

National Elk Refuge News – October 9, 2009

Refuge Conducts Flyway Survey on Sandhill Cranes



National Elk Refuge volunteers Kathy Eichinger and Betty Mulcahy observe sandhill cranes from their vantage point on Miller Butte. Photo courtesy of Chuck Mulcahy.

The National Elk Refuge participated in a Rocky Mountain Population sandhill crane survey last month, helping to capture peak staging activity in the region. The survey was part of a larger count done concurrently in other parts of Wyoming as well as Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado.

The Pacific and Central Flyway Councils identified a range of dates during mid-September for participating agencies to

gather the information for this year's count. The survey on the National Elk Refuge was completed by Refuge Biologist Eric Cole, along with one biological technician and five refuge volunteers. A total of 220 cranes were observed in the Headquarters, Nowlin, Ben Goe, Poverty Flats, Peterson, McBride and Pedersen management units. This year's count was the highest number observed on the National Elk Refuge in recent years.

Most Rocky Mountain Population sandhill cranes stage in specific locations during late August to early October. The September pre-migration survey is the best opportunity to survey the population. Previously, cranes were surveyed in the spring, but because of the presence of other subspecies, the spring survey was replaced with a September pre-migration survey beginning in the mid-1990s. The carefully coordinated surveys on the fall pre-migration staging

areas provide a minimum estimate of the population at that point in the biological year.

Habitats along migration routes tend to be large open riparian wetlands near agricultural areas. Wet meadows and native lowland grassland habitats are important as they can be an important source of macroinvertebrates for cranes.

An increase in home development and subdivisions has been identified by the Pacific and Central Flyways Council as negatively impacting habitats and staging areas in portions of eastern Idaho and western Wyoming. Consequently, the number of sandhill cranes counted on the National Elk Refuge provides critical data for population management decisions.

Sandhill cranes are among the oldest existing species of birds. The striking birds can be identified by their grey bodies, red foreheads, white cheeks, and long dark pointed bills. They can also be identified by their unique trumpeting call.



A pair of sandhill cranes stage on the National Elk Refuge this fall. Photo courtesy of Mark Gocke, Wyoming Game and Fish Department.