



Don MacCarter

**Sandhill cranes** (*Grus canadensis*) are a highly visible species held in esteem by both wildlife viewers and the hunting public. At the same time, crop damage caused by sandhill cranes is a major concern among some agricultural crop growers. A goal of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish is to satisfy the recreational and

commercial interests of New Mexico citizens along with the ecological needs of cranes.

## Physical Characteristics

Sandhill cranes have heavy bodies and long necks and legs. The average greater sandhill crane stands up to 3.9 feet and has a wingspan of 6.6 feet. They can weigh 16 lbs. Sandhill cranes are colored gray and sexes are generally indistinguishable. Adults have red skin on their crown with gray nape feathers. Juveniles have a feathered crown, brown nape feathers and buff-colored secondary wing coverts.

## Distribution

New Mexico is a major migration route and winter range for sandhill cranes. The greater sandhill crane (*G. c. tabida*), largest of the subspecies, nests in the Rocky Mountain region (RMP). They winter along the Middle Rio Grande Valley from Albuquerque to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Smaller numbers winter in southwestern New Mexico and Las Vegas NWR.

The lesser sandhill crane (*G. c. canadensis*) breeds in western Alaska and Siberia. Canadian sandhill cranes (*G. c. rowani*) breed from Alaska to west-central Canada (MCP). In New Mexico, the principal wintering area for lesser sandhill cranes is along the Pecos Valley with the majority wintering on Bitter Lakes NWR. Other sizable populations are scattered near the city of Portales and Grulla NWR in Roosevelt County.

Lesser and Canadian sandhill cranes mix with greater sandhill cranes in the Middle Rio Grande Valley and southwestern New Mexico.

## Habitat Requirements

Quality winter habitat is critical since sandhill cranes congregate in high densities and are dependent on limited resources. Sandhill crane numbers and distribution are dependent on the availability of food (primarily grain) and shallow-water roost sites with minimal disturbance.

Sandhill cranes feed on seeds, grains and other foods from surface land. Waste corn is a primary food source, while other important foods include sorghum, alfalfa, grasshoppers and sow bugs. Cranes probe shallow marshes for chufa tubers. Sandhill cranes in Roosevelt County feed on peanuts left in the field.

Changing agricultural practices (converting from grain crops to alfalfa) on private lands has reduced available food supplies. Urban development also is reducing sandhill crane habitat.

Cranes roost in shallow water, four to eight inches deep, bordered by a sparsely vegetated shoreline. Cranes seek an isolated location that reduces contact with humans. Optimal roost sites are within 10 miles of feeding areas.



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## Population Dynamics

Adult cranes are long lived. The oldest known sandhill crane survived 36 years. Most crane mortality is due to human activity with hunting being the leading factor. Collisions with power lines and fences and avian diseases are other leading causes of mortality.

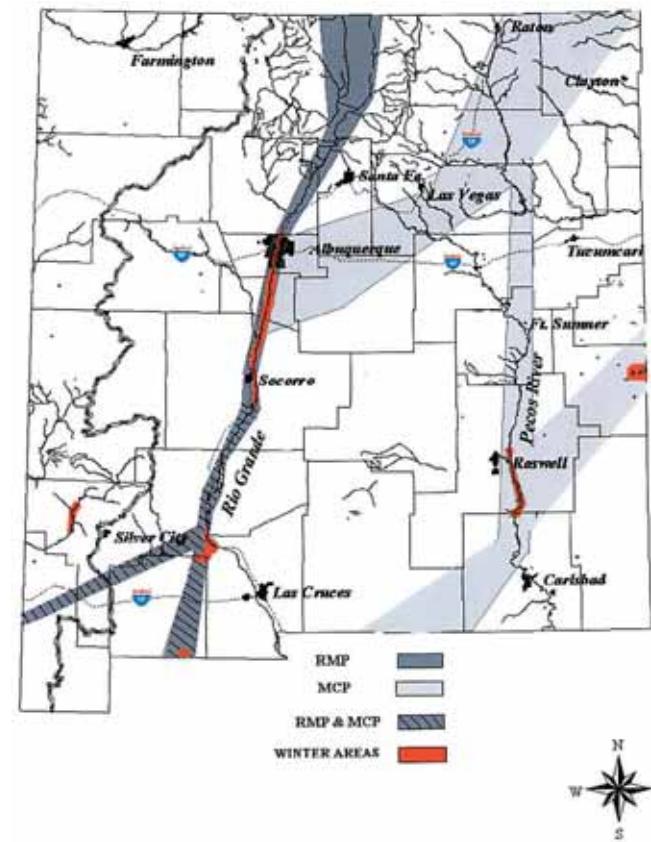
Mycotoxin poisoning is a major disease in Curry and Roosevelt counties caused by eating moldy waste peanuts in late winter. Plowing peanut fields after warm, moist weather makes waste peanuts unavailable to cranes.

Sandhill crane populations are closely monitored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and cooperating states. Populations of sandhill cranes in New Mexico are currently stable. The Department of Game and Fish conducts aerial surveys during the fall and winter months to estimate the number and distribution of cranes in the state. Additionally, Bosque del Apache NWR and Bitter Lakes NWR conduct weekly ground counts.

Low annual recruitment rates among sandhill cranes limits their ability to recover rapidly from population declines. Sandhill cranes usually raise only one young each year.

The Department of Game and Fish, in cooperation with other states and the USFWS, have developed management plans to ensure viable crane populations. To view a copy of the Department's Sandhill Crane Management Plan, visit our web site at [www.wildlife.state.nm.us/](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/).

## Sandhill Crane Migration Routes and Winter Ranges



## Hunting Cranes

Sandhill cranes feeding on private lands result in depredation complaints. Hunting is one of the tools the Department uses to reduce such complaints.

An interested hunter must have a New Mexico Small Game License plus a Sandhill Crane Permit. Permits are issued by drawing for the Middle Rio Grande Valley, Estancia Valley and Southwest seasons. Permits for hunting in the southeastern part of the state are free and must be obtained from any Department of Game and Fish office.



Christine Gonzales

plastic decoys. Use mainly feeder decoys with some decoys in an upright relaxed pose.

Hunt areas that cranes use regularly for feeding. Hunting near roost sites discourages cranes from using the area again and birds will move elsewhere.

Sandhill cranes have excellent eyesight. Camouflage clothing and blinds are important to making a successful hunt. A single-reed turkey diaphragm call makes a realistic crane call.

Sandhill cranes are powerful birds. Use nontoxic shot sized #4 through BBB. Hunters should only take shots within 40 yards and shoot for the head and neck. This will reduce crippling loss and increase chances for a successful harvest.

## Habitat Conservation Funding

Private lands that sandhill cranes utilize are crucial to the continued conservation of this species.

Landowners interested in helping with crane conservation have many opportunities to obtain financial assistance. Sources of funding include:

- **N.M. Department of Game and Fish**

State Wildlife Grant  
Landowner Incentive Program  
Playa Lakes Joint Venture Grants

- **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

Partners for Fish and Wildlife

- **Natural Resources Conservation Service**

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)  
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)  
Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)

- **The Nature Conservancy**

Conservation Easements



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#### in New Mexico



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