

## Sandhill crane

### *Antigone canadensis*

You'll probably hear them before you see them. They can be quite loud, but they have to be as they communicate with the rest of their flock going 45 mph several thousand feet above the ground. Sandhill cranes are very large, migratory birds that commonly travel the Mississippi/Great Lakes flyway in flocks numbering in the hundreds. They are an important part of the Chicago regional ecosystem and, happily, one that we have been seeing (and hearing) more frequently.

Sandhill cranes are magnificent birds that can live to be 20 years old. Adults are large, weighing about 10 pounds. That's heavy for a bird, but flying is absolutely no problem. They have an 80-inch wingspan and are very skilled at soaring. Wings extended, they can ride thermal winds for hours, requiring only an occasional flapping of their wings to stay aloft. In flight, their long legs trail out behind them and their long neck is kept straight.

Outgoing, smart, and social, sandhill cranes are marked by red foreheads, white cheeks, and long, dark, pointed bills which are good for catching fish, insects, small reptiles and amphibians. The rest of their body is covered in grayish feathers. Young cranes have reddish-brown appearance, which changes as they mature.

Once nearly vanished from the Midwest, sandhill crane populations have bounced back. In the 1930s, only two dozen breeding pairs lived in Wisconsin. Today, their population in the upper Midwest is now nearly 100,000.

The most important factor in the sandhill cranes' recovery has been the conservation and restoration of wetlands, marshes and prairies, the cranes' preferred habitat for nesting and breeding. There they can find the food they need and protection from predators.

The population expansion is so widespread that some sandhill cranes, once a rare sight in Illinois, are now calling the Chicago region home, especially in the wetlands of Cook, Lake, and McHenry counties. Migrating cranes traverse the city and follow the Chicago River system and the western edge of Lake Michigan on their way to Indiana. There, in the expansive marshes of the Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Area, they converge in fall with thousands of other sandhill cranes. Most of the cranes will go on to make the three-day flight south to Tennessee, Georgia, or even Florida, although some will remain locally to spend the winter at Jasper-Pulaski.

A good place for crane watching locally this February is the Cook Country Forest Preserves in Palos and your own backyard.

**Friends of the Chicago River**

