



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Status and Harvests of Sandhill Cranes 2026

*Mid-continent, Rocky Mountain,
Lower Colorado River Valley and
Eastern Populations*



Status and Harvests of Sandhill Cranes 2026: Mid-Continent, Rocky Mountain, Lower Colorado River Valley and Eastern Populations

MARK E. SEAMANS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Bird Management, Branch of Assessment and Decision Support, Lakewood, CO (mark_seamans@fws.gov).

Abstract: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), working with partners, annually assesses the population status and harvest of four populations of sandhill cranes: the Mid-continent (MCP), Rocky Mountain (RMP), Lower Colorado River Valley (LCRVP), and Eastern (EP) populations. The spring 2026 estimate of abundance for MCP sandhill cranes in the Central Platte River Valley (CPRV), Nebraska, corrected for visibility bias, was 527,440 birds, which was 48% less than the 2025 estimate of 1,005,573. All Central Flyway states except Nebraska allowed crane hunting in portions of their states during the 2025–26 season. An estimated 31,435 Central Flyway hunters participated in these seasons, which was 11% lower than the number who participated in the previous season. Hunters harvested 76,389 MCP cranes in the U.S. during 2025–26 season. The fall 2025 pre-migration survey for the RMP counted 25,316 cranes, 2% higher than the count from 2024. Hunting seasons during 2025–26 in portions of Arizona, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming resulted in a harvest of 1,810 RMP cranes, a 6% increase over the previous year’s harvest. The LCRVP survey results indicated a 9% increase from 2025 (2,927 birds) to 2026 (3,203 birds). There is currently no hunting season for cranes in the LCRVP. The fall 2025 survey was not completed for the EP due to the Federal Government shutdown. A total of 1,277 EP cranes were harvested in Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee during the 2025–26 season, which was 3% less than the 2024–25 harvest.

Introduction

The sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis*) is a popular gamebird in the U.S. and is also hunted in Canada and Mexico. Authority and responsibility for management of this species in the United States (U.S.) is vested in the Secretary of the Interior. This responsibility is conferred by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 which, as amended, implements migratory bird treaties between the U.S. and other countries. Sandhill cranes are included in the treaties with Great Britain (for Canada) and Mexico (U.S. Department of the Interior 2013). These treaties recognize hunting as a legitimate use of the renewable migratory bird resource.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is the lead agency responsible for crane harvest management. Maintenance of crane populations in a healthy, productive state, while providing public hunting opportunity, are the primary management goals. Management activities include population assessment, harvest regulation, and habitat management. Each year, crane abundance is estimated for four hunted populations: the Eastern (EP), Mid-continent (MCP), Rocky Mountain (RMP), and Lower Colorado River Valley (LCRVP). These estimates are used by wildlife managers in setting annual hunting regulations (Ad Hoc Eastern Population Sandhill Crane Committee 2010, Central, Mississippi and Pacific Flyway Councils 2018, Pacific Flyway Council 1995, Pacific Flyway Council and Central Flyway Council 2016). Past federal

frameworks for crane hunting in the U.S. are in Appendix A.

Populations

The MCP, numerically the most abundant of all the North American crane populations, is composed of the lesser (*A. c. canadensis*) and greater (*A. c. tabida*) subspecies of sandhill cranes. Their breeding range extends from northwestern Minnesota, northern Ontario, and western Quebec, then northwest through Arctic Canada, Alaska, and into eastern Siberia. The MCP wintering range includes western Oklahoma, New Mexico, southeastern Arizona, Texas, and northern portions of Mexico (Fig. 1A). The MCP is well known for its use of the Platte River in Nebraska as a stopover site during spring migration.

The RMP is composed exclusively of greater sandhill cranes that breed in isolated river valleys, marshes, and meadows of the U.S. portions of the Central and Pacific Flyways (Drewien and Bizeau 1974). The highest nesting concentrations are in western Montana and Wyoming, eastern Idaho, Colorado, and Utah. The RMP migrates through the San Luis Valley (SLV) in Colorado and winters primarily in the Middle Rio Grande Valley, New Mexico, with smaller numbers wintering in the southwestern part of New Mexico, in southeastern Arizona, and at several

