

A Fresh Look At Nebraska



-Isms

By LuAnn Schindler

Before the rose-mandarin fingers of light streak across the pre-dawn sky, a migration plods toward a resting spot along the Platte.

Here, in the dark light of morning, bird watchers and naturalists listen for the chattering of sandhill cranes. Once sun breaks horizon, the gray birds leave the congregation in search of food.

Nebraska is merely a month-long rest stop. The sandhill species uproot from winter vacations in Mexico, Texas and New Mexico, landing along the Platte to gain energy for the trip to breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia.

It's a ritual bringing thousands of visitors to the heartland. It's a rite of nature, drawing over half a million sandhill cranes to a fifty-mile stretch between Kearney and Grand Island.

It's a booming tourist business where visitors pay up to \$40 a pop to sit on viewing platforms among the native grasses or camouflage themselves in Audubon's crane blinds and marvel at the miracle in the meadowlands.

Gibbon's Rowe Sanctuary reports that fossils show cranes inhabited Nebraska more than nine million years ago. Sandhill cranes have withstood change and adapted to Nebraska's ever-evolving landscape.

Cranes, which weigh a slight six to twelve pounds, stand between three and four feet tall. But it's the vision of long, dangly legs and overstretched wingspans that mesmerize visitors.

Although cranes are omnivorous, their diet depends on where they are "hanging out." Along the Platte valley, cranes chow down on an estimated three million pounds of unharvested corn. The Audubon Society estimates the grains comprise 90 percent of a crane's food intake. The remaining ten percent consists of seeds, grubs, earthworms, snails, amphibians, small reptiles and rodents, and plump plant tubers.

Five subspecies of sandhill cranes have been identified, although that number is debatable. The Florida, Mississippi, and Cuban sandhill cranes are non-migratory.

Migratory species – those that land in Nebraska - include the lesser and greater crane. And now, all things crane gets controversial. The U.S. Geological Survey identifies the Canadian sandhill, a cross between a lesser and a greater, as a possible sixth subspecies. Other biologists disagree with these findings.

Who would think that cranes cause so much controversy?

They do.

In Minnesota, cranes are causing a hullabaloo. A growing population, the cranes are disrupting the state's farmland, enough so that Minnesota approached the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and asked for a "ribeye in the sky" – or sandhill crane - hunting season.

In 2009, over 19,000 cranes from the Central Flyway – the Great Plains states – were bagged. Nebraska is the only Central Flyway state that says 'no' to crane hunting. I hope that sensibility continues.

Cranes are works of art: a chorus of clamoring voices singing the prairie's praises and graceful dancers beckoning others.

I can't imagine spring without the cranes. I can't fathom missing the swaying mass of speckled sky moving in rhythm.

I can't envision an empty, purple-haze western sky without thousands of cranes as they return to the sandbars in the Platte at sunset, wings outstretched in celebration.