

Sandhill Cranes – Facts and Figures

Developed by the Tennessee Wildlife Federation

The following is a compilation of facts and figures regarding sandhill cranes mainly in the eastern U.S. In the near future, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) Commission will be considering a sandhill crane hunting season in east Tennessee. This would be the first season of its kind in our state's history and marks a remarkable population recovery of the greater sandhill crane population in the eastern U.S.

As is the case with sandhill cranes in several states, the population that migrates through Tennessee is healthy enough to support both crane viewing and hunting. We look forward to the opportunity to responsibly hunt sandhill cranes in Tennessee this coming winter.

Executive Summary

1. The eastern population of greater sandhill cranes is healthy and estimated by professional biologists to be more than 100,000 birds.
2. Modern day regulated crane hunting has existed in the U.S. since 1961, and no crane hunting season has negatively impacted a crane population.
3. Sandhill crane hunting and viewing festivals co-exist in seven U.S. states.
4. Both federal and state wildlife biologists believe that the sandhill population is healthy enough to support a hunting season. The population numbers of cranes used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for the eastern U.S. and TWRA for Tennessee are NOT estimates. They are actual counts of cranes during their surveys. For 2012, the USFWS count was 87,796 for the eastern U.S. and TWRA's 2013 count was 18,701. These are not estimates, but rather hard numbers. Population estimates are significantly higher for both the eastern U.S. and Tennessee.
5. The methodologies used to count cranes have been standardized and perfected by wildlife biologists since the 1950's when biologists started using similar techniques to monitor continental waterfowl populations.
6. The potential impacts on whooping cranes from the hunting of sandhill cranes are overstated.
7. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has historically issued depredation tags to landowners to kill sandhill cranes. The rules of these permits also require landowners to leave the cranes to rot after they are killed, resulting in wasting the resource.
8. Many landowners have stopped applying for (or never bother to apply for) depredation tags because the process is tedious, difficult and slow.
9. Sandhill cranes have a proven capability to negatively impact agriculture crops, resulting in significant financial crop damage annually.
10. If approved, the TWRA will most likely implement a season by taking a conservative approach to season lengths and bag limits, which we support and which has been proven sustainable in other states.

Why an Eastern Population Sandhill Crane Hunting Season in Tennessee?

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Mississippi and Eastern Flyway Councils, and state biologists have all concurred that the population of eastern greater sandhill cranes is large enough and healthy enough to sustain regulated hunting. This fact is also played out in multiple states around the country where viewing and hunting of sandhills take place on an annual basis, with no detrimental effects to either pastime.
- The science and biological opinion is clear that having a limited hunting season on Tennessee's sandhill cranes is viable and safe for the overall population. Given this biological and scientific support for such a season, we should allow this season to proceed. To not allow this season to occur in the face of this evidence could bring into question any of Tennessee's numerous hunting and/or fishing seasons and make them vulnerable to being overturned or removed from consideration based solely on opinion and not science.
- Not allowing a hunting season for these cranes would arguably constitute an unreasonable restriction upon our citizen's right to hunt and fish, since the primary reasons given to oppose the season have not been based on science or biology, but rather on personal opinions which oppose hunting for the purpose of opposing hunting.
- The Tennessee eastern population of greater sandhill cranes is large, healthy, and growing, and is quite capable of supporting all recreational uses, including watching and regulated hunting.
- Concerns about incidental take of whooping cranes are unfounded and overstated. Since 1955, there have been only three documented cases in the U.S. of waterfowl hunters accidentally shooting whooping cranes. An additional three whooping cranes have been killed by poachers/illegal shooting, but not by hunters. The remainder of human caused whooping cranes losses are largely attributed to vandals.
http://wsobirds.org/files/Conservation/Whooping_Cranes_and_Shooting_Related_Mortalities.pdf
- Currently, the eastern population of whooping cranes is considered by the USFWS to be an experimental/non-essential population. Several other states that allow for the hunting of sandhill cranes have developed methods for effectively educating hunters and preventing the accidental take of whooping cranes. Due to the experimental/non-essential status of whooping cranes in Tennessee, there is no federal authority to force the closure of a sandhill crane season if and when whooping cranes are present in the state or area where sandhills will be hunted. Efforts to link sandhill crane hunting to the potential of accidental take of whooping cranes are a back-door attempt to stop Tennessee's proposed sandhill crane season.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Mississippi and Eastern Flyway Councils have produced a Eastern Population Greater Sandhill Crane Management Plan, which includes guidance and allowance for sandhill crane hunting seasons in the states covered by these councils.

