

Arriving at a Destination Near You: Sandhill Cranes of the Okefenokee NWR

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Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

November 2004

November is known for football, fall foliage, food, and fair weather. It is also the beginning of an annual event that has occurred at the swamp for thousands of years, the migration of greater Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis canadensis*). Now arriving at the refuge to stay for a few short months, make sure you come see these magnificent winged travelers, which are admired the world over for their grace and beauty.

Cranes are revered by many ethnic groups because of their interesting behaviors and stately appearance. Dances by Native Americans, the aborigines of Australia, the Ainu of Japan, and some African tribes mimic the courtship rituals of cranes. Images of cranes also appear in paintings and on clothing throughout the world. The cranes found in the Okefenokee, known as Sandhill Cranes, are also venerated by many wildlife watchers, who visit the refuge each winter just to see them. The cranes are recognizable by their large size (up to 48 inches in height), long neck, long legs, and the tufts on their rumps. Adults are primarily gray with a distinctive red forehead; juveniles are brown with a darker brown crown. The refuge is a stopping point for hundreds of greater Sandhill Cranes migrating from the northern United States and Canada. This migratory population of cranes usually starts to arrive in November and the population reaches a peak at the end of December. Estimates of the population of cranes during the winter months are between 600 and 1000 individuals. Sandhill Cranes on average fly 166 miles per day, with some

individuals flying up to 460 miles per day. They can reach flight speeds between 14 and 52 miles per hour, depending on wind speed and direction. Prior to the start of migratory travel from their breeding areas in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and southern Canada, cranes eat voraciously to build up their fat reserves and join other individuals to form a flock. Then they begin their southward migration, rising into the sky, flying in wide circles to be lifted higher by thermal air currents. The cranes reach heights up to one mile where they stop flapping, extend their wings, flock together in a “V” formation, and then glide southward propelled by gravity and wind. While flying and resting, cranes will call out frequently. If you listen carefully, you might hear their distinctive cry, a shrill rolling *garooo-a-a-a*. In fact, the word Crane comes from the Anglo-Saxon *cran*- “to cry out”.

Once the migrants arrive at Okefenokee, the groups spread out over the open wet prairie habitat. After their long journey, cranes spend a lot of time foraging on a wide variety of plants and animals including roots, sprouts, stems, seeds, insects, fish, frogs, snakes, rodents, and even small birds. They need to consume lots of calories to regain their fat stores from the long migration.

The greater Sandhill Cranes usually depart from the Okefenokee by March and start their migration northward. A good place to see them is from a boat in the Chesser Prairie or from the Swampwalk boardwalk tower. So take advantage of the cooler weather and clear sunny days to visit the refuge in the next few months to see and listen to these wondrous birds, great winged travelers of the sky.