

Annual Sandhill Crane Summary 2022
Homer, Alaska

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



The Boardwalk pair in April at Beluga Slough just after arriving!

Season Summary

After a long winter with snow still three to four feet deep on the ridge above Homer, the first crane observation on April 13th marked the beginning of crane season and the celebration of spring's arrival. On April 19th, a crane watch report logged the first sandhill crane on the ground in Homer. A huge snowpack on the ridge does not stop or slow down the cranes' arrival. With abundant estuary habitat, tidal areas, and upland areas on south-facing ridge slopes, arriving cranes have many choices of feeding spots despite a deep snowpack at higher levels.



Contrasting views of an upland crane nest (left) and an estuary crane nest (right).

Nesting Report

The Citizen Science Nesting Ecology program builds on a graduate study done for Kachemak Crane Watch in 2011-2013. This citizen science program monitors the outcomes of known crane nests that cooperating residents report to KCW annually. We record location, total number of nests, numbers of colts hatched, fatalities, and fledged colts. We do not disclose locations of nests, and we caution our cooperators not to disturb nesting cranes.

June and the first half of July were warm and rain free, perfect weather for nurturing baby Sandhill Crane colts during their most vulnerable time. Even with that edge, the fledging success was slightly lower this summer.

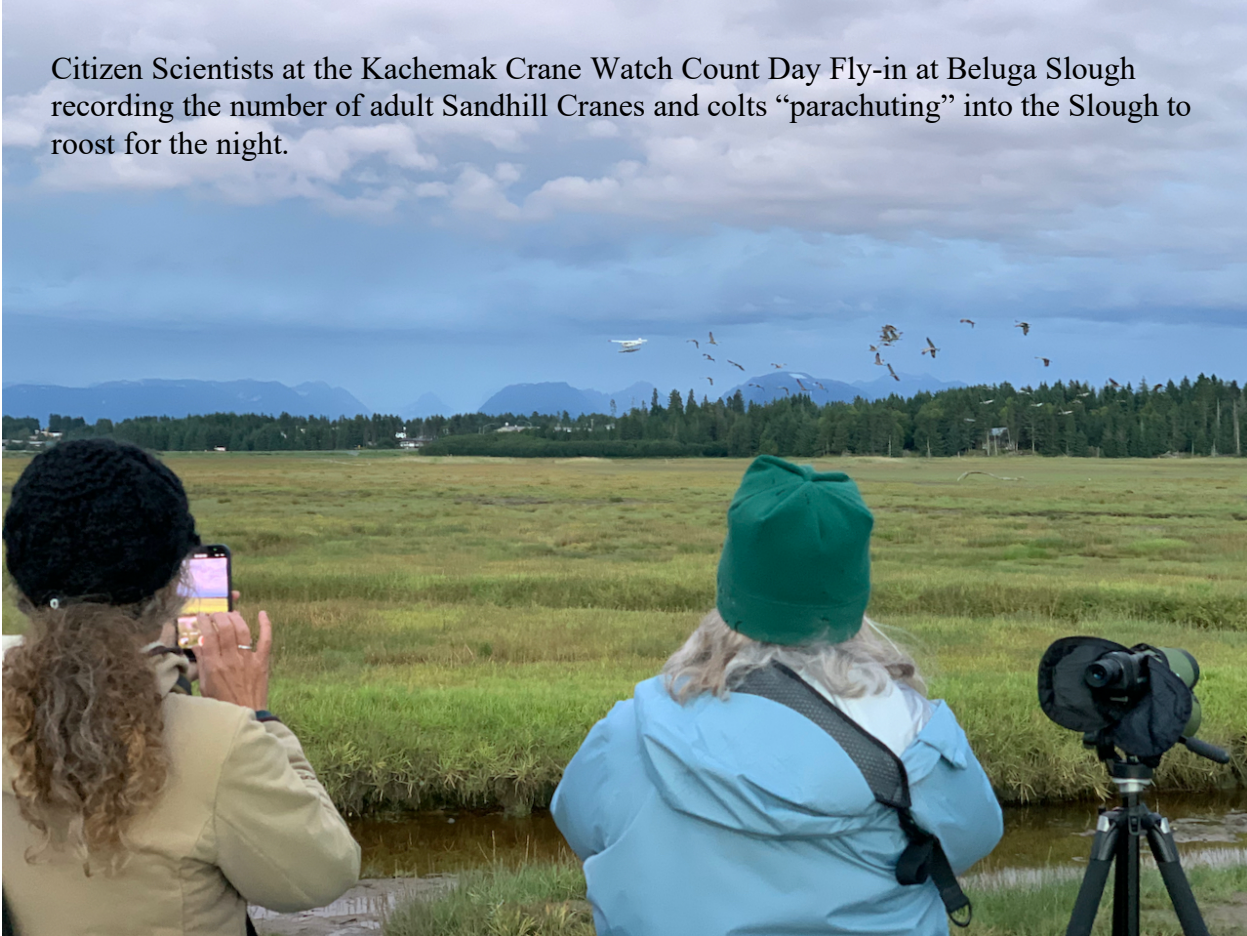
This year, 49 nests were reported, and 90 colts hatched. Other reported nests that did not have complete information were not included. Seven nests failed but the cause of loss was not observed. Coyotes, eagles, loose dogs, crows, ravens, and other predators can take the eggs or colts. A total of 59 colts fledged, a 65.6% success rate, compared to 68% last year. Twenty-one single colts fledged, while 19 crane pairs raised twosomes, a total of 38 fledged colts. (See Tables 1-5, pages 8-9.)

