

The Sandhill Crane's Remarkable Recovery

By Ron Hoffman



Sandhill Cranes were considered common in Michigan prior to the 1880s, but by the early 1900s ornithologist feared they would become extirpated. Lawrence Walkinshaw, a world authority on cranes, estimated only 17 pairs survived in southern Michigan in 1931 and fewer than 100 pairs in the Upper Peninsula. From those alarming low numbers the population has rebounded now to more than 20,000.

Two Michigan Audubon sanctuaries, Bernard Baker Sanctuary in Calhoun County and Phyllis Haehnle Sanctuary in Jackson County, have significantly contributed to this remarkable recovery. Walkinshaw documented that cranes were barely surviving at both areas before becoming sanctuaries. He found only three cranes at Baker in 1921 and three more at Haehnle in 1935. Establishing Baker as a sanctuary in 1941 and Haehnle in 1955, not only provided breeding habitat, but also protection during the fall waterfowl hunting season. By 1955 these two sanctuaries harbored 21% of 204 sandhills found in southern Michigan. Their combined acreage is only 2.9 square miles, yet they attracted on average 50% of the cranes during fall staging in Michigan. One has to wonder what the crane population would be today if these two properties had not become sanctuaries.



Pair of sandhill cranes photographed along the shore of Mill Lake near the Discovery Center.



An Adult Crane and hatchling on a nest in Big Portage Marsh in the Waterloo Recreation Area

Monitoring population levels is basic to understanding the status of a species. Since 1979 “craniacs” in Michigan have participated in a fall survey that estimates the size and trend of the eastern population of Greater Sandhill Cranes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife coordinates the survey throughout eastern North America. Last year, counters tallied 44,000 sandhills in the eastern population including 58 Michigan cooperators who found 17,747 cranes. Baker Sanctuary alone attracted 7,292 cranes, the largest concentration in the state.

The number of cranes counted in 2008 was 7 % less than in 2007 Two factors had a major effect on last year’s count. First, cooperators were unable to visit staging areas in several counties that normally harbor cranes.

Secondly, a rain event during September flooded many night roosts forcing cranes to disperse to areas not normally surveyed. For example, the Haehnle Sanctuary normally attracts more than a couple of thousand cranes only had 395, while 2,530 were counted roosting in nearby flooded fields. It is suspected that some cranes went undetected at other non-traditional roosts.

Each fall crane viewing maps are available at the Discovery Center to help visitors enjoy these magnificent birds.