

Lesser Sandhill Cranes, Annual Summary Homer, Alaska, Summer 2017

By Kachemak Crane Watch

Thanks to reports to Kachemak Crane Watch we know that some of Homer's Sandhill Cranes migrated south on September 7. Another group of roughly 80 cranes were observed migrating out on a glorious fall morning at 11:30 a.m. the next day – September 8. Also on September 8, cranes were reported flying in several flocks of hundreds over the Stariski Creek area coming from across the Inlet. These cranes are probably part of the western Alaska population. Cranes choose ideal weather preferring a strong frontal wind followed by high pressure bringing upper air currents from the northwest to aid their long flight.

On September 9, the third of three Annual Sandhill Crane Count Days sponsored by Kachemak Crane Watch validated the earlier local crane departure with a count of 40 adults and 16 colts. On the previous Count Days (August 26 and September 2) 117 cranes including 14 colts and 136 cranes including 25 colts were counted at Beluga Slough.

This is the second fall season that the cranes have gathered to roost at Beluga Slough. Local cranes also use other locations in the area, including Mariner Park Lagoon, Lampert Lake, and wetlands in the Anchor River/Fritz Creek Critical Habitat Area. Cranes need shallow water to roost in at night so they are safe from approaching ground predators – sort of like an early-warning system.

The grand finale of this year's crane migration occurred on September 17, when a series of Sandhill Cranes (many apparently from western Alaska) flew overhead as they 'kettled up'. They were distinctive forming their characteristic V flying shape. They flew over Homer and Kachemak Bay, spiraling around, regrouping, then surging on toward the wintering grounds with a mighty triumphant crane chorus reverberating all around the Bay. What a memorable sight and goodbye until next year message. Not often are we fortunate enough to have the wind currents just right to bring so many cranes over our area, but this year was a gorgeous spectacle of migration.

The local population, despite all the hazards of raising their flightless young, seems to be holding its own. Kachemak Crane Watch estimates the local population to be stable at about 200 to 250 individuals. It is difficult to know the exact number of cranes using the area from Anchor Point south to the head of Kachemak Bay because there are so many wetland areas away from people, and not everyone who sees cranes calls in the sighting.

Some family groups linger in the area longer than the main migratory flock departure date. If a pair nests late they will remain in the area to allow their colts time to get ready for the 2400-mile migration to the Central Valley of California around Sacramento. Most cranes lay their eggs in the first week or two of May. After 30 days, the eggs hatch, usually in the first week or two of June. The parents have 60-70 days to safely raise the chicks to fledging, when they then can fly anywhere in the area.

Kachemak Crane Watch continued monitoring nesting success this year. Twenty-nine nests were confirmed compared to 30 last year. That is about the average number of nesting pairs reported over the years. The 29 pairs produced 54 colts, with 34 reported fledging roughly 70 days after hatching, a 63% success rate, 2% more than last year.

Part of Kachemak Crane Watch's mission is public education. Information on this year's crane sightings show a cautionary tale emerging that is important to discuss. What is different this year is the strong uptick in cranes hanging out in the main part of town, due in large part to an increase in the number of people putting out corn for the cranes. We are at a point where problems are starting because people are choosing to attract cranes into areas where they should not be encouraged.

Kachemak Crane Watch has received reports from residents about cranes walking down busy streets, hanging in local neighborhood yards, and nesting in town. We have had complaints about cranes digging up lawns and flower gardens and scratching cars.

While a few cranes have nested in town over the years, the number of nesting pairs in town has increased as have the number of non-breeders in small flocks dropping in around town. This is of concern because more cranes in busy neighborhoods may result in injuries to people as the cranes defend their territories and protect their colts; and to the cranes themselves from cars, loose dogs, and injuries from flying into powerlines. Some folks use herbicides on lawns in town. Worms from these treated lawns fed to very young colts can kill them.

In urban areas of Florida, many of these same issues emerging here had come to a head with cranes becoming aggressive and even attacking children. To address the problem, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission banned the feeding of cranes.

But there is more to this emerging tale. On September 8, 2017, the day of the main local migration, someone came into the neighborhood of a nesting crane pair out East End Road and shot their two colts on the private property right next to where the cranes spent most of their summer. The neighbors that had observed the cranes nesting were furious and distraught. These two young cranes were used to people in their territory. This senseless, unethical killing within a neighborhood is a dangerous practice that cannot even be called a fair chase hunt. How something like this can be legal certainly needs review. It is not a safe, ethical, or sportsman-like way to hunt cranes.

Cranes bond and do not nest until about their 3rd or 4th year so recruitment of adults and maintenance of the adult breeding population are critical. Homer can be a safe haven for cranes if we remove risks associated with cranes in Homer.

Perhaps a sandhill crane hunting closure within 1/4 or 1/2 mile of the road system from Anchor Point south to the end of East End Road would protect cranes until they resume their wild lives as they join migrating flocks heading south. This could be accomplished through a proposal to the Board of Game.

With the cranes departure, we will miss their ethereal calls, exuberant ballet dances, and magnificent aerial spirals, soaring, and parachuting in for landings, only to leave us with images to dream about until they return. At least this year, after completing the difficult journey south, habitat conditions on their wintering grounds should be better. California received a significant amount of rain, so there will be enough water to flood fields and keep wetlands on refuges full.

Kachemak Crane Watch appreciates Citizen Science cooperators whose efforts in reporting breeding success and non-breeding flock numbers help keep track of Homer's Sandhill Cranes population. Citizen Science, and working with other crane groups like Save Our Sandhill Cranes in Sacramento and the International Crane Foundation, helps Kachemak Crane Watch gather and share information to educate people about cranes in both their summer and winter habitats.

Sign up for our email list on the Kachemak Crane Watch website at www.cranewatch.org. Remember, when you see cranes in the Kachemak Bay area from Anchor Point south, send your report to 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

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

2017	34
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

First Reported Arrival Dates

2017	March 29
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)**

2017	100
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+



Flock landing in September, late evening, at Inspiration Ridge Preserve. Photo by Nina Faust



Flock gathered at Inspiration Ridge Preserve leaving on migration to Sacramento CA at 11:30 am on September 9. Photo by Nina Faust



Migrational flock heading toward Caribou Hills. Photo by Nina Faust



Two fledged colts enjoying some independent time from the parents. Photo by Nina Faust



Sandhill Cranes flying past Grewingk Glacier on their way to areas on the Homer bench below.
Photo by Nina Faust



An adult Lesser Sandhill Crane parachutes in for a landing at Inspiration Ridge Preserve. Photo by Nina Faust