

Nina Faust
Today, 4:28 PM
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All About Cranes #8 Bald Eagles as Sandhill Crane Predators

Bald Eagles are formidable Sandhill Crane predators. In the past month, Kachemak Crane Watch has received reports of two adult Sandhill Cranes killed by Bald Eagles. Although no one saw the eagle kill the first crane (C046), the eagle had been stalking the cranes from nearby trees. C046's remains were found in the yard of a neighbor on the other side of East End Road, and evidence strongly points to an eagle kill. C046 and his mate had been nesting on an island in a pond. The female subsequently abandoned the nest, resulting in the failure of the eggs to hatch.

This eagle has been causing problems in the neighborhood. People have reported this particular eagle has learned to kill chickens under the alders and has plucked off several cats. A day after C046 was killed the person whose yard where the crane's remains were found lost his Jack Russell Terrier. He is fairly sure the eagle took his dog.

The second killing of a Sandhill Crane by a Bald eagle occurred in mid-June and was witnessed by Fred Harnisch, a resident of East End Road. Here is his account:

Between 9 and 10:30 P.M. on Friday, June 14, 2013, I witnessed a mid-air attack of an adult Sandhill Crane by an adult Bald Eagle which ended in the eagle killing and eating the crane about 75 yards north of milepost 12.5 of East End Road, Homer, Alaska.

Upon arriving home at my cabin about 9 P.M., I heard crane calls and looked up and at around 100 yards, about 300 feet in the air, a pair of cranes were flying downslope towards the Homer Spit followed alongside by an eagle. In less than 1/4 mile, the cranes split and the eagle followed

one which soon developed into a fight for life, looking similar to a WW II dogfight, until the eagle rolled on top of the crane and they tumbled down towards the ground which was hidden from my view by a patch of alders.

I ran up to my deck to gain a better view where I eventually I spotted movement on the ground. I got into my truck and drove down towards the site on a dirt road leading north off New East End where I discovered the eagle feeding on the crane. Further back in the trees, I later noticed another adult eagle that looked like it just came from a fight and was all fluffed up and tired. Since I forgot my camera, I went back to retrieve it at my cabin and came back and took some photos. Early the next morning I went back to the site looking for the crane's carcass to see if this crane had any identification tag, but the carcass was gone. The past two mornings a lone crane has flown over my cabin calling.

Kachemak Crane Watch has talked with a number of residents in the East End Road area who have cranes nesting or loafing in their neighborhoods. Some residents have said they have neighbors feeding eagles nearby and have recounted losses of pets or poultry and harassment of cranes by eagles. Cranes stalked by eagles are sometimes chased off nests resulting in the loss of eggs to other predators or the death of the unhatched chick when the egg is left unbrooded too long. While predation is a normal part of the life in the wild, eagle feeding can attract additional eagles to an area, increasing predation on cranes and waterfowl. Eagles will go for the easy prey resulting in the death of pets and livestock (primarily chickens). Local residents are especially protective of their cranes and don't want them to become food for eagles.

Feeding any top predator is not wise. Kachemak Crane Watch is hopeful that those folks feeding eagles will stop. Sandhill Cranes are celebrated in art, myths, and literature by cultures the world over. We are fortunate to be able to live so close to these iconic symbols of longevity, loyalty, and love.