

Lesser Sandhill Cranes, Annual Summary Homer, Alaska, Summer 2018

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

As the fall colors spread a mantle of brilliant warm foliage across the hillsides, the last of Homer's Sandhill Cranes forage in small family groups with their later hatched colts and most of us wistfully savor the last moments with these iconic summer visitors.

Kachemak Crane Watch's three Citizen Science Count Days at the end of summer culminated Saturdays evening with enthusiastic craniacs gathered at Beluga Slough counting cranes as they arrived between 6:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. Folks were not disappointed! Cranes arrived slowly at first, but then steadily dropped in with evening sun transforming their soaring forms into golden, graceful gliders parachuting down, legs extended, wings arched to slow descent as they dropped among the gathered flock already foraging, calling, dancing, and socializing. The grand finale on September 8 this year was the 73 cranes that dropped in just before the counters left for the evening. There is no way to know if that flock was our local cranes or ones that had flown in from further north on the Alaska Peninsula or even Siberia. Cranes gathering to roost for the night in Beluga Slough has been occurring for at least the past three years. For data on the counts at Beluga Slough the past two years, see the Beluga Slough Count Days Table at the end of this article.

Several callers reported many groups of 100s flying in from across Cook Inlet, kettling up to catch the wind currents, then heading east toward the head of Kachemak Bay. Others lucky enough to be up in the Fox River Flats called to report thousands on the ground staging in the wetlands around that area between September 8 to September 10. Most of the flocks flying to the head of the Bay came from the west side of Cook Inlet and flew over the North Fork area.

The 2018 nesting season was very successful overall. Reports of crane arrivals began with the first report on April 7. This year, the overall fledging success rate was 76.2%, (63 colts hatched from 33 reported nests and 48 colts survived to fledging or being able to fly). That is a 13.2% increase over 2017. A few more nests were reported this year. In comparison to earlier years, the trend shows improvement in the numbers of young cranes surviving till fledging. The local crane population, based on the nesting success and reports throughout the summer, including the final three Count Days, indicate the population is at least stable or slightly increasing. More reports of groups in new places were received this year than in past years.

Predation is still a factor in survival of colts. This year several were lost for unknown reasons and one nest was lost to eagles. However, one colt needlessly died due to a dog attack. Three loose dogs in a Skyline Drive neighborhood attacked a young colt, mangling and severing one of its legs, breaking the other, and taking chunks out of its breast. The neighbors who enjoyed watching this family raise its colts watched the suffering colt valiantly use its wings to drag itself out of the ditch where it had been all night to be with its family that had returned the next morning from the roosting area. Kachemak Crane Watch was called to rescue the colt. The three loose dogs returned to go after the colt and family that evening but were chased off. The bird rescue crew had to wait till almost dark for the family to leave for the evening roost. Once the horrific extent of the colt's injuries was discovered, the colt had to be euthanized.

It is illegal to let your dog harass wildlife. If there are nesting cranes, calving moose, or other wildlife reproducing in your neighborhood, dogs should be kept on a leash when walked, and when at home kept under control. In Alaska we live with wildlife nearby and must take the needed steps to keep our pets from killing wildlife. For those who have nesting cranes in their neighborhood, signs can be ordered to remind folks about neighborhood nesting cranes and the need to leash dogs and drive slowly. Information about how to order one of these signs is at the end of this article.

Last year a pair of crane colts was killed by a hunter who shot the young birds in the yard next door to where the parents have raised colts for years, horrifying neighbors who had watched these colts grow up. Not only is hunting this close to homes a dangerous practice, it is not sporting or ethical as the crane family was habituated to the area and the humans who put out corn for them. Proposal 91, **5 AAC 92.080. Unlawful methods of taking game**, proposed by Victoria Wilson

Winne, would address this problem by prohibiting discharge of certain weapons used for hunting and trapping within 1/2 mile of any residence in Unit 15C. Comments are due March 1, 2019 and can be submitted online at <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=process.comments>.

This year cranes arriving in the Central Valley of California around the Sacramento area will find good winter habitat conditions. According to Dr. Gary Ivey, a leading crane expert, "Overall, water and habitat conditions are pretty normal in the Central Valley this year. There is plenty of water for their roost sites. Most of the fires are pretty much out or contained, and they weren't in areas where cranes winter. The biggest concern is the continued shift away from crane-compatible grain crops to permanent crops such as vineyards and orchards in the cranescapes which at some point could cause major winter food shortages for cranes."

Bart McDermott, Refuge Manager of Stone Lakes NWR in Elk Grove CA, elaborated, "One issue for the cranes has been a significant amount of land use conversion from grain and alfalfa for dairy farming and irrigated and dry pasture for grazing to walnut orchards over the past few years. Along some of the back roads east of the Refuge, many fields that used to be in wildlife compatible crops are now trees. Fortunately one of the larger dairy's that support both cranes that roost at Cosumnes and Stone Lakes is still in operation with large fields of alfalfa and corn. We are collaborating with a few partners, including our friends group, on means to conserve some of the remaining farms in the area either with conservation easements or other incentive programs, but it takes time and outreach." McDermott also mentioned that they will continue conducting coordinated roost counts with all of the wetland managers in the Delta and San Joaquin Valley over the winter.

While in their wintering area, the colts will gain their red crowns and develop yellow eyes. Just when they get their adult voices is not completely clear. Dr. Gary Ivey says, "I still hear some chick calls in early April during migration north, near Burns Oregon and Othello Washington. As with their body feather molt, I suspect the timing of the voice change is variable by individual as some birds tend to molt and get their red crowns much earlier than others."

It would be interesting to know if this summer's colts returning to Homer next spring with their families have their adult voices or still have their chick voices. If you have cranes nesting nearby, next spring listen for chick calls, and let Kachemak Crane Watch know what you hear when the families return with their young next spring.

Citizen Scientists reporting breeding success and non-breeding flock numbers help Kachemak Crane Watch keep track of Homer's Sandhill Cranes population. Citizen Science and working with other crane groups like Save Our Sandhill Cranes in Sacramento and the International Crane Foundation helps Kachemak Crane Watch gather and share information to educate people about cranes in both their summer and winter habitats.

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.

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



Adult Sandhill Cranes at Inspiration Ridge Preserve.



Time to head south.



Landing gear down!



Heading south!



An adult sandhill crane with its colt.



This year's fledged crane colts.



Birders gather for Count Day Fly-in at Beluga Slough.

Tables

**Number of Reported Fledged Colts
from Anchor Point South**

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

First Reported Arrival Dates

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

**Largest Observed Flock Size
Prior to Fall Migration
(Inspiration Ridge Preserve monitoring site)**

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+

Nest Data					
Year	Nests	Colts Hatched	Colts Fledged	Nest Success	Fledging Success
2018	33	63	48	87.9%	76.2%
2017	29	54	34	-	63%
2016	30	49	30	-	61.2%

Beluga Slough Count Days						
Count Day	8/26/17	9/2/17	9/9/17	8/25/18	9/1/18	9/8/18
Colts	14	25	16	27	38	25
Adults	103	111	40	87	99	152
Total Cranes	117	136	56	114	137	177



This Nesting Crane sign or one very similar can be purchased for \$20 one-sided, or \$30 two-sided. They are available at North West Signs and Vinyl // Bay Welding Services, Jamin Bultman // Graphic Designer, jamin@northwestak.com // [907.235.5106](tel:907.235.5106) // [907.315.7567](tel:907.315.7567)