

Observations and Research of Lesser Sandhill Cranes in the Homer Area Summer 2009

By Edgar Bailey

Local spring migrants first appeared on April 9 with five cranes flying over east Skyline Drive.

First Observed Arrival Dates

2009	April 9
2008	April 3
2007	April 2
2006	April 7
2005	April 13
2004	April 17
2003	April 20

Based on personal observations and anecdotal information, the overall local crane population in the Kachemak Bay area remains low, probably less than 200.

Largest Observed Flock Size

(Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2009	82
2008	90
2007	118
2006	80
2005	78
2004	55
2003	100+

Average Daily Count (May-August)

(Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2009	12
2008	17
2007	18
2006	29
2005	16
2004	14
2003	11

Up to 136 cranes were counted this summer on lawns along Gladys Court Subdivision (Mile 4.3 East End Road) and adjacent tidal flats. Cranes frequently flew back and forth between Skyline Drive and Gladys Court.

Flocks seen in cut hayfields generally represent non-breeders and failed breeders. It is difficult to see pairs of cranes with small colts (chicks) since they usually stay in territories in cover until fledged. Then family groups often join flocks of non-breeders, especially in late August and early September just before fall migration.

The first reported colt was one on June 18 at Mile 11 East End Road. This was 10 days later than last year, which experienced a warmer spring. The first reported fledged crane was on August 3.

About the same number of colts (34) were reported as the past three years. Some colts may have been counted more than once, and some counts may reflect better reporting, especially in more recent years. Twenty-five fledged colts were seen, but ten were killed or died of unknown causes. The number killed by hunters is unknown. All but 11 pairs of cranes were observed with one colt, the rest had two.

Number of Reported Colts

2009	34 (9 died/killed)
2008	33
2007	35
2006	36
2005	29
2004	23

Crane Fall Migration Dates (Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2009	9/12
2008	9/11
2007	9/14
2006	9/10
2005	9/6
2004	9/12
2003	9/10
2002	9/10
2001	9/5
2000	9/7
1999	9/15

Local fall migratory behavior began in late August with some family groups joining congregating, non-breeding flocks. Seven colts with parents appeared at the Skyline Drive monitoring and staging site. The peak departure date of local Homer cranes this year was September 12, compared to September 11 last year. Since 1999 when records began, departure of most local cranes usually occurred on or about September 10, depending on weather conditions. Sandhill Cranes normally migrate in clearing weather during daylight and favorable tailwinds. They usually begin migration mid-morning. The earliest recorded departure of most Homer cranes was September 5, 2001, and the latest known crane sighting in the past 10 years was 12 birds on October 11, 2005. Also, five were reported milling over Baycrest October 11, 2008.

This year the first observed high-flying cranes migrating eastward, probably mainly from Bristol Bay, were on August 11. Unlike most falls when hundreds or even thousands in some years pass high over the Homer area, most of the large migratory flocks flew north of Diamond Ridge. Waves of hundreds crossed the Kenai Peninsula over Ninilchik and northward. An estimated 300 cranes were reported flying east over Halibut Cove on September 26, and about 500 were sighted at the Fox River Flats 2 days later.

For more information about Homer's local cranes go to <http://www.cranewatch.org>.