



# Sandhill Crane Fact Sheet

## Classification

**Sandhill Crane – *Grus Canadensis***

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Family:** Gruidae

**Order:** Gruiformes

**Genus:** *Grus*

**Species:** *Canadensis*

There are 6 subspecies of the Sandhill Crane found in North America. The 3 migratory populations, the Greater, Lesser, and Canadian are found in California.

**Greater Sandhill Crane – *Grus Canadensis Tabita***

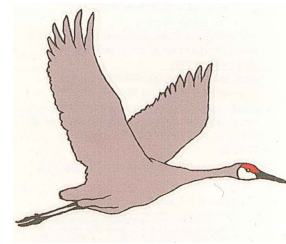
**Lesser Sandhill Crane – *Grus Canadensis Canadensis***

**Canadian Sandhill Crane – *Grus Canadensis Rowani***

**Mississippi Sandhill Crane – *Grus Canadensis Pulla***

**Florida Sandhill Crane – *Grus Canadensis Pratensis***

**Cuban Sandhill Crane – *Grus Canadensis Nesiotis***



Sandhill Cranes' closest relatives, besides other crane species, are other birds in the order Gruiformes, such as coots, rails and gallinules.

## Description / Identification

**Appearance:** Sandhill Cranes are long-legged, long-necked, tall, upright, stately birds with sharp pointed beaks, heavy bodies, and long sturdy toes.

**Height/Weight:** **Lesser:** 3-4 feet / 7-8 lbs.

**Greater:** 4-5 feet / males ~12 lbs.; females ~9.5 lbs.; largest subspecies

**Sexes:** Plumage indistinguishable; male slightly larger. Some behaviors can distinguish them.

**Subspecies:** Difficult to tell apart in field. Lessers noticeably smaller. Plumage identical.

**Plumage:** When viewed from a distance, adults appear uniformly silver-gray, but careful observation will reveal some variations. The rear portion of the crown, as well as the nape, are a darker slaty gray. The gray back, wings and shoulders are noticeably darker than the pale gray neck and belly. The underwings are light gray, almost white. The throat and chin are very pale gray to white. Cheek color, which ranges from sooty gray to white, is an important social marker in crane society.

**Head:** (except for young) Red crown patch naked of feathers. **Crown Patch:** The distinctive bright red patch of bare skin stretches from the base of the bill, under the eyes, over the forehead and top of the head, and ends at mid-crown.

**Bill:** Black, straight, and long (Lesser – 4 in.; Greater – 5 in.)

**Wings:** Long and Wide **Wingspan:** Lesser – 6 ft.; Greater – 7ft.

**Tail:** Extremely short with 12 rectrices (feathers used for steering, balance, and maneuvering in flight)

**Legs and Feet:** black, sturdy, and heavily scaled; 4 sharp-clawed toes on each foot.

**Flight:** Neck extended forward, feet trail behind. **Wingbeat:** Slow downstroke, quick upstroke; often glides

**Voice:** Resonant and deep trumpetlike notes that can be heard for several miles.

## Migration

The Lesser Sandhill Cranes that winter in the Central Valley have traveled from their breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. The Greater Sandhill Cranes that winter here nest in northeastern California and south-central Oregon. Sandhill Cranes do much of their migrating from mid-morning to afternoon, when thermals are strongest.

## **Feeding / Diet**

Sandhill Cranes spend most of the daylight hours in areas where food is most abundant, generally walking several miles a day through dry pastures, fields, wet meadows, or marshes in search for food, eating as they go.

The omnivorous diet of a typical adult Sandhill Crane is 90% vegetable, 10% animal and is incredibly varied. Sandhill Colts (chicks) eat mostly terrestrial invertebrates; earthworms, insects and arachnids.

## **Mating / Breeding**

The Sandhill Crane is monogamous and mates for life.

Unlike their gregarious behavior during the rest of the year, Sandhill Cranes are territorial during the breeding season, and each pair will vigorously defend its nesting area. Sandhill Cranes return to the same territory season after season.

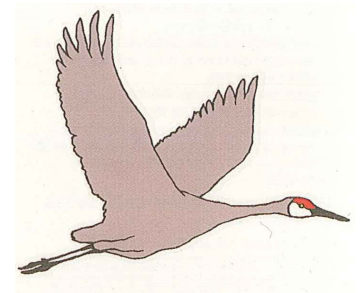
## **Status**

The ancient, adaptable Sandhill Crane is the most abundant crane species worldwide, and about 3,000 lesser and greater Sandhills settle in at the Cosumnes River Preserve (CRP) each winter. Most of the Preserve's wintering cranes are Lessers, but the Delta (including the Preserve) is a critical wintering area for the much-less-abundant Greater.

The Lesser is the most abundant of the Sandhill Crane subspecies. The Great subspecies once bred widely in meadows and marshes throughout the West and Midwest, but because of human encroachment Greater Sandhill Cranes have lost more habitat than any other subspecies. Conservation and habitat restoration efforts have helped greater to stage enough of a comeback in some areas to be taken off the federal threatened list, but they are still listed as threatened in California, where the breeding grounds of these wild, easily agitated birds have been seriously disturbed by humans. Current Greater and Lesser populations seem to be stable.

## **Populations**

<u>Subspecies</u>	<u>Worldwide Population</u>	<u>Central Valley Population</u>
Lesser	~500,000	~25,000
Greater	~ 10,000	~ 6,000



## **Watching Cranes**

**When and Where:** Prime Sandhill Crane viewing season at the Cosumnes River Preserve is between October 15 and March 1. Dawn and dusk are the target times to observe the greatest numbers of crane and the widest variety of intriguing behaviors.

## **Etiquette**

**Be Still:** Limit your movement while watching feeding birds. Should a "lookout" crane decide you're a threat, the flock may well fly off, depleting their hard-won energy stores.

**Be Quiet:** Speak quietly to avoid spooking cranes. Stay at least 400 yards from feeding cranes.

**Don't Wear Out Your Welcome:** Should you see any of these behaviors, it's time to back off:

- Cranes nervously withdrawing into the center of a flock;
- Cranes slamming their bills into the ground then tossing their heads defiantly high;
- Cranes standing rigidly erect, looking straight ahead, necks stretched to the limit.