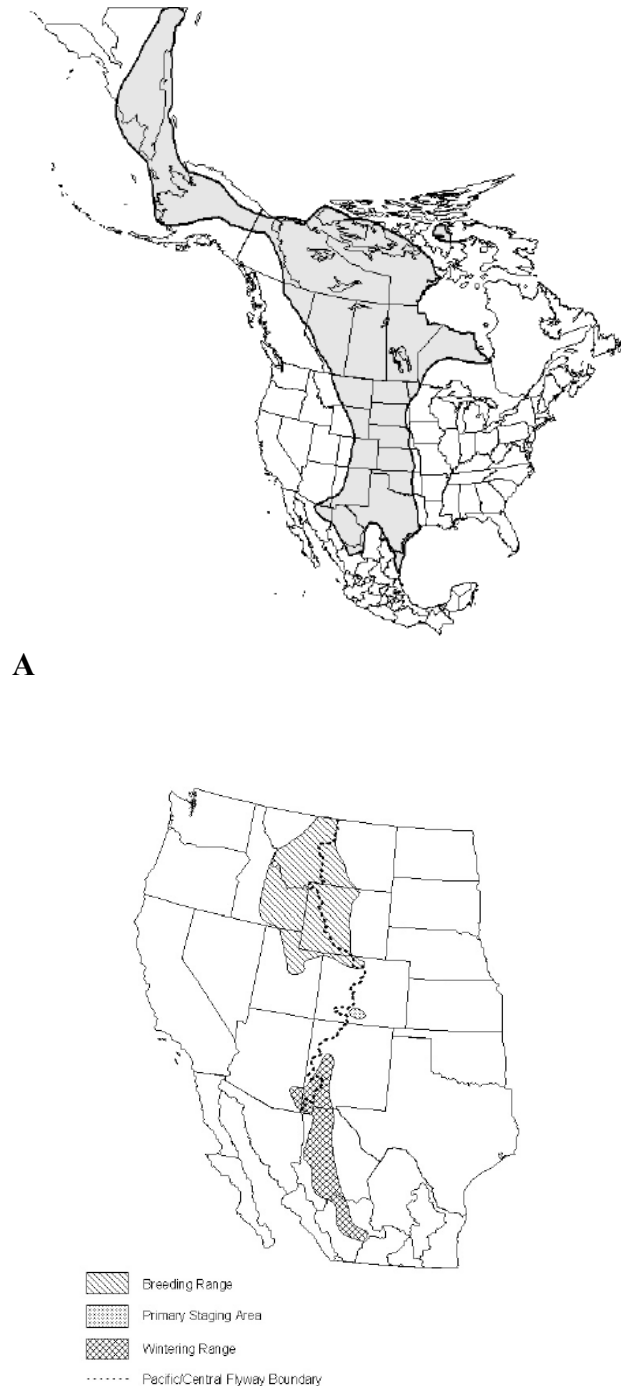


Figure 1. Primary wintering and breeding range and the approximate migration corridor of Mid-continent sandhill cranes (A; based on figures in Tacha et al. 1994, Krapu et al. 2011) and Rocky Mountain Sandhill Cranes (B; Tacha et al. 1994, Drewien et al. 1996).

locations (~14) in the Northern Highlands of Mexico (Fig. 1B).

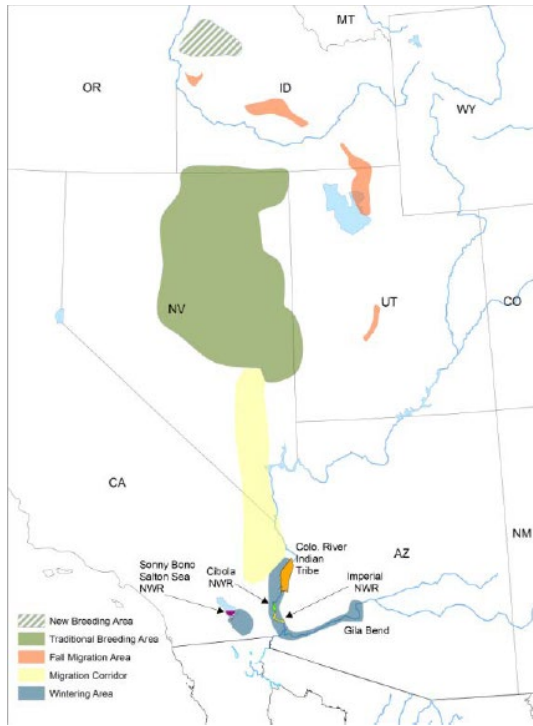
The LCRVP is numerically the least abundant of the six migratory populations of sandhill cranes recognized in the U.S. (Drewien et al. 1976, Drewien and Lewis 1987). The LCRVP is composed exclusively of greater sandhill cranes that breed primarily in northeastern Nevada and southwest Idaho, with smaller numbers in parts of Utah (Fig. 2A). This population winters largely in the Colorado River Valley of Arizona and Imperial Valley of California (Grisham et al. 2018).

