

FLORIDA CRANE A RESIDENT OF MISSISSIPPI

BY E. A. McILHENNY

Plates 21, 22

ON April 8, 1938, while visiting Mr. James R. Leavell, of Chicago, at his winter home about eight miles south and east of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, in a section of the Mississippi coast known as Pointe aux Chènes, I was informed that there were Sandhill Cranes in the vicinity. Seriously doubting this information, I answered that most likely the person who had reported Sandhill Cranes had seen Great Blue Herons, as the birds are similar. Later that same afternoon, Mr. Leavell, Mr. Leslie L. Cook, Mr. H. P. Flateau and myself, driving in Mr. Leavell's station wagon, went to see Mr. Ernest Carroll, who had reported the cranes, and who works for Mr. Flateau. Carroll lives at Fontainebleau Farm, which is about seven miles east of Ocean Springs, on U. S. Highway 90. Carroll had told Mr. Flateau that he had found a Sandhill Crane's nest during the spring of 1937 in a sparse wet pinewood section known as Bear Pond.

Proceeding to Carroll's house, I questioned him carefully, and he described the bird so accurately, also giving an imitation of the call, the location of the nest, and the size and color of the eggs, that I was confident he had seen Florida Cranes (*Grus canadensis pratensis*), their nest and eggs. On asking him if he could show me the nest which he had found the year before, he stated that he could, and proceeded to take us about three miles out on Highway 59 which runs north from Highway 90 near Fontainebleau. He stopped at Wiley Shumaker's house, a considerable distance out in the open pinewoods on a logging road, stating that Shumaker lived near a place where Sandhill Cranes were often seen. Shumaker told us that Sandhill Cranes passed his house every day going to and from Bear Pond and their roosting grounds to the east, and that he had seen Sandhill Cranes that morning. He also stated that he had killed Sandhill Cranes when they had passed near his house. He described the birds accurately, as well as their nests and eggs.

Bear Pond is only about a half mile from Shumaker's house, and on Carroll's telling us that he could take us to the old nest, which I was anxious to see, we drove a short distance through the woods, left the car and walked across the level, wet, sparsely timbered pine flat. Two of the party lagged behind because of the heavy going, but Mr. Leavell and I followed Carroll to the edge of Bear Pond, where Carroll stopped. I then asked him just where the nest was located, and he pointed to a low, cypress bush, about one hundred feet from where we stood, and said it was near that cypress.

It was then that I saw the head and neck of a Sandhill Crane, and could

make out the outline of its body sitting on what appeared to be a slight mound. I called the bird to Carroll's attention, and he said that he had seen the red spot on the bird's head but thought it was a Red-bird (*Richmondia cardinalis magnirostris*), meaning a male Cardinal. As we walked toward the crane, it took wing, flying directly toward us, passing not more than twenty feet in front and not ten feet above us (Plate 21). Gaining the altitude of the trees, it flew west across the open woods for about a quarter of a mile, and joined its mate who was seen to rise to meet it. All the while this bird was calling and croaking in the typical voice of the Sandhill Crane. The two birds started toward us, but one of them alighted on the ground in an opening, and the other bird came back and circled near us, then turned back to its mate, who joined it in the air. Then, the two birds circled near us, flying below the tops of the trees and giving their peculiar and never-to-be-forgotten call. After making a couple of circles near us, they alighted in the open woods about 150 yards away, remaining in plain sight all the while we were near the nest.

I thought it unwise to touch the nest or to go immediately to it, but we went within six feet of it and could plainly observe the two elongated, oval, dry-grass-colored eggs which were sparsely spotted all over and heavily spotted toward the larger end with burnt umber brown (Plate 21). Carroll said the eggs were deposited in the same nest in which he had seen eggs at about the same time in 1937.

