

Sandhill Cranes

What's the difference?



You may have seen sandhill cranes in different parts of the United States. Even here in Mississippi, residents will see the greater sandhill cranes that migrate in the winter. The Mississippi sandhill cranes are a separate subspecies of sandhill crane and they do not migrate.

The different sub-species of Sandhill Crane vary greatly in size and weight. Lesser Sandhills are the smallest, standing 3 - 3.5 feet tall. The Mississippi Sandhills stand about 4 - 4.5 feet tall.

At the other end of the extreme, Greater Sandhills are the largest sub-species and average 4.5 - 5 feet tall. When the greater sandhills are in Mississippi, they are noticeably taller than the Mississippi sandhills. The Mississippi sandhills are darker grey with a much brighter red head and white cheek patch.

The migratory greater sandhills will circle high in the sky, using thermals similar to how they migrate while the resident Mississippi sandhills will generally fly just over the treetops. They will often feed in the same fields during the day, which is the best time to see the difference between the two subspecies.

The two subspecies do not interbreed. The migratory birds are here during the winter and go back north for nesting season.



What is There to Do?

Because there are so few cranes and the refuge is charged with protecting them from excessive disturbance, you cannot be assured of seeing a crane on your visit. However, you can learn about them and their unique habitat at the visitor center.

You are invited to hike, photograph, and birdwatch on refuge nature trails: the 3/4 mile C.L. Dees Nature Trail adjacent to the visitor center and the Fontainebleau Trail about eight miles southwest of the Center, adjacent to the Ocean Springs Middle School.

Both travel past savanna, pineywoods, and bayou habitat. Plant life is abundant by the trails, particularly in spring when the wildflowers are in bloom. A variety of orchids, pipeworts and dewberries add color to the savanna.

Look for unique carnivorous plants. Birdlife is most diverse during the fall and spring migration. Notable species include eastern bluebirds, Bachman's sparrows, and several wintering sparrows, particularly the Henslow's.

The visitor center is open Tuesday - Saturday, from 9 am to 3 pm.

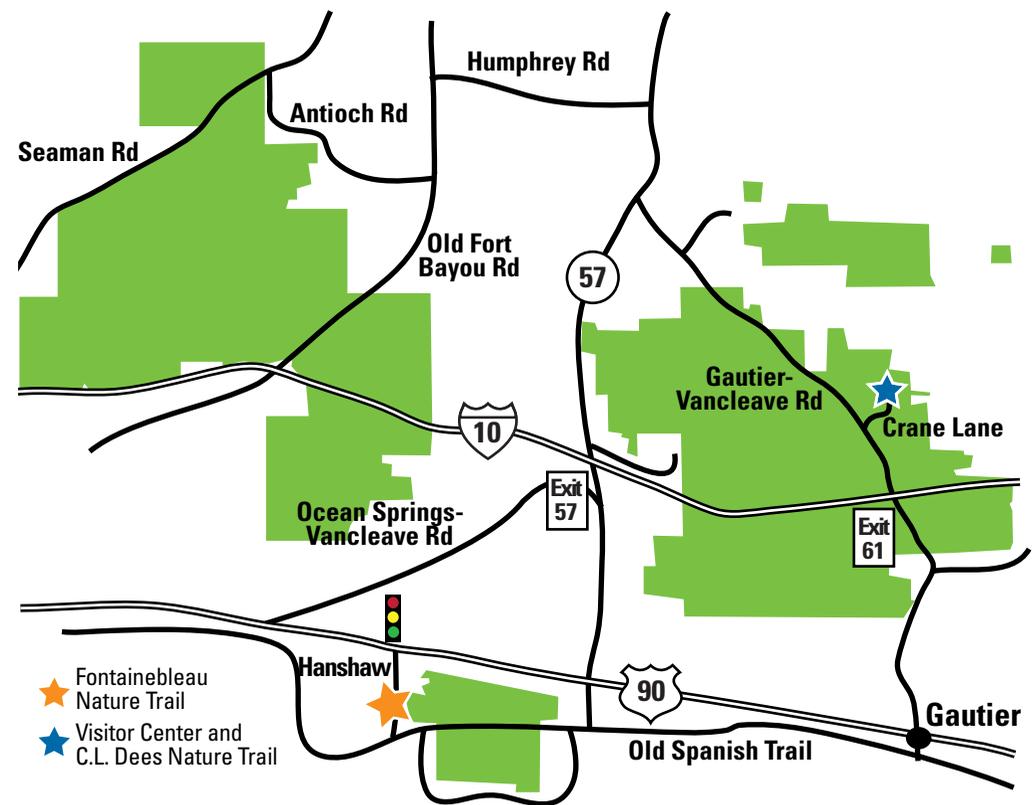
Tours and programs are offered throughout the year. Contact the office or check on-line for a schedule of events.



