



No Mere Bird!

THE NORTH AMERICA SANDHILL CRANE PROGRAM

“The quality of cranes lies...as yet beyond the reach of words. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men.”

– Aldo Leopold, *Marshland Elegy*

The recovery of the Sandhill Crane is one of the great conservation success stories of our time. When Aldo Leopold penned *A Marshland Elegy* in 1937, only two dozen pairs of Sandhill Cranes lived in Wisconsin. Leopold feared the imminent demise of the species, and foresaw the day when “the last crane will trumpet his farewell and spiral skyward from the great marsh.” But the cranes bounced back! Today there are as many as 90,000 Sandhill Cranes in the upper Midwest, and their range is

expanding to the east. Sandhill Crane populations in the west have similarly increased following historic lows in the 1940s. And each spring in Nebraska, more than 600,000 Sandhill Cranes congregate on the Platte River in one of the earth’s greatest wildlife spectacles.



Photo by Tom Lynn

Across much of North America, Sandhill Cranes are back in our lives and familiar to many—bugling over cities on migration, nesting in suburban parks and farmlands, and roosting on river sandbars.

How did Sandhill Cranes return in such numbers? Regulatory protection, especially the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, played a critical role in reducing hunting and other pressures on wild birds. Early research efforts and the establishment of refuges were essential to the survival of the species. Federal and private conservation programs, such as the Wetland Reserve Program, Conservation Reserve Program, and the nationwide land trust movement encouraged and accelerated the conservation and restoration of wetlands and adjacent prairies—providing essential habitat for Sandhill Cranes. This species also demonstrates a remarkable ability to adapt to human development, thriving on farmlands where they feed on waste grains, insects, and other plants and animals, and in suburban parks and green spaces, where they rest and feed alongside houses, bike paths, and schools.

Sadly, not all Sandhill Crane populations are flourishing, and emerging threats loom. The species includes three rare non-migratory subspecies. The Endangered Cuban Sandhill Crane numbers fewer than 600 wild birds. The isolated Mississippi Sandhill Crane is managed intensively, but only about 25 breeding pairs persist. The Florida Sandhill Crane has been in slow decline for decades. On the west coast, in Washington and California, the Sandhill Crane is listed as a threatened species.

Changing landscapes and burgeoning populations create a multitude of hazards and threats for cranes. Sandhill Crane hunting is authorized in sixteen states and two Canadian provinces, yet the impact of hunting on specific populations and overall breeding success is poorly known. Urban expansion and agricultural conversion have reduced wetland breeding habitat and the availability of crane-friendly grain crops in many crane staging and wintering areas. High-voltage transmission lines and large wind farms are expanding rapidly across the country, increasing the likelihood of collisions for cranes and other birds. Challenges to the Federal Clean Water Act and state laws threaten to undermine vital protections for the wetlands that cranes depend on.

The International Crane Foundation is committed to ensuring that Sandhill Cranes continue to recover and serve as a source of inspiration all across North America.

OUR IMPACT

The International Crane Foundation's North America Sandhill Crane Program is built on a rich history of Sandhill Crane research, monitoring, and problem-solving. **We focus on the factors that were key to Sandhill Crane recovery over the past century: restoring and protecting wetlands, reducing pressures on migration and wintering areas, increasing public awareness about cranes and the wetlands they depend on, and ensuring peaceful coexistence between cranes and farmers.** We

study, monitor, and mitigate emerging threats to Sandhill Cranes, such as power line collisions, shifts to less wildlife-friendly agricultural crops, and water scarcity in the western U.S. We take action on the farmlands of Wisconsin and the Midwest; on the west coast and along the Pacific Flyway; and in other valuable landscapes across North America. In all these places we work with partners on vital lands and waters, including National Wildlife Refuges and private holdings, to safeguard Sandhill Cranes and perpetuate their recovery.



Photo by Cynthia Routledge

Safeguarding the Pacific Flyway for Sandhill Cranes

Beautiful, graceful, and enchanting, Sandhill Cranes inspire observers across their Pacific Flyway. This population breeds in the intermountain regions of the western U.S., in the interior of British Columbia, and along the coasts of Canada and Alaska, migrating annually to wintering grounds in California's Central Valley. This region from the

Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean is home to some 70 million people and 70 thousand cranes—and the cranes are losing ground. Many key breeding and migration sites, and especially wintering areas, are threatened, and **Sandhill Cranes are a state threatened species in California and a state endangered species in Washington.**

In a region dominated by mountainous landscapes and deserts, fertile lowlands with reliable water supplies are increasingly stressed by a growing human population. Wetlands and associated upland foraging sites are being lost to urban development at an alarming rate. Shifts in agricultural land use—from cereal crops, which provide food for winter flocks of cranes, to vineyards and orchards—reduce available forage for migrating cranes and many other wildlife species. Climate change and the associated increase in droughts have triggered water scarcity and aggravated water use conflicts.

