



Kachemak Crane Watch

Homer, Alaska

All About Cranes #7

When do cranes migrate and where do they go during the winter?

The Sandhill Cranes that summer in the Homer, Alaska area are part of the Pacific Flyway population of Lesser Sandhill Cranes. They will begin migrating to their wintering grounds in early to mid-September. The exact date they leave depends on several factors, primarily weather. Crane families may leave later than non-paired cranes, waiting until their colts' wing muscles are strong enough to sustain the long-distance flights. The earliest known date cranes have left Homer is September 5th in 2001, with the latest departure date September 17th in 2011. In fact, in 2011 the cranes left in two primary pulses – the first group left September 9th and the final pulse left September 17th. The entire journey is approximately 2400 miles.

Once the cranes leave Homer many actually head north to the Chickaloon Flats and/or the Portage Valley area, then along the Alaska Coast until reaching the Ketchikan area wherein the cranes fly inland to the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, down through eastern Oregon and Washington, and into California's central valley where they overwinter. In California, they winter at four different locations south of Sacramento, including the San Joaquin Delta. During fall migration, important stop-over sites include Chickaloon Flats, Portage Valley, and Bering Glacier Lowlands in Alaska; Smithers, British Columbia; and Othello, Washington. Cranes will spend 7% of the year migrating south to their wintering grounds.

Beginning in March, the cranes begin their northern migration to their breeding grounds in Homer. They pretty much follow the same path – flying through eastern Oregon and Washington, the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, and then along the Alaska coast to Homer. The earliest arrival date is April 2 in 2007, with the latest arrival date of April 21 in 2011. During spring migration, important stop-over sites include Burns, Warner Basin, and Chewaucan Marsh in Oregon; Othello, Washington; and Gustavus, Alaska. The cranes spend 15% of the year migrating to their breeding grounds in Homer.

The cranes' migration routes were verified during a satellite telemetry study undertaken by the International Crane Foundation, through funding by Kachemak Crane Watch. Ten cranes were captured and fitted with satellite transmitters. The migration routes to and from Alaska, and their movements while in Homer and on their wintering grounds in California, were recorded and mapped. To watch a video about the satellite telemetry study see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY2wm-TITgo>. A copy of a map showing

the migration route both to and from their wintering grounds in California can be found at Kachemak Crane Watch (www.cranewatch.org) (<http://cranewatch.org:8080/Cranewatch/kcw-brochure/annual-travels-of-homer-cranes-map/view>).

When do the colts fledge?

By the first week of May, many of Homer's Sandhill Cranes start laying their eggs. Typically, the pair will lay two eggs, one to three days apart. Around Homer, it is fairly common for two colts to hatch after approximately 30 days of incubation, but less common for both to make it to fledging (being able to fly). Usually each adult will take care of one colt, continually feeding the colt while it follows the adult around. Crane colts are precocious birds. Within roughly 24 hours, the tiny fluff balls on stilts are able to follow their parents around and even swim.

Throughout the 60-70 days it takes for the colts to finally take flight (fledge), the young will continuously stretch and flap their developing wings. They will take advantage of open downhill areas to run with their gangly wings furiously flapping, trying with everything they have to get some air. When they finally are able to fly, several more weeks are needed for the colts to become strong flyers. Sometimes, when nests are destroyed, and the pair renests and is able to successfully raise the young, the family will remain in the area a week or two after migration to allow the colt to develop its flight muscles sufficiently to make the long trip to California. They may cover as much as 350 miles daily on migration, so a fully developed set of wings is essential.

The family will stay together on the migration south, in the wintering grounds, and on the flight back to the breeding area around Homer. However, once the family returns in April or very early May, the colts are driven from the adult pair's territory so they can nest again.