The EP, which consists of greater sandhill cranes, has rebounded from near extirpation in the late 1800's (Leopold 1949, Walkinshaw 1949, 1973). Most EP cranes breed across the Great Lakes region (Wisconsin, Michigan, Ontario, and Minnesota); however, the range of this population is expanding in all directions (Fig. 2B) (Lacy et al. 2015) with some range overlap with the MCP now occurring (Wolfson et al. 2017). By early fall, EP cranes leave their breeding grounds and congregate in large flocks on traditional staging areas throughout the breeding range. During migration, EP cranes use traditional stopover areas, which include Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in northwest Indiana and Hiawassee State Wildlife Refuge in southeast Tennessee. Historically, EP cranes primarily wintered in southern Georgia and throughout Florida (Walkinshaw 1973, Lewis 1977, Tacha et al. 1992, Meine and Archibald 1996). Recent annual Midwinter Survey data, conducted by state and federal agencies, show substantial numbers of cranes wintering farther north into Kentucky, Tennessee, and even Indiana in some years (2013–2020 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [unpublished data], Fronczak et al. 2017, Urbanek 2018).

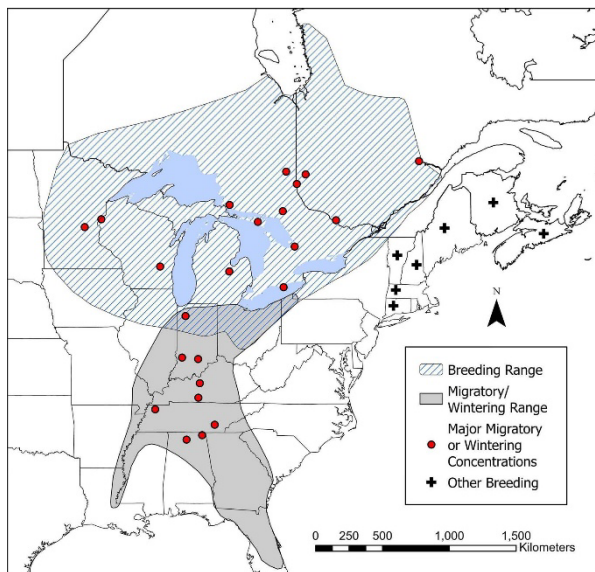
Methods

Population Monitoring

Mid-Continent Population. Extensive spring aerial surveys on major concentration areas that are corrected for observer visibility bias provide annual indices of abundance that are used to estimate population trends. These surveys are conducted in late March, at a time when cranes that wintered in Mexico, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas usually have migrated northward to spring staging areas along the Platte River in Nebraska, but before spring "ice break-up" conditions allow cranes to move into Canada (Benning and Johnson 1987).



A



B

Figure 2. Approximate range of the Lower Colorado River Valley Population (A) and Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes (B). Eastern Population map from Wells et al. 2025.

The survey along the Platte River is a strip transect survey where counts by aerial observers are corrected for flock-size estimation bias by comparing counts from aerial observers with photographed flocks (Benning and Johnson 1987). The observer-specific correction factors are then applied to the observer flock counts prior to expanding estimates over the survey area. Crane counts outside the Platte River are conducted and summarized by state coordinators (participating states: Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Wyoming, and areas in Nebraska outside the Platte River survey area). The state efforts are focused in areas of traditional crane use/occurrence and are led by observers in the air and on the ground. Observations recorded outside the aerial transect region were not photo-corrected and do not follow a statistical sampling design but are used to assess the timing of the Platte River Survey. The survey is considered reliable if $\geq 90\%$ of the cranes counted are in the Platte River Valley area (Central, Mississippi and Pacific Flyway Councils 2018).

