

The Sandhill Cranes of the Rainy River Area of Ontario

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Figure 1. A recently hatched Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis tabida*) hides in the grass near Rainy River, Ontario, 2 June 1989.

Photo: Kayo Roy.

The far-carrying ringing bugle call of the Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) is one of the characteristic bird sounds in the Rainy River area in northwestern Ontario. The Sandhill Crane is found as a breeder, a migrant, or a winter visitor, over much of North America, being absent from only the east-central and northeastern parts of the continent (Tacha *et al.* 1992, Sibley 2000). In Ontario, Sandhill Cranes breed throughout the province, from the Hudson Bay Lowlands in the north, to the shores of Lake Erie in the south

(Tebbel and Ankney 1982, Pedlar and Ross 1997). The species has become more evident in the southern part of the province during the past 20 years (Lumsden 1987, Sandilands 2005). Six subspecies of Sandhill Cranes have been recognized (Walkinshaw 1965, Lewis *et al.* 1977). Of these, two subspecies are found in the Rainy River area, with *G.c. tabida* (Greater Sandhill Crane) present as a breeder and *G.c. rowani* (Canadian Sandhill Crane) present as a spring and fall migrant.

Discussion

The Greater Sandhill Crane is a fairly recent addition to the avifauna of the Rainy River area. As the area was settled and land cleared for farming from the late 1800s to the present, habitat suitable for Sandhill Cranes was created. This new habitat was found and colonized by adventuresome cranes from breeding populations in northern Minnesota. A faunal survey of the Rainy River area carried out in 1929 does not make note of the species (Snyder 1938). Just when they arrived is not precisely known but from my own observations, they were fairly common from Emo westward in the early 1970s. Lumsden (1971) indicates they were present every year by the mid 1960s,

and I suspect they may have been there for a decade or more by then.

The Greater Sandhill Crane winters in family groups in Florida. By mid-April, breeding pairs, sometimes still accompanied by a young bird of the previous year, arrive in the fields, fens and bogs in the Rainy River area. Often the ground is still snow-covered but the birds appear to have sufficient fat reserves to see them through to final snow melt. In a year with a late spring, several pairs may come together in ploughed fields, where the dark soil has hastened snowmelt and affords some feeding opportunities. However, the pairs tend to keep well separated from one another, and sometimes will respond to the urge to call and dance.

The pairs move to their breeding territories as soon as snow melt permits. The cranes use a wide variety of habitat for nesting sites including: cattail (*Typha* sp.) marshes, wet meadows with scattered willow (*Salix* sp.), drier hayfields, and bogs and fens with scattered Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*) and Tamarack (*Larix laricina*). Two eggs are usually laid on a nest consisting of a mound of vegetation gathered from the immediate area. The non-incubating parent is always nearby, feeding and alert for danger. On hatching, the young are lead away from the nest by their very protective parents. Although two eggs are laid and hatch, it is rare for more than one young to survive. The young birds are very aggressive toward

each other from the time of hatching, and in most cases only one survives the constant sibling conflict to reach adulthood. The young are nearly full grown and flying by mid-August, and by early September the family groups have left the area for their wintering grounds in Florida.

The Canadian Sandhill Crane uses the Rainy River area as a stopover during spring and fall migration, between wintering grounds in New Mexico and Texas, and breeding areas in the boggy lowlands south and west of Hudson Bay and James Bay. Flocks of this subspecies, sometimes as many as 100 birds, use the large fields of the Rainy River area as overnight stops during their spring and fall migrations. The *rowani* flocks usually appear later in the spring than the breeding *tabida*, and can sometimes be seen well into May. This later arrival is likely linked to the delayed snow melt on their more northerly breeding grounds. Likewise, in the fall, southbound flocks are usually noted in late September and early October, well after *tabida* have left.

I have observed the behavior of several spring flocks of *rowani* over the years. The birds usually chose the largest field they could find on which to spend the night, no doubt as a means of easier predator detection. On sunny mornings the birds of the flock do not do much. Some food searching goes on and a few enthusiastic individuals engage in calling and short bouts of

dancing. As the air warms a general restlessness pervades the flock and so on, with much calling, a few birds launch into flight. This activity is infectious and the rest of the flock soon follows, with the entire group slowly spiraling upwards in flapping and gliding flight to a significant altitude. Then, still calling, they drift off to the north in a “kettle” in the laid back manner of migrating cranes. Migrating cranes seldom display the migratory urgency and determination of other species such as waterfowl. The flocks of *rowani* are more common in the spring than the fall. This may be related to weather patterns that encourage a more westerly drift during the fall migratory period. It could also be a reflection of food availability, in the harvested grain fields in southern Manitoba and points south, that the birds have learned to use.

Conclusion

The two subspecies of Sandhill Crane using the Rainy River area exhibit distinct differences. The breeding Greater Sandhill Crane, having wintered in Florida, arrives to begin nesting in mid to late April. By early September the family groups have started to move south. Both spring and fall migration involves only pairs or family groups. Larger aggregations are a factor of coincidence, or the influence of a traditional stopover location with good food supplies, with the family groups main-

taining a comfortable distance between each other. The visiting spring and fall migrant, the Canadian Sandhill Crane, arrives from New Mexico and Texas in late April through late May, usually in flocks of 50 or more individuals. The flocks rest overnight and, weather permitting, move on the next morning. Feeding seems to be incidental in the resting flock. Flocks again appear in the area in late September and October, but are usually not seen as frequently as in the spring. There is some suggestion the breeding *tabida* are somewhat larger in size than the migrant *rowani*, but I have not been able to see the difference in the field. Indeed, although some authors recognize *rowani* as a separate subspecies based on size considerations (Lumsden 1971, Walkinshaw 1973, Lewis *et al* 1977), others have questioned the validity of this separation, since there is a continuum of size between the two subspecies, with overlap in measurements (Tacha *et al.* 1985). However, in western Rainy River the two forms are distinctive in arrival and departure times, as well as in numbers seen, coming from two distinct wintering areas.

Acknowledgements

Ron Tozer and Ross James kindly reviewed earlier drafts of this article and offered several helpful comments. Kayo Roy generously permitted the use of his photograph of a baby Sandhill Crane taken near Rainy River, Ontario.

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