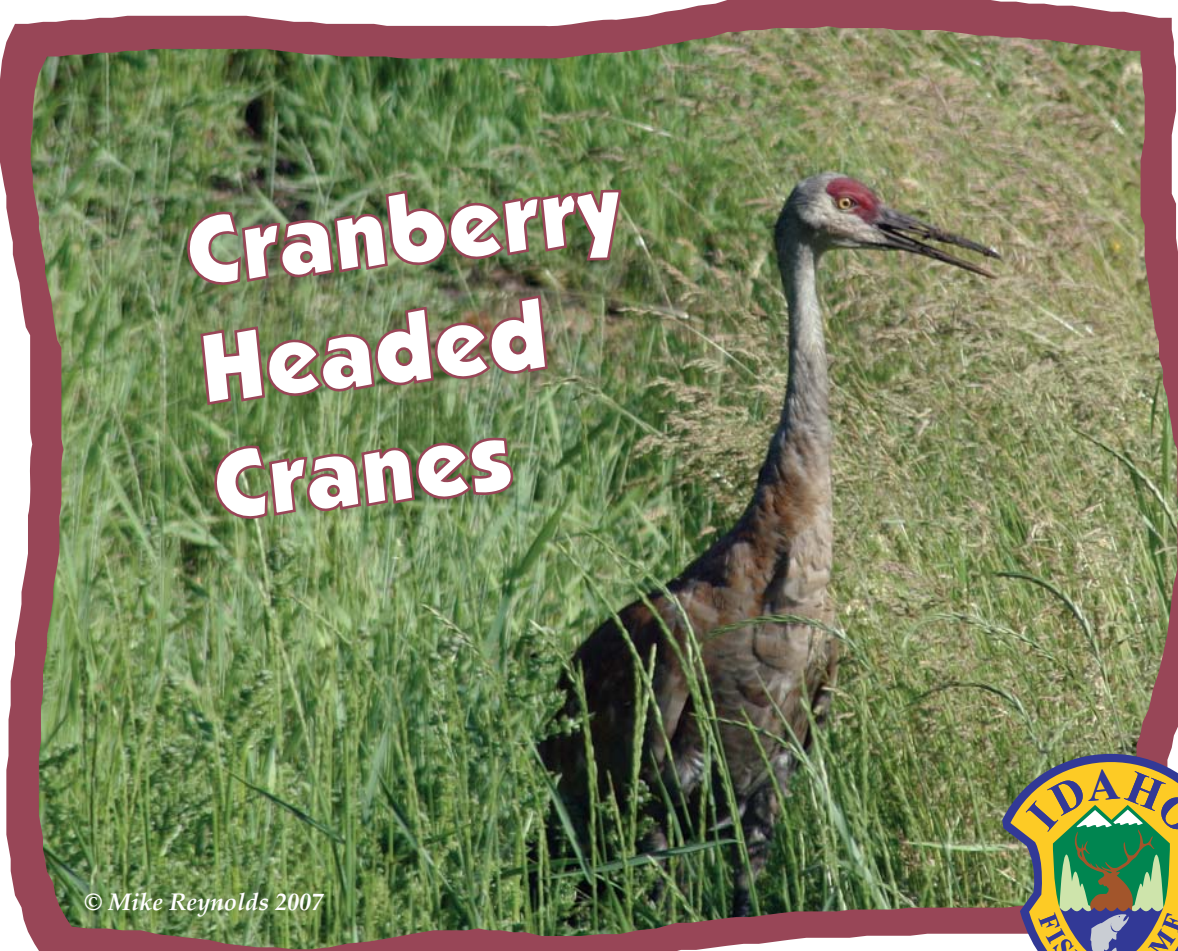




Wildlife Express!

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Cranberry Headed Cranes

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Let's Look At...



Sandhill Cranes

When is a bird like a ghost? When it is a Sandhill Crane! These tall, gray, stately birds can seem like ghosts when they call from the mists of a marsh, but they are very real and will be returning to Idaho early this spring.

Sandhill Cranes are one of Idaho's largest birds. They are as tall as a fourth grader and have long legs and a long neck. Their feathers are gray, but they have a bare patch of red skin on their forehead. A sandhill crane's wingspan is six to seven feet, just like a bald eagle. Sandhill cranes live in open wet places like wet meadows and marshes. Here they eat roots, seeds, berries, earthworms, insects, mice, frogs and snakes. Their long bill helps them probe in the soil and pick seeds off the surface of water or the ground.

