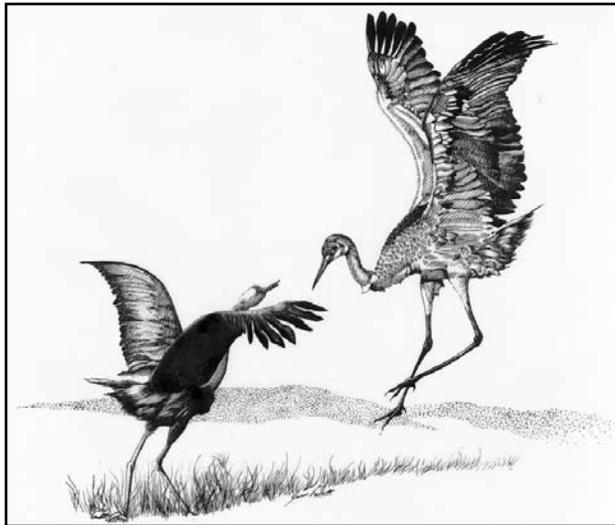


Ohio Division of Wildlife

## Life History Notes

# Sandhill Crane

Scientific Name: *Grus canadensis*



State  
Endangered  
Species

Publication 382  
(R106)

## Introduction

The sandhill crane is among the oldest living species of birds, dating back 2.5 million years. Today, it is an endangered species in Ohio.

A native species, the population in Ohio has decreased due to loss of habitat, primarily wetlands. Their former breeding range in the state extended into northwestern Ohio, an area which held a small breeding population that disappeared in the 1880s. The last nesting pair prior to the 1980's was recorded in 1926 in Huron County. In 1985, a pair appeared in Wayne County, but did not start reproducing until 1987. Since that time, nesting pairs have increased along the Killbuck Valley (Holmes and Wayne counties). Breeding pairs have also been reported in Ashland, Ashtabula, Geauga, Wyandot, and Williams counties. Numbers of cranes breeding in Ohio will probably continue to increase as the young from previous years reach breeding age.

Perhaps the most unique characteristic of the sandhill crane is its tendency to dance. Although an integral part of their courtship, they can be seen dancing any time of the year. The dance of the sandhill crane includes many quick steps around each other, wings half spread with an occasional leap into the air up to eight feet off the ground. Part of this ceremony includes bowing towards one another. Outside of its occurrence during courtship in the spring, researchers are unclear as to why this behavior continues throughout the year.

## Description

Sandhill cranes are wading birds characterized by long legs, necks, and bills. The sandhill crane ranges between 34 and 38 inches in height and has a six to seven foot wingspan. Their weight varies from 7.7 to 14.4 pounds according to the sex of the individual bird and the race to which they belong. Outward appearance of the sexes is alike except in size. The male is slightly larger than the female.

The plumage of the adult sandhill crane is gray with a bald red skin patch on its forehead. Their eyes are yellow and their bill, legs, and feet are blackish. Immature sandhill cranes have a gray body with a brownish head and they lack the red skin patch.

There are six races of the sandhill found in North America. Three of these races—the Mississippi, Cuban, and Florida—are sedentary and are the most threatened populations of sandhill cranes. The Mississippi and Cuban races, numbering 40 to 50 and 200 birds respectively, are threatened with extinction. Populations of the other three races are larger and include the lesser, greater, and Canadian races. The sandhill cranes seen migrating through and breeding in Ohio are of the greater sandhill crane race. These birds winter in Florida and fly north in late February or early March. The majority of this race nests in the Great Lakes region of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan and their numbers appear to be increasing.

Some of the more populated races are hunted in the central and western United States and Canada.

## Habitats and Habits

Sandhill cranes are primarily a wetland dependent species. On their wintering grounds, they will utilize agricultural fields; however, they roost in shallow, standing water or moist bottomlands. On breeding grounds they require a rather large tract of wet meadow, shallow marsh, or bog for nesting. A single pair's breeding territory can cover up to 200 acres. They will build their nests in undisturbed wetlands in up to three feet of water. The four to five-foot wide nest consists of marsh plants, tubers, or roots pulled up by the birds using their bills.

