

# Why the Sandhill Crane is Not a Suitable Game Species

BY HEATHER GOOD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A Sandhill Crane is shown in profile, standing in shallow water. The crane has a distinctive reddish-brown cap and a long, slender neck. Its body is covered in brown feathers, and its legs are dark. The background is a lush, green wetland with tall grasses and reeds. The water is calm, reflecting the crane and the surrounding vegetation.

Over the past few years, wildlife enthusiasts, birdwatchers, and conservationists in Michigan have taken a strong stance against proposals to designate two federally-protected migratory birds as game species in the state of Michigan: the Sandhill Crane and Mourning Dove. Michigan Audubon has taken an active role in not only opposing these proposals but also in ensuring the voices of our members and supporters — and the application of sound scientific research, policies, and practices — are represented to our legislators. Needless to say, these proposals did not reflect a clear, responsible understanding about what makes a species suitable for game designation versus what an avian species requires for long-term sustainability, including continued protection from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This is exactly the case with the Sandhill Crane, a species that is ultimately not suited to be hunted.

Sandhill Crane © Joseph Ulrich

Due to a tone shift under Governor Whitmer’s leadership — one that seems to value both biological and ecological sciences as vital components of wildlife management — the good news for the moment is that these two species will continue receiving federal protection as migratory birds and not be designated as game in Michigan. Even so, it is important to demystify false claims and the overall misunderstanding about the population of Sandhill Crane in Michigan, what hunting them would do to their numbers, and how this knowledge is greatly missing from the overarching conversation. What we saw with these proposals in both 2017 and 2019 was an alarming amount of misinformation circulated about the Sandhill Crane; information that, if it had led to these proposals passing, would put this species at great and potentially irrevocable risk.

### **Population & Breeding Ecology**

An important consideration for Sandhill Crane is their breeding ecology; adults are very long-lived with pairs remaining together long term, require a lot of habitat to support breeding, and raise very few young that survive to fledging. Furthermore, successful pairs migrate with their young to wintering areas in the southern states, stopping along their migration route at well-known staging areas. Given these facts, it would be difficult — if not impossible — to persevere as a local breeding population if they were subjected to hunting. A loss of an adult would most certainly impact the viability of the bound pair and their ecology of migrating with young along their ancestral migration routes. In fact, 100 years ago, cranes were almost extirpated from Michigan because of exploration. Their recovery began in 1916 with the passage of the MBTA but cranes did not recover their former range in Michigan for another 80 years — when a single pair finally returned to Isle Royale in 1996.

Not only must current population numbers be estimated with confidence, but we need to understand how those numbers have fluctuated over time and what has caused those fluctuations in order to really understand this species’ population dynamics. We are nowhere near this level of data-driven readiness or confidence with the eastern population of Sandhill Crane. This was a large part of the frustration felt by wildlife biologists and ecologists on this issue. Wildlife biologist and U.P. resident Joe Kaplan commented on the potential designation of the Sandhill Crane as a game species, stating “Sandhill Cranes, unlike other game species, just don’t express the population dynamics that can tolerate harvest — a principle that has governed conservation and hunting for the past century. Localized crop damage aside, this species deserves full protection as a cherished member of Michigan’s non-game migratory birds.”

The number of Sandhill Crane seen in Michigan may appear to be increasing, but it is difficult to differentiate Michigan (resident) populations from those that are migrating — a crucial element that demands further research and understanding. Sandhill Crane is also a bird species with a clutch size that can range from 1-3. This is quite different from the clutch size of Wild Turkey, which tends to average around 11-12. The high clutch size for Wild Turkey is one of the primary reasons why their

diminished populations are able to rebound so quickly. Even if a Sandhill Crane is able to produce a clutch size of three, it is highly unlikely that all would reach an age suitable for further reproduction. Some Sandhill Crane won’t even begin to reproduce until the age of seven. If Sandhill Crane became a game species and fell below the minimum viable population as a result, the detrimental effects would be long-lasting and would run the risk of endangerment.

### **Policy**

We don’t live in a bubble. What we do for or to our bird populations in Michigan impacts the whole. It goes without saying, then, that any Michigan policy will directly affect the Sandhill Crane species throughout the eastern population region. It was not long ago that the policy, or lack thereof, brought the U.S. Wild Turkey populations to numbers that were at risk of never recovering. However, through the implementation of sound policy developed through the understanding of their behaviors and demographics, their numbers have rebounded in such a way that allows them to be hunted here in Michigan on a yearly basis. Fortunately, Wild Turkey have proven to be a resilient species that have the ability to repopulate despite the high number of licenses approved each year. The same potentiality, however, cannot be implied for Sandhill Crane.

### **Habitat Loss**

The primary habitats best suited for the Sandhill Crane are diminishing at unprecedented rates with the further expansion of human populations and agricultural developments. Preserving these wetlands would be another key factor, if not the primary one, as to whether the Sandhill Crane would be able to repopulate following a hunting season. We must ask ourselves what wildlife management looks like when, due to the impacts of humans, their habitat is shrinking, changing, or flat-out disappearing. Sandhill Crane spend most of their lives in freshwater wetlands, including marshes, wet grasslands, and river basins. Along with these natural habitats diminishing in Michigan and throughout the United States, these habitats are also shifting due to climate change. By directly impacting habitats, we indirectly impact bird behaviors, migratory patterns, and conservation efforts. What would be a more suitable bill for wildlife management? Wetland conservation that preserves and celebrates two vulnerable, wildly-treasured, unique elements that rely on us for intelligent, consistent stewardship: our wetlands and our cranes.



Sandhill Crane with adopted gosling.  
Photo by Ron Conigliaro



Heather was a member of Michigan Audubon’s Board of Directors, studied at the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment, and volunteered with birds of prey at the Leslie Science and Nature Center and as an independent rehabilitator of raptors before beginning her tenure as executive director in early 2016.