Sandhill cranes can be found in much of the United States. There are six subspecies of sandhill cranes. Subspecies are kind of like cousins. They are related but are usually larger or smaller and live in different places. Here in the Rocky Mountains, we have the greater sandhill crane subspecies.

Idaho's sandhill cranes are summer residents. They arrive in early April and they spend the summer raising their young. Once the cranes arrive, they begin to establish a territory. Nest building soon begins. In an area of standing water, both parents pull up plants. They toss these plants over their shoulders to make a floating nest mound. Once the mound is built, a nest cup of small stems or twigs is added. Two pale brownish eggs are laid and incubated by both parents. In 29 to 32 days, the eggs hatch.

Baby cranes are called "colts," because of their long legs. When they hatch, they are covered with down, and their eyes are open. One day after hatching, the colts leave the nest to follow their parents. For about two weeks, the youngsters are fed by their parents. The adult cranes help their colts learn about what to eat. Soon the colts are feeding themselves, eating mostly insects. Insects give the colts protein that helps them grow one inch a day! At the end of the summer, they will have switched to eating mostly plants. A study in Idaho found that sandhill cranes eat a diet of 73% plants and 27% insects and earthworms.

By fall, young cranes are the same size as their parents. Unlike many birds, they will stay with their parents until spring. Together, they will join other crane family groups and pairs to form large flocks during migration. Here in Idaho, Gray's Lake is a major gathering place for sandhill cranes before migration. This is a great place to observe the gray ghosts of the marsh before they fade away for the winter.



Meet the Cranes

Sandhill cranes belong to the crane family, a small group of birds with only 15 species. Cranes are found on every continent except South America and Antarctica. Like our sandhill crane, other cranes are tall with long necks and legs. They live in wetlands and eat many things. Most cranes are plain colored, but several have beautiful plumes of feathers on their heads during the breeding season.

Here in the United States, we only have two species of crane, the sandhill crane and the whooping crane. While sandhill cranes are fairly common, whooping cranes are one of North America's most endangered birds. Being endangered is a problem for most of the world's crane species. Six species are endangered and five are threatened. Only a few species have large populations. Part of the problem for cranes is that they do not reproduce until they are two to six years old, and they usually only have one or two chicks. This means that crane populations grow slowly.

The other big problem for cranes is habitat loss. Cranes need wetlands and for a long time people thought wetlands were useless. So, wetlands were drained to plant crops or develop things like roads and buildings. Little-by-little, cranes lost their homes. By the time we realized what was happening, a lot of wetlands were gone. We now understand that wetlands are very important places. People are working to protect the remaining wetlands that cranes need.

Habitat for breeding is important, but so is wintering habitat. To find the habitat they need, many of the world's cranes fly long distances each spring and fall. Cranes in the United States spend their winters in the southern United States. Most of Idaho's sandhill cranes migrate to New Mexico or Arizona. Other cranes are real long distance travelers. The Siberian crane makes a round-trip journey of 10,000 miles every year!

Cranes are long-lived birds and can live to be 20 years old or more in the wild. Cranes are also known for their beautiful courtship dances. People have imitated the dances of cranes for thousands of years. Others have used dancing cranes as the subject of paintings, drawings and sculpture. For many cultures, cranes are important symbols.



Sandhill in flight.

Endangered Species

Have you ever heard the word "endangered"? It is a pretty scary word, especially if you are a kind of animal that is called endangered. An endangered animal or plant population is one that is so small that it might become extinct. Being extinct is no fun—just ask a dinosaur! Oh, I guess you can't!

So, how does a species of animal or plant become endangered? Sometimes, it is because that animal never had a big population to begin with. The giant panda of China is a good example. Pandas have a very special habitat that can only support a small population of pandas. Changes to this habitat have caused problems for the panda. Now, it is an endangered species.

Species can become endangered because of people hunting too many. Wolves and bison are good examples of this. Having hunting regulations helps make sure that people only harvest the animals they need.

The biggest reason animals and plants become endangered is habitat loss. When a species loses its home, it's in big trouble. Many animals and plants can quickly adapt to living in a changed habitat, but others cannot. When species cannot change as quickly as their habitats, their populations begin to fall. They become endangered.

In 1973, the Endangered Species Act was passed in the United States. Using this law, scientists identify what animals and plants are in trouble. They can then find ways to help the species. Protecting habitat is often one of the most important things that is done. Because of the Endangered Species Act, many animals and plants have been protected. More importantly, some have come back and are no longer endangered. The bald eagle and peregrine falcon are two examples of species that were endangered. Today, these species are doing well.

