

Montana Outdoors PROFILE

Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*)

By Tom Dickson

Referred in Asia for their elegance and beauty, cranes have a small but growing following in North America.

Dignified and stately in flight, the sandhill crane also moves on land with grace and agility. Most spectacular is the bird's mating dance, in which two cranes bow, leap, hop, skip, and pirouette like avian ballet dancers. A nervous bird with spotting-scope eyesight, the crane prefers open areas where it can keep watch for coyotes, its primary predator.

The sandhill is in the same family as the whooping crane, today one of the world's rarest birds.

Appearance: Sandhill cranes are big wading birds with long legs, a long neck, and a rapier-shaped bill. They stand four feet tall and can stretch their wings out six feet wide from tip to tip. These slender birds are mostly gray except for the forehead, which is bright red, and their black legs and bill. They weigh seven to eight pounds.

Sound: There's no mistaking the call of the sandhill crane. There's also no way to accurately describe it. Sandhills makes a loud, rolling, musical rattle that can be heard from more than a mile away. One nature writer compares it to the sound of "fingernails drawn along the teeth of several combs," undulating up and down and amplified by the birds' exceptionally long windpipe.

Food: Omnivores, cranes will eat anything from berries and grains to snakes and amphibians. Even mice, voles, and other small mammals are sometimes found in the stomachs of sandhill cranes.



JOHN R. FORD

Reproduction: The crane nest is usually a simple affair consisting of a shallow depression in soil lined with dry grass and feathers. The female lays two spotted, gray-brown eggs. Both parents incubate the eggs by trading places throughout the day. The eggs hatch in 30 days. Because the sandhill crane produces relatively few young and doesn't begin breeding until age eight, it takes a long time for populations to recover from a drop in numbers.

Habitat: Generally, sandhill cranes seek out wet areas where they can find food and avoid predators. In Montana, sandhills nest in wet meadows and other wetlands and near streams and beaver ponds.

Status and management in Montana: Sandhills are counted each September in western Montana before the birds migrate south. This and similar surveys in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming indicate that the Rocky Mountain population contains roughly 20,000 cranes. The breeding range of the Rocky Mountain population had dropped to 150 to 200 breeding pairs in the 1940s due to unregulated hunting.

Now enough sandhill cranes nest in and migrate through Montana to allow a regulated hunting season on the

birds each fall. Roughly 500 hunters receive permits each year. The cranes are hunted by placing decoys in feeding fields, similar to a technique used to hunt geese.

Where to see them: Sandhill cranes are a common sight in eastern Montana during the fall migration. Skeins of migrating birds pass overhead throughout the region in October, enjoyed by photographers, hunters, and wildlife watchers.

In western Montana, one of the top spots for viewing cranes up close is the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Beaverhead County, 50 miles west of Yellowstone National Park. In April, the birds arrive from their wintering grounds in southern New Mexico, and they stay until heading south in September. Look for cranes along creeks, wetlands, and open grassy areas. Get more information by calling (406) 276-3536 or on-line at www.gorp.com/gorp/resources/us_nwr/mt_redro.htm (Note: this is a commercial web site. The wildlife refuge's official site was inaccessible when this issue went to press). ■

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