

## Sandhill cranes in western Colorado



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

People always express to me how difficult it must be to be a writer. Most claim that even letter writing is tough on them, and give sympathy for me to have to spend time in front of a keyboard. For me, writing has always come rather easy.

Anyone who has ever hung their head and drooled over a keyboard knows there are times when the words just do not flow. Sometimes it seems that the brain just draws a blank, and the harder you try, the worse it becomes. For the most part, I do pretty well keeping a flow of words to paper, and seldom have that problem.

My dilemma is the photography part of outdoor work. If there ever was a more uncooperative subject for picture art, it is the North American animal. I have never had the slightest inkling of cooperation from an animal whenever I want to take his picture.

If I see a deer or elk standing in a field, by the time my camera is out, they vanish. I spent three days trying to take a picture of a hummingbird for an article, with little success I might add. Recently, I wrote an article about the woodpecker because we have so many around our house. The minute I decided I wanted a picture, I have not seen one since. No, I don't walk around with a camera hung on my neck, but a little cooperation from the critters would be appreciated.

The population of the greater sandhill crane is no exception to the uncooperative nature of the animal kingdom. I was driving through Delta awhile back, and saw a flock of them in a field. When I turned around and came back for a picture, they flew off. I decided to write about these majestic birds, but if I chose to wait for a picture, this article would never have been written.

Cranes fly in sizeable flocks, usually at an altitude reserved for eagles and other birds of prey. When in flight, the strange sounding "kerronk" sounding call can be heard for miles, long before you ever see the birds in the air.

The past couple of years, I have noticed a fair number of cranes in the skies around Montrose during the spring and fall. By the time I locate a camera, the birds have flown to another part of the state. These birds are on a mission of migration when you hear those large flocks in the late winter and early spring skies.

Cranes start arriving in late February from their winter nesting grounds, most of which are in New Mexico. They will make stops in the San Luis Valley, and the Western Slope counties of Delta, Montrose and Mesa on their track North. Most are headed to the summer breeding grounds in Idaho, Wyoming and Montana.

Cranes will travel up to 200 miles a day during migration. In flight, these large birds can reach 35 mph. When you watch them fly, it appears they are lost, often making large circles in the air, but their general direction of travel is evident. The sounds made during flight can be heard for miles.

There are 15 species of cranes, but the greater sandhill is the only species found in Northwest Colorado. During



(Above) Sandhill cranes resting at a staging area during their migration. (Photo by David Hannigan/ Colorado Parks and Wildlife) (Right) A sandhill crane showing off its 7-foot wingspan. (Photo by Van Graham/ Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

migration, 75 percent of the entire population of sandhill cranes can be found along a 75-mile stretch of the Platte River, in Nebraska.

Sandhill cranes mate for life, and attract their potential mate through a courtship that includes a dance, with jumping into the air, bobbing their heads, and stretching out their 7-foot spanning wings.

Both parents build the nest together, using cattails and grasses. The finished nest will be half a foot high and 40 inches across. The female will lay two pale colored eggs with brown specks on them.

The male shares incubation duties with the female. The eggs usually hatch 32 days later. The chicks will stay with their parents for 10 months, but are ready to start swimming and leave the nest at just eight hours old.

Sandhill cranes are among the oldest living species found on the planet. Fossils have been found that date back nine million years. Petroglyphs in the Four Corners area, Mesa Verde National Park, and above Colorado Springs indicate a presence as observed by Native Americans.

Various archaeological studies in the Four Corners area have located crane bones among the cliff dwellings. This indicates the birds were probably a food source for past civilizations.

The population of the crane declined with the rapid expansion of the west as settlers utilized the wildlife as a primary food source. This expansion caused the decline and near extirpation of the elk, mule deer, bison, and the cranes.

During the 1900s, up until around 1960, there is very little reference to sandhill cranes in the recorded history. The populations dropped steadily as the western expansion continued. A study in 1961 showed a total count of cranes in a Routt County staging area at 41.

Colorado's Nongame, Endangered, or Threatened Species Act in 1973 threw the sandhill crane into the spotlight. The greater sandhill crane was added to the endangered species list due to the population decline. The remnant breeding population in Northwest



Colorado was down to 25 pairs.

In 1992, Colorado Parks and Wildlife implemented a recovery plan for the sandhill cranes. The birds have been doing well since, and have been removed from the endangered species list, downgraded to threatened species. The migration in the San Luis Valley will see over 25,000 birds.

Over the last 20 years, a small number of cranes have been found nesting in Mesa County, western Montrose County, and more recently in Delta County. Crane population appears to be expanding as now

reports of nesting birds have come in from Gunnison County.

I hope that the population of these majestic birds continues to do well. Maybe if there are enough of them around, I will finally get some pictures of them.

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## The effects of winter



Snow covers the streets and mountains in and around Telluride. (Submitted photo/ Tom Bain)



## Montrose County

Publishing Dates: April 19, May 17, June 14, July 19, Aug. 16, Sept. 20, Oct. 18, Nov. 15, Dec. 20, 2019

## Job Connection!

The Job Connection special section is new for 2019. It will feature ads as well as business profiles, tips and stories. It will be published each month and will be distributed through the paper, several drop locations around Montrose County and will be available online under our special sections tab. The first special section published on Jan. 18, 2019.

We are encouraging businesses to include a business profile into the special section each month. The profiles are designed to let the readers know what the business does, who business is and where the business is going in the future. To submit a profile send an email to [deannes@montrosepress.com](mailto:deannes@montrosepress.com).

