



All About Cranes



Each year a growing number of Sandhill Cranes migrate to the Tennessee River Valley for the winter. The largest concentrations of these stately birds are found on Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. Through refuge cooperative agreements, local farmers plant corn on refuge land to insure the cranes have plenty to eat. In addition to corn, the cranes will eat worms and snails found in the cornfields.

Sandhill Cranes mature after four or five years and mate for life. Probably best known for their expressive dancing, these birds can be spotted in early spring pointing their heads skyward, flapping their wings, and jumping short distances in the air. At times one bird will inspire others to join in the dance resulting in an almost choreographed routine. Several theories exist on why the cranes dance. Some suggest it is a way for them to express nervous energy while others think it is a way for pairs to synchronize their breeding cycles. It has even been suggested that the cranes dance because they are simply content.

Do You See Any Cranes?

Standing over three and half feet high, the Sandhill Crane is one of America's tallest birds. Look for this long-necked all gray bird with its distinctive red crown. Cranes in Alabama are found in small flocks primarily in open fields usually identified by

their far carrying bugle-like call. Hearing the birds is a good way to spot flocks flying high overhead or find them hidden in a far corner of a large field. The best time to search for the cranes is between November and March.



Sandhill Cranes/Walt Burch



Snow Geese/William Gates

These Fields Are Not Just For The Cranes

With an abundance of corn, many other species including a variety of geese can also be found with the cranes. The most regular of these is the Snow Goose, easily spotted because of its snow-white plumage. Careful inspection may turn up the very similar but slightly smaller Ross's Goose which is a less common but regular visitor to the area.



Food plot/ADCNR, Mark S. Sasser

Planting Food For Wildlife

One of many ways managers help wildlife is through the planting of food crops. Corn, wheat, oats, millets, and various legumes are planted annually to supplement wild food sources. These foods can help increase the survival and health of many species. Supplemental planting is encouraged near the Beaverdam Peninsula tower where farmers plant corn specifically for Sandhill Cranes, several species of geese, and other waterfowl.