

Watching sandhill cranes from Colorado skies

Written by Jayne Olsen

Thursday, 09 April 2009 08:46 - Last Updated Thursday, 09 April 2009 08:54



MOFFAT, Colo. — Overhead, big fluffy clouds are slowly making their way across the sky. I watch them and hear this awful commotion.

Listening closer, I identify the sounds of several hundred sandhill cranes looking for wetlands and bean fields for feeding. Lost in the clouds, I wait to see them appear on the horizon. The sound gets louder and louder as they come into sight.

High overhead, these graceful birds continue talking and looking for a resting place and food. They have a very distinctive call and it's usually not forgotten. It is a you will hear call long before the birds come into view, because their voices are such that they can be heard from more than two miles away.

The cranes make a clackety-clack and bugling call. They are a large, tall, gray bird with a wing span of 6 to 7 feet. Adult cranes have yellow eyes, black bills, legs and feet, with a bright red patch on the crest of their head. Males and females look nearly alike.

In the spring, they "paint" their feathers with mud to camouflage themselves in the brown grasses. When you see a large bird in the sky, you'll know it's a sandhill if the neck is outstretched and the downward flap of the wings is followed by a quick upstroke.

There are several subspecies of Sandhill cranes, with the most common standing about 3 to 3 ½ feet tall, and weighing 6 to 7 pounds. The cranes called "greater" sandhills are 4 to 5 ½ feet tall, and can weigh 10 to 14 pounds.

Watching sandhill cranes from Colorado skies

Written by Jayne Olsen

Thursday, 09 April 2009 08:46 - Last Updated Thursday, 09 April 2009 08:54

You can find sandhill cranes throughout most of North America. Since cranes' toes are too short to grasp branches, they build their nests on the ground near open water in grassy areas. The nest is made of heaped plant material about 5 feet in diameter.

The females usually lay two eggs and are incubated by both parents. They hatch in about a month, usually about mid-May. The cranes will renest if they lose the eggs to predators. The youngsters are tended by both parents and begin to fly in a little over two months.

Sandhill cranes select a mate when they are 4 years old and live as many as 25 to 30 years with the same mate. When they are ready to mate, their courtship ritual includes a series of dances that they do while making calls.

Alternately bowing and leaping, with wings stretched out, they circle each other. The male will sing a note; the female replies in a two-note answer.

The crane families feed together on tubers (swollen underground plant stem) worms, grasshoppers, snails, frogs, seeds, and sometimes snakes, small birds, and mice.

The cranes can be a problem for farmers when they pull up sprouting corn or beans in the spring, or eat large amounts of grain in the fall. The cranes migrate south in the fall and north in the spring. They rely on the reservoir's water and wetlands for protection and adjacent agricultural lands for rest, food and to regroup before continuing their journey.

On their annual treks, many states are waiting for the return of the Sandhill cranes. Festivals and viewing are planned for these neat birds. One group, stopping off near Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge in Colorado, will have 20,000-plus migrating greater sandhill cranes and a few thousand lesser sandhills.

Also, thousands of waterfowl, numerous wintering bald eagles and other raptors highlight the wildlife viewing. They "load up" on fuel in the San Luis Valley. For millions of years the sandhills have been spending their spring break in Colorado's "Valley of the Cranes."

Watching sandhill cranes from Colorado skies

Written by Jayne Olsen

Thursday, 09 April 2009 08:46 - Last Updated Thursday, 09 April 2009 08:54

Only 12 states have a hunting season on the sandhill cranes. At one time, they were legal to hunt in Wisconsin, but in the 1930s they became endangered, and were then protected.

While the cranes now have grown in numbers, a leading threat to them is the loss and degradation of the wetland habitats. On a recent trip to town, I drove by a field and spotted these cranes and geese feeding on barley seed left by the rancher. I was so impressed by these few birds that I didn't look on the other side of the road until I was leaving — I was stunned to find that there were thousands of sandhill cranes on that side, feeding.

They were very alert and watching my every move. Not wanting to startle them, I proceeded to drive on, not taking any more pictures. It was breathtaking seeing so many cranes. I know I would like to return and view this again.

The arrival of the cranes to this area brings a migration of interested bird watchers to view this awesome spectacle. Many of the refuges have viewing schedules. Check them out in your area.

Some viewing tips: Limit your movement because you can cause the flock to fly away. Try to keep your distance to at least 400 yards. Be quiet. Be patient. And have your camera ready for some great pictures.