

LEUCISTIC SANDHILL CRANES IN FLORIDA

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Atypical plumage coloration has been described in many species of birds (Hailman 1984) and these aberrantly marked individuals are usually seen as curiosities. They can sometimes present problems for identification as well as correct description. Abnormally white Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) are described by several observers. A Crane seen near Last Mountain Lake, Saskatchewan was described as having "head, neck, breast, and anterior portions of the back that were pure white" (Miller 1961). Another Sandhill Crane seen in Saskatchewan was "completely white except for a red forehead and brown wings" (Shadick 1985). A crane with a "pale or diluted version of the normal plumage" was seen in Nebraska (Murphy 1960). Another Sandhill Crane with "normal coloring of the head, neck, and tail, but the wings, and back that were white with a patch of brown" was seen, also in Nebraska, in April 1970 (Tremaine 1970). These authors all referred to these white or light plumaged Sandhill Cranes as albino or partially albino. This condition is more correctly described as non-eumelanin schizochroism (Harrison 1985; J. P. Hailman, pers. comm.) resulting in a leucistic appearance.

These previously published reports were all from mid-continental North America, this is understandable since most Sandhill Cranes migrate through this region (Tacha et al. 1992). Several thousand Greater Sandhill Cranes (*G. c. tabida*) winter in Florida, and there is also a large resident population (4,000 to 6,000) of Florida Sandhill Cranes (*G. c. pratensis*) (Tacha et al. 1992). There are no published accounts of leucistic Sandhill Cranes for Florida, however we have seen three aberrant plumage Sandhill Cranes in recent years. The first, seen in January 1987, was on a private ranch between Paynes Prairie and Levy Lake in Alachua County. This bird had a scattering of gray feathers on the wings and back, but otherwise was white. A second bird, mostly white with a darker wash on the head and neck, was seen in December of 1995. This Crane was seen on an agricultural area near the University of Florida campus, on the outskirts of Gainesville, also Alachua County. The third bird (Fig. 1), the whitest of these three, was seen near Osteen in Volusia County. This bird, along with several normal plumage Sandhill Cranes, was seen several times in January of 2001 and again in January 2002. Plumage of this individual was entirely white. Legs, feet, and bill were yellowish rather than the typical dark greenish gray. The comb and eyes were of normal coloration; begonia rose and spectrum orange (Tacha et al. 1992), respectively. This bird was only seen during the wintering period for Greater Sandhill Cranes, which suggests that it is most likely *G. c. tabida*. None of the other accounts of leucistic Sandhill Cranes describes color abnormalities of the soft parts.

Murphy (1960) speculated on the possibility that one of these leucistic Sandhill Cranes could be mistaken for a Whooping Crane (*G. americana*). The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has been participating in an effort to reestablish non-migrating Whooping Cranes in the southeastern United States for the past 10 years (Nesbitt et al. 2001). In 2002, there was a population of 90 to 100 Whooping Cranes free living in Florida. Observations of Whooping Cranes have been confirmed from many counties in peninsular Florida, from the Georgia border to Lake Okeechobee. The mobility of this population means a Whooping Crane could be expected to occur



Figure 1. Leucistic Sandhill Crane photographed near Osteen, Volusia County, Florida.

anywhere in Florida at any time of year. There is an ongoing attempt by a state-federal-private coalition, The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, to establish a migratory population of Whooping Cranes in the eastern United States that will migrate from Florida to Wisconsin (Archibald and Duff 2001). An abnormally white Sandhill Crane also might be assumed to be a hybrid between a Sandhill and a Whooping crane. This would be a highly unusual occurrence. Hybrids have occurred as the result of intentional artificial inseminations under captive conditions (George Gee, pers. comm.). The 3 resultant offspring were mostly white, as in leucistic Sandhills, but these hybrids all had a more massive bill and head, more characteristic of Whooping Cranes. Care should be taken to rule out the possibility of a leucistic Sandhill Crane when assessing the possibility that a Whooping Crane has been sighted anywhere in the eastern United States—particularly in Florida. Special attention should be given to the features of the head; these will best distinguish the two species.

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