

Lesser Sandhill Cranes, Annual Summary Homer, Alaska, Summer 2015

By Kachemak Crane Watch

After an extraordinarily warm winter with little snow, the first two Sandhill Cranes were reported on the ground in Homer on April 21, 2015. However, migrating flocks were first spotted flying high and heading west on April 4. Spring in Homer was early this year, by nearly a month over last spring, with most snow gone in the high country by mid-April. In the past two years, a changing climate has given Homer mild winters and warmer, dryer summers. Despite the early spring, most cranes kept to their regular schedule for nesting.

This summer, the cranes were reported around Homer in smaller flocks of 10 to 30 individuals. Cranes that have not paired up are usually younger birds, 1 to 3 years old. They hang out in groups of non-breeders which can also include cranes who have lost mates, or pairs that have failed in nesting. Many things can happen to make a nest fail, such as bad weather, predators taking the eggs or baby colts, disease, or infertility. Usually, failed breeders will leave their territory after a while and join the non-breeders at favored feeding areas and night time roosts.

This year Kachemak Crane Watch was able to confirm 19 nests, hatching 29 colts. Only colts 17 were reported fledged. The number of reported fledged colts was down from 24 that were reported in 2014. With the completion of the three-year Nesting Ecology Study in 2013, reporting is not as reliable since KCW does not have a biologist following crane nesting success throughout summer. We are dependent on crane watchers to let us know where nests are, how many colts hatch, and how many colts finally fledge in August. Several colts were lost to predators, one likely by coyote and two by neighborhood dogs, and one appeared ill and died of unknown causes. Next summer, if you have a nesting pair in your area, please let KCW know so we can better track nesting success in the Kachemak Bay region.

By mid-August, when colts are fledged, the smaller flocks gather in preparation for migration. Some family groups join the bigger flock. Kachemak Crane Watch sponsored three Count Days, August 27, September 2, and September 8. Count days help with population estimates and give us an idea of the number of colts being seen. The largest flock reported during Count Days was 99 on Inspiration Ridge Preserve. However, on another day, Lani Raymond reported 120 down on the beach foraging at low tide.

Following three days of stormy weather, most of Homer's Sandhill Cranes migrated on September 12, when the skies cleared and the winds switched to westerly or northwesterly. The same day hundreds were reported over Anchor Point flying from across Cook Inlet heading south. It is with great sadness that we watch the cranes leave,

but this year especially we watch with trepidation knowing that they are heading to Central California where a devastating drought and horrendous wildfires are creating a very dry, desolate landscape for birds.

The major concern is there will not be enough water to flood fields or keep wetlands on refuges full. Cranes depend greatly on seasonal wetlands and flooded grain fields as well as harvested corn fields for roosts and/or food. Less water means fewer places for waterfowl and cranes to roost or feed. Overcrowding in these diminished wet areas breeds diseases like avian cholera. Also distressing is that less food and water will likely reduce fitness in the cranes making them more susceptible to diseases and possibly keeping them from breeding.

The stresses we know Homer's Sandhill Cranes will probably experience in their wintering areas highlights the importance of trying to track breeding success here in Homer. KCW will work to improve its citizen science response next summer to better track local breeding pairs and their nesting success. It will be especially important to continue following our known breeding pairs to see if signs of diminished fitness show up. Kachemak Crane Watch will continue working with its sister group, Save Our Sandhill Cranes in Sacramento to share information that will help educate people about cranes in both summer and winter habitats.

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

First Reported Arrival Dates

2015	April 21
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

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

2015	17
2014	24
2013	20
2012	24
2011	21
2010	36
2009	34
2008	33
2007	35
2006	36
2005	29
2004	23

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

2015	99
2014	38
2013	95
2012	120
2011	105
2010	61
2009	82
2008	90
2007	118
2006	80
2005	78
2004	55
2003	100+



Sandhill Crane displaying to other cranes in the flock.



Preening sometimes leaves a mouthful of feathers.



A Great Blue Heron landed in a flock of 90 cranes.



Sandhill Crane colt is challenged by another flock member as cranes gather for migration.



Sandhill Crane charges after another crane.



This year Sandhill Cranes left for California on September 12.