The whooping crane was the first bird to be listed as endangered. They were killed for food and their feathers. Their habitat was destroyed. By 1941, only 23 whooping cranes remained in the wild. Concerned people protected them from hunting and started to save the crane's habitat. Today, the wild population of whooping cranes is about 500 birds. While they are still endangered, the Endangered Species Act has helped make sure that they did not become extinct.



Young crane chick.

You Are What You Eat — Herbivore



Mule deer in sagebrush.

If a meat-eating critter is a carnivore, what do you call an animal that only eats plants? They are called herbivores (HERB-a-vores). Herbivores have special adaptations for eating plants. Big flat teeth that can grind up tough plant fiber are very important. You will not find fangs in an herbivore's mouth! Because plant fiber is so hard to digest, some herbivores, like deer and elk, have stomachs with several chambers. Each chamber helps break down the plant fiber, so

the animal can use it. Animals with chambered stomachs also "chew their cud." This basically means that they barf up some of their food and chew it again. It sounds gross, but it's an amazing adaptation of some herbivores.

Seeds are hard to break down, but that's no problem for seed-eating birds. They just swallow tiny stones that help crush the seed in the bird's gizzard.

What about animals that eat both plants and animals? These critters are called omnivores (AHM-na-vores). Omnivores have adaptations for eating both meat and plants. They often have some sharp teeth for tearing meat. They will also have grinding teeth for eating plants. Good examples of omnivores are bears, bluebirds, and raccoons. If you want to see one of the most common omnivores in the world, just look in the mirror!

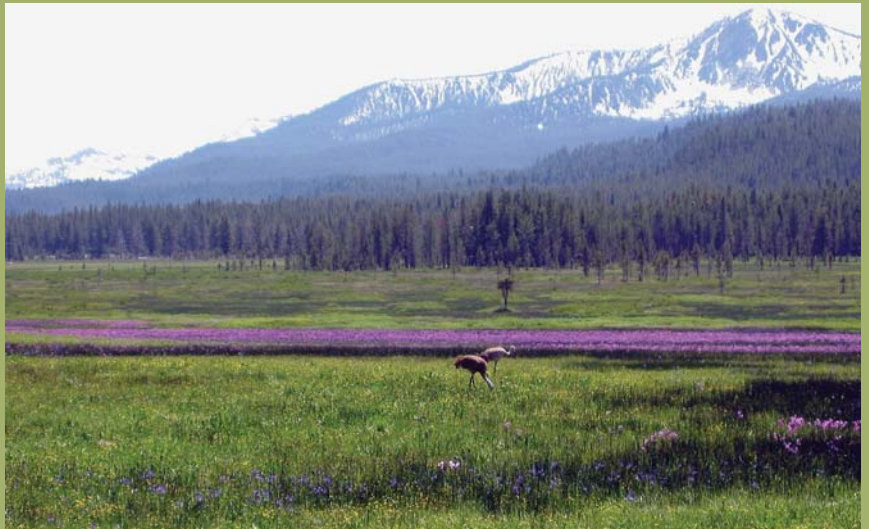
Living Fossils

Cranes might be a small group of birds, but they are one of the oldest. In fact, scientists believe that cranes are the oldest bird family in the world! Quite a few fossil cranes have been found in the United States. They have given us a lot of information about how long cranes have been on Earth. The fossils have also allowed us to see how much cranes have changed.

The oldest fossil crane was found in Nebraska. When it was compared to the skeleton of a modern-day crane, it was almost the same. When scientists found out how old the crane fossil was, they were amazed. It was found to be 10 million years old! That means that unlike many prehistoric animals, cranes have not changed very much. Other animals like prehistoric beaver and mammoths were very different than the beaver and elephants we see today, but cranes stayed almost the same. This means that cranes were able to adapt to the changing habitats of prehistoric North America.

Sandhill cranes are also a pretty old species of bird. The oldest fossil of a sandhill crane is 2.5 million years old. It was found in Florida.

Like the 10 million year old fossil crane, it looks pretty much the same as today's cranes. Fossil sandhill cranes have been found all over North America. This means that ancient sandhill cranes were able to find the habitat they needed in many places. Today, you can see these living fossils right here in Idaho!



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You Are What You Eat — Carnivore



Bobcat on snowbank.

Animals eat just about anything. Some eat plants, some eat bugs, some eat fish and some eat rotten stuff. All animals have to eat. What they eat helps you tell what kind of animal they are.

Some animals eat only meat. No veggies, thanks! Now their meat might be a nice juicy grasshopