

Annual Sandhill Crane Summary 2023  
Homer, Alaska

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



*Crane flock at Inspiration Ridge Preserve in late August.*

**Season Summary**

Winter lasted long into the 2023 spring, making some people wonder if the cranes would be late or if they would even be able to nest up on the ridge due to the late melting fields of snow. Sandhill Cranes' migration is much like clockwork; they showed up pretty much when expected. Even with the snow they were able to nest in their territories on the ridge. While 5 were seen flying near Bishop's Beach on April 5<sup>th</sup>, on April 10<sup>th</sup> a local resident along Beluga Slough reported hearing about 40 at Beluga Slough. Luckily, these early arriving cranes, some of whose nesting areas are on the snowy ridge above Homer, have numerous estuary habitats, tidal areas, and upland areas on south-facing ridge slopes in which to find food. Overall, the nesting season was very successful.



*Nesting habitats: an estuary crane nest (left) and an upland crane nest (right).*

### **Nesting Report**

Kachemak Crane Watch has kept track of nesting cranes in the Homer area since 2011 when the three-year Citizen Science Nesting Ecology program first started. Since then, KCW has annually monitored known crane nests with the help of cooperating residents who report location, number of eggs hatched, fatalities, and number of colts fledged. At the end of the nesting season, KCW does the numbers based on what has been reported: total number of nests, number of colts hatched, fatalities, number of fledged colts, percent nesting success, and percent fledging success. Locations of nests are not made public, and we caution our cooperators not to disturb nesting cranes during observations.

Despite the perception of many people that this was a cold, rainy, miserable summer, Sandhill Cranes probably did not mind it all that much as their nesting success rate was better this year. Looking at the climate data from the Homer airport for the 4 months during which cranes are nesting or raising their young shows that our summer was not as bad as perceived. The average high and low temperatures were very close to normal in degrees Fahrenheit, but the rainfall was mostly above average. Average rainfalls for May, June, July, and August are 0.97”, 0.96”, 1.56”, and 2.46”, respectively. Fortunately, the heavier rain months fell during the time when most of the colts were larger and able to thermoregulate. Below is a table of rainfall at Inspiration Ridge Preserve during the important time of brooding eggs and raising the colts.

	Av. High	Av. Low	Rain (inches)
May 2023	50.5	38.7	1.42
June 2023	57.8	46.8	1.25
July 2023	61.9	50.2	4.25
Aug 2023	63.2	50.1	5.33



Resident juvenile Bald Eagle landing at Beluga Slough in September.

This year, 61 nests were reported, 54 nests successful, an 88.5% nest success rate. Some 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. Twenty-five single colts fledged, while 31 crane pairs raised twosomes. A total of 74 colts fledged out of 87 hatched, an 85% success rate, compared to 65.2% last year. (See Tables 1-6, pages 9-10.)

This year we had few reports of what caused the loss of a

nest or colt. One dead adult was sent for necropsy at the State Veterinarian's office, which showed that the crane died from systemic bacterial infections, and two others were found dead.

### Beluga Slough's "Boardwalk Pair"

Just an update on this popular and appreciated pair. Remember, last year the female's leg was badly injured, and KCW learned an eagle had killed her. The male found a new mate before the end of summer.

