

Annual Sandhill Crane Summary 2024

Homer, Alaska

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



Crane flock at Inspiration Ridge Preserve in early September.

Season Summary

Migration seemed a bit early this year as the Inspiration Ridge Preserve counts dropped by 40 cranes on September 6th. By September 11th, the flock of nearly 100 had departed, signaling that migration was in full swing.

Not all local cranes migrate at the same time. There were still cranes showing up at Beluga Slough and at feeding areas around town, but by the 13th flocks of hundreds of cranes were passing over Homer from across Cook Inlet. Some families who nest later were in town still working to get their colts in condition for the long trip south to Central California.

Early October 2024, only lone cranes appeared to be left in town. The injured female at Inspiration Ridge Preserve left on September 30, the same day a late flock of 30 cranes were reported flying towards the head of Kachemak Bay. An Anchor Point singleton was reported leaving on October 15, and interestingly, this one seems to do this every year according to his human neighbor.

This year on April 12, the first cranes were observed flying in Homer, with the first report of cranes landing in town on April 17th. Conditions on the ridge above Homer were still snowy, but that does not stop the cranes. With a diversity of excellent feeding areas like Beluga Slough and Mariner Park Lagoon, as well as the intertidal zone along the beaches at low tide, cranes nesting on the ridge can rest and fatten up on the bench below before starting their nesting season.



Left: Cranes nesting on the ridge arrive to find their nesting area still covered in snow. Right: Beluga Slough has an abundance of food available for the new arrivals. Photos by Nina Faust.



Northwestern crows harassing a Bald Eagle at Beluga Slough. Photo by Nina Faust



Sandhill Crane at Mariner Park Lagoon rolls her egg in the nest. Photo by Nina Faust

Nesting Report

Since 2011, Kachemak Crane Watch's ongoing Citizen Science Nesting Ecology program has tracked nesting cranes in the Homer area. Local residents contribute to this monitoring project by reporting location, number of eggs hatched, fatalities, and number of colts fledged. If you have a nesting pair, please join us next year in our on-going effort to track nesting success. Information about where cranes nest is not made public, and we caution our cooperators not to disturb nesting cranes during observations.

This year, the total number of reported nests dropped to 51 compared to 61 last year. Some people did not report in this year, and several cooperators could not determine if their cranes had a nest. Predators were a bit more successful this year as well, with eagles likely taking eggs or a recently hatched colt on three nests, coyotes or bears on two other nests, and monofilament line entangling and killing one of the Boardwalk Pair's colts. (See Figure 1, page 9)

Another pair were likely shot in their neighborhood. One colt whose body was sent to the Alaska State Veterinarian was necropsied and found to have died from the trauma of gunshot. Its sibling had disappeared just before this one was discovered, but the symptoms the human neighbors observed were the same in both colts, so it is likely they both died from being shot. Hunting cranes is not legal until the season opens in September, and it is dangerous to hunt cranes in neighborhoods any time. Furthermore, it is very unethical and unsafe to do so where cranes are living in people's yards. If cranes are shot out of season, the incident should be reported to the Alaska State Wildlife Troopers.

Overall, the cranes still had a good nesting season with a 74.5% success rate. Of the 75 colts hatched, 55 colts, 73%, fledged. Ninety five percent of single colts raised by a pair fledged,

while 60.7% of twins raised by a pair fledged. Single colts have an advantage with both parents feeding and protecting only one colt.

Our local Sandhill Crane population is increasing. This is evident in more nest sites near existing nests, most likely young cranes moving into territories near their parents or other relatives. Also, people are reporting more groups of young non-breeding adults ranging through neighborhoods around town. This is not surprising considering over 21 years, 744 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 8-9.)

Count Days

Citizen Scientists gathered at the Beluga Slough picnic table for the 8th annual Sandhill Crane Count Days on August 24th, August 31st, and September 7th to count the cranes as they gracefully floated down to rest and feed for the night. From 6 p.m. until the official time of sunset each count day, all arriving cranes are recorded.

