

Florida Sandhill Cranes: A Threatened Species

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You may have noticed a long-legged, long-necked, gray, heron-like bird in inland shallow freshwater marshes, prairies, pastures and farmlands. Sandhill cranes are magnificent birds and can be found in both rural and urban areas such as golf courses and road side greenways and are cherished members of the Florida ecosystem.



Typically sandhill cranes are seen in small family groups or pairs. They are known to stay with the same mate for several years and young sandhills stay with their parents until they are about 10 months old. Like their endangered relatives the whooping cranes, sandhills live to be older than most birds. In fact, some sandhills live up to 20 years.

Sandhill cranes are majestic birds that fly with powerful, rhythmic wing beats, with their necks outstretched. They are omnivorous, meaning they eat a variety of plant and animal matter. Some of their favorite meal items include seeds, plant tubers, grains, berries, insects, earthworms, mice, snakes, lizards, frogs and crayfish. Unlike other wading birds, such as herons, sandhill cranes do not "fish."

One of the most distinguishing features of sandhill cranes is their call, which is one of the most distinctive bird sounds in Florida. This "call of the wild" has been described as a bugling or trumpeting sound, and can be heard for several miles.

Sandhill cranes are sensitive birds that do not adjust well to changed environments and high human populations. People inadvertently put them in harm's way when they attract these birds to their yards with feed. Some "feeding" is accidental such as when bird seed is spilled from feeders by other animals onto the ground below making a nice

feeding station for cranes. But, some people deliberately feed sandhill cranes. In 2002, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission made it illegal to feed sandhill cranes (Florida Fish and Wildlife Code 68A-4.00(3)). Cranes that have been fed by humans typically can become aggressive toward people. In several instances, children have been attacked by cranes. Cranes fed by humans also have been known to damage window screens and cause other property damage. This behavior is probably a response of the birds to seeing their reflection, bringing out a territorial defense behavior (scratching at windows or shiny automobiles). Cranes also are more likely to tangle in human garbage in areas populated by people. Cranes are more likely to crash into power lines in urban areas where such aerial hazards are concentrated. Cranes attracted to people's yards for feed are put at risk as they walk across roads. Many sandhill cranes are killed each year on Florida roads. Attracting cranes to urban areas increases the threat of predation (especially to young cranes) by dogs or cats.

Four things you can do to better coexist in "Crane Country"

- Never feed cranes and encourage your neighbors not to feed cranes. Cranes are less likely to inhabit urban areas if easy meals are not provided.
- Cover or move automobiles so that cranes cannot see their reflections in the shiny surfaces. Windows or glass doors that the cranes attack can be temporarily covered with material so that the birds do not see their reflections.
- Temporarily cover windows or screens. A string mounted on stakes about 2.5 feet off the ground will provide an exclusion "fence" around the parts of homes (window or pool screens) that are being damaged by cranes.
- Accept some digging for food. Cranes sometimes damage lawns and gardens as they dig for food such as mole crickets and beetle grubs. The birds, in this case, provide natural "biological control" of these common pests of turf.

For more information contact County Extension at 352-527-5700.

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