

GREATER SANDHILL CRANE

Grus canadensis tabida

THE GREATER SANDHILL crane is a very large bird with long legs and a long neck and it measures about 4 feet tall and weighs approximately 12 pounds. It is slate gray in color and has a red patch of skin on the forehead.

Greater sandhill cranes are sometimes confused with the great blue heron, a bird that's similar in both size and color, but the distinction is easy to make when they are in flight. While the heron pulls its head up and back, forming an "S" with its neck, the crane's neck is fully extended in a straight line with the body during flight.

Five populations of greater sandhill cranes, all migratory, are recognized in North America and number about 52,000 birds. The Lower Colorado River Valley population, approximately 1,700 birds, nests in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah and Wyoming. The greater sandhill crane's nesting habitats are mostly marshes, beaver ponds and willow-lined drainages in high mountain meadows, but the crane's breeding range in Colorado has shrunk to a small portion of five counties in the northwestern part of the state. Colorado's nesting population appears now to be about 150 pairs. The Rocky Mountain population is migratory and spends the winter months in the Lower Rio Grande River Valley in central to south-central New Mexico. Less than 10 percent migrate as far south as Mexico.

The population decline in Colorado is generally considered to be the result of human settlement. As people moved in, much of the nesting habitat became unsuitable because of either direct or indirect human disturbance during the incubation and chick-rearing periods, resulting in poor nesting habitat, nest abandonment and loss of young.

Additionally, many of the cranes were shot for food.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife began to address the serious decline in the state's greater sandhill crane breeding population in the early 1970s through habitat protection and the monitoring of migration staging sites and nesting areas.

Initial recovery efforts included the listing of Colorado's local breeding flock as a state endangered species in 1973. Shortly thereafter, the Division and the Routt National Forest began cooperative habitat protection and improvement projects in an effort to increase the number of nesting pairs and reproductive success. The Routt National Forest Plan was modified to include protection of sandhill crane habitat. The Division completed a greater sandhill crane recovery plan in 1992. The plan included biological goals and specific conservation actions that would ensure a long-term, self-sustaining breeding population in Colorado.

Intensive population monitoring studies were begun in the late 1980s and continued through most of the 1990s to document an increasing number of cranes nesting in Colorado. As a result of the studies, in 1993 the Colorado Wildlife Commission down-listed the cranes to a threatened status. Subsequently, as the crane population continued to exceed recovery plan objectives, the Commission de-listed the cranes in 1998, and the bird is presently listed as a species of special concern.

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Recovery efforts of greater sandhill cranes that began in the 1970s resulted in the delisting of the species in 1998.

