

Lesser Sandhill Cranes Observations in the Homer Area Summer 2014

By Kachemak Crane Watch

Spring in Homer was early this year, by nearly a month over last spring's late start. An early report of high flying cranes at Mile 16, East End Road, came in on March 26. The first arrivals in Homer were reported on April 14, but the first report of a large flock of 70 was on April 20.

First Reported Arrival Dates

2014	April 14
2013	April 19
2012	April 11
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

Sandhill Crane gatherings seemed a bit more fractured this year, with fewer reports of large flocks greater than 30 reported. The non-breeding groups appeared to be using some different areas in smaller aggregations. As usual, mid-summer many non-breeders left the Homer loafing areas for other unknown places, and Kachemak Crane watch received few reports of larger flocks in the community. Mid-August, the non-breeding flocks returned to the Homer area but again mostly in smaller groups.

This year Kachemak Crane Watch was able to confirm 24 fledged colts. Factors affecting nest success include potential predation from mainly eagles, coyotes, and dogs. Lynx are also determined and effective predators on adult cranes or colts. A lynx was observed dragging off an ambushed colt one day, and then an adult another day.

**Number of Reported Fledged Colts
from Anchor Point South**

2014	24
2013	20
2012	24
2011	21
2010	36
2009	34
2008	33
2007	35
2006	36
2005	29
2004	23

The crane flock using the Inspiration Ridge Preserve (IRP) monitoring site was smaller than in past years. The largest IRP flock counted this summer was 38, reflecting the more dispersed gatherings in different locations around the area. Inspiration Ridge Preserve is being managed to benefit cranes by providing large mowed fields, ponds, and natural habitat for nesting away from busy roads and power lines.

Kachemak Crane Watch observer, Lani Raymond, has been doing beach counts in the evenings when cranes spend time foraging on the low tide intertidal beach on the way to their roost. Her highest count was 97, which is higher than the 12-year average of 85 at IRP. This is a good indicator the population is fairly stable, estimated at about 200. We know there is more than one roost.

**Largest Observed Flock Size
Prior to Fall Migration
(Inspiration Ridge Preserve monitoring site)**

2014	38
2013	95
2012	120
2011	105
2010	61
2009	82
2008	90
2007	118
2006	80
2005	78
2004	55
2003	100+

In 2014, migration again occurred on several different dates. No reports were received from anyone observing local cranes staging and departing on September 13, the day it appears the majority of cranes slipped out of town. September 18, many residents witnessed a migrational spectacle of thousands of Sandhill Cranes passing over Beluga Lake and Slough. Kachemak Crane Watch received reports of stringers of two to three thousand cranes in one passing. A few small groups, particularly family groups were still being seen even after the major migrational flocks passed overhead. If colts hatch late, families will stay even several weeks after the main migration to allow colts time to develop enough strength for the rigors of a 2400 mile migration to central California.

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, usually departing about mid-day after foraging. Conditions were very acceptable on September 14 for a such departure.

Many people who have Sandhill Cranes living in their neighborhoods share their experiences with Kachemak Crane Watch. There is enough drama, tragedy, and excitement for many crane soap opera episodes, from attacks by lynx and Bald Eagles, to a colt getting stuck in a cow pen, to fights over territories. There is the tale of the family that left one of their colts behind and flew off with the one fledged colt. Another family has a female crane with a broken wing that managed to help fledge their two colts. The male left with the two colts and as of October 8, the female was still on the territory. These and many more fascinating stories of the lives of these birds make this Sandhill Crane season in Homer exciting and personal for those keen observers who take the time to watch their interactions.

Sandhill Cranes are enduring symbols of wilderness, their ancient trumpeting calls a reminder that constant vigilance is needed to preserve this magnificent species.

~Edgar Bailey, Co-founder, Kachemak Crane Watch



Sandhill Crane colt stretches to strengthen its wings in preparation for flight.