

It's a Bird! It's a Sandhill Crane!



With awe-inspiring movements, radiant calls, and their prominent coloration, sandhill cranes bring joy to those around them. The species can be observed at many points across North America throughout the year, though the most well-noted sightings occur during migration. Sandhill cranes are one of the longest surviving species, with fossil evidence of the cranes dating back approximately 2.5 million years!



Sandhill cranes are omnivores that dwell in wetlands and prefer habitats along rivers, marshes, or croplands (TheCornellLab, 2019). They are distinguished from other crane and Heron species by their bright red foreheads, white cheeks, and gray, red, brown, or "rust" colored plumage. The National Wildlife Federation found that this unique lower body coloration occurs from preening! Using iron-rich mud to clean and straighten their feathers leaves behind the iconic reddish-brown residue.



Sandhill cranes are also very well known for dancing. While this event may occur throughout the year, sightings are most common during mating season, early spring. Highlights of the dances include flapping wings, calling, jumping, and throwing things into the air (NWF, 2022).



Jenni Frankenberg Veal shares in her 2014 publication of *Appalachian Voices, Sandhill Cranes: A Winter Spectacle in Southeast Tennessee*, that there are 15 different species of cranes worldwide, including six Sandhill

crane subspecies. Three subspecies are migratory birds: the Lesser Sandhill crane, The Greater Sandhill Crane, and the Canadian Sandhill Crane (NWF, 2022). Fall migration begins in October and November, while spring migration ranges from February to March. TWRA notes that the Greater Sandhill crane, *Grus canadensis tabida*, travels through and overwinters in Tennessee each year! Bob Butters, in his 2019 article, *A Sight To See: Sandhill Cranes at The Hiwassee Refuge*, explains that the area around the Hiwassee river provides a great deal of food, desired shallow water, and adequate land for cranes and other bird species to gather and thrive through the winter.



The 31st Annual Sandhill Crane Festival will celebrate approximately 20,000 birds that have chosen the Hiwassee River Refuge as their winter home this year. Please join us on January 15th and 16th from 8:00 am - 4:00 pm to take it all in at the Old Birchwood School, Birchwood Community Center. 5623 HWY 60, Birchwood, TN.

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Photographer: Wolf Jedamski

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Camp Wildernest Wildlife Center

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