

WATCHING SANDHILL CRANES IN THE SULPHUR SPRINGS VALLEY

Sandhill Cranes are regularly found during the winter in the Sulphur Springs Valley of southeastern Arizona. The cranes migrate into the valley as early as September and stay as late as March, with the majority of the birds present between November and February. Cranes that spend the winter in the Sulphur Springs Valley represent two populations, the Rocky Mountain and the Mid-Continent populations.

The Rocky Mountain population is made up of the “greater” subspecies *Antigone canadensis tabida*. The nesting range for these birds centers around Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho with other nesting sites in Wyoming, Montana, Utah, and Alberta. An estimate for this entire population based on a survey conducted in the early 2020's was approximately 22,750 birds. Winter range for these birds includes southwestern New Mexico, mainly the area surrounding Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, the Sulphur Springs Valley and northern Mexico.

The Mid-Continent population, which includes three subspecies: “lesser” Sandhill Crane, *Antigone canadensis canadensis*; Canadian, *Antigone canadensis rowani*; and “greater,” *Antigone canadensis tabida*, had a record high estimate of nearly 1.3 million birds in the Central Platte River Valley during the spring of 2023. The nesting range of this population includes central and northern Canada, Alaska, and northeastern Siberia. The population overwinters in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, southeastern Arizona, and northern Mexico. The Sulphur Springs Valley usually has around 30,000 to 40,000 cranes each winter. This number is based on an annual survey conducted by the Arizona Game & Fish Department. The January, 2021 Sandhill Crane count recorded the highest total ever at more than 47,000 cranes.

Natural History of Sandhill Cranes

Sandhill Cranes usually begin nesting at about four years of age. First- and second-time nesters are not as successful as older birds. Nests, consisting of mounds of vegetation, are usually located in shallow marshes or wet meadows. Cranes usually lay two eggs, but it is unusual for a pair to raise more than one young per year.

During a period of rapid growth the young birds feed primarily on animals they can catch in the shallow water or adjacent uplands. During an average year, young of the year birds comprise about 10 percent of the fall population.



Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis*) Photo by: Tom Whetten

The cranes begin to congregate in late August at pre-migration staging areas; migration to wintering areas begins in September. Cranes typically migrate in a few long, high-altitude flights, staying at traditional stopover sites. Major stopovers include the Platte River in Nebraska for the Mid-Continent population and the San Luis Valley in Colorado for the Rocky Mountain population.

The Sandhill Cranes begin arriving in Arizona in late September and remain until the middle of March when their return migration to nesting areas begins. Wintering areas selected by cranes feature shallow-water roosting areas with low or no vegetation. The Willcox Playa, including near Cochise Lake, and Whitewater Draw offer excellent roosting areas. Cranes typically overwinter in areas close to fields, with a preference for harvested fields of corn or other grain crops. The cranes leave their roosting areas in early morning, usually around sunrise, and fly to feeding areas where they spend three to four hours.

After feeding, the birds fly to loafing areas, which may be the night roost site, other wetland areas, fallow fields or simply desert grassland areas. Sometimes the cranes return to feeding areas in the afternoon for an hour or two, but the afternoon feeding flight is much more variable than the morning flight. From near sunset until virtually dark, cranes return to their roosting sites.

Sandhill Cranes are overall gray in color with black feet, legs and bill, and a dull red patch of skin on the forehead. In flight, blackish primary feathers can be seen. Some cranes may stain their body and wing feathers a rusty brown by preening mud containing ferric oxide into their feathers. The greater Sandhill Cranes may stand as tall as five feet and their wingspan is an impressive six to seven feet. An adult greater Sandhill Crane normally weighs between 10 and 14 pounds. The Canadian subspecies is slightly smaller and the adult lesser Sandhill Cranes smaller still. The lesser subspecies stand nearly 3.5 feet tall with a six-foot wingspan and weigh on average 6 to 7 pounds. The cranes are a very vocal bird and their loud bugling rattle, *kar-r-r-o-o-o*, can be heard more than a mile away.

Where to See Sandhill Cranes

The Sulphur Springs Valley covers an area over 80 miles long from Bonita (north of Willcox) to Douglas (along the border with Mexico). The cranes can generally be seen at four roosting areas within the valley. If you are at one of these locations at least 15 minutes before sunrise you can see the cranes as they depart for the fields. Many cranes also return to these roosting areas between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. In the evening, Sandhill Cranes return to their roosting areas around sundown:

1. the [Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area](#) on Coffman Road southwest of Elfrida. The [Crane Cam](#) is also a great way to see the cranes at Whitewater Draw.
2. the [Apache Station Wildlife Viewing Area](#) north of the power station along Highway 191 south of Cochise.
3. the [Willcox Playa Wildlife Area](#), on Kansas Settlement Road east of Willcox. For better viewing, follow the small, blue signs for 1/4 to 1/2 mile past the wooded area. Note that this area is best in wet years and may not have cranes during dry years.
4. and, the [Cochise Lake Birding Area](#) near the golf course just southeast of Willcox is an excellent place to view the cranes. The can be found in different areas in and around the lake.

While foraging, the cranes are generally in pastures or fields of corn, milo or alfalfa between 7:30 and 12:00 noon and 2:00 and 5:30 p.m. The cranes may be seen in agricultural fields throughout the valley. The feeding patterns are variable and the cranes may feed in one field for several days or may change to fields many miles away from day to day. While viewing cranes in the fields, please respect private property rights and remain on the roadways. Agricultural districts where cranes are commonly observed are:

1. **Stewart District:** along Ft. Grant Road between Willcox and Bonita
2. **Kansas Settlement:** along Kansas Settlement road between Robbs Road and Parker Ranch road, southeast of Willcox
3. **Sunsites:** along Cochise Stronghold Road and Birch Road, north and east of Sunsites
4. **Elfrida:** along Highway 191 north of Elfrida
5. **McNeal:** along Central Highway and Davis Road west of McNeal