

## Lesser Sandhill Cranes, Annual Summary Homer, Alaska, Summer 2016

By Kachemak Crane Watch

This year's Sandhill Crane season started winding down on September 7 when roughly half of Homer's cranes took off with little fanfare. With a rising barometer and favorable winds from the northwest, several large flocks of 100 to 150 cranes and many smaller groups were spotted flying high over Kachemak Bay heading towards the Fox River Flats.

The next evening, on September 8, the third of three Annual Sandhill Crane Count Days sponsored by Kachemak Crane Watch, validated the departure. During the previous two count days at Beluga Slough, a group of dedicated craniacs counted cranes landing in the wetlands during an exciting two-hour fly-in period. On August 27, 152 cranes were seen, including 18 colts and 1 banded crane. September 2, the count totaled 164 cranes, but only 11 colts and one banded were documented. The final day, September 8, the gathering number of cranes had diminished to 75, including 17 colts and the same banded bird.

The large gathering at Beluga Slough is new. In past years, cranes have gathered for roosting in a variety of other locations in the area, including Mariner Park Lagoon, Lampert Lake, and wetlands in the Anchor River/Fritz Creek Critical Habitat Area. This year cranes were also observed foraging on the tidal flats at low tide off of Bishops Beach just over the berm from Beluga Slough. Cranes need shallow water to roost in at night so they are safe from approaching ground predators.

The local population, despite all the hazards of raising its young, seems to be holding its own. Kachemak Crane Watch estimates the local population at about 200, but may be increasing slightly since the total group size at Beluga Slough is a bit higher than past years. Not all cranes in the area join the large flocks seen on count days.

It is not unusual for the family groups to linger in the area longer than the non-

breeding or failed breeder group. Depending on when the young hatch, readiness of colts to make the long 2400-mile migration varies. Most cranes lay their eggs in the first week or two of May, and after 30 days of incubation, eggs hatch in the first week or two of June. The crane chicks (colts) requires 60-70 days to final take-off as full fliers, known as fledging. So any crane eggs hatched later than early June require an extra week or two of conditioning to make the long journey to California's Central Valley around Sacramento.

Weather all over the United States was well above average this year. With an early, warm spring in Homer, it was not surprising that Kachemak Crane Watch received Sandhill Crane sightings a month earlier than usual. The first sighting was reported on March 9 by Mary Sanders who saw three flying low in the Beluga Lake area. Three were briefly reported on the ground the next day, and a smattering of reports of 1 to 4 cranes were also reported. However, no one confirmed any continuous sightings of cranes staying on the ground anywhere in the Kachemak Bay area during March. The second week of April reports came in reporting local birds landing around the area in the usual spots. So most likely, the early arrivals were cranes traveling to destinations further west.

This year Kachemak Crane Watch was able to confirm 30 nesting pairs through its Citizen Science network. That is about the average number of nesting pairs reported over the years. The 30 pairs produced 49 colts, but only 30 fledged by the end of the nesting season, a 61.22% success rate. Comparison to earlier years documented by Michelle Michaud during our Nesting Ecology Study in 2011, 2012, and 2013, the success this season was comparable, 70.59% in 2011, 70.97% in 2012, and 62.50% in 2013.

Given the elevated number of eagles in the area this summer due to the Common Murre die-off, the cranes appear to be holding their own. Kachemak Crane Watch received several reports of eagles killing adult cranes. All four colts in the Beluga Slough area were taken by predators. The Slough has two resident Bald Eagle pairs, and harassment of the crane families was constant during the breeding season.

One person reported watching a group of five Bald Eagles hunting as a pack. The five eagles flushed one of the adult cranes which fled ahead of the eagle pack, flying off into the distance with the five in pursuit. The crane did come back to its mate later. Eagles won in the end as one of that pair was killed by an eagle not

long after that. Other predators on cranes include loose dogs and coyotes. Two colts were reported taken by coyotes.

As the cranes depart, we all marvel at the aerial displays, the flock dancing in the marsh, and the care adult cranes give their young to make their migration possible. They have a difficult journey south and many challenges in their wintering area. With drought continuing in California, questions remain of whether there will 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. Drought means fewer places for waterfowl and cranes to roost or feed. Overcrowding in these diminished wet areas breeds diseases like avian cholera. Less food and water will likely reduce fitness in the cranes making them more susceptible to diseases and possibly keeping them from breeding.

The work we do in Homer through Citizen Science efforts in tracking breeding success and non-breeding flock numbers is an indicator of how well Sandhill Cranes are doing. It is 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 and to help educate people about cranes in both summer and winter habitats.

Sign up for our email list on the Kachemak Crane Watch website at [www.cranewatch.org](http://www.cranewatch.org). Remember, when you see cranes in the Kachemak Bay area from Anchor Point south, send your report to [reports@cranewatch.org](mailto:reports@cranewatch.org) or call Kachemak Crane Watch at 235-6262.

*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**

2016	30
2015	17
2014	24
2013	20
2012	24
2011	21
2010	36
2009	34
2008	33
2007	35
2006	36
2005	29
2004	23

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

2016	April 1
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

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

2016	86
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+



A young Sandhill Crane family readies for migration south during the last few weeks of summer on Inspiration Ridge Preserve. Photo by Nina Faust, Kachemak Crane Watch.



Sandhill Cranes gather to roost in the late evening light at Beluga Slough.  
Photo by Nina Faust, Kachemak Crane Watch.





Sandhill Cranes dance at Inspiration Ridge Preserve in the late evening before departing for their roost.

Photo by Nina Faust, Kachemak Crane Watch.



Local craniacs gather at the Beluga Slough picnic table to watch the Sandhill Crane evening fly-in. Photo by Nina Faust, Kachemak Crane Watch.