The estimation of crane abundance in the Platte River Valley and its associated variance follows the analysis methods used for waterfowl (Smith 1995). The Platte River Valley aerial survey is divided into 10 strata. The average density of birds among the transects in each stratum is calculated. The total number of birds in each stratum is then estimated as the stratum area multiplied by the average density multiplied by the visibility correction factor (i.e., the correction for each observer based on a comparison of the observer counts versus the photo counts).

Rocky Mountain Population. A fall pre-migration survey is conducted during the last full week of September to improve the chances that cranes are in the survey area (Bunting et al. 2022, VonBank et al. 2023). The annual RMP census began in 1995 and focused on historic pre-migration staging areas and migration stopover areas in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming (Drewien and Bizeau 1974, Drewien et al. 2021). There were 89 areas surveyed in 2025 (Thorpe 2025). New areas have occasionally been added to the survey as more has been learned about crane movements (Bunting et al. 2022). This survey only provides an index to fall population size because it does not count the entire fall population, thus the actual fall flight of the RMP is likely larger.

Harvest management decisions for the RMP are informed by fall population size and by fall recruitment. Each year from mid-October to early November a survey to estimate recruitment of greater sandhill cranes is conducted in the San Luis Valley, Colorado. Flocks of cranes are observed, and individuals are aged (hatch-year versus after-hatch-year) based on plumage characteristics (Drewien et al. 1995). Annual recruitment is estimated as: $\text{number juveniles} / \text{total number of cranes} \times 100$.

Lower Colorado River Valley Population. The current wintering distribution of the LCRVP is concentrated at Cibola National Wildlife Refuge, on areas just north of the Cibola National Wildlife Refuge belonging to the Colorado River Indian Tribes in southwestern Arizona, areas within and near the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NWR in southern California, and the Gila River in Arizona. Collectively, these areas are believed to comprise more than 90% of the total cranes in the LCRVP in winter. Spring migration is generally initiated as early as the first week of February. Since 1998, the abundance of cranes in the LCRVP has been estimated by an aerial cruise survey that covers the four main winter concentration areas.

Eastern Population. A fall survey is conducted every year in late October to estimate the number of cranes in the EP. Volunteers from the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyways (i.e., FL, GA, IA, IN, MI, MN, NY, OH, PA, TN, WI, and the province of Ontario) participate in the survey, counting the number of cranes at historic migratory staging areas. Count areas are identified based on previous studies (Walkinshaw 1973, Lewis 1977, Tacha et al. 1992, Meine and Archibald 1996, Fronczak et al. 2017, Urbanek 2018) or from historic information about where cranes congregate. These counts provide an index to fall population size. They do not count the entire fall population, and the actual fall flight of the EP is likely larger since some cranes are not present at staging areas during the survey (Fronczak et al. 2017).

Harvest and Hunter Participation

Annual harvest and hunter participation for the MCP in the Central Flyway states and Minnesota is estimated by the USFWS Harvest Information Program (HIP). HIP was cooperatively developed by the USFWS and state wildlife agencies to provide reliable annual estimates of hunter activity and harvest for all migratory game birds (Elden et al. 2002). Sandhill crane hunters are required to obtain either a sandhill crane hunting permit and/or register under the Harvest Information Program (HIP) to hunt MCP cranes in the U.S. portion of the Central Flyway, Minnesota in the Mississippi Flyway, and Alaska in the Pacific Flyway. The permits or HIP registration records provide the sampling frame for conducting annual harvest surveys. In Canada, the harvest survey is based on the sale of Federal Migratory Bird Hunting Permits, which are required for all crane hunters.

To estimate annual harvest for the EP and RMP, state agencies within their ranges issue a limited number of permits or tags. All sandhill crane hunters in the range of the RMP must obtain a permit to hunt cranes, which provides the sampling frame for independent harvest estimates and allows for assignment of harvest quotas by state. Montana and Wyoming conduct

surveys for RMP crane harvest outside of the range of MCP cranes. Arizona and New Mexico hunters harvest both MCP and RMP cranes. Arizona and New Mexico rely on check stations to estimate the proportion of harvest comprised of greater sandhill cranes (i.e., RMP cranes). In the EP, cranes are hunted in Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee, and these states require their hunters to obtain permits and report on their hunting effort and success.