The nest was situated on the ground in about six inches of water and was built up about twelve or fourteen inches above the water (Plate 21). It was about four feet across, constructed of dry grass and dry weed stalks with some small, dry pine twigs showing; it was slightly depressed in the center and was typical of the nests of the Sandhill Cranes that I have seen elsewhere, more especially in Florida, Dakota, western coastal Louisiana, and Manitoba, when these birds were still plentiful and shot as game. I can remember Sandhill and Whooping Cranes so plentiful in the late 'seventies at Avery Island, Louisiana, that guards were placed in the sweet-potato fields to protect the crop, for these large birds dug and ate the potatoes in great quantities. We did not disturb the nest in any way, or approach immediately to it.

Later, we questioned John King who works for Mr. Flateau. King stated that he had lived in this vicinity for forty years and had seen Sandhill Cranes at all times of the year, had often seen their nests, eggs and young. He said these birds passed his house daily, and since the turn of this year (1938) he had seen as many as nine at one time in his field. He stated that two or three pairs nest regularly in Bear Pond and that a number of cranes are resident in the vicinity of Martin's Bluff, about eight miles east of Bear Pond. He said that at this time of year, cranes are mostly in pairs and

stay in the vicinity of their nests, but later in the year they go in flocks and congregate every evening at Crane Meadow, a short distance east of his house, where they spend the night.

He described Crane Meadow as being about forty acres in extent, a grassy flat covered with shallow water with a few large pine trees growing in it. He stated that there is hardly a day during which he does not see a number of Sandhill Cranes and at times he passes very near them in his car. He stated that at this time of the year, and in the winter, they fed on the new grass as it sprouted in the freshly burned, open pine flats. He evidently knows the bird well, and his statements are to be relied on.

Before leaving the Leavells, Mr. Leavell very kindly agreed to interview other people living in this section of Mississippi, in an effort to gather additional data on the distribution of Sandhill Cranes in this section. Mrs. Leavell kindly undertook to send me the information. Under date of April 9, 1938, Mrs. Leavell writes: "Wilson Noble, one of our neighbors, is engaged in cutting the timber on the land on which is located Bear Pond, which you visited on Friday, April 8th. [It was in this pond that I saw the nest of the Sandhill Crane containing eggs and the two old birds.] Wilson states that last year he saw three crane nests, each containing two eggs; one was the nest which you saw, another about one mile west, and a third nest a short distance north of the place where you left the automobile when you visited the first nest. This last nest is located in the Little Bear Pond, the place you visited being the Big Bear Pond. Wilson says that he has not seen any of these nests this year, but is sure that they are there as he daily sees the birds come and go from these locations. He states that there is another nesting place east at a spot called the Ben Williams Swamp. For identification, this swamp is located southeast of John King's house about a half mile. [John King lives two and a half miles north of Fontainebleau Farm.] Wilson further says that last winter, probably December or January, he was driving down one of the side roads and a flock of cranes flew out of the grass just ahead of him and that he counted twenty-five birds in this one flock. This was near Ben Williams Swamp. On numerous occasions he has seen eight or ten together.

"Wilson manifests considerable interest in the preservation of the birds and promises to do all that he can to prevent them from being disturbed. Wilson Noble and Ernest Carroll are the only local people who have the full story, and each has promised to report to Mr. H. P. Plateau any developments or further information."