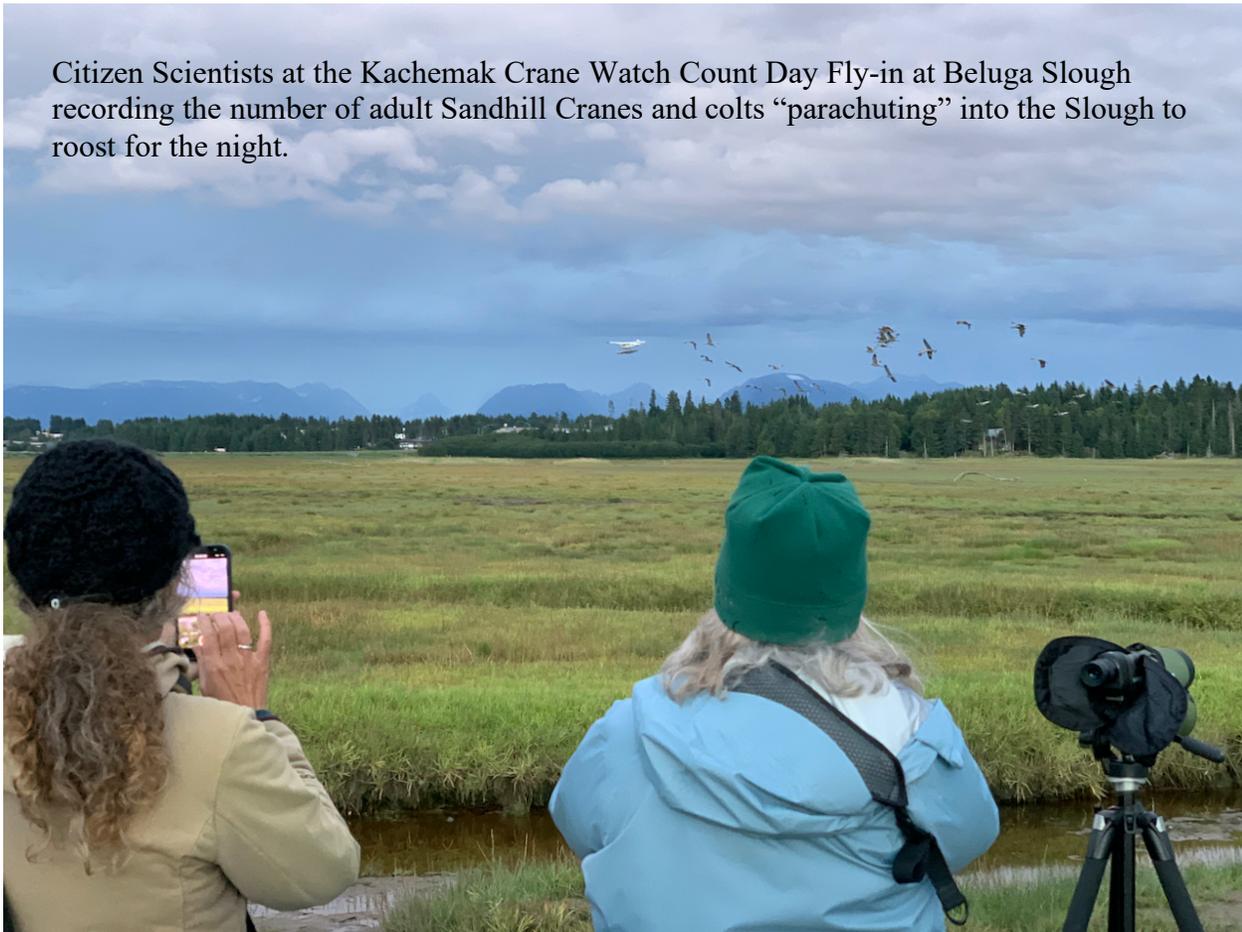
They returned this spring, nested, and hatched two colts. Unfortunately, one colt was taken, likely by one of the resident Beluga Slough eagles. They managed to fledge the remaining colt and left on migration in September.



Boardwalk pair landing at Beluga Slough in September.

## Count Days

August 19th, August 26th, and September 2nd were the 7<sup>th</sup> annual Sandhill Crane Count Days.



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.

Those fall days in the last few weeks the cranes are in town before leaving on migration to the Central Valley in California near Sacramento are filled with the vibrant and excited energy of the newly fledged colts, their parents, and all the flocks of non-breeders as the cranes lift off on nearly daily, long training flights. The anticipation builds in the flock and in local crane enthusiasts or craniacs, as everyone awaits the day or days of departure.

During this time, Kachemak Crane Watch hosts its three-day citizen science counts that include three Saturday evenings of crane watching, counting, and conversation at the Beluga Slough picnic table on the gravel trail off the boardwalk below Islands and Ocean Visitor Center. Counters arrive at 6 p.m. and count all arriving cranes until the official time of sunset in Homer. Weather can be challenging sometimes, but this year weather was very fine.

Reported sightings all day help Kachemak Crane watch gather information on crane numbers and locations before the average departure date in mid-September. August 19<sup>th</sup>, the count started near high tide so many of the cranes by-passed the Slough for the beach area or just did not show up. We only had 11 colts with 45 adults, for a total of 56, the lowest count at Beluga Slough those three days. The 26<sup>th</sup> more than made up for that poor showing with 31 colts and 156

adults, a total of 187 cranes. That is the highest total count number at Beluga Slough recorded on any of the seven years of counting at the Slough. The final day, September 2, recorded 20 colts and 121 adults, totaling 141. There were some large, group drop-ins and the most amazing weather phenomenon was the brilliant, red, puff-ball clouds at the very end of our August 26<sup>th</sup> count. A perfect ending to our best count day!



This year's main migration took place on September 11 and 17, both days that large migrant flocks were reported flying over parts of Anchor Point and Homer with several blocks with at least 1000 were reported, along with many large groups in the 100s. These high-flying passing flocks come from the Alaska Peninsula nesting areas, crossing Cook Inlet in different places each year depending on where the most favorable air currents for migration are located. Some years they are further north, and other years over Anchor Point and Ninilchik, and sometimes over Homer. The last reported flocks of these high-flyers over North Fork Road were reported on October 2.

## Report from the Wintering Grounds in Central California

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

Refuge staff flooded our wetlands mid-August for early fall migrants. “Hopefully, about half of our wetland acres (320) will be flooded by mid-October, the remaining filling through the end of November, a total of 665 acres available for sandhill cranes, waterfowl, arctic geese and shorebirds,” Refuge Manager, Bart McDermott, explained. “The first pair or group of sandhill cranes on the Refuge usually arrive within the last two weeks of September.”

Many of the cornfields are harvested in late September and will hopefully provide some foraging habitat for sandhill cranes. The field across from the Refuge shop already has a flock of Canada geese on it. The New Year’s Eve flood delayed some farming operations and our wetland and weed control management activities. Fortunately, the flood did not impact the fall harvest as many farmers in our area were able to replant or drain their fields. “Our farmer who had planted winter wheat on our 80 acres lost the entire crop to flooding and had to replant corn which was harvested this week,” manager McDermott reported.



