



Kachemak Crane Watch

Homer, Alaska

All About Cranes #4 By Kachemak Crane Watch

How large are crane territories? Why do they form territories? Do crane territories overlap?

Sandhill Crane pairs usually return to the same breeding territory each year, as long as habitat conditions remain suitable. Suitable habitat includes nest site, roosting area, feeding area, and sometimes isolation. Last year colts who return with their parents from the previous year are driven away when the mated pair is ready to begin nesting. Males typically establishing breeding territories close to where they were born.

Territorial sizes vary, and pairs have been known to nest within 300 meters (981 feet) of each other. In some cases, cranes' breeding territories overlap. No information is available on territory sizes in Homer. However, for Greater Sandhill Cranes in Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho, five territories ranged from 25 – 57.5 acres, and averaged 42.5 acres. At Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, territory size depends on the number of nesting pairs and ranged from 3-170 acres, and averaged 62.5 acres.

Sandhill Crane use calls to defend their territories. They will also aggressively chase off other cranes within their territories. The male is the prime nest defender.

How many eggs do cranes lay and how long before they hatch? Who incubates the eggs?

Homer's Lesser Sandhill Crane population generally arrives in mid to late April. Cranes may begin laying their eggs around the first week of May. Many nesting pairs were reported to be on the nest by May 9, with some pairs not laying eggs until the end of May. In the Arctic, Sandhill Cranes may not lay their eggs until late May or early June. Generally, two eggs are laid. Eggs, which are oval-shaped, and brown with reddish spots, take roughly 30 days to hatch. Crane pairs raise one brood per year.

Both cranes share incubation. Sometimes both are at the nest for fairly long periods of time. Each adult takes a turn incubating the egg while the other goes off to forage. They may forage fairly close to the nest, or they may go quite a distance away. Some cranes go a mile or more away to feed, and upon returning to the nest, usually call to their mate while still in the air 1/4 mile away or more. Cranes paint their feathers with

iron laden mud to maintain camouflage, so if a paint hole is not close, they may have to fly off to the nearest one. Generally, the off duty adult stays nearby so it can return if there is a problem at the nest.

When the chicks (called colts) hatch, they are covered in a soft golden down. They can walk and leave the nest within 24 hours of birth. The parents' brood (sitting on) the chicks to protect them and keep them warm for up to three weeks. The adults also feed the young.

Sandhill Crane Viewing Etiquette

- Respect private property.
- Rather than approaching cranes, use binoculars or spotting scopes to observe them.
- When possible, use your car as a "blind" by staying in or near the vehicle.
- Keep pets leashed.
- Teach children good viewing etiquette by keeping them with you.
- Never bother cranes on a nest or at their nighttime roost.
- Cranes are protected migratory birds. It is illegal to harass them, except during hunting season.

If you have a Sandhill Crane question, email it to reports@cranewatch.org.