Results

Mid-Continent Population. The photo-corrected count from the March 2026 survey of the MCP was 527,440 in the Central Platter River Valley (Thorpe 2026), which was 48% less than the 2025 estimate of 1,005,573. Due to a data processing error, the 2025 estimate was revised downwards from that reported in last year's status report. The photo-corrected estimates for the CPRV portion of the survey suggest an increasing population trend since 2006 with higher counts in several of the recent surveys (Fig. 3). However, estimates also have more inter-annual variability in recent years relative to historic values. Earlier annual population estimates for the MCP can be found online in the [Central Flyway Data Book](#).

During the 2025–26 season in the Central Flyway, 109,123 hunters were either HIP-certified or obtained crane hunting permits, which were not limited in number, with 31,435 of these individuals hunting at least one time (Table 1). The estimate of active hunters in the Central Flyway during the 2025–26 season was an 11% decrease from the previous year. During 2025–26, the estimated number of hunters in Texas comprised 67% of all sandhill crane hunters in the Central Flyway (Table 1). Outside of the Central Flyway, Minnesota issued 1,377 permits for the 2025–26 season and had 866 active hunters (a 7% decrease in permits and a 4% increase in estimated active hunters from the 2024–25 season). During the 2025–26 season the estimated number of days afield per hunter in the Central Flyway (2.76) was 5% greater than that of the previous year (2.62) and was 8% lower than the long-term average of 2.98. The preliminary estimate of retrieved mortality associated with the sport harvest in the U.S. was 14% lower than the previous year's estimate (Fig. 3).

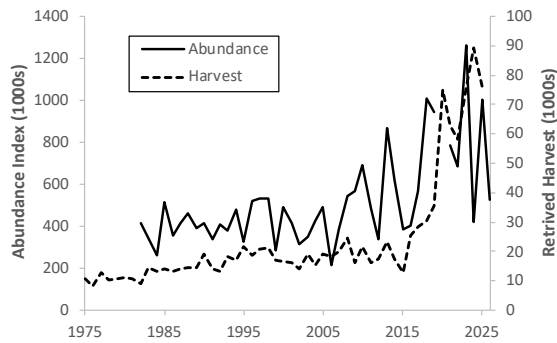


Figure 3. Abundance index of Mid-Continent sandhill cranes in the Central Platte River Valley (CPRV) and retrieved harvest of the Mid-continent population throughout its U.S range, 1975–2026.

Cranes from the MCP also occur in Alaska, Canada, Mexico and the RMP hunt areas in Arizona and New Mexico (Table 1). Estimates for the 2025–26 sport harvest in Canada (Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan) were not available at the time this report was completed. For Alaska, sandhill cranes harvested in Game Management Units (GMUs) 11-13 and 18-26 are believed to be MCP cranes, while cranes harvested in GMUs 1-10 and 14-17 are assumed to be Pacific Coast Population cranes. There also is some intermingling of MCP cranes with RMP cranes in portions of New Mexico and Arizona; however, periodic bag checks allow estimates of harvests for each population. The total estimated MCP harvest in Alaska and in the RMP hunt areas in Arizona and New Mexico was 2,893 cranes for 2025–26. In the 16th year of Minnesota’s sandhill crane hunt the estimated harvest (1,059 cranes) increased by 8% from the previous year. No annual harvest surveys are conducted in Mexico, but annual MCP harvests probably are <10% of the retrieved harvest in the U.S. and Canada (R. Drewien and D. Nieman, personal communication).

Rocky Mountain Population. The 2025 September pre-migration survey counted 25,316 cranes, a 2% increase from the count in 2024 (Fig. 4; Thorpe et al. 2025). The 2025 recruitment rate of 8.1% (1% below the long-term [1972–2025] average of 8.4) suggested near-average nesting conditions, but a mean brood size of 1.05 (Collins 2025) in 2025 was below the 40-year mean of 1.23 (Fig. 5), which suggested otherwise.

