



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Sandhill Cranes in Arizona

Cibola National Wildlife Refuge

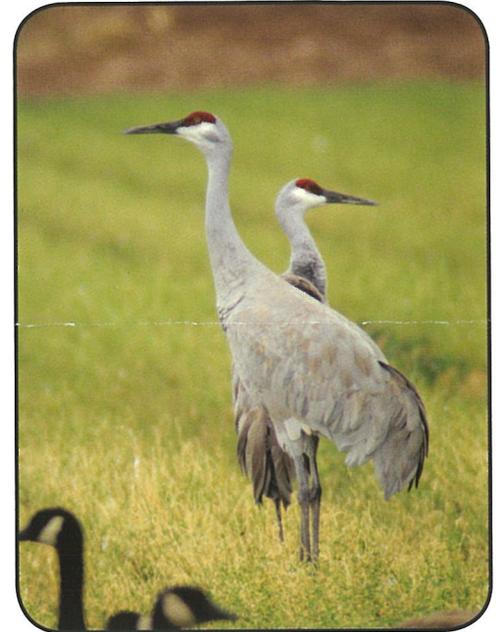
Sandhill cranes occur regularly in three general locations in Arizona; the lower Colorado River, near Gila Bend and the Sulphur Springs Valley in southeastern Arizona. Almost all of the birds that winter along the Colorado River and the Gila River belong to the Lower Colorado River Valley Population (LCRVP) of Greater Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis tabida*). The largest flocks are found at Cibola National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and the Colorado River Indian Reservation. The population nests in northeastern Nevada, southwestern Idaho, extreme northwestern Utah and possibly southwestern Oregon. Recent marking studies indicate that the nesting range of this population may be larger than previously thought. It is estimated that this population contains approximately 2,000 birds.

The cranes that winter in the Sulphur Springs Valley represent two populations, the Rocky Mountain (RMP) and Mid-Continent (M-C). The RMP is the greater subspecies (*G.C. tabida*). The nesting range centers around Grays Lake NWR in Idaho. RMP cranes nest in the valleys of the Rocky Mountains in Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Utah and Alberta. The September 1992 population estimate based on counts on staging areas was approximately 20,000 birds. The winter range of the RMP is southwestern New Mexico, mainly the area surrounding Bosque

del Apache NWR, the Sulphur Springs Valley and northern Mexico.

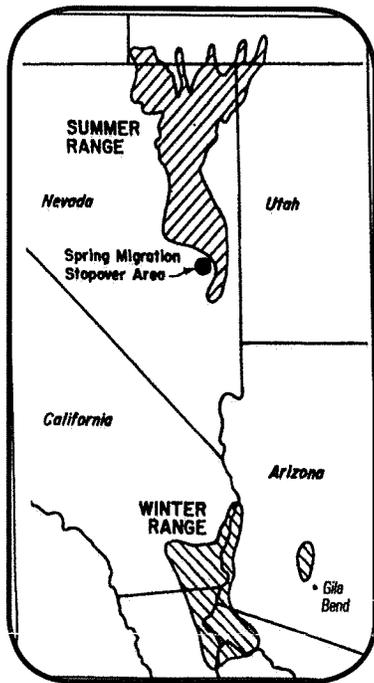
The M-C population includes three subspecies of sandhill; the lesser, *G.c. canadensis*; the Canadian, *G.c. rowani*; and the greater, *G.c. tabida*. The nesting range of this population includes central and northern Canada, Alaska and northeastern Siberia. The population, estimated to contain approximately 500,000 birds, winters in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, southeastern Arizona and northern Mexico.

M-C cranes are hunted in eight Central Flyway states. RMP cranes or mixed populations of RMP and M-C cranes are hunted in four states: Wyoming, Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. All hunters within the range of the RMP population are strictly limited by special permits and hunters are required to bring bagged birds to check stations so that the subspecies composition of the bag can be determined. The Pacific-Flyway Study Committee has developed a management plan which includes a formula for determining the maximum annual harvest of RMP cranes and a means of allocating that harvest among states. State's harvest allocations are adjusted annually depending on current population status.