- The basis for allowing these hunting seasons is that the population has recovered to a level that can support and sustain hunting and that these birds are classified as a game bird.
- 1,260 sandhill cranes were killed during depredation takings, primarily for agriculture (141 depredation permits authorizing the kill of 2,525 cranes were issued), in USFWS Region 3 (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Missouri) during 2011.

The Sandhill Crane Population

- Eastern sandhill cranes last three years fall staging count (not estimate): 2012 = 87,796; 2011=71,975; and 2010=49,666 (USFWS actual crane count numbers).
- Eastern population of greater sandhill cranes is estimated to be over 100,000 individuals according to wildlife professionals.
- In Tennessee, the previous five year counts were as follows: 2009 = 20,191; 2010 = 48505; 2011 = 16540; 2012 = 13356; 2013 = 18,071 (USFWS/TWRA Mid-Winter Survey crane count)
- The eastern population sandhill crane is the greater sandhill crane, while the western sandhill is the lesser sandhill crane .
- The methodologies used to count cranes have been standardized and perfected by wildlife biologists since the 1950's when biologists started using similar techniques to monitor continental waterfowl and waterbird populations.
- Most of the sandhill cranes presently hunted in the U.S. belong to the Mid-Continent Population, which at more than 500,000 birds is the largest sandhill crane population in North America. The Mid-Continent Population winters in Alaska, Siberia, and Canada and migrates through the Central Flyway to its wintering grounds in Texas, New Mexico, southeastern Arizona, and Mexico. From 2000 to 2009, it's estimated that 8,600 hunters harvested about 17,000 sandhills annually from the Mid-Continent Population.
- While certainly less numerous than their Midwestern counterparts, the sandhill population in the East has grown significantly in the last 30-40 years. As of the USFWS fall 2009 survey, the Eastern population numbered slightly less than 60,000 birds—up from 30,000 in 1996. Professional biologists believe that the population is now more than 100,000 individual birds.

Where Sandhill Crane Hunting Currently Occurs

- States and Canadian provinces that have sandhill crane hunting seasons:
 - A total of 15 U.S. states, 3 Canadian provinces, and Mexico allow sandhill crane hunting.
 - Texas and New Mexico have been hunting sandhills since 1961
 - In total, 13 states in the West and Midwest, including nine of the 10 states in the Central Flyway, allow sandhill crane hunting today. Sandhill crane hunting seasons currently exist in (*asterisk represents states where hunting and viewing festivals occur*):
 - Alaska*
 - Arizona*
 - Utah
 - Colorado*
 - Kansas

- Montana
 - New Mexico*
 - North Dakota*
 - Oklahoma
 - South Dakota
 - Texas*
 - Wyoming
 - Minnesota
- Wisconsin (Native American tribes are hunting the greater sandhill crane)
 - Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba
 - Mexico
 - Minnesota approved a sandhill crane hunting season in July 2011. In the process, Minnesota became the first state in the Mississippi Flyway to hold a sandhill crane in almost 100 years in the fall of 2011. That hunt was limited to the northwest corner of the state, however, which is used by members of the Mid-Continent Population as a nesting and migration resting spot.
 - Minnesota's inaugural crane hunt ran Sept. 4 to Oct. 10, and 1,962 hunters paid \$3.50 for a crane permit.
 - In addition to Minnesota, Kentucky passed a sandhill crane hunting season and held a successful hunt in 2011/2012 and 2012/2013.

