

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*



Folk Name: Kronky, Little Brown Crane

Status: Migrant and casual Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Plowed fields, short-grass fields and pastures

The Sandhill Crane is a stately, gray bird that stands almost 4 feet tall. The adults have a red “cap” on the top of their head and a white cheek and chin. Most Sandhill Cranes breed in the far northern United States and north into Canada, but there is a small breeding population in Florida. Sandhill Cranes migrate annually from their northern breeding sites to wintering sites far to the south and back. One regular migration route extends as far east as the western tip of North Carolina.

Conservation efforts implemented during the last half of the twentieth century have helped the Sandhill Crane population to grow, and today there are more Sandhill Cranes than any other type of crane in the world. In fact, they are now legally hunted in a few states, including Tennessee, where local hunters tout the flavor of the bird’s meat calling them “sirloin in the sky.” However, this hunting is very controversial as it can be hard for hunters to discern the Sandhill Crane from the endangered Whooping Crane.

Cranes have long been confused with herons. The common name “crane” has been applied to a variety of herons, making their identity even more unclear. People reported sighting what they believed to be “sand-hill cranes” in North Carolina counties decades before the first true Sandhill Crane was formally documented in the state. For example, local weather prophets believed that “a ‘sand-hill crane’ flying up the creek...[knew] more about when it is going to rain than the government.” However, the birds they were referring to were in fact, Great Blue Herons. One humorous example of this comes from a



Sandhill Crane in Mecklenburg County. (Taylor Piephoff)



J F M A M J J A S O N D

piece printed in the local sports section about a Charlotte Hornets baseball game in 1913 that was disrupted by a bird—which in all probability was a Great Blue or other species of heron.

“The game was lost Monday afternoon, it is believed, because of the appearance of a stork over the grandstand in the fourth inning. The big bird flew about over the diamond for a minute or two and seemed to be eyeing someone in the grandstand. However that may be... several were terribly frightened. The situation was relieved and everyone breathed easy; but it was too late, when the stork flew straight to the grandstand and soared above it—it was then seen to be only a sand-hill crane and everyone felt easy again.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, July 23, 1913

Apparently, no baby was delivered and these baseball players and fan’s short-lived distress was soon forgotten.

The first record of a true Sandhill Crane in North Carolina wasn’t recorded until 1957, the second in 1968, the third in 1970, and the fourth in 1974. The first and third were found near the coast, and the second and fourth were seen in the far western part of the state. The first published record from the Piedmont of North Carolina was an adult Sandhill Crane sighted at Jordan Lake on July 8, 1980.

South Carolina had recorded about 10 sightings by 1970, and that number increased to about 30 by 1989. The first sighting of Sandhill Crane ever reported in the South Carolina Piedmont was reported from our region. Chip White submitted a detailed report to Dr. Sid Gauthreaux at Clemson University of a Sandhill Crane that he had observed on March 4, 1973, in Chester County. The bird was viewed at close range, both standing and in flight.

There has been a marked increase in the number of

records in the Central Carolinas since this initial sighting. In all likelihood, this is due to the continuing growth of the nation's Sandhill Crane population—which is a true conservation success story. There were three reports here in the late 1990s, and there have been over a dozen since the turn of the twenty-first century.

Taylor Piephoff sighted a Sandhill Crane in Mecklenburg County off U.S. 74 near Stallings, when it was “forced down in an ice storm” on February 10, 1994. Two Sandhill Cranes were seen by several observers in Iredell County during the Statesville Christmas Bird Count on January 4, 1998. The count editor noted the birds had been present for some time and that good identification details were provided. One Sandhill Crane was seen by many birders north of Shelby and near Waco in Cleveland County, from August 25, 1999, through the end of September. This crane showed up beside a small pond on the Hooker family farm, a family that was repeatedly described as being kind and welcoming hosts. Lori Owenby recounted: “We had marvelous scope views of the bird feeding, walking, and hiding! It would lay down in the grass and get as low as possible—totally disappearing from view at times.”

By 2000, Sandhill Cranes had become more common in the Carolinas both in migration and during the winter. Four were seen at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge January 13, 2002, and one at Riverbend Park in Catawba County on March 25, 2002. Laura Fogo sighted one flying over the Pee Dee River on January 5, 2005. One was reported in Townville, SC, on November 11, 2006. Three were seen and photographed by Ron Underwood near Cleveland, Rowan County, NC, on February 3, 2009. A pair was found by John Scavetto in Union County near Stallings, NC, on June 28, 2009. He reported having seen one near there earlier in the year. One was later relocated on July 1, 2009, by David and Marcia Wright at the Fincher Farm, just across the border in Mecklenburg County.

A Sandhill Crane was shot in York County in June 2009 and was turned over to a local wildlife rehabilitator for treatment. The bird had been shot by 15 bullets at close range and did not survive. The specimen is now in the collections of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

John Scavetto photographed a flock of 22 Sandhill Cranes flying above Charlotte's Renaissance Festival and across the Cabarrus-Mecklenburg county line near Davidson on October 10, 2010. MCPRD staff watched three flying over the Clarks Creek Nature Preserve in Charlotte on December 8, 2010. Christmas Bird Count participants watched one fly from Stanly County into Montgomery County near the Lake Tillery Dam on December 31, 2011.

A Sandhill Crane was found in Charlotte on April 30, 2014, at the Whitehall Business Park. It is possible that a recent severe storm forced the bird down. This bird appeared exhausted, and it accepted food from concerned employees who photographed it while it roamed the parking lots, calling loudly. Then it disappeared. Several hours later, a second Sandhill Crane was sighted (possibly the same bird) off Sam Wilson Road about 9 miles away. This bird also seemed unafraid of humans and was easily captured and turned over to a local wildlife rehabilitator for examination. The bird was determined to be underweight with mild feather fraying, but was otherwise uninjured. It was rehabilitated and was released at a wildlife refuge in eastern Tennessee in late May.

Two of our most recent reports come from Catawba County. Park Rangers reported two Sandhill Cranes flying over Riverbend Park on February 27, 2016, and Lori Owenby spotted two Sandhill Cranes at Murray's Mill near the town of Catawba on April 26, 2017. Mandy Crivello photographed a Sandhill Crane in a residential yard in Kannapolis near the Cabarrus-Rowan county line on May 21, 2017.