Their diet is varied and the birds will walk several miles while searching for food. Sandhill cranes will eat roots, tubers, seeds, berries, grain, mice, small birds, snakes, lizards, frogs, and crayfish in wet meadows or bogs. In a dry pasture, they may feed on grasshoppers, earthworms, and crickets.

The sandhill crane is a diurnal (active in the daylight hours) species and will roost at night in relatively large groups. During daylight hours, they break up into smaller groups, usually pairs or family groups.

In flight, the sandhill crane migrates at high elevations in large flocks, often composed of thousands of birds. The flight formation is usually a "V", but sometimes it's a straight line. The birds spend little time gliding and are noted for a quick upward wingbeat and a longer downward wingbeat. Sandhill cranes fly with their necks fully extended and can be distinguished from herons which fly with their necks bent in something of an "S" shape. Their flight speed has been recorded at 25 to 35 mph.

## Reproduction and Care of Young

The sandhill crane is monogamous and will generally only change mates due to the death of one of the pair. Nest construction usually begins in April and eggs are laid in May among the greater sandhill crane race in the Great Lakes region. Clutch size varies from one to three eggs; there are usually two. The eggs are olive with lavender or brown spots and they are incubated for 28 to 30 days by both the male and female. Each pair will raise a single brood in a year; however, they can renest if the eggs are damaged or destroyed by predators.

After hatching, the older chick is more aggressive than the younger, and the two must be separated by the parents. The parents will split up and walk in separate directions so that one chick will follow one parent and the other chick the other parent. The precocial young will leave the nest in less than 24 hours.

The juveniles will fly 90 days after hatching. After fledging, the young remain with their parents throughout the year. The parents will abandon their young cranes just prior to the next nesting season. These sexually immature

birds will find a mate as early as three years of age, but will not actively reproduce until age five. Little is known of their life expectancy in the wild. In captivity, the oldest sandhill crane lived to be 24 years old.

## Management Plans

The Division is buying and restoring wetlands on state property and working with landowners to protect and restore wetlands on private properties. The nesting pairs on state property are left undisturbed to enhance nesting success rates.

## Viewing Opportunities

Killbuck and Funk Bottoms wildlife areas provide the best viewing opportunities for sandhill cranes. Occasionally, sandhills are seen flying over Magee Marsh Wildlife Area and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge during the spring and fall migration periods.

## Do Something Wild!

The sandhill crane is an endangered species within the state of Ohio. Money to acquire and restore wetlands, which is a critical habitat for the sandhill crane, has come through the Do Something Wild! state income tax checkoff program. Through the generosity of Ohio citizens, who either donated through the checkoff or their direct contribution to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to obtain habitat that will benefit cranes, and educate and inform Ohioans about our endangered species.

Tax time **is not** the only time you can help. Contributions to our Endangered Species and Wildlife Diversity program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 1840 Belcher Drive, Columbus, Ohio 43224-1329. All contributions, whether made on your tax return or directly, are tax deductible.

## At a Glance

Mating: Monogamous

Peak Breeding Activity: April-May

Incubation Period: 28-30 days

Young are Hatched: June

Clutch Size: 2 eggs

Young: Precocial, fledge (gain flight) in 90 days

Number of Broods per Year: 1

Adult Weight: 7-14 pounds

Adult Height: 34-38 inches

Adult Wingspan: 6-7 feet

Life Expectancy: Unknown in the wild; 24 years in captivity

Migration Patterns: Seasonal resident; unknown how far young go to establish their own territory.

Feeding Periods: Daylight hours

Typical Foods: Grain, insects, birds, mammals (small), amphibians, and reptiles.

Native to Ohio: Yes

Active or Potential Nuisance Species: No

This species is endangered in the state of Ohio.

## Additional Reading

Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Management in North America edited by T. C. Tacha and C. E. Braun.

The Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas by Bruce G. Peterjohn and D. L. Rice.

The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds by J. K. Terres

Birds of the World by O. L. Austin, Jr.