To address these threats, the International Crane Foundation has launched a new program in the western United States to promote landscape conservation through the power and appeal of Sandhill Cranes. We are:

- Conducting research on Sandhill Crane ecology to improve our understanding of the species' status and distribution, and to develop best management practices for its conservation.
- Developing a crane conservation strategy for public and private lands in California's Central Valley, in partnership with agency representatives and conservation biologists.
- Coordinating the Pacific Flyway Plan for the Pacific Coast Population of Sandhill Cranes, which will define goals and objectives for crane conservation and identify important research needs for the entire flyway.
- Engaging the public in outreach activities to garner support for wildlife conservation, champion Sandhill Cranes as icons of biodiversity in agricultural landscapes, and educate citizens and stakeholders through venues such as bird festivals and community forums.

Photo by Ted Thousand



Ensuring Sandhill Crane recovery in the Midwest

Even where crane populations are strong and growing, there are still conservation challenges. As Sandhill Cranes increase in density and spread across the Midwest, their impact on certain types of cropland, at certain times, has intensified. Crane conservation is most successful when farmers view cranes, where they occur on agricultural lands, as economically and environmentally beneficial, rather than detrimental. **To reduce crop depredation by cranes, we have studied how cranes damage seedling corn, tested a safe substance that is distasteful to cranes,**

and teamed with Arkion Corporation to provide a new deterrent (now called Avipel®). Each year, more acres of cropland are treated. We also assist and encourage landowners to value, manage, and protect wetlands and

grasslands where cranes nest. These healthy landscapes provide fish and wildlife habitat and improve groundwater infiltration and water quality. Going forward, our Midwestern focus is on:

- Sharing information and expertise to help ameliorate human-crane conflicts caused by crop depredation;
- Minimizing crane mortality from collisions with power lines and energy infrastructure;
- Ensuring strong policies and incentives for wetland protection.

Providing national expertise and support for Sandhill Crane conservation

Across North America, Sandhill Cranes depend on a combination of private and public lands to meet their ecological needs. A network of Federal and State protected areas and tribal lands support substantial numbers of breeding, staging, and wintering Sandhill Cranes. These include: Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in Indiana, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Oregon, Bosque del Apache NWR in New Mexico, Modoc NWR and Ash Creek Wildlife Area in California, Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR in Mississippi, Monte Vista NWR in Colorado, Gray's Lake NWR in Idaho, and Wheeler NWR in Alabama. These and many other public lands support Sandhill Crane recovery, and often feature vibrant Friends groups who host crane festivals, assist with public outreach, manage lands for wildlife habitat, and raise funds for crane conservation. Sandhill Cranes also are widely dispersed on private lands, including farms, ranches, and recreational lands. In the western U.S., more than 60% of Sandhill Crane pairs breed on private lands. They depend on the positive stewardship of wetlands and adjacent lands for successful breeding and migration. Crossing the boundaries between public and private lands, Sandhill Cranes migrate through long corridors where they must navigate power lines, hunting, and other threats. **The International Crane Foundation provides advice, expertise, and science-based support to all who work to help Sandhill Cranes thrive across the continent by:**

- Providing expertise and support to Flyway Councils, Joint Ventures, National Wildlife Refuges (and their Friends groups), state agencies, and other conservation organizations regarding Sandhill Crane habitat development, management, and restoration.
- Supporting the efforts of the Audubon Rowe Sanctuary and partners in Nebraska who are securing and restoring riverine habitat and sufficient water along the Platte River corridor to sustain more than half a million Sandhill Cranes on migration each spring.



Photo by Tom Lynn

- Advising and supporting private landowners who wish to retain Sandhill Cranes on their lands or seek assistance reducing crop depredation by crane flocks following spring planting.
- Advocating for strong wetland protection at local and national levels and promoting low-impact siting and development of power line and energy infrastructure. This includes offering expert-testimony on power line siting, wetland development, hunting regulations, and other issues affecting Sandhill Cranes.
- Maintaining databases and serving as clearinghouse for population numbers and trends for the major sub-species and populations of Sandhill Cranes.

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT

The International Crane Foundation works worldwide to conserve cranes and the ecosystems, watersheds, and flyways on which they depend. Most of the world's cranes, including our treasured Whooping Cranes here in the U.S., are rare, endangered, or in decline. But the remarkable recovery of Sandhill Cranes is a story of true conservation success. Sandhill Cranes are proof that when private and public landowners commit to sharing their lands with cranes, when they truly benefit from that commitment, and when broad public support ensures policies that promote the protection and wise management of wetlands, cranes and many other species of wildlife can thrive among us. Your support will help ensure that Sandhill Cranes remain an important part of our lives and our landscapes close to home and across North America.



Photo by Joel Sartore

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