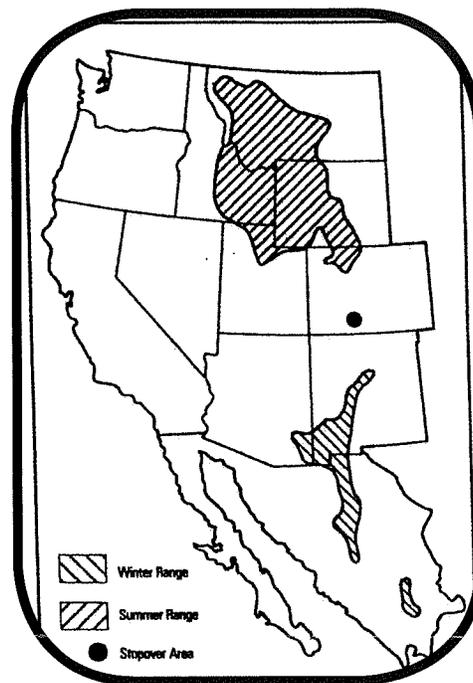


Sandhills usually begin nesting at about four years of age. First and second time nesters are not as successful as older birds. Nests, consisting of mounds of local vegetation, are usually located in shallow marshes or wet meadows. Cranes usually lay two eggs, but it is unusual for a pair to raise more than one young per year.

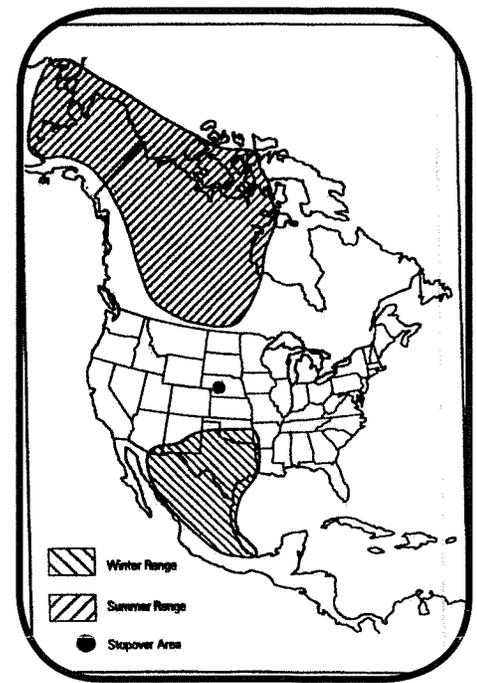
During the period of rapid growth the young birds feed primarily on animals they can catch in the shallow water or adjacent uplands. In years when the marshes dry up before the young birds are able to fly predators take a heavy toll. During years of average water conditions youth-of-the-year birds comprise about 10 percent of the fall population.



Summer and winter ranges of the Lower Colorado River Valley population.



Summer and winter ranges of the Rocky Mountain population.



Summer and winter ranges of the Mid-Continent population.

In the fall and winter cranes feed mostly on grain, left in fields after harvest. At this time of year animal matter is a smaller portion of their diet.

M-C cranes had a very successful nesting seasons in 1987 and 1988, as evidenced by juvenile adult ratios, above 20 percent in Arizona. Conversely drought conditions in the western U.S. resulted in less than 4 percent young birds in the RMP. The percentage of young birds in the Colorado River Population was about 2 percent in 1991 and 1992.

Adult greater sandhill cranes normally weigh 11 to 13 pounds. The largest bird documented in Arizona weighted 15 pounds. Adult lesser sandhills average 6 to 7 pounds. The Canadian subspecies is slightly smaller than the greater subspecies.

Sandhills begin arriving in Arizona in October and remain until late February. During that period the birds fly from roosting areas to feeding areas, beginning just before sunrise where, if undisturbed, they feed for about three hours. Following feeding the birds fly to loafing areas, which may be the night roost, other wetland areas, fallow fields or simply grassland areas. Sometimes the cranes return to feeding areas in the afternoon for an hour or two, but the afternoon feeding flight is much more variable than the morning flight. From near sunset until virtually dark cranes return to roosting sites.

The most convenient places to observe sandhills are in harvested corn fields near the Willcox Playa and the north boundary of the Cibola NWR. The morning feeding flight usually starts about 15 minutes before sunrise, but sometimes as much 40 minutes before. Depending on the cropping/flooding pattern, cranes can usually be seen on the Goose Loop Tour at Cibola National Wildlife Refuge.