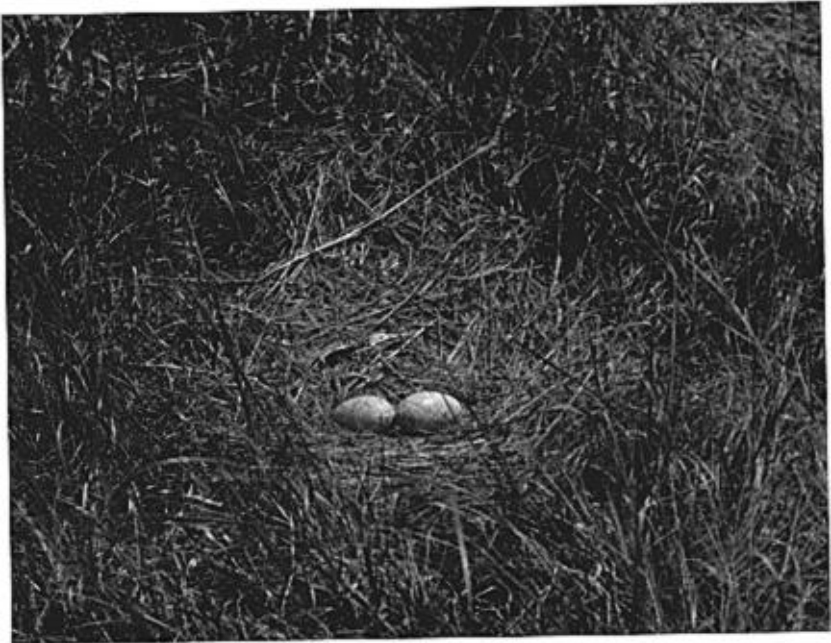
Under date of April 15, 1938, Mrs. Leavell writes me as follows: "Mr. Plateau, Jim [Mr. Leavell], and I took a short trip today in search of cranes and crane information. It is reported to us that about five miles due north of Ocean Springs there is a large flock of Sandhill Cranes, so we journeyed



FLORIDA CRANE IN FLIGHT



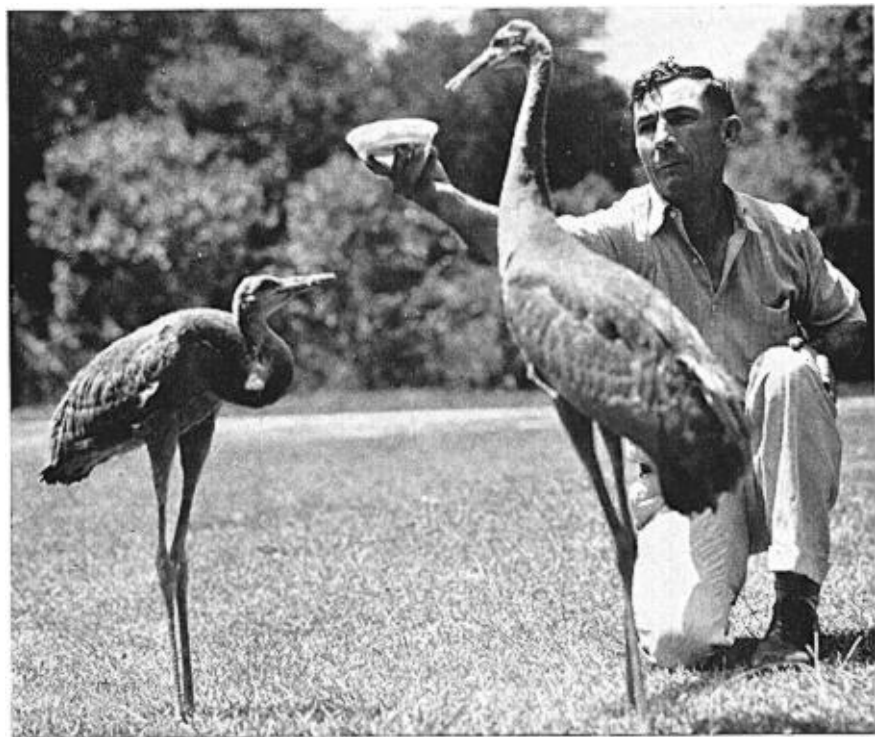
CHICK THREE DAYS OLD



NEST OF FLORIDA CRANE IN MISSISSIPPI



YOUNG FLORIDA CRANE THIRTY-NINE DAYS OLD



YOUNG FLORIDA CRANES AT SIXTY-ONE AND SIXTY-SIX DAYS

there. We found no cranes, but Mr. Flateau had an interesting conversation with Mr. Cox and Mr. Harding, both residents of that community. They each advise that there are quite a number in their community and that they have seen recently as many as nine in a flock. Mr. Cox appears to be an educated man and interested in bird life. He says he thinks he knows where some are nesting as he sees the cranes each morning and evening near his house. The location of this flock is about ten miles west of the Bear Pond cranes."