Photos from left to right: cranes walking, ©Bill Campbell; crane nest, USFWS; dwarf sundew, Larry Dees; biologist conducting a nest check, USFWS; cranes flying in the savanna, USFWS

For more information:

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Mississippi Sandhill Crane

National Wildlife Refuge

Established in 1975, the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Over 550 national wildlife refuges are administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The refuge consists of three land units totaling 19,300 plus acres. These units all lie within the limited nesting range of the endangered Mississippi sandhill crane. The refuge objectives are:

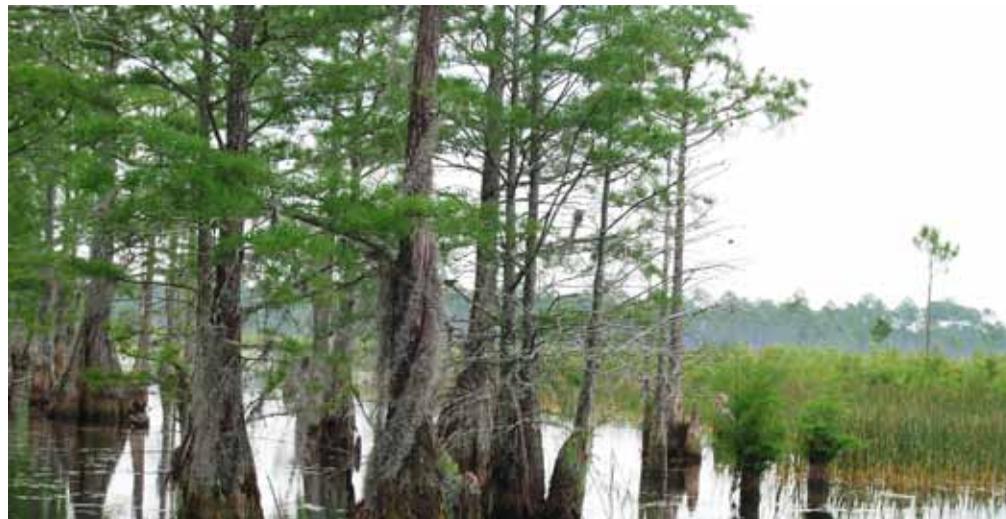
- to provide protection and management for the cranes, one of the rarest bird populations on earth,
- to restore, protect and preserve unique savanna plant communities required by the cranes and among the most species-rich and endangered in North America, and
- to provide environmental education, interpretation and wildlife oriented recreation to refuge visitors.

Why a Refuge Here?

Historically, the Mississippi sandhill crane was found in semi-open, wet savanna habitat that was prevalent in the south. Savannas are meadows established on acidic water-logged soil. The crane survived in the isolation afforded by the unproductive land.

By the mid-1950's, however, timber companies had purchased the savanna tracts and converted them into pine tree plantations. In addition, fire suppression, factories, highways and other commercial developments threatened the crane's existence. By the 1960's, only a remnant population of cranes – 30-35 birds - could be found.

The Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge represents a milestone in the history of wildlife conservation in the United States. The Mississippi sandhill crane was among the first species listed as "endangered" when the Endangered Species Act was enacted in 1973. The refuge, in turn, became the first refuge to be authorized by the new law. As a result,



Photos, top to bottom, left to right: cypress ponds are important for crane roosting and nesting, USFWS; young crane, USFWS; Visitor Center exhibit; fire is important to maintain the wet pine savanna, USFWS; pitcher plants in the savanna, Pope Johnson; students participate in the Fire Academy, USFWS; pink orchid, Larry Dees.

restoration of this globally-rare habitat to protect and restore an endangered species began in 1975 with the creation of the refuge.

Habitat Management

Restoring the habitat to its previous open savanna state is a long-term program. Dense pine woods are unacceptable nesting and feeding habitat for cranes. Prescribed burning and mechanical clearing effectively maintains the open grasslands. Burning is a particularly efficient method of removing dense, shrubby vegetation without damaging the wet pine savanna soil.

When the land was used for timber production, the owners attempted to drain the savannas which promoted the growth of pine and brush cover. Today, restored savannas throughout the

refuge encourage the growth of unique vegetation that once covered much of the southern Jackson County. Plants such as sundews, club mosses, pitcher plants, pipeworts and orchids have become more abundant.

Crane Management

At the time of refuge establishment, the 30-35 birds included only about five breeding pairs. The sandhill crane is a long-lived bird (from 20 to 30 years) but rarely lays more than two eggs per year. Cranes mate for life but a pair may not nest or successfully fledge young every year. In other words, crane parents do not produce many chicks, thereby making population increases a slow process.

To enhance natural production, a captive breeding and release program was begun.

Beginning in 1965, eggs from wild cranes were sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to form a captive breeding flock. Since 1981, offspring from this flock have been released annually on the refuge as part of a restocking effort.

In the mid-1990s, the captive flock was moved to the Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species outside New Orleans, LA and to the White Oak Conservation Center, near Jacksonville, Florida.

The captive reared cranes are brought to the refuge in groups and released into the wild. Biologists monitor the cranes through radio telemetry and using color bands on the cranes' legs. This crane supplementation, the longest and largest in the world to date, has resulted in a

population increase to over 100 individuals and nearly 25 breeding pairs.

Cranes continue to reproduce in the wild. Nesting season begins in March. Cranes will incubate for about 30 days and then hopefully begin to raise their chick.

The best time of year to view the cranes is from October to March, but there are possibilities throughout the year.