

North Dakota outdoors: The over looked and under appreciated sandhill crane

By Doug Leier



Have you ever been sandhill crane hunting? Not just a chance opportunity when a few sandhills drifted through while goose or duck hunting. If you haven't I'd suggest it might be a new or different way to enjoy North Dakota outdoors this fall. Here's a little more information about these overlooked and under appreciated migrants.

About sandhill cranes

John Palarski, North Dakota Game and Fish Department migratory game bird biologist explains: "There are four populations of sandhill cranes that migrate through the United States — Rocky Mountain, Lower Colorado River, Eastern and Mid-continent."

The latter population of birds are those that color North Dakota's skies gray in spring and fall, and to the pedestrian looking for, say, color or size differences between one group to the next, there's not much to distinguish one population of sandhills from the others.

Most are differentiated just by where they are breeding and where their migratory paths take them.

"What's interesting about the Mid-continent population of sandhill cranes is that they have four main breeding affiliations or areas where they're breeding," Palarski said. "Some of those birds go up to western Alaska and eastern Siberia to nest, while some go into eastern Alaska and western Canada. Another group goes to far northern Canada, and the fourth breeding affiliation is kind of in that northwestern Minnesota area and eastern and central Canada as well."

North Dakota is an incredibly important stopover site for cranes making long-haul migrations to breeding grounds.

"What the cranes are looking for in North Dakota are our shallow wetlands where they can rest and refuel," Palarski said.

"Considering that some of these birds are migrating a couple thousand miles to places like Siberia, Alaska and northern Canada, North Dakota plays a key role during their migration."

The menu to refuel for the long flight north is diverse for these birds.

"Sandhill cranes are technically omnivorous. While we think of them eating a lot of grains, wetland seeds, vegetation, wetland plant tubers ... they're also known to eat amphibians, reptiles and small mammals as well," Palarski said.

Cranes mate for life, biologists tell us, and hang with their dancing part-

ner year-round.

"Typically, their clutch size is two. The chicks will leave the nest and begin foraging right after hatching," Palarski said. "But it takes around 65 to 75 days for them to actually fledge and be able to fly."

While North Dakota and its Central Flyway location plays a key role in helping shuttle cranes from wintering to breeding grounds in spring, the list of sandhills reportedly nesting in North Dakota over time is not long. Much of that has to do with an absence of large, shallow marshes, or bogs, in North Dakota that the cranes prefer for nesting.

"North Dakota has an affiliation with birds breeding in northwestern Minnesota, so we'll still have birds that occasionally drift over into North Dakota to nest," Palarski said.

Crane hunting 101

Sandhill crane hunting is an often-overlooked option in North Dakota. These underappreciated visitors through North Dakota are very unique. Not just in size, sight and taste.

Their early September migration from Canada in North Dakota provides a different option between early Canada goose and regular waterfowl for hunters. The few thousand hunters



There are four populations of sandhill cranes that migrate through the United States — Rocky Mountain, Lower Colorado River, Eastern and Mid-continent. Photo courtesy of North Dakota Game and Fish

each fall are part of a niche group. While small in numbers the draw for sandhill crane hunting can be less competition and congestion.

While the "flyings sticks" look like an easy target, crane hunters are all too familiar with the long necks and keen eyesight flaring many a flock. Most hunters choose a heavy load and magnum option to help balance the odds for efficient, clean kills taken from longer distances.

These birds are notorious for roosting and feeding in different locations. Just because you scout a field in the evening doesn't mean they'll use the same feed for a morning decoy hunt.

Space won't permit the full disclosure on cleaning, preparing and eating. I'll will say that I've made and

eaten crane stir fry and jerky with a few other culinary experiments, all of which were better table fare than "roast crane."

A look at crane hunting in North Dakota

1984 – 3,189 hunters, 4,367 cranes harvested

1994 – 2,497 hunters, 6,235 cranes harvested

2004 – 2,491 hunters, 3,967 cranes harvested

2014 – 1,743 hunters, ss2,924 cranes harvested

2023 – 3,029 hunters, 5,419 cranes harvested

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and engaged community and stronger community leadership."

Committee member Rob Keller, co-founder of the ND Public Information Officer Association, said local newspapers are "indispensible" for local, state, federal and tribal information officers to get information out to the public both during periods of crisis as well as providing that on a general basis.

"What we put out has to be timely, accurate, and has to be actionable



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information to everyone in the community," Keller said of the importance of local newspapers and how they are among the most trusted sources of information. "Without them, there's going to be a significant gap."

Keller said that one thing discussed in the steering committee is how even smaller newspapers need to have a strong social media presence so that even if information can't get out in a timely manner in a weekly newspaper, they could get that information out on social media platforms.

"This is especially important in times like, for example, in the western part of the state when the fires were happening," Keller said.

"There's a lot of papers that don't have a social media presence, so one thing we've talked about is creating a team that could help with that. From our standpoint, it is extremely important. While we have only three news deserts now, maybe a few more are coming."

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