

# BIRD OF THE MONTH

## SANDHILL CRANES

The bird that we've chosen to profile this month is one of only two crane species native to North America and is also one of the largest birds found in our area. While the other native crane, the Whooping Crane, is highly endangered, the Sandhill is more abundant and is quite easy to observe in the Flathead. This spring Bill and I were fortunate enough to spot a pair with two babies while accompanying a first grade class on a field trip to Smith Lake. What a thrilling sight for a bus full of future birders!

Sandhills are tall, stately gray birds measuring about 3 feet in height, with a wingspan of 6 feet. Male and female are similar in appearance except for size. The male weighs nearly 12 pounds, while the female is slightly smaller at approximately 9.5 pounds. Both have white cheeks, a large pointed black beak and a bald red forehead that darkens in color when the bird becomes stressed.

Although Sandhills are often confused with Great Blue Herons, there are some major differences that make identification fairly easy. In flight the herons tuck their head back to their shoulders in an "S" while cranes fly with their necks outstretched. Also, cranes tend to fly with a rapid upstroke of wings while herons fly at a slower, more deliberate pace. Sandhills nest separately on the ground while herons nest in large colonies called rookeries. Additionally, herons have a low hoarse croak while cranes have a loud trumpet-like call that can be heard for over a mile. This amazing vocalization is possible because the Sandhill's trachea loops once in the sternum instead of going directly to the lungs like most birds.

The Sandhills in our area are migratory, arriving in the Flathead from mid-April until early May. A large percentage of the Sandhills from the Rocky Mountain region winter at the Bosque del Apache near Socorro, New Mexico. This 1300 mile trip is handled easily by these large birds who travel nearly 350 miles per day, flying in V-formations at speeds reaching 50 mph and often cruising at altitudes between 5000 and 12,000 feet (1 to 2.25 miles)!

Upon their arrival in the Flathead, Sandhills seek out nesting territories near or close to wetlands, shallow marshes and lakes, or wet meadows. Favorite diet items include frogs, rodents, insects, bulbs, seeds, berries and when available, waste grain. Sandhills begin breeding at 7 years of age and mate with

only one partner for life. During breeding season they engage in the famous courtship dance during which the birds spread their wings and leap into the air while calling. While watching this ritual dance, you can identify the males and females by the beak position since females hold their beaks horizontally while calling and the males hold their beaks vertically. We were once fortunate enough to observe a dozen or more dancing cranes on a knoll near Clark Drive at sunset. What a magical experience!

Large (5 feet in diameter) nests of plant material are built in shallow water and both parents incubate the 2 eggs which are hatched in about 30 days. The babies can walk immediately and for this reason are called colts. These colts are covered with a rusty brown down and during this time the parents preen with mud and vegetation to take on a more rusty appearance themselves and thus help camouflage the babies. Although the colts can capture food at an early age, they receive parental care and feeding until they fledge in approximately 75 days. Sadly, only one of the colts usually survives.

Although Sandhills are very territorial during breeding season, they become more social in August as they prepare for their fall migration. During this time it is common to see groups of a dozen or more birds feeding together on the recently harvested grain fields. They also begin to roost together in small groups and finally gather in large staging area in preparation for the flight south. Colts will accompany parents to the wintering area and this migration group remains together at the wintering area. The gatherings at the staging areas and wintering areas offer some of the best opportunities for viewing Sandhill Cranes. Typically, the birds will feed on agricultural fields during the day and fly back to a shallow pond or lake at night. This evening fly-in is an event not to be missed. Last February, at the Bosque del Apache, we sat on the tailgate of our pickup and watched and listened to an estimated 15,000 cranes fly overhead. Of course I managed to click off a few pictures too!

Locally, at this time of year you should be able to see groups of Sandhills feeding in the fields near Clark Drive. Can you think of a better excuse for a fall drive? Happy Birding!

By Jeannie Marcure

Sources used to prepare this article include: [www.michiganaudubon](http://www.michiganaudubon) and [www.whofoo.org](http://www.whofoo.org)

