

GREATER SANDHILL CRANES WINTERING IN FLORIDA AND GEORGIA

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Introduction

The breeding range of the eastern population of Greater Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis tabida*) includes parts of Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, and the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba (Drewien et al. 1975, Wilson Bull. 87: 299). Less is known about the winter range of these birds. Walkinshaw (1973, Cranes Of The World, New York, Winchester Press) stated that they wintered in Florida on the Kissimmee Prairie and at Paynes Prairie near Gainesville, and possibly in the Okefenokee Swamp of southern Georgia. At Paynes Prairie, a peak winter population (Jan. 1970) of 1,800 Greater Sandhill Cranes (Williams and Phillips 1972, Auk, 89: 542) has declined over the past 6 years to less than 400 (Nesbitt 1977, Fla. Field Nat., 5:16-17).

Censuses of southward — migrating Greater Sandhill Cranes at the Jasper-Pulaski Wildlife Area, Indiana, during the fall of 1974 (Shroufe 1976, Proc. Int. Crane Workshop, 1: 51-58) indicated an eastern population of at least 9,000 birds. Censuses at Jasper-Pulaski during October-November 1976 now suggest a population of 12,000 -15,000 (pers. observ.). The distribution of these birds on their wintering grounds is poorly understood.

The University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point has been conducting Sandhill Crane research since 1973. Migration studies include color-marking cranes with either white aluminum neck collars or green, 9 x 2 inch plastic wing tags with white or black numerals. During the summer of 1976, 2 cranes from central Wisconsin were successfully fitted with portable radio transmitters (AVM Instrument Co., Champaign, Illinois 61820).

The objectives of my research in Florida were: (1) to locate concentrations of wintering Greater Sandhill Cranes, and (2) to locate cranes marked or radioed in Wisconsin.

Methods

I travelled over 3,000 miles in Florida and southern Georgia during 23 December 1976 — 11 January 1977, contacted 25 persons believed to have information on wintering cranes, and spent 3 hours in the air searching Paynes Prairie and much of the Kissimmee Prairie. Equipment included 7 x 50 binoculars, a 15 x 60 spotting scope,

and a portable receiver and antennas (AVM Instrument Co.).

Care was taken to distinguish between the migratory Greater Sandhill Crane and the Florida Sandhill Crane (*G. c. pratensis*), a year-round resident of Florida and southern Georgia. As the 2 subspecies are nearly identical in appearance, they can be separated in the field only by behavioral differences. Florida Sandhill Cranes are observed in family groups of 2, 3 or 4 birds, while wintering Greater Sandhill Cranes usually occur in larger flocks in which distinct pairs and family groups are not apparent.

Results

I was able to account for over 4,500 wintering Greater Sandhill Cranes by direct observation and through the observations and reports of others (Fig. 1). The largest concentrations were in north-central Florida and southeastern Georgia.

I found 5 Wisconsin-marked cranes at 3 locations. A crane wing-tagged on 27 July 1976, at Buena Vista Marsh, Portage County, Wisconsin, was observed with approximately 100 other sandhills on 7 January at Paynes Prairie. Two cranes wing-tagged in central Wisconsin between 1974 and 1976 were among the 800 cranes near Weirsdale, as was a bird that I had equipped with a radio transmitter on 28 June 1976 at the Mead Wildlife Area, Marathon County, Wisconsin. Another crane, marked with a white neck collar in the fall of 1973 at the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, Juneau County, Wisconsin, was among the 125 cranes at the Hayman Ranch, Osceola County.

Concentrations of wintering Greater Sandhill Cranes were observed in 3 habitats. In Highlands and Osceola Counties cranes were found on the extensive improved pastures characteristic of the Kissimmee Prairie. In north-central Florida (Alachua, Putnam, Marion, and Lake Counties) concentrations of cranes were associated with agricultural land, green fields of oats and rye, fallow fields where the earth had been recently disturbed, and cornfields harvested the previous summer. In the Okefenokee Swamp, Georgia, cranes inhabited a diverse wetland of wooded and shrub swamps interspersed with areas of emergent and floating vegetation and open water.

Discussion

These 4,500+ wintering Greater Sandhill Cranes probably represent no more than 30-35 percent of the eastern population. Although a good beginning, clearly other concentrations can be located. In

south-central Florida it is possible that flocks of several hundred cranes could be overlooked on the extensive prairies and pastures of the Kissimmee Prairie and from the DeSoto Prairie west to the Sarasota – Fruitville area. Flocks of 200 – 300 birds have been observed in recent years at several locations in south-central Florida: on the DD Ranch northwest of Myakka River State Park, Sarasota County, at Indian River Marsh, Glades County, and south of Lake Istokpoga, Highlands County.

Most (76%) of the cranes reported here were from north-central Florida (Alachua, Putnam, Marion, and Lake Counties), and evidence exists of other wintering flocks in these counties. Cranes have been reported from the vicinity of the Ocala National Forest, both near the southeast corner (John Hartsfield, pers. comm.), and from the Alexander Springs area (Brian Knowles, pers. comm.).

The Greater Sandhill Crane population in the Okefenokee Swamp also needs further study. The region's inaccessibility makes accurate population estimates difficult, and the 600 noted here could be an underestimate. The possibility also exists that cranes are wintering in other parts of southern Georgia.

This was only a partial survey and continuing efforts should be directed toward identifying wintering areas of eastern Greater Sandhill Cranes in Florida and Georgia. Information on winter crane concentrations and reports of observations of wing-tagged cranes should be sent to the author in care of Dr. Lyle Nauman at the address listed below.

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