Weather can be challenging sometimes, but this was the first year that the count was called

off due to a heavy, driving rain squall on day 1. The second count day totals were 86 adults and 14 colts for a total of 100. The third count day had 167 adults and 28 colts for a record total of 195 cranes. Previous high total was 187 in 2023, and some of the birders counted 203 that evening.

While the count was happening at Beluga Slough on the three Count Days, an observer was counting the pre-migration flock at Inspiration Ridge Preserve. For each of the three days respectively IRP's evening high counts were 114, 82, and 72. This flock is separate from those roosting at Beluga Slough. Later in the evening they head into the Fritz Creek Critical Habitat area to roost.



*Citizen Scientists count adult Sandhill Cranes and colts as they land in Beluga Slough to roost for the night.
Photo by Nina Faust*

A few highlights from the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge Sandhill Crane Report

*Submitted by Laura Amaya, Biologist
ACE Intern, Stone Lakes NWR, Elk Grove, CA*

Earlier this summer, we completed several rounds of irrigations to promote the growth of native grasses that support insects, larvae, aquatic invertebrates, small vertebrates, and seeds—critical food sources for the cranes and other waterfowl. So far, most of our wetland units have been mowed, with a few remaining areas scheduled for completion by the end of September.

Our strategy to provide a balanced mix of open water and vegetative cover aims to attract not only sandhill cranes but also to create suitable habitats for ducks, geese, herons, and other waterbird species. Beyond wetland management, we are addressing invasive species in the grasslands, particularly star thistle, which degrades grazing lands and disrupts habitats for grassland songbirds and other migratory birds. Additionally, nearby crops are being harvested, leaving behind grains and seeds that serve as foraging habitats for the cranes.



Wetland mowing for the maintenance of sandhill crane habitat. Source: USFWS

We have been carefully monitoring the water supply in the Stone Lakes Basin and are pleased to report that there is sufficient water available. We began flooding the wetlands on September 5, 2024, with the goal of having 80% of the wetlands filled by the end of October. Flooding is scheduled to be completed by December 18, 2024. The staggered flooding regime allows there to be new open water habitat and foraging opportunities for cranes and waterbirds to use throughout the fall and winter.



Lesser Sandhill Cranes at Cosumnes River Preserve in Sacramento, CA. Photo by Scott Bartos

Concluding Update on the Arrowshot Crane

April 23, 2024, the Arrowshot Crane and his mate were reported back on their nesting territory in Homer. No update on their colts was available as they did not land with the pair. The pair arrived in good shape. By early May they were on a nest, and by late May had 2 colts.

Unfortunately, predators got their colts. It is remarkable how resilient this male is to have suffered that terrible injury last summer, then was rescued, recovered quickly enough take training flights with their two colts, migrated to CA, and then returned this summer. To learn about this remarkably tough crane and his family, go to Youtube,

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6jFcdH_im3pK0ULc0jVlgvWwwan1p-w



Right: Arrowshot Crane with mate and 2 colts in 2023. Left: Arrowshot Crane and mate on their territory, 2024. Photo by Nina Faust (left) and Mark Marette (right)