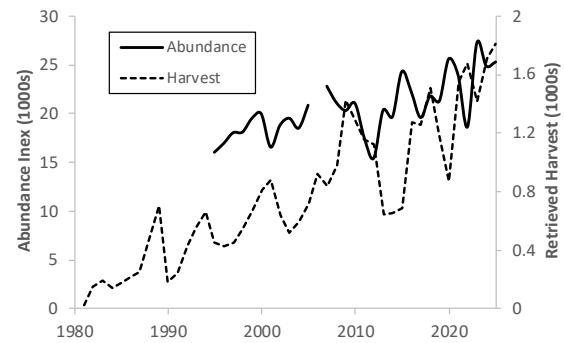


Figure 4. Abundance index and retrieved harvest of the Rocky Mountain Population of sandhill cranes, 1981–2025.

Special limited hunting seasons during 2025–26 resulted in a harvest of 1,810 RMP sandhill cranes, which was 6% greater than last year (Fig. 4). Previous year’s abundance and harvest estimates for the RMP can be found in the [Pacific Flyway Data Book](#).

Lower Colorado River Valley Population. The survey counted 3,203 cranes in 2026, a 9% increase from the previous year’s count of 2,927 cranes (Table 1). The LCRVP was not hunted during the 2025–26 season. Previous year’s abundance estimates for the LCRVP can be found in the [Pacific Flyway Data Book](#).

Eastern Population. The 2025 fall population survey for the EP was not conducted due to the Federal Government shutdown. Previous year’s abundance estimates are displayed in figure 6 and in the [Mississippi Flyway Data Book](#). During the 2025–26 season, Kentucky issued 1,012 tags to hunters, who harvested 182 cranes (Table 3; J. Brunjes, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, personal communication). Tennessee issued 2,500 tags to hunters, and 562 cranes were harvested in 2025–26 (Table 3; J. Feddersen, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, personal communication). Alabama issued 2,247 tags to hunters in 2025-26, and 533 cranes were harvested (Table 3; S. Maddox, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, personal communication). The total number of Eastern Population sandhill cranes harvested during the 2025–26 hunting season was 1,277, which was 3% less than last year (Table 2).

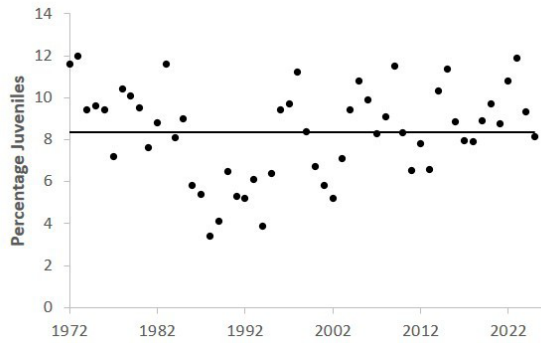


Figure 5. Annual indices for recruitment (% juveniles) of the Rocky Mountain Population of sandhill cranes. Solid line indicates the long-term (1972-2025) average of 8.4

Acknowledgements

This report provides population status, recruitment indices, harvest trends, and other management information for the Mid-Continent (MCP), Rocky Mountain (RMP), Lower Colorado River Valley (LCRVP), and Eastern (EP) populations of sandhill cranes. Information was compiled with the assistance of many biologists from across North America. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of P. Thorpe, C. Cain, S. Catino, J. Drahotka, and D. Fronczak for conducting annual aerial population surveys, T. Bidrowski, D. Hubl, J. McKinney, M. Ryckman, P. Smith, R. Murano, O. Fitzsimmons, and C. Rudd for coordinating MCP ground surveys, D. Collins for conducting the RMP productivity survey, R. Raftovich for conducting the U.S. Federal harvest surveys for the MCP, S. Olson and L. Harding for compiling population and harvest information collected on sandhill cranes in the Pacific Flyway, and D.S. Benning, R.C. Drewien, J.A. Dubovsky, and D.E. Sharp for their career-long commitment to sandhill crane management. We especially want to recognize the support of the state and provincial biologists in the Central, Pacific, and Mississippi Flyways for the coordination of sandhill crane hunting programs and the distribution of crane hunting permits, and their assistance in conducting annual cooperative surveys and sharing harvest data. T. Cooper, P. Devers, P. Garrettson, T. Sanders, D. Scott, and P. Thorpe reviewed earlier drafts of this report.

