

**Observations of Lesser Sandhill Cranes in the Homer Area
Summer 2010**

By Edgar Bailey

Local spring migrants first appeared on April 18 with one crane flying over fields near the Wasabi restaurant (mile 5 East End Road).

First Reported Arrival Dates

2010	April 18
2009	April 9
2008	April 3
2007	April 2
2006	April 7
2005	April 13
2004	April 17
2003	April 20

Largest Observed Flock Size
(Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2010	61
2009	82
2008	90
2007	118
2006	80
2005	78
2004	55
2003	100+

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

Average Daily Count (May-August)
(Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2010	7
2009	12
2008	17
2007	18
2006	29
2005	16
2004	14
2003	11

As in the past, flocks of cranes were seen 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. However, most of the cranes disappeared mid-summer from traditional sites this year. This absence of birds was partly accounted for by an increase in numbers west of McNeil Canyon.

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 largely 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.

On June 7, the first colts were reported along Diamond Ridge Road. This was 10 days later than last year, which experienced a warmer spring.

About the same number of colts (36) was reported as in the past 4 years. Some colts probably were counted more than once, and some counts may reflect better reporting, especially in more recent years. Also, some colts undoubtedly never were counted. All but 7 pairs of cranes were observed with two colts, the rest had one.

A few colts were taken by eagles and other predators. The population of Bald Eagles around Homer this past summer was notably less and was reflected in fewer cranes killed. The smaller number of eagles probably is due to the cessation of large scale feeding on the Spit. Unfortunately some comparatively minor feeding continues. The number of cranes killed by hunters is unknown.

Number of Reported Colts

2010	36
2009	34
2008	33
2007	35
2006	36
2005	29
2004	23

Primary Crane Fall Migration Date

(Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2010	9/8
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 families joining congregating, non-breeding flocks. On August 28 six colts with parents appeared at the Skyline Drive monitoring and staging site. The apparent peak departure date of local Homer cranes this year was September 8, compared to September 2 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 after foraging. 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 10, 2008, and in 2009 a lone crane was repeatedly seen near Anchor Point until December 21 when this bird perished in a major snowstorm.

This year the first observed high-flying cranes migrating northeastward, probably mainly from Bristol Bay, were on September 18. Unlike falls when hundreds or even thousands in some years pass high over the Homer area, few large flocks were seen. This year some cranes foraged on the mud flats below Gladys Court with more than 70 birds present through mid September.

A brochure published by Kachemak Crane Watch and the International Crane Foundation entitled "Annual Travels of Sandhill Cranes from Homer, Alaska" will soon be available.