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COYOTE PREYS ON YOUNG FLORIDA SANDHILL CRANE

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Predation has not been identified as a significant mortality factor among healthy, grown Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) (Bennett and Bennett 1990, Tacha et al. 1992). But for young cranes, before and just after fledging, predation is probably the most significant mortality source. The probability of survival from hatching to fledging (80 days of age) is 0.649 in Florida Sandhill Cranes (*G. c. pratensis*) (Nesbitt 1992). Bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) are primary predators of cranes in Florida, although elsewhere other mammalian and avian predators have had an impact on pre-fledged young and sick or injured Sandhill and Whooping Cranes (*G. americana*) (Perkins and Brown 1981, Drewien et al. 1985, Tacha et al. 1992). Coyote (*Canis latrans*) and Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) predation has reduced success in local breeding populations of Greater Sandhill Cranes (*G. c. tabida*) in Oregon (Littlefield 1976, 1981). Coyote populations have recently invaded and are increasing in Florida, particularly in the panhandle and north-central peninsula (Brady and Campell 1983, Wooding and Hardisky 1990).

Movements and productivity of Florida Sandhill Cranes have been monitored on Kanapaha Prairie since 1985. Kanapaha Prairie comprises 650 ha of freshwater marsh and grassland in southern Alachua County, 5 km SW of Gainesville. The 5–6 pairs of Florida Sandhill Cranes that annually nest on this area were observed at least once 2–6 days a week.

One of the territories, designated the blue-white-blue (BWB) territory, has been monitored since 1985. The resident pair had fledged five young from 1985 to 1992. This pair hatched both eggs from their 1993 nest on 18 and 19 March. One of the chicks disappeared on 16 April.

On 30 April, "guard calls" (Tacha et al. 1992) were heard from the adults at ca. 0750 by LCB; the pair, but not the remaining chick, was in a stand of live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) a few meters from the prairie edge. Almost immediately the two adults flew to the open prairie south of the oaks. Their chick then appeared, running southwestwardly from the oaks and toward the prairie. A coyote was then seen walking in the direction of the adult cranes and their chick. Thinking at first the animal might be a neighbor's dog, LCB began yelling and ran toward the animal hoping to scare it away. The coyote ignored her approach and continued to walk toward the chick at a fast pace. The coyote jumped the chick from behind and quickly killed it. The adult cranes were 8-10 m from the chick when it was killed. Once the kill was made, they approached and remained near the coyote "guard calling" and walking agitatedly around the animal as it ate. The adults appeared at times to be no more than 3 or 4 m from the coyote. The coyote remained at the site of the kill for about 5 min. and retreated when SAN approached in a truck. The coyote may have been raising a litter of pups; later that summer SAN saw a pair of adult coyotes and three pups about 500 m west of the kill site.

This observation is consistent with the hunting technique described for coyotes (Banfield 1974:287), but differs somewhat from the method observed for smaller canids preying on cranes. Bennett (Drieslein and Bennett 1979) watched a red fox (*Vulpes fulva*) take a Greater Sandhill Crane chick in Wisconsin. The method of capture used by the fox relied more on stealth and stalking, with a short (a few meters) run to grab the chick and carry it off. Before the fox caught the chick, the adults attempted to distract it by running in opposite directions with wings lowered, they continued to give this distraction posture for 10 min. after the fox had killed the chick (Drieslein and Bennett 1974). In the episode we are describing, the adults had seen the coyote well before the chick was taken but they never made an effort to distract it. Possibly they did not perceive the coyote as a potential predator. There are several coyote-like dogs in the area that pay no attention to the cranes. Because the coyote is a recent arrival to north-central Florida, the resident crane population may need to recognize that coyotes are a threat before they will react to them appropriately.

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