

Naturalist Notebook

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Illustration by: Moe Brand

Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*)

Sandhill cranes are among the largest birds in North America. You can recognize them from a distance as they are about five feet tall and stand erect. Their feathers are mostly gray with some brown; their face is white with a red crown. Flying gracefully through the air, their wing span is seven feet long. And just as unforgettable is their echoing song of kar-r-r-o-o-o. Sandhill cranes are migratory birds that fly south for the winter making parts of Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico their home. Flying north in the spring, over a quarter million birds make their stop on the Platte River in Nebraska, making this a must see wildlife spectacle. They continue to fly north until they reach their breeding grounds in parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Oregon, Idaho, Alaska, and Canada. Populations from Florida, Mississippi and Cuba do not migrate.

Courtship consists of a male and female performing a “dance” together with each spreading its wings and leaping into the air while singing. Sandhill cranes build their nests on or near shallow water using the vegetation nearby. Eggs are usually laid in pairs, but will sometimes be one or even three. Baby Sandhill cranes are pale olive to buff with brown or gray markings. They are quick to leave the nest, usually a day after hatching, but will stay with their parents for the first ten months of life, migrating with them. Marshes are the most common habitat you’ll find Sandhill cranes, but they will also live in prairies, fields and river valleys surrounded by forests. Being omnivores, they will eat insects, aquatic plants including berries and seeds, rodents, snails, frogs, lizards, and snakes depending on where they live and what time of year it is.

Sandhill cranes have very few predators that will take them on, however; a Great horned owl may try to catch a baby bird. With having very few predators, populations are doing well, but they are at risk for losing their habitats due to land development. The concern lies along their migratory routes and the stops they make along the way. Land is becoming more fragmented every year, making it harder for these majestic birds to fly the distance they need between their nesting and summer grounds.

A pair of Sandhill cranes was spotted at River Bend Nature Center at the end of May and early June. They were heard singing, viewed flying and walking on the hillside of the prairie.