Sandhill Cranes foraging in the wetlands at Stone Lakes NWR in Sacramento, CA. Photo by Jeanne Cunningham, *Friends of Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge*.

## Saga of the Arrowshot Cranes

Fifteen years ago, Kachemak Crane Watch funded a three-year Sandhill Crane Nesting Ecology Study. Then the number of nests documented each year were just under 30. Now, Kachemak Crane Watch's nest monitoring project has over 60 nests documented, more than double.

Cranes are nesting throughout the community, from the head of the Bay to areas in Anchor Point. People who live with nesting cranes love "their" cranes and are very protective of them. (Watch "For the Love of Cranes," <https://youtu.be/BJdj9pEGx88>.)

This summer, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, one Homer neighborhood with a crane family that has been nesting there at least seven years was shocked to find that someone, likely living in the neighborhood, had shot the much-admired male crane who was raising two colts with his devoted mate. The male crane was shot through his front breast by an arrow shot from above, possibly from a neighbor's porch. The arrow then went through the male's wing and feathers, pinning the wing so that the crane could not move it.



Jason Sodergren (left) and Dr. Ralph Broches DVM (right) remove the arrow from the rescued male Sandhill Crane. All updates here:

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6jFedH\\_im3pK0ULc0jVlgvWwwan11p-w](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6jFedH_im3pK0ULc0jVlgvWwwan11p-w)

Despite his injury, the male crane returned to his family and continued feeding his colts and defending the family from predators. Human neighbors reported he valiantly chased off an eagle attack and continued guarding his family while they fed.

When Kachemak Crane Watch was contacted, we immediately formed a rescue team, contacted several crane experts to review our rescue plan, secured needed antibiotics (donated by, Homer Veterinary Clinic) and other medical supplies, and coordinated with the human neighbors to help in keeping track of the crane as we tried to catch it.

After one failed attempt, we returned a second time and succeeded in catching the crane. We quickly settled him down, removed the arrow, administered antibiotics, checked him over, and decided to release him immediately back to his family. Even after all this very trying experience, he ran off flapping his newly released wing and very quickly rejoined his mate and colts.

Since the injury was early in the summer, the male crane had most of summer to heal his wing and breast muscle, and he regained his flying abilities along with his colts as they learned to fly. By migration time in mid-September, he was fully flying with his family. He was reported as having migrated with his family to Central California for the winter. Our hope is he makes it safely there and comes back next spring with his family. That will be the Cinderella ending to this story!

## The Season's Wrap Up



As the last of the migrants pass through on their way south, the sun is coming up later, the leaves have turned colors, and the first frosts have hit. Craniacs miss the daily routine of greeting the cranes each day. We miss their daily rounds in our neighborhoods, their resounding calls, their ballet in the sky (thanks Roberta), and their daily family life. What I miss is their daily inspiration as symbols of so much that is good that we should emulate—their devotion to their offspring, their faithfulness to their mate and colts, their resilience in the face of severe adversity, their tenacity to perform and complete their family responsibilities, and their effort to overcome severe challenges. If there is one crane family that epitomizes all of this, it has to be the Arrowshot Crane and his family. “Sneaky Pete “ you have touched the hearts of many Homer folks, so we all hope you and your family make it back to your neighborhood next spring!

If you still need your crane fix, watch this video. The best photos from the 2023 summer Sandhill Crane season will help ease your withdrawal.

Video: *Sandhill Cranes 2023 Summer Slide Show* <https://youtu.be/BYPnPIwcZfl>

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*



## Appendix--Tables

First Reported Arrival Dates	
Year	Date
2023	Apr 5 & 10
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	Number of Colts
2023	74
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

Reported Departure Dates	
Year	Date
2023	9/11 and 9/17
2022	9/5 and 9/10
2021	9/11
2020	9/10
2019	9/14
2018	9/9
2017	9/7 and 9/8
2016	9/7
2015	9/12
2014	9/13 and 9/14
2013	9/9 and 9/14
2012	9/6 and 9/13
2011	9/9 and 9/17
2010	9/8
2009	9/12
2008	9/11
2007	9/14
2006	9/10
2005	9/6
2004	9/12
2003	9/10
2002	9/10
2001	9/5
2000	9/7
1999	9/15

Table 3

Largest Fall Flock at IRP	
Year	Number
2023	122
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 4

Nest Data					
Year	Nests	Colts Hatched	Colts Fledged	Nest Success	Fledging Success
2023	61	87	74	88.5%	85%
2022	50	92	60	86.0%	65.2%
2021	46	70	54	78.0%	68.0%
2020	42	70	45	78.6%	64.0%
2019	38	68	44	78.9%	64.7%
2018	33	63	48	87.9%	76.2%
2017	29	54	34	x	63.0%
2016	30	49	30	x	61.2%

Table 5

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
Count Day	8/19/23	8/26/23	9/2/23						
Colts	11	31	20						
Adults	45	156	121						
Total	56	187	141						

Table 6