

Annual Sandhill Crane Summary 2025

Homer, Alaska

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



Pre-migration gathering of cranes at Inspiration Ridge Preserve in mid-August.

Season Summary

Anticipating cranes in spring, Homer residents look skyward, listening for those triumphant arrival calls reverberating from afar, announcing local Sandhill Cranes have returned from their winter sojourn in Central California near Sacramento. A first flyover of two was recorded on March 29th near Seaside Farms, followed by five flying west over the Slough and one off the Anchor Point bluff on April 7th. The first on-the-ground sighting was a pair landing at the Beluga Slough picnic table on April 12th, marking the official beginning of our local Sandhill Crane nesting season.

Nesting pairs continued arriving the rest of April and on through the end of May. With a staggered arrival, pairs start nesting from late April on through the first week of June or even a bit later. This is a good survival strategy so not all colts hatch at the same time, nor are they all simultaneously ready after fledging to migrate. That is why some nesting pairs are seen with their colts still in town even after the main group has left on migration.



Painting feathers for nesting.



Sitting on nest at Mariner Park Lagoon.

Immediately after the big fields of Inspiration Ridge Preserve were mowed for the cranes on August 10, non-breeding cranes started coming to the newly mowed fields to feed. Each day brought a few more non-breeding cranes to the gathering. Meanwhile, nesting pairs were urging their colts to fly so flight training could start in earnest for the long journey south to the Sacramento area, roughly 2400 miles. By the third week of August, between 75 to 100 Sandhill Cranes were using the grassy fields and ponds at IRP. A few of the early nesters showed up with one or two colts to join the flock as well.

The main migration this year started on September 11th with a magnificent showing of a high flying flock of 2000 plus circling around Beluga Slough and then fading away in the fog on their course to upper Kachemak Bay. Flocks of hundreds and a few of a 1000 plus streamed over Homer and Anchor Point for the rest of the day. The southward migration from the Alaska Peninsula coming across Cook Inlet continued for the next few days.

Reports of these passing cranes continued through September 20th. One flock of two Vs of 40 cranes each flying northeasterly spurred two lingering local cranes to take flight in an effort to catch the passing flock. Hearing the calls of the two locals, the V formation switched into kettling mode, circling around, usually flying higher and higher to catch a favorable wind, allowing the two local cranes to catch up.

Inspiration Ridge Preserve and Kachemak Crane Watch, both entities of the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies, hosted 11 Sandhill Crane Tours between August 21 and September 5th this past summer. The tours provided an opportunity for visitors to view and photograph cranes and learn about their natural history and lives in the Kachemak Bay area. Watch for next year's tour dates in early August.



Participants on a Sandhill Crane Tour at Inspiration Ridge Preserve.

A new wildlife cam streams live video from IRP, sweeping from the breathtaking view of Grewingk Glacier across Kachemak Bay eastward through the fields where the gathering pre-migration flock and families with colts hang out. It's a great way to check out the beautiful winter sunrises as well. The cam is on the website, <https://hdontap.com>, under Inspiration Ridge Preserve. If you cannot make it to a crane tour, this is a good way next summer to see what the cranes are doing at IRP any time of the day.

(<https://hdontap.com/stream/394029/inspiration-ridge-homer-alaska-live-webcam/>)



Fall pre-migration crane flock at Inspiration Ridge Preserve. By HDonTAP webcam.

Nesting Report

Nest monitoring through Citizen Science is important for overall monitoring of Homer's local Sandhill Crane population from the head of Kachemak Bay south to Anchor Point area. Since 2011, KCW has gathered information from cooperating residents living with nesting cranes nearby. Cooperators help KCW's Nesting Ecology Program by reporting nesting location, number of eggs hatched, fatalities, and number of colts fledged so nesting success and approximate overall local population can be figured. Information about where cranes nest is not made public, and we caution our cooperators not to disturb nesting cranes during observations.



Crane tracks at a nearly dry IRP pond.

Summer 2025 was relatively dry as evidenced by some local water aquifers that feed ponds and water wells drying up in late August. Despite favorable weather for nesting and survival of young, this weather also favored reproduction of predators and other animals, making for a tougher year for Sandhill Crane survival. Sandhill crane colt mortalities throughout the summer took a significant toll on cranes this year with reports of eggs taken early on and colts killed or missing due to eagles, coyotes, lynx, loose dogs, and unknown reasons.

This year, the total number of reported nests was slightly up, 54 compared to 51 last year. Overall, nesting success was way down, only 55.6% of nests succeeded compared to last year's 74.5%. Of the 80 colts hatched, 47 or 58.5% made it to fledging. As in most years, some people don't report, and often cooperators are not able to determine if their cranes had a nest or not.

