Lesser Sandhill Cranes Observations in the Homer Area Summer 2011

By Edgar Bailey and Nina Faust

The first spring migrants were reported on April 17 flying high over Beluga Lake. Reports of cranes on the ground were received from observers on Diamond Ridge and Gladys Court on April 21.

First Reported Arrival Dates

2011	April 21
2010	April 18
2009	April 9
2008	April 3
2007	April 2
2006	April 7
2005	April 13
2004	April 17
2003	April 20

This summer, flocks of cranes were seen on lawns along Morning Star Road (2.3 miles out East End Road from Paul Banks School) and near Gladys Court on adjacent tidal flats. Flocks were also reported on and off during summer about 15 miles out East End Road. In late August, after colts had fledged, flocks started filtering into the Inspiration Ridge Preserve hayfields. Cranes frequently flew back and forth between Skyline Drive and Morning Star Road. During mid-summer most of the cranes disappeared from traditional sites. This absence of birds was partly accounted for by an increase in numbers east of McNeil Canyon, but it is still a mystery where the majority of the flocks go during this period. These flocks generally represent non-breeders and failed breeders.

Largest Observed Flock Size
(Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2011	105
2010	61
2009	82
2008	90
2007	118
2006	80
2005	78
2004	55
2003	100+

This year Kachemak Crane Watch launched its 3-year Nesting Ecology Project that will include an online Sandhill Crane Atlas and observation database. The project this year sponsored three Citizen Science Observation Days in September to gather data for a population estimate. Biologist Michelle Michaud also contacted landowners about nesting cranes to determine location, numbers of colts, and nesting habitat.

This year the first colt hatched along Diamond Ridge Road on June 6, one day earlier than in 2010. The Nesting Ecology Project confirmed that 35 eggs hatched, but only 21 known colts fledged this year. There were 24 crane pairs that produced one or two colts (pre-fledling) and in the end, 17 pairs were successful in fledging young. Thirteen pairs had one colt, and four had two colts.

Five of the 24 nests were observed with measurements taken and vegetation noted. Of these one was located in a tidal wetland, one in a depressional or wetland/upland complex, one on an artificial island, and two in uplands. Kachemak Crane Watch has posted a slide video about the Nesting Ecology Project with photos of the nests and habitat at www.cranewatch.org under the Videos tab.

A Sandhill Crane Family nesting at Inspiration Ridge Preserve was monitored daily for 122 days, from the day the pair arrived. Their behavior, nest site, and development of the colts was filmed most of the summer. Short videos of this family are available on the KCW website. The pair lost one colt, then 2 days later

disappeared for 20 days. They finally returned with a fledged colt and migrated with the main flock on September 17.

Predation still remains a serious problem for crane nesting success. A few colts were taken by eagles, dogs, and other predators. Fortunately, the population of Bald Eagles around Homer this past summer was notably less. Unfortunately some people are still feeding Bald Eagles and may not realize the consequences to Sandhill Cranes trying to raise young and to other waterfowl. The number of cranes killed by hunters is unknown. Based on personal observations and anecdotal information, the overall local crane population in the Kachemak Bay area remains low, probably less than 200.

Number of Reported Colts from Anchor Point south

2011	21
2010	36
2009	34
2008	33
2007	35
2006	36
2005	29
2004	23

Local fall migratory behavior began in late August with some families joining congregating, non-breeding flocks. On September 16 and 17, 11 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 17, compared to September 8 last year. A partial migration occurred this year on September 9 with around 30-40 departing. Based on Kachemak Crane Watch data since 1999, the average departure date of most local cranes is on or about September 10, depending on weather conditions. Sandhill Cranes normally migrate during daylight with clearing skies and favorable tailwinds. They usually begin migration mid-day after foraging.

Primary Crane Fall Migration Date
(Skyline Drive monitoring site)

2011	9/9 & 9/17
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

This year a Lesser Canada Goose was reported all summer long with local Sandhill Crane flocks. Sometimes it would be with just a small flock of seven, other times with 30, and at migration time it was staging with the big flock of 105. No one knows how it came to be with these flocks but it does appear to be imprinted on cranes. It flew off with the big migratory flock on September 17. However, it showed up two days later with a family of three on Morning Star Road. It was reported leaving on September 22 with the family of three and has not been seen since. Hopefully it will make it to the Central California wintering grounds and back next spring.

This year high-flying flocks of three thousand or more, probably cranes mainly from the Bristol Bay region, were reported on September 19, flying over Epperson Knob north of Homer. Flocks of hundreds were seen over Homer as well. The last reported sighting was a flock of 24 on September 25. A map of the cranes‘ migration route is available on the Kachemak Crane Watch website. Also, a brochure published by Kachemak Crane Watch and the International Crane Foundation entitled, “Annual Travels of Sandhill Cranes from Homer, Alaska,” is available at Islands and Ocean Visitor Center, or a copy can be downloaded at www.cranewatch.org.