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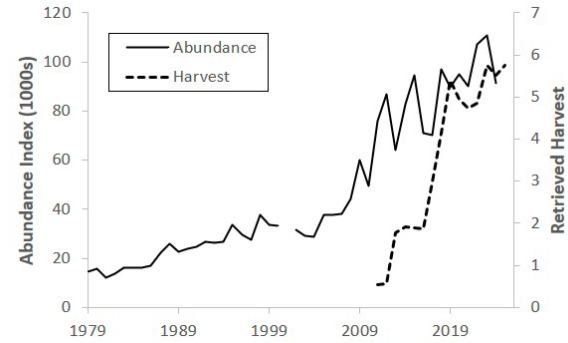


Figure 6. Abundance index and retrieved harvest of the Eastern Population of sandhill cranes, 1979–2025.

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Table 1. Preliminary estimates of Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Population harvest, hunter numbers, days afield, and hunter success from the 2025–2026 Harvest Information Program.

State/Province	Harvest Permits Issued	Harvest	Active Crane Hunters	Days Afield	Bag per Hunter
CO	6,474	61	212	514	0.29
KS	2,860	1,803	855	2,751	2.11
MT	2,424	464	763	2,443	0.61
NM	3,767	3,419	1,545	4,849	2.21
ND	5,499	2,205	2,838	12,138	0.78
OK	16,511	7,037	3,113	6,902	2.26
SD	24,858 ^a	148	625	2,416	0.24
TX	70,380	57,091	21,163	53,646	2.7
WY	1,208	209	321	1,059	0.65
CF Total	109,123	72,437	31,435	86,718	-- ^b
AZ	-- ^c	380	--	--	--
AK	-- ^c	1,978	--	--	--
MN	1,377	1,059	866	3,221	1.22
NM ^d	-- ^d	535	--	--	--
U.S. Total	110,500	76,389	32,301	89,939	-- ^b
AB ^e	--	--	--	--	--
MB ^e	--	--	--	--	--
SK ^e	--	--	--	--	--
Canada Total	--	--	--	--	--

^a South Dakota does not issue individual permits but relies on the Harvest Information Program sampling frame to estimate harvest and hunter numbers.

^b Regional estimates of hunter success could not be obtained due to the occurrence of individual hunters being registered in the Harvest Information Program in more than 1 state.

^c Number of permits issued, hunters, and days afield for Mid-continent Crane hunters could not be estimated in Alaska and Arizona because in these states' hunters pursue cranes from two or more populations.

^d Mid-continent Crane harvest within the Rocky Mountain Population range in New Mexico. Number of permits issued, hunters, and days afield for Mid-continent Crane hunters could not be estimated in this area because hunters pursue cranes from two or more populations.

^e Harvest and hunter information for Canada were not available for this report.

Table 2. Estimated harvest and number of permits sold for Eastern Population sandhill cranes, 2011–2025.

<i>Year</i>	<i>KY Harvest</i>	<i>KY Tags Issued^a</i>	<i>TN Harvest</i>	<i>TN Tags Issued^a</i>	<i>AL Harvest</i>	<i>AL Tags Issued^a</i>	<i>Total Harvest</i>	<i>Total Permits Issued</i>
2011	50	534	No Season	No Season	No Season	No Season	50	534
2012	92	570	No Season	No Season	No Season	No Season	92	570
2013	87	570	350	1,200	No Season	No Season	437	1,770
2014	96	704	393	1,200	No Season	No Season	489	1,904
2015	75	694	161	1,200	No Season	No Season	236	1,894
2016	171	672	586	1,200	No Season	No Season	757	1,872
2017	119	660	830	2,319	No Season	No Season	949	2,979
2018	60	1,432	555	2,711	No Season	No Season	615	4,143
2019	96	1,237	746	2,958	291	1,200	1,133	5,395
2020	65	1,035	630	2,700	391	1,200	1,086	4,935
2021	117	1,029	484	2,500	234	1,200	835	4,729
2022	180	1,148	640	2,500	265	1,200	1,085	4,848
2023	71	991	475	2,500	322	2,250	868	5,741
2024	193	858	676	2,500	442	2,154	1,311	5,512
2025	182	1,012	562	2,500	533	2,247	1,277	5,759
<i>Average</i>	110	876	545	2,153	354	1,636	748	3,506

^a Each tag allows a hunter to take one crane.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Division of Migratory Bird Management
Branch of Assessment and Decision Support
12100 Beech Forest Road
Laurel, Maryland 20708
<http://www.fws.gov>

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For State Transfer Relay Service: TTY/ Voice: 711