Under date of April 22, 1938, Mr. H. P. Flateau writes me: "I am pleased to give you further information on the cranes. Last Sunday, April 22d, I sent Ernest Carroll out on an all-day exploration to what is known as Crane Meadow. This is about two miles due east of Bear Pond. Ernest watched six pair practically all day, but was unable to locate any nests. There is another resident here by the name of Emile Ladnier, who has been getting some posts out for me at a location about two miles northeast of Crane Meadow. This section is known as Bayou Castelle. Ladnier and Donald Martin, on Tuesday, April 19th, counted thirty-four cranes in one flock. Yesterday, April 21st, he reports finding a nest with two eggs in same. Sunday, I am sending Ernest and Emile to make a thorough inspection of which I will report later of the findings.

"I believe you and Mr. Leavell talked to John King, the man who works for me at the house, about cranes. John sees cranes practically every day going over his house and believes there is another colony near same."

Under date of May 4, 1938, Mr. H. P. Flateau writes as follows: "I am pleased to give you further information on the cranes. Ernest discovered and has located three different crane nests, one with two eggs, one with three, and one in the process of building. On this same expedition he watched six different cranes. This is in the Bayou Castelle district. Sunday, he and John King (the latter works at the place and is the man you and Mr. Leavell interviewed) went on what we will designate the Ernest Williams' location, and there found six different nests. These all seemed to be old nests with the exception of two. One pair of cranes would not leave, so after searching, they found one young crane on the ground. Emile Ladnier has located a nest with two eggs. Location of this nest is about half-way between the Bear Pond and Bayou Castelle.

"I checked up on the Cox Harding location last Sunday. They advised if I had been an hour earlier they could have shown me three cranes. I met Mr. Cox in town last Tuesday and he said on Sunday afternoon, as well as Monday and Tuesday, the same cranes that he had been seeing, were feeding each morning and night on his place.

"I am sorry to report that the nest at the Bear Pond has been destroyed, or rather, the eggs are gone."

In an attempt to check a little more accurately the number of nesting Florida Cranes in this locality, my friends at Pointe aux Chènes spent a number of days during late April and early May in the field and located eleven occupied nests of this fine bird. All of the nests contained two eggs except one; this nest contained three eggs, one of which seemed smaller than the two others, and was not so dark in color. All of the nests located were built of small sticks, twigs and dry grass, into mounds from twelve to eighteen inches high, concave at the top and lightly lined with dry grass. All except one nest were built in wet locations, where there was some, and often considerable, standing water around them, in areas which had been either cut off or burned off some years before, and which were thinly covered with stumps and second growth. The one nest not in water was on dry land, in which a slight hollow had been scooped out and lined with dry grass.

Sad to relate in the territory where these cranes nested, on Thursday, May 12, in the space of two hours, there was a rainfall of between six and seven inches with a wind velocity of from sixty to seventy miles an hour. The wind and rain destroyed every one of the crane nests under observation. After the storm, when the nest containing three eggs was visited, two little cranes were found dead in the nest. The light-colored egg did not hatch, and on being broken was found to be addled. In two other nests young birds were found dead; in one nest one young bird just hatched was dead and the other egg partly covered with water was observed to be pipped and the chick alive. It was placed under a hen, and is now a strong, healthy youngster. A little crane four or five days old was found deserted by its parents and almost dead from exposure. It also was taken in, and is now strong and beginning to feather (see Plate 22, showing these young at later stages).

From the evidence gathered, it is quite definite there exists a considerable resident breeding colony of Florida Cranes in the wet lands of southeastern Mississippi. In all probability, it has been there from prehistoric times, and its numbers are not decreasing. How this considerable colony of large and rare birds could have passed unnoticed and unrecorded by naturalists until now, is a mystery.

Avery Island, Louisiana