Sandhill Crane Viewing Festivals (*please note in previous section states that have viewing festivals and which allow hunting of sandhills*)

- States that have sandhill crane viewing festivals (*asterisk indicates states that allow crane hunting and also note that this does not represent an exhaustive list of festivals but rather those readily findable via Google internet searches*):
 - Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival, Fairbanks, Alaska*
 - Wings Over Wilcox, Birding and Nature Festival, Wilcox, Arizona*
 - Festival of the Cranes, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, San Antonio, New Mexico*
 - Monte Vista Crane Festival, San Luis Valley, Colorado*
 - Yampa Valley Crane Festival, Steamboat Springs, Colorado*
 - Sandhill Crane Festival, Steele, North Dakota*
 - Whooping and Sandhill Crane Festival, Port Aransas, Texas*
 - Necedah Lions Whooping Crane Festival, Juneau, Wisconsin – cancelled due to lack of interest after 10-years* http://www.wiscnews.com/news/local/article_5609b000-6adf-11e0-97c0-001cc4c002e0.html
 - Whooping Crane Festival, Berlin, Wisconsin*
 - Sandhill Crane Festival, Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, California
 - Sandhill Crane Festival, (Eaton County) Bellevue, Michigan
 - Sandhill Crane and Art Festival – “Cranefest”, Calhoun Co., Michigan

- Hiwassee Refuge, Tennessee
- CraneWatch Festival, Kearney, Nebraska
- Othello Sandhill Crane Festival, Kennewick, Washington
- Florida Crane Festival, Gainesville, Florida

Sandhill Crane Crop Damage

- As the population has grown, so too have reports of sandhill crane crop damage. Crop depredation is increasing because of the cranes' attraction to new shoots of spring agricultural crops, including corn and winter wheat. Cranes uproot the germinating seed of corn plants or other crops and feed on the attached kernel. Later in the year, farmers deal with grazing and trampling damage to winter wheat, as well as damage to standing un-harvested corn, when large concentrations of sandhill cranes are present.
- A report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed 84 complaints of sandhill crane crop damage from Wisconsin alone in 2007, resulting in \$263,000 in damages.
- As a result of this damage, between 200 and 300 harvest permits are issued for sandhill cranes each year in the Mississippi Flyway to deal with crop damage. Though not issued as part of a formal hunting season, these depredation permits have provided biologists with evidence that sandhills can be harvested without impacting the overall population.
- In Tennessee, the number of crane depredation tags has declined from a high of 4 in 2008 (90 cranes killed) to a recent number of one permit in 2011 and 2012 (17 and 18 cranes killed respectively). In speaking with local land owners and farmers in the Sequatchie Valley, the primary reason for the low numbers and decline in permits appears to be (a) many landowners and farmers are unaware that depredation permits are available, (b) they are leery of working with the federal government and the requirements of the permit, (c) the permits are time consuming and difficult to obtain, requiring multiple calls to the USFWS and others, and (d) that because of the difficulty in obtaining the permits they are often not timely issued, and are not available to address crop depredation problems.

Expectations of a Tennessee Sandhill Crane Season

While no formal presentation has been given by TWRA establishing the parameters of a 2013 sandhill crane season, we can infer, from a previously proposed and publicly discussed season considered in 2011, the agency would design a limited hunting season on this game bird that would closely follow current waterfowl hunting seasons.

We would expect the agency to issue 700-1000 permits to hunters, which would allow each hunter to harvest up to three cranes during the season. Thus, the total potential harvest available in a Tennessee season would be below the allowable amount identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Additionally, we would expect and have requested that the TWRA follow the lead of other states and conduct education and training for hunters as to the differences in appearance of sandhill crane and whooping cranes. While we do not fear that hunters will accidentally take whooping cranes, we feel it prudent to be cautious and provide the training nonetheless.