, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates. These foods provide calcium and protein for egg production. The cranes spend almost half of their time searching the grasslands, wetlands, and fields along the Platte.

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Birds Roost on the River Safe from Predators

The Platte River here is the ideal width and depth, with islands bare of trees and brush. These are the conditions that sandhill cranes need to safely roost at night.

At the height of the migration, up to 100,000 cranes will crowd into the most heavily used stretches of river. Concentrations as high as 10,000 birds per half mile of river are common. Family groups call to each other, and the combined voices of thousands of birds is breathtaking. The cranes quiet somewhat as they settle to roost at night. At dawn, they awaken and disperse again to nearby feeding areas.

Naturally wary, the Sandhill Crane can be formidable when necessary. Cranes use their beaks and feet to protect themselves and their young from predators or other threats.



The cranes converge 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*

Healthy Habitat Helps Ensure a Stable Population



A bird's-eye-view of the perfect roosting site. 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 land along the river provides cornfields and wet meadows for the birds to feed in during the daytime, with habitat bordered on the largest piece of contiguous lowland tall grass prairie in the state of Nebraska.

This was a system once maintained by a combination of natural occurrences. Without human management, the channels would be choked with vegetation and cut into the land, deepening the shallow river channels that the cranes need. The Crane Trust and other conservation groups maintains this critical habitat through restoration and management practices on the river and adjacent land.

During migration, the Crane Trust surveys and counts the cranes on an 83-mile stretch of river. The mid-continent crane population has been stable or increasing in recent years. Population growth 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.

The 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 potential mates.

Emotions are also conveyed by the "crown," a patch of reddish skin on the crane's forehead. This exposed area contracts when the crane is relaxed and 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. Cranes reach sexual maturity in 3-5 years and mate for life. Mated pairs engage in "unison calling." 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