



Kachemak Crane Watch

Homer, Alaska

All About Cranes #3 by Kachemak Crane Watch

1. Where do cranes nest and what materials do they use to build their nests?

Sandhill Cranes are ground nesters, building their nests primarily in wetlands, but also in upland grassy areas. Cranes create a nest from whatever plants are available. In the Homer area, cranes use both wetlands and upland areas. Known nests consist primarily of grasses and sedges. When the cranes return in the spring, the grasses and sedges are dull brown in color offering cranes sufficient camouflage to help prevent detection from predators. Cranes will often paint their feathers with mud to help them blend in with surrounding vegetation. The mud stains their gray feathers a rich brown/rust color. The more rust colored the feathers, the more iron there is in the soil used to paint their features. Cranes who have painted their feathers are much more difficult to see on their nests than unpainted cranes.

Cranes establish nesting territories and will return each year to that territory. However, cranes do not necessarily use the same nest as in previous years. At one known nesting location, the cranes have used three different locations within their territory in the past three years. Cranes may abandon their territory for one or more reasons, including (1) Loss of nest or chicks, (2) disturbance by humans or predators (including dogs), (3) nesting pair are young inexperienced birds, (4) lack of adequate food or water in the territory, (5) conflicts with neighboring pairs or aggressive non-paired cranes, and (6) loss of mate.

Do cranes mate for life? When do they first nest?

Cranes are considered symbols of marriage fidelity and loyalty. These long-lived birds, which can live 25-40 years in the wild, are basically monogamous and “mate for life.” On average, they usually don’t begin nesting or egg-laying until around age 4 or 5 and may not successfully breed the first few attempts. Sometimes the pair may divorce in this early stage of pair bonding. Those that are successful will form permanent pair bonds, possibly for the rest of their lives; however, occasionally, even older pairs may divorce. Cranes are sometimes killed by predators, hunters, or accidents with cars or powerlines, for example. In this case, the crane will likely seek another compatible mate.

The elaborate dances that crane pairs often perform is part of the pair bonding ritual. These intricate performances will include bowing with stretched out wings, leaping high

into the air, throwing sticks or plants, and other moves. Often these dances occur before the nest is ready and just before the pair copulates.

The pair stays together throughout the year. If they have colts, the whole family will migrate south together and return to the nesting territory in the spring. Then the colts will be driven off the territory.