This year has been quieter in terms of injury reports. One dead colt sent for necropsy at the State Veterinarian's office died from the effects of a blunt trauma to its abdomen. A necropsy on a second crane colt is still pending. A concern about Avian flu prompted a quick response to these two unknown deaths.

Beluga Slough's "Boardwalk Pair"

In early spring, the female's leg was badly injured, and KCW learned an eagle had killed her. The male left for 3-4 weeks. He returned with a new mate. After visiting his long-time human neighbors, they went to the Slough to chase off family of three in their territory. He and his new mate settled into his routine and were even seen painting at the Slough during the second Count Day evening. She will likely settle in nicely when they return next spring to breed.

Citizen Scientists at the Kachemak Crane Watch Count Day Fly-in at Beluga Slough recording the number of adult Sandhill Cranes and colts “parachuting” into the Slough to roost for the night.



Count Days

August 20th, August 27th, and September 3rd were the 6th annual Sandhill Crane Count Days. Each of the day-long count days, Kachemak Crane Watch hosted an evening crane count at Beluga Slough from 6 p.m. till sunset, counting adults and colts as they flew in. Citizen scientists areawide called in sightings all day to help Kachemak Crane watch gather information on crane numbers and locations before the average departure date in mid-September 3rd had the most cranes of the three evenings at the Beluga Slough fly-in with 26 colts and 104 adults dropping down like avian paragliders trying to avoid entanglement with the beginner fliers. With good weather at the evening counts, craniacs enjoyed the magic of cranes flying through a rainbow against a mountain backdrop and small flocks spotlighted in radiant evening sunlight. Cranes like to roost in areas with shallow water like the Beluga Slough.

Some of Homer's Sandhill Cranes departed on September 5th, sometime after mid-day when several flocks of 100s came across Cook Inlet from the Alaska Peninsula. The Inspiration Ridge Preserve flock took off about then and joined a bigger group heading off on migration. They know when it is time to leave, but it seems to always leave a big hole in our hearts as they head to the Sacramento Valley and surrounding areas in Central California.



Short-Necked Colts

In 2019, a short-necked colt was reported at two different locations in Homer. In September, Kachemak Crane Watch filmed the colt at the location where it was regularly seen. Its thigh feathers and under the body appeared unpreened. The colt mostly knelt to eat, possibly because it was sickly or because eating while standing was difficult and tiring. The family was reported in several locations out East End Road after most cranes had left. The last sighting of the family was September 21, 2019.

This year, the pair that raised the 2019 colt returned to the same house and had a long-necked colt. The human neighbors believe it is the same pair that had the short-necked crane in 2019.

In a nearby neighborhood, another pair had a short-necked colt. This is the other house the 2019 pair had frequented. The neighbors with the long-necked colt firmly believe their pair is the 2019 pair. So, is the 2022 pair with the short-necked crane a relative of the 2019 pair, possibly an offspring, or there is something in the environment causing this deformity?

Kachemak Crane Watch will continue to monitor this area for future problems. The short-necked colt and parents were last reported in Homer on September 15, 2022. If sighted this winter, please report the sighting to Kachemak Crane Watch. Watch the Short-necked Crane colt video: <https://youtu.be/twclifniEus>.



