



Sandhill Crane Facts



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Identification

A large-bodied bird, the sandhill crane has an impressive wingspan, long black legs and a relatively short bill. Sandhills have grey plumage on the body, becoming white or paler grey on the face, chin and upper throat. During the spring and summer, the plumage of sandhill cranes in regions with iron-rich mud acquires a rusty brown hue, due to the bird's habit of preening the reddish mud into their feathers. This artificial coloration is lost in the autumn when the cranes molt their feathers. In contrast to the adult,

juvenile sandhill cranes are cinnamon brown, becoming grey during the first year. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the sandhill crane is the bare patch of red skin, which covers the forehead and crown.

This species produces a range of vocalizations, including a single, loud warning call, breeding pair synchronized calls, which the strengthen pair bond, and a low, soft call to maintain contact while foraging. Although the taxonomy of this species is debated, there are generally six commonly recognized subspecies of the sandhill crane, which differ greatly in size and weight and occupy separate geographical areas.

Migratory populations leave the northern breeding grounds between early autumn and early winter. During migration, this species forms large flocks, which concentrate in vast numbers at certain areas during the journey, known as staging grounds.



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Life History

Sandhill cranes feed on plant material—tubers, seeds and berries—as well as small animals—insects, worms, snakes and mice. The chicks grow rapidly on a high-protein diet of insects and other invertebrates. Like other crane species, the sandhill crane exhibits extravagant dancing behavior, including bowing, jumping, running, stick or grass tossing and wing-flapping. While dancing has an important role in courtship, it is performed outside the breeding season by individuals of all ages, and is thought to aid motor development, as a defense, and to strengthen the pair bond. Sandhill cranes typically mate for life.

Migratory sandhill cranes arrive at their breeding grounds in the spring and lay eggs from early April to late May. Nests are constructed from plants formed into a low mound with a central cup. The 1-3 eggs are incubated by both sexes for 29-32 days. The young fledge at around 67-75 days, but do not become independent of the parents until they are 9-10 months old.



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Range

The sandhill crane occupies a variety of open habitats, occurring predominantly in freshwater wetlands such as bogs, sedge meadows and fens, as well as grasslands, pine savanna and cultivated areas.

The sandhill crane has a large range extending throughout North America, from northern Canada, south to northern Mexico. Populations are also found in Cuba and extreme north-eastern Siberia. The subspecies can be divided into migratory and non-migratory populations.

In 2003, staff from the Finger Lakes Community College spotted not only a pair of sandhill cranes, but also a colt, on the New York State DEC Northern Montezuma Wildlife Management Area. Today, there are two known nesting pair on the Montezuma Wetlands Complex.

Status

Since the mid-1950s, a large number of conservation measures and programs have been developed and implemented to benefit the sandhill crane. Hunting of this species is regulated throughout the USA and Canada, in accordance with its listing under the Migratory Bird Treaty of 1916 (5). In addition, international trade is regulated through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which permits limited export of all but two subspecies. The sandhill crane occurs in a large number of protected areas, many of which have been designated specifically for this species. In addition, several management plans have been developed and implemented for regional populations and subspecies, along with a variety of conservation initiatives employed by Non-Governmental Organizations .

Interesting Facts

- The Sandhill Crane does not breed until it is two to seven years old.
- Sandhills can live up to the age of 20.
- Mated pairs of sandhill cranes stay together year round, and migrate south as a group with their offspring.



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