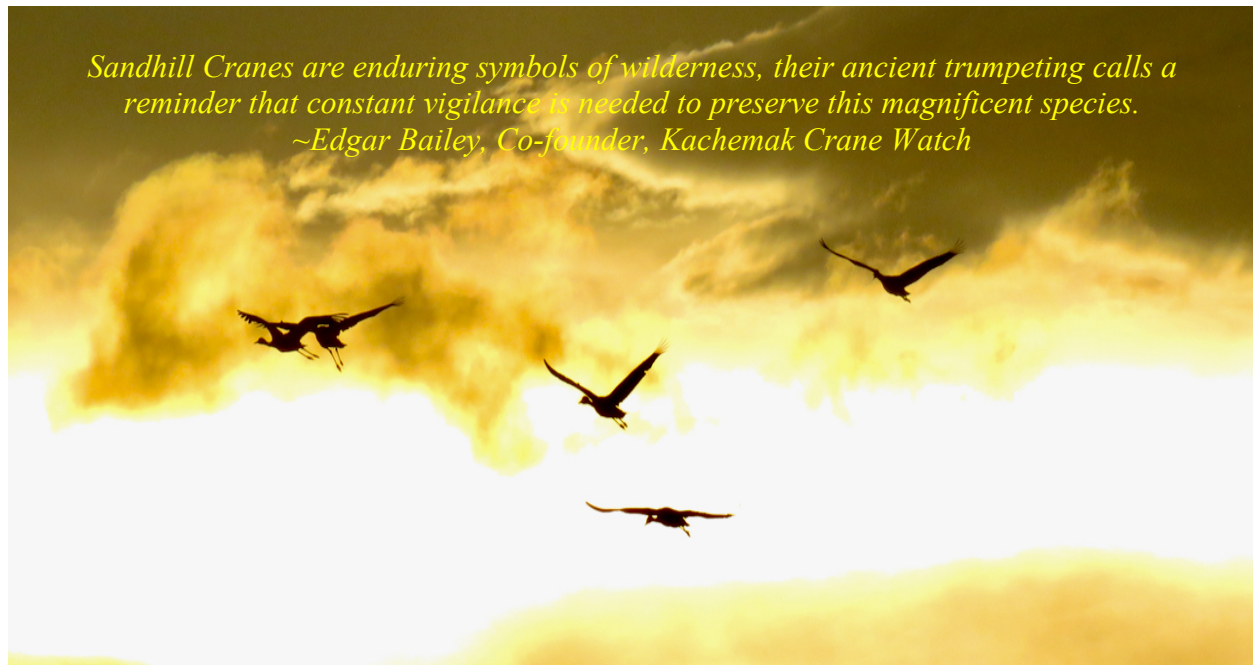
The Season's Wrap Up

At summer's end, after migration, a startling silence falls across town. No trumpets overhead, no unison calls in yards, no peeping little crane voices at the Slough. The silence at Inspiration Ridge Preserve on the day after the flock of nearly 100 left was profound. Those sounds slip inside our heads and hearts, leaving an empty feeling when the crane symphony orchestra heads south. However, knowing conditions in the wintering grounds are good, with plenty of water and food and no fires right now, is calming. Homer's cranes will be resting and readying themselves over the winter for another successful season in Kachemak Bay when they return next April.

If you still need your crane fix, watch the slideshow, "2024 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/ANHgNtCNrTQ>

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*

Until next spring...

Appendix--Tables

First Reported Arrival Dates	
Year	Date
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
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

Largest Fall Flock at IRP	
Year	Number
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 3

Nest Data					
Year	Nests	Colts Hatched	Colts Fledged	Nest Success	Fledging Success
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	744		

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
Count Day	8/19/23	8/26/23	9/2/23	8/24/24	8/31/24	9/7/24			
Colts	11	31	20		14	28			
Adults	45	156	121	2	86	167			
Total	56	187	141	Rained out!	100	195			

Table 5

Beluga Slough's Boardwalk Pair Loses 2nd Colt
 By Kachemak Crane Watch, July 17, 2024



Last Sunday Kachemak Crane Watch a dead colt was reported in Beluga Slough. When the colt was later inspected, it was found to have monofilament fishing line tightly wrapped around and cutting into the right leg. Not only is this terribly painful, but likely kept the colt from feeding. It is an agonizing death.



Photo by Jeff Picton

Discarded monofilament line is one of the leading causes of bird deaths, yet so preventable. If you are fishing don't drop line on the ground or discard it in the back of an open pickup. Cut it up in short pieces or roll it up tightly, tie it off, and put it in a covered trash can so curious birds do not get into it and get entangled.

When cranes lose a colt, they often stay by the body sometimes for days, mourning the loss. The Beluga Slough Boardwalk Pair below Islands and Ocean Visitor Center is Homer's most watched and beloved local Sandhill Crane Family. The loss of the second colt to such an awful human caused death has saddened many of the family's admirers, several of whom went to the Slough today to look for the remaining monofilament line, which was successfully recovered. If you see discarded line, save a bird's life by picking it up and putting it in a secure garbage container.



Photo by Jeff Picton



Photo by Meagan O'Neill



Photo by Nina Faust

Figure 1