Predators were a problem this year. All three usual nesting pairs that use Mariner Park Lagoon or Beluga Slough lost their nests. Coyotes were suspected in Mariner Park Lagoon. What took the two that use Beluga Slough is unknown. Eagles do nest on the edge of Beluga Slough. Coyotes slink through the area; an otter was seen in the Slough, and a black bear sometimes cruises through. Loose dogs are also a concern. This year there were 46 mortalities that include eggs and colts that were destroyed or lost. KCW often does not get complete data as sometimes the families show up with one or two colts or none and there is no information on what happened to the missing ones.

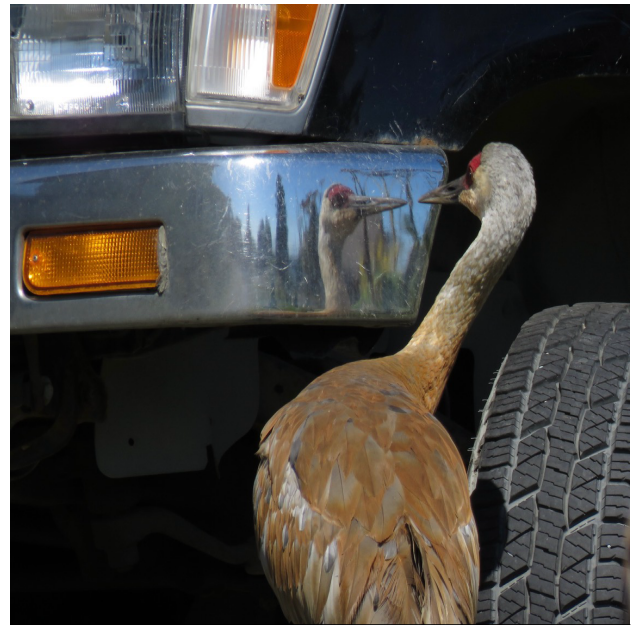
One dead colt whose body was found and reported to KCW and then sent to the Alaska State Veterinarian. The necropsy found it died from blunt trauma consistent with the possible predator attack that also likely caused its sibling to disappear. The human neighbors of the crane family reported a disturbance where the crane family roosts at night before the colt was found.

Our local Sandhill Crane population is increasing. More groups of young non-breeding adults ranging through neighborhoods around town have been seen in diverse parts of town, many in areas that they had not frequented before. Even some of the nesting pairs with colts were easy to see around town. The increase is not surprising considering over 22 years, 791 known colts have fledged in the Kachemak Bay area from all reported nests from Anchor Point south to the head of Kachemak Bay. (See Tables 1-6, pages 9-11.)

Count Days

The ninth annual Sandhill Crane Count Days at Beluga Slough on August 23, August 30, and September 6 welcomed quite a few tourists from a cruise who were delighted to meet knowledgeable locals who shared their crane knowledge with them. From 6 p.m. until the official time of sunset each count day, all arriving cranes are recorded.

Weather this fall was relatively pleasant for all count days. Cranes do not always cooperate. On August 23 the tide was fairly low. Many of the cranes chose not to land, so that day the show was almost nill. The other days everyone was delighted with the graceful parachute style landings in the Slough highlighted by families with colts who were not the most stable in their landing skills. Check the Count Days Table on page 10 for all the totals of arriving cranes.



"Truck Townie" fighting his reflection in the bumper.



Craniacs gathering at Beluga Slough for Count Day fly-in.

2025 Annual Crane Report from Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge,
Bart McDermott, Refuge Manager

Sacramento's Central Valley's Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge continues to provide an essential pit stop for sandhill cranes and other waterfowl migrating along the Pacific Flyway. According to Refuge Manager Bart McDermott, "The first crane sighting on Stone Lakes NWR last season was on September 17, 2024. Our Refuge staff also conducted roost surveys from October 2024 – January 2025, with a peak of 737 cranes in November.

"Refuge staff will begin flooding the first set of wetlands in early September to provide foraging and loafing habitat for the first wave of weary birds," McDermott explained. "Staff also plans to flood the remaining seasonal wetlands through November and December to provide over 700 acres of roosting habitat for wintering sandhill cranes. Additionally, cattle are used to graze over 4,000 acres of seasonal grassland habitat to provide foraging habitat for sandhill cranes, curlews and arctic geese."

Just east of the Refuge, the Harvest Water Project began installing the pipeline that will provide highly treated wastewater to local farmers to irrigate crops. The project has some funding to support sandhill cranes. This winter they will begin creating small 32-acre crane roost sites. Over the course of the next few years, they will be ramping up to a target of 700 acres of roosting habitat and 2,800 acres of foraging habitat.

Several National Wildlife Refuges in California and Nevada have been struggling to provide habitat for resident wildlife and migratory birds as budgets and staffing cuts continue this year



Recently arrived Greater and Lesser Sandhill cranes enjoying newly flooded Lewis Unit wetlands at Stone Lakes NWR in Sacramento, CA area. Photo by Autumn Turner

due to efforts to reduce the federal workforce. The staff at Stone Lakes NWR continues to operate with vacant positions. The Refuge was directly impacted by the Valentine's Day firing of one employee. Fortunately, they were hired back just in time for the spring migration where we focus on weed control and preparing the wetlands for the fall flood-up.

McDermott concluded, "Despite the setbacks and challenges, our staff is looking forward to hearing the primeval calls of the cranes again soon. The annual office Crane Arrival Poll shows guesstimates of crane arrival sometime between September 12 to 26. Our Wildlife Refuge Specialist, Autumn Turner spotted the first group of sandhill cranes on the Refuge on September 22, 2025. She recorded a handful of lessers with a pair of greater sandhill cranes in our northern wetland unit. Unfortunately, no one on the staff had that day selected. "

Turner quipped, "So the honor of winning the poll will have to wait another year. We are just glad to see the cranes back in their winter home, enjoying the freshly flooded wetlands!"

The Season's Wrap Up



When migrational unrest starts, the exhilaration in the cranes is contagious. Their mounting excitement finally bursts into action as the flock springs up, soaring skyward, disappearing on training flights to unknown destinations. Later, an exhausted flock returns, landing mostly gracefully with many cranes dropping to the ground, gasping from exertion, to take a

nap. Colts immediately nod off, others may eat a bit, some preen, but they all rest.

Preparing for a 2400-mile journey is a marathon undertaking, spread over 4 to 6 weeks, beginning just as the crane colts are starting to fledge. They will alternate training with periods of rest. After a day or two of many hours flying, the flock at Inspiration Ridge Preserve will rest all the next day if not disturbed by eagles or coyotes.

As the mid-September departure date approaches, flight training lasts longer. This is the time of year when colts are often reported lost. Most people report them as taken by a predator, but this time of year the colt probably just got tired and had to rest, so it landed somewhere. Most of the



Colt with parents.



Intent to fly.

time the family comes back the next day with the colt. Most likely the colt knows where the night-time roost is located, so they get back together then.



Migration day, (this year mainly on September 11), flocks around town were excited. Within the bigger flocks around town as departure time gets closer, the cranes start talking to each other. One male crane usually starts the calling that announces the potential departure. They move toward the leader, all facing the same direction as the leader. The purring running through the flock is very audible now. The lead bird stretches his neck out forward, as does his mate, and as he takes off,

the whole rest of the flock takes off as well. The receding flock's flight call joyously announces the start of migration, leaving most craniacs sighing that the season is over. The remaining cranes will trickle out in smaller flocks over a couple more weeks, but the orchestra of loud, raucous, trumpets heard all over town is now headed south to play more symphonies in the grain fields and marshes of Central California for the winter.

If you still need your crane fix, watch the slideshow, “2025 Season of the Cranes,” with Kachemak Crane Watch’s best photos from this summer. Hopefully, the video will ease your crane withdrawal.

Video: <https://youtu.be/1ZLK9bMfdU>

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

Photography and report by Nina Faust for Kachemak Crane Watch.

Appendix--Tables

First Reported Arrival Dates	
Year	Date
2025	April 12
2024	April 12
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

Reported Departure Dates	
Year	Date
2025	9/11 thru 9/15
2024	9/10
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 2

# Fledged Colts from Anchor Point South	
Year	Number of Colts
2025	31
2024	55
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 3

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	8/24/24	8/31/24	9/7/24	8/23/25	8/30/25	9/6/25
Colts	11	31	20		14	28	13	2	18
Adults	45	156	121	2	86	167	65	17	79
Total	56	187	141	Rained out!	100	195	78	19	97

Table 4

Nest Data					
Year	Nests	Colts Hatched	Colts Fledged	Nest Success	Fledging Success
2025	54	80	47	55.6%	58.5%
2024	51	75	55	74.5%	73%
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%
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		
		Total	791		

Table 5

Largest Fall Flock at IRP	
Year	Number
2025	100
2024	114
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 6