

## : Bird Brief :

### **Sandhill Crane** (*Antigone canadensis*)



**ORDER:** Gruiformes (12 Families)

**FAMILY:** Gruidae (15 Species)

Photos & text by

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Several years ago, my husband and I returned to his home town in Nebraska for his father's funeral. His father, Ken, was a remarkable man! He was the most gentle, wise, kind, and patient person I knew. He loved and cared for his wife, children, and all animals with unwavering loyalty, compassion, and respect. He would rise extremely early to tend to his farm animals and make sure everyone was comfortable and repeat these efforts several times each day. He even had his best friend King, who was a scrawny, orange tabby cat, ride along in his truck or ATV during chores or for drives to town. At any rate, his passing was very difficult. But, I will never forget the most impactful moment I experienced when leaving the church on that cold, clear, autumn day. I kept hearing trilling honking but was unable to see where the sound was coming from. Then, once family and friends were all outside, the sound became louder and we all looked up to see many Sandhill Cranes circling directly above. It was as if Ken was giving us all a big hug by way of the beautiful cranes singing and circling around us. This spiritual moment still makes me tear up. Sandhill Cranes have always been a special bird in my life and when I see them, I think of strength, loyalty, reliability, and grace.



**Wilcox, AZ**

March 2, 2019

Sandhill Cranes have an extraordinary migration pattern. During the winter months, cranes can be found in large flocks around shallow, fresh-water rivers in Texas and Mexico. Around mid-February, family flocks of cranes form into larger flocks and fly north to breeding grounds. During the journey, cranes will settle at the same stop-over habitats or staging posts along the way. The Platte River Valley in Nebraska is the most common inhabited location and can bring up to 75% of the world's population. The cranes will spend several weeks in the valley where they will gain 10% more body weight for the continued migration. Every morning, at the very first sight of light, the cranes will begin vocalizing and the flock will soon take flight. Individuals will disperse to open water and agricultural fields where they forage for grains left from the previous growing season, as well as plants, invertebrates, frogs, small mammals, birds and eggs. The cranes will then reconvene back in the valley at night and roost with the rest of the flock. Migration then continues further north with shorter stays at staging posts until they reach breeding grounds in the upper United States, Canada, and Siberia. Sandhill Cranes migrate at around 2,500 feet, but have been recorded flying as high as 12,000 feet. They fly in "V" formation for energy conservation and can travel longer distances on warmer days because of improved updrafts. This can allow the cranes to travel up to 500



miles in about 10 hours. The adults train the young how to travel and relocate all staging posts and wintering habitats for the following migrations. Vocalization is steady during flight amongst the family.

Once the breeding site has been selected, the breeding ritual begins. Sandhill Cranes mate for life. However, both mated and unmated pairs still perform the mating “dance” which reminds me of the beautiful dance styles of the Native Americans. The pair will hop, bow, throw grass in the air, spread wings, and sing loud duet rattling calls. Sandhill Cranes have a long neck, and thus a long windpipe or trachea, which allows for loud sound to be generated during vocalization. I have often wondered how far away a Sandhill Crane can be heard. After a brief search through my references, I found that the call from a crane can be heard 2.5 miles away - *WOW!* Could you hear a car horn sound from 2.5 miles away? At any rate, post-pair bond dancing continues regularly and secures the established bond. The pair will make an elevated nest of sticks which is surrounded by water. The parents will incubate an average of 2 eggs for 30 days while duet singing at dusk and dawn. The precocial babies will leave the nest around day 4, but will follow and stay with the parents until the next annual breeding cycle. The parents are very protective of their young and will become aggressive to any predator like fox and raccoons. Sandhill Cranes are sexually mature by 2 years of age.

Sandhill Cranes are one of the first to arrive in Wisconsin to begin breeding. I usually see them in agriculture fields near water. In fact, they tend to turn a rufous color while they are here because they try to camouflage into the habitat by preening with mud that is iron-rich in our environment. They are marvelous to see fly, tend to their young, listen to, and enjoy during the spring and summer months. Many bird watchers will take trips south to see them in their staging posts during migration in the spring and fall. This is definitely worth the journey to experience! And since they frequent the same habitats, you can always expect to see them at the same time in the same place each season.

#### References:

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