

# Lesser Sandhill Cranes, Annual Summary Homer, Alaska, Summer 2021

By Kachemak Crane Watch  
*A Project of the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies*



*After a more normal winter snowfall, cranes were greeted by a deep snowpack up on the Homer ridge in April!*

## Season Summary

Three springs ago, we lived in a different world, yet we can count on the cycles of spring. Homer's Lesser Sandhill Cranes' arrival brought magnificent crane choruses and accompanying joyful dances celebrating a new season of crane watching and all the wonders of an Alaskan summer. Although the first glimpses of cranes were singletons in flight on April 1st, the first actual on-the-ground crane was not reported until April 17<sup>th</sup>. By mid-May many crane pairs were already on their nests.



Kachemak Crane Watch continues to collect information on local nesting crane pairs, adding to the data of the original 2011-2013 Nesting Ecology Study conducted by Michelle Michaud for a graduate studies project under the guidance of Dr. Gary Ivey. This citizen science program is extremely valuable in providing a glimpse of the reproductive health of our local cranes from year to year.

This year, 45 nests were reported, and 79 colts hatched. Other possible nests were never verified so could not be used in the data. As in other years, several nests failed because predators stole the eggs, and several colts were reported taken by eagles or other predators. Weather did not seem to be a big factor this summer in colt mortality. A total of 54 colts made it to fledging out of 79 hatched, a 68% success rate, slightly higher than last year. Single colts were raised by 16 crane pairs, while 19 crane pairs raised twosomes. (See Tables, page 7.)



This year has been quiet in terms of injury reports. Interestingly, a crane with a broken beak seen in 2019 at Inspiration Ridge Preserve showed up again at a site on the Homer bench below IRP. It was well adapted to picking up corn by sticking its beak deeper into the dirt to pick up corn and was seen preening. In 2019 it did not have a mate and was in the flock by itself. The photo taken by Nina Faust was in the fall as the cranes were gathering for migration.



*Photo by Ted Heuer*

gets along in the future despite its beak problem. It is a wonderful adaptation. Next summer if the pair returns to Homer, it would be educational to get some footage of this crane taking care of its young.

This summer a crane that looks like the 2019 crane was seen mating and reportedly uses the same technique to get food as the one photographed in 2019. Her preening ability is good enough to keep her feathers in order.

Please let Kachemak Crane Watch know if you see this crane. Try to get a photo. It will be interesting to see how it



*Photo by Nina Faust*

This year's fifth annual Sandhill Crane Count Days took place on August 21, 28, and September 4<sup>th</sup>. Kachemak Crane Watch hosted an evening crane count each Saturday at Beluga Slough when cranes fly in to roost. Citizen scientists area wide on these Saturdays call in sightings all day to help Kachemak Crane watch gather information on crane numbers before the average departure date in mid-September. Numbers for the Saturday evening Beluga Slough fly-in were much lower than past years but did not fail to delight observers watching the families with their

newly fledged colts coming in for a landing. Many of the cranes were using an alternate roost where one observer reported 150 cranes. (See Count Days table for specific numbers on page 7.) Nonetheless, watching the cranes fly in, dance, preen, and forage was magical in the waning golden sunlight of the first two nights and mystical in the fog of the third night.



*Count Day observers at Beluga Slough watching a Sandhill Crane pair and colt in the golden setting sun's light on the marsh.*

Most of Homer's Sandhill Cranes departed on September 11, sometime after mid-day. The day before departure a flock of 500-700 cranes coming from across Cook Inlet flew over the North Fork area on their way to the wintering grounds. Numerous other smaller, high-flying migrational crane flocks were reported after that large group and continued into the next day, when Homer's cranes heard the clairon call of migration and knew it was their window before another big storm. The flocks are all heading to the Sacramento Valley and surrounding area in Central California.



Managers of refuges, Preserves, Nature Conservancy lands and other crane groups are working together to prepare for the arrival of these Pacific Flyway cranes. We know Homer cranes go to these areas from data obtained from satellite tracking devices that a 2008 KCW banding project put on 10 Homer cranes. Below is part of this year's Stone Lakes NWR's report a crane gathering site where C003, a Homer nesting female who has disappeared, was sighted several years ago.

**Fall 2021 Refuge Report**  
**Bart McDermott,**  
**Wildlife Refuge Manager**  
**Stone Lakes NWR**

The Centrally Valley received very little rainfall during the winter of 2020-2021. The total accumulation for the Refuge was just over 6 inches, which amounted to only 30% of the average rain fall for the Sacramento area. We learned in early spring that we are in fact in for another drought and that's been on the forefront of every wetland manager and farmer's mind in the California Central Valley. State Wildlife Area and Federal Refuge managers began communicating early as we headed into the growing season. The group has been having bi-weekly calls to discuss habitat conditions and projected wetland acres based on water deliveries.

Fortunately, the wetland habitat at Stone Lakes is looking good. Our neighbors at the Cosumnes Preserve and Staten Island have also been working all summer to prepare their wetlands for the arrival of waterfowl and sandhill cranes. Despite many of the appropriative water rights and contract water deliveries being curtailed very early in this water year, the Refuge should be able to flood up wetlands using other water rights and sources.



Photo provided by Stone Lakes NWR



Photo provided by Stone Lakes NWR

The Stone Lakes staff are eagerly waiting for their first cranes to arrive. Staten Island staff had their first flock of greater sandhill cranes show up over the last weekend of August which is a first for their record books.

We are hopeful to receive some rain showers in early November as many of us are ready for some weather to wash away the smoke and dust. If the frequency of drought and water curtailments become a consistent occurrence, we may need to think about alternative sources to create and maintain wetlands. The local sanitation district has a project called Harvest Water that will provide highly treated wastewater to local farmers to irrigate crops. One of the benefits will be to help recharge the groundwater aquifer and provide ranchers and farmers who grow wildlife friendly crops a reliable and low-cost water supply. The program also has population targets and incentives for farmers to provide roost habitat for sandhill cranes which will help wintering cranes and waterfowl.



*Sandhill Crane flock at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge wetlands. Photo provided by Stone Lakes NWR.*

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. Reports to our main number and email are much more likely to reach Kachemak Crane Watch than random posts on social media.

*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*





# Tables

First Reported Arrival Dates	
Year	Date
2021	April 17
2020	April 9
2019	April 2
2018	April 7
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

Number of Reported Fledged Colts From Anchor Point South	
Year	Number
2021	54
2020	42
2019	44
2018	49
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
2003	42

Largest Premigration Flock at IRP	
Year	Number
2021	108
2020	103
2019	88
2018	95
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+

Nest Data					
Year	Nests	Colts Hatched	Colts Fledged	Nest Success	Fledging Success
2021	46	70	54	78%	68%
2020	42	70	45	78.6%	64%
2019	38	68	44	78.9%	64.7%
2018	33	63	48	87.9%	76.2%
2017	29	54	34	-	63%
2016	30	49	30	-	61.2%

Beluga Slough Count Days									
Count Day	8/26/17	9/2/17	9/9/17	8/25/18	9/1/18	9/8/18	8/24/19	8/31/19	9/7/19
Colts	14	25	16	27	38	25	17	15	9
Adults	103	111	40	87	99	152	103	47	25
Total	117	136	56	114	137	177	120	62	34
Count Day	8/22/20	8/29/20	9/5/20	8/21/21	8/28/21	9/4/21			
Colts	16	12	16	18	13	15			
Adults	83	79	50	34	49	43			
Total	99	91	66	52	62	58			