

MIGRATORY STOPOVER FOR SANDHILL CRANES

About 23,000 - 27,000 Sandhill Cranes migrate through the San Luis Valley (SLV) in the spring and fall. The length of their stay in the SLV depends on habitat conditions along the migratory route. The Rocky Mountain population of Greater Sandhill Cranes spend more time in the SLV than at their wintering and breeding grounds. In spring, cranes typically arrive mid-February and leave by early April. Peak migration usually occurs in early March. In fall, cranes typically arrive in mid-September and leave by mid-November. Peak migration occurs in early October.

BEST CRANE VIEWING SITES

Food availability is a large factor in the distribution of cranes in the SLV. During migration cranes primarily feed on small grains such as barley and wheat, but they will also supplement their diet with roots, seeds, invertebrates, and small vertebrates found in wetlands. After early fall when the barley has been harvested on privately-owned fields, cranes and waterfowl spread throughout the Valley taking advantage of this food source. After months of foraging on private fields little food is left for the subsequent spring. Grain fields on the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge are mowed in the spring to provide food for birds when it is more limited on private lands.

The Alamosa Refuge receives less crane use than the Monte Vista Refuge because of the lack of farming nearby. Still, the Bluff Overlook offers beautiful views of wetlands and the surrounding mountains. In the spring, look for bald eagles and many ducks. In March, Alamosa Refuge's wetlands along the main wildlife drive is dry because of the timing of the irrigation season. But look for porcupines, raptors and coyotes.

BEST TIME TO VIEW

Cranes are fairly habitual and predictable. Visitors aware of their daily patterns can find good places to observe these birds throughout the day.

Feeding

Cranes feed in agricultural fields from sunrise to mid-morning and again in the late afternoon to sunset. In spring, most cranes forage on the Monte Vista NWR. The refuge farm fields can be viewed from:

- Wildlife viewing pull-outs south of the Monte Vista NWR Office and county road 8S
- County roads 2E and 7S

Loafing

During mid-day (10 am to 4 pm) cranes can be found in wet meadows and other uplands on and near the Monte Vista NWR, where they loaf and occasionally feed on roots, tubers, invertebrates, and other food. Cranes will loaf in a variety of habitat types and do not always use areas with water.

Good places to watch loafing Cranes on the Refuge are:

- At the pull-offs on the west side of Hwy. 15
- On county roads 2E, 7S, and 3E

Roosting

In the evenings and through the night, cranes use shallow open water to roost. Most roost sites are closed to the public. However, you can still see cranes fly in and out of roosts at sunrise and sunset. Good places to view these flights on the Monte Vista NWR are:

- The Refuge auto-tour route. The tour route is open from one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset. Enjoy watching the cranes quietly so you don't disturb them.
- The wildlife viewing areas on 8S and on Hwy. 15
- The area near the intersection of county roads 7S and 2E

SUB-SPECIES

Two sub-species of Sandhill Cranes visit the SLV: Greater, and Lesser. The sub-species look very similar and are difficult to differentiate. The Greater is larger than the Lesser and Canadian.

The Rocky Mountain population of Greater Sandhill Cranes is estimated to be 18,000 to 23,000 birds. Ninety-five percent of these use the SLV in the spring and fall to refuel before moving on to the breeding or wintering grounds.

The majority of the Rocky Mountain population breeds in the greater Yellowstone area encompassing Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and northern Colorado. Most winter in the Rio Grande Valley at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge near Socorro, New Mexico or farther south. Although Lesser Sandhill Cranes frequent the Valley, only about 3,000 - 5,000 of each subspecies normally migrate through.

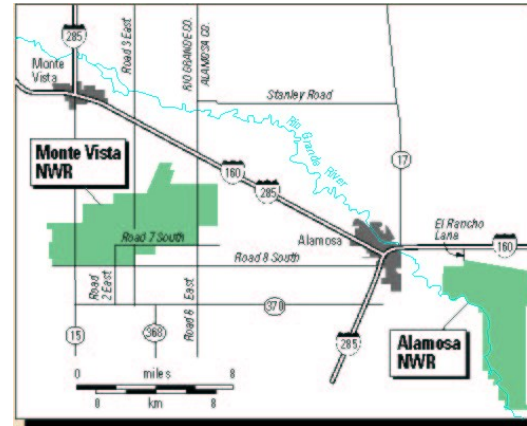
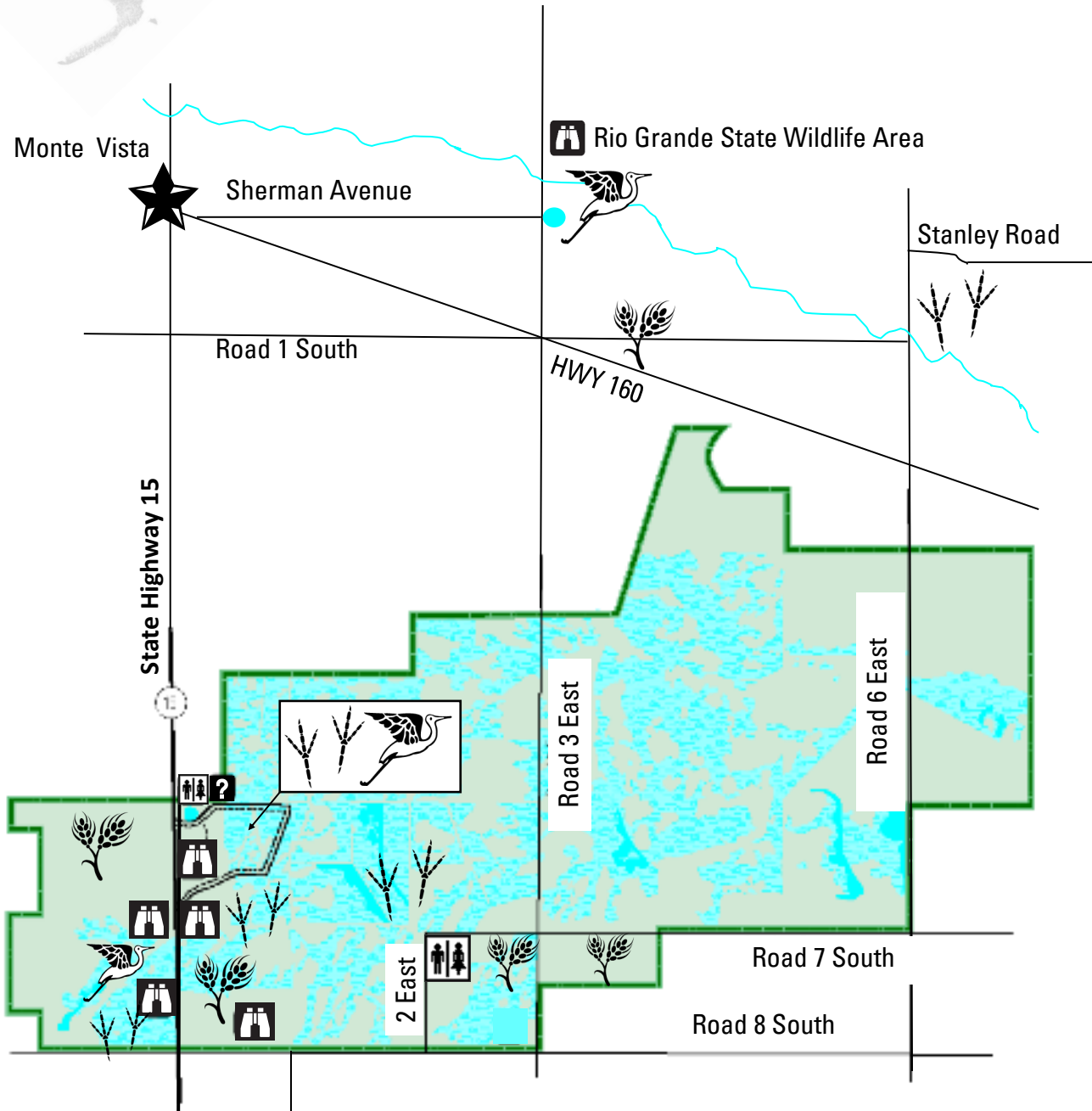
NATURAL HISTORY

Cranes live from 20-30 years and breed at about 2-5 years old. Sandhill Cranes bond for life. Pair bonds are formed and reinforced with a "dancing" behavior (hopping and flapping the wings) that can be seen in the spring. Sandhill Cranes build large ground nests primarily in wet meadow habitat and both sexes incubate eggs. As with most cranes, Sandhill Cranes lay two eggs but usually only one chick will leave the nest. In the fall, crane family groups- two adults and one juvenile- leave the breeding grounds. The juvenile stays with the parents through the summer, fall, and winter and will accompany the parents on the northward migration. In route, breeding adults begin renewing pair bonds and the juvenile leaves (or is forced out of) the family group.

San Luis Valley NWR
9383 El Rancho Lane
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Sandhill Crane Viewing Map



Feeding Areas:
 Refuge farm fields, sunrise to 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. to sunset.

Loafing Areas:
 Wet meadows and a variety of other habitats 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Roost Sites:
 Places to view cranes entering (sunrise) and leaving the roosts (sunset).

Wildlife Viewing Areas

Rest Rooms

Information
 We hope you enjoy viewing cranes in the San Luis Valley. Please remember-crane roosts are closed to the public to protect the birds.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Monte Vista
National Wildlife Refuge

Sandhill Crane Viewing



Artwork by Kelly Ortiz