2019 colt (left) and 2022 colt (right), photos by Krysti Howell

Report from the Wintering Grounds in Central California

Submitted by Bart McDermott, Refuge Manager, Stone Lakes NWR, Elk Grove, CA

The local Delta wetland managers from the Cosumnes River Preserve, Staten Island, Yolo Bypass, Woodbridge Crane Reserve, and the Bufferlands all met at Stone Lakes NWR on August 18, 2022 to discuss fall flood up plans. Most already had a few wetlands flooded for the shorebird return and planned to be 100% flooded by mid-November. The outlook on how much habitat there will be for the rest of the Central Valley and Northern California is uncertain. Due to the extremely low level of Lake Shasta and other reservoirs around the region, many of the farmers and wetland managers will not get their full allocations of water.

The situation in the Klamath Basin in Oregon is even more dire. For the first time in history, all 3 refuges in the Klamath NWR Complex are dry. This means there will be very little wetland habitat for birds to use as a stopover as they migrate south into the Central Valley.

The northern portion of the Central Valley is not doing much better. Typically, there are around 500,000 acres of rice fields in the northern Central Valley that birds use to forage in when they arrive in the fall. Due to reductions in water supply, only half of the rice was in production this summer leaving over 250,000 acres fallow. Other state and federal wetland units in the CV are only receiving a portion of their water allocations. Unless there is another early winter with



several rainstorms, most birds will be forced to pack into the few wetlands they find or be left high and dry. This could further exasperate the botulism and cholera outbreaks seen across the West the past few years.

Fortunately, Stone Lakes NWR still has the water to fill all Refuge wetlands, and the three lakes are full despite an endless layer of aquatic weeds. Flooding up the first set of wetlands on the



Freshly flooded up wetlands in mid-September 2022 at Stone Lakes NWR in Elk Grove near Sacramento CA .
Photo by Bruce Hall, USFWS.

Refuge started September 13, 2022. By the second day, some resident ducks, geese, and shorebirds were using it. Sandhill cranes were spotted foraging in a recently harvested corn field on the same day and flew over into one of the flooded wetlands in the Headquarters unit.

Later in September, flooding will ramp up. The Refuge is planning for a typical schedule with 81% of seasonal and permanent wetlands flooded by the end of October. Depending on rainfall and water supply, the remaining wetland acres will be flooded over the course of the winter.

Coordinated sandhill crane roost surveys with the other wetland managers in California are planned. In November, the Refuge visitor services manager will lead a tour for the Sandhill Crane Festival. Over the course of the winter, other guided tours will be offered from the visitor use area at the Headquarters.



The fall departure is always bittersweet. As we enter the season of sensational sunrises and sunsets, memories of sun-lit Sandhill Cranes flying over Homer, calling to cranes below to join the V heading south will have to sustain our craniac urges. The reality of their departure marks the start of fall and our journey into winter. Like all cycles of life, we will live our lives with the flow of the season until once again the cycle circles back to spring, and we once again joyously welcome that well-known clarion call of our magnificent Lesser Sandhill Cranes.

If you are experiencing crane viewing withdrawal symptoms, watch this video. It is a compendium of three Sandhill Crane slide programs from 2020 through 2022.

Video: 2019 to 2022 Homer Alaska Sandhill Cranes

<https://youtu.be/Itk6Xc9qgUE>.

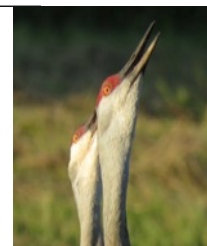


Sandhill Crane pre-migration gathering at Inspiration Ridge Preserve in Homer.

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. 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



Appendix--Tables

First Reported Arrival Dates	
Year	Date
2022	April 13
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

Table 1

# Fledged Colts from Anchor Point South	
Year	Date
2022	59
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

Table 2

Largest Fall Flock at IRP	
Year	Number
2022	97
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+

Table 3

Nest Data					
Year	Nests	Colts Hatched	Colts Fledged	Nest Success	Fledging Success
2022	50	92	60	86.00%	65.20%
2021	46	70	54	78%	68%
2020	42	70	45	78.60%	64%
2019	38	68	44	78.90%	64.70%
2018	33	63	48	87.90%	76.20%
2017	29	54	34	x	63%
2016	30	49	30	x	61.20%

Table 4

Beluga Slough Count Days Fly-in Count									
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	8/20/22	8/27/22	9/3/22
Colts	16	12	16	18	13	15	18	11	26
Adults	83	79	50	34	49	43	64	42	104
Total	99	91	66	52	62	58	82	53	130

Table 5