



# ***Kachemak Crane Watch***

## ***Homer, Alaska***

### **All About Cranes #5 by Kachemak Crane Watch**

#### **What do Sandhill Cranes eat?**

Cranes have a very varied diet that includes both plant and animal matter. They are known as “omnivores.” On a foraging foray around Homer, cranes may eat insects, voles and other small mammals, small birds, eggs, frogs, fish, tadpoles, leeches, and lots of earthworms. In ponds, they will seek tubers, succulent vegetation, and other aquatic plant material. Seeds, grains, berries, and other plant matter are part of their extremely diverse diet.

Here in Homer, corn should only be a very small supplement. It is not necessary. When colts are first hatched, protein sources are most important to help growing colts develop properly. That is why cranes spend most of their day digging worms for the colts.

Since cranes probe the ground with their 4-inch long beaks to feed, it is important not to use any kind of pesticides or herbicides on your lawn. Toxins can get into the food sources that cranes find in the ground under lawns and can kill the colts. Colts are much more susceptible to toxins than adults.

On the wintering grounds, cranes travel mostly in flocks to agricultural fields to feed on waste grains like corn, wheat, and sorghum. They roost in wetland areas where they can probe for plant and animal foods before returning during the day to the agricultural areas.

#### **What other threats do cranes face besides loose dogs?**

Loose dogs and cranes do not mix. Dogs that chase cranes can (1) kill the young; (2) stress cranes and prevent adult pairs from mating; (3) injure cranes; (4) steal and destroy the eggs; (5) chase cranes away from their nesting areas often causing them to abandon their territory; and (6) attract other predators to their nesting area due to the commotion of being harassed. Sandhill Crane parents with colts will attack animals threatening their young and could cause injury to dogs. They will use their 4-inch long beak as a defensive tool to protect their young.

Sandhill Cranes, including their eggs and their young, are prey for a number of different animals besides dogs, and may be killed and eaten by such predators as wolves, Bald Eagles, large owls, ravens, coyotes, bears, and lynx.

Additional threats include vehicles. Driving too fast in residential areas where cranes and their colts may be crossing the road or feeding along the roadside, can result in injury or death to cranes when vehicles cannot stop in time to avoid hitting the cranes.

Habitat loss is another significant threat. As increasing residential development occurs in the Homer area, cranes are losing more of their nesting, feeding, and roosting habitat. This loss results in cranes having to nest and feed in developed areas, where conflicts with loose dogs and vehicles pose problems for the birds.

On their wintering grounds, loss of habitat is the primary threat. Much more of California's central valley is being converted from agricultural lands and wetlands to residential and commercial enterprises, or to vineyards, orchards, and turf farms. During migration cranes stop off at different areas en route to their breeding or wintering grounds to restore their energy supplies by feeding in agricultural areas. These areas too are being developed or converted to other croplands and subdivisions.

Unfortunately, beginning in September, Sandhill Crane hunting is allowed in Alaska. This activity is a direct threat to cranes. Recently, a crane was illegally killed in Homer with a bow and arrow. Poaching poses a further threat to cranes.

For more information about human induced threats to Sandhill Crane in the Homer area, download a brochure describing these threats and what can be done to prevent or lessen them at [www.cranewatch.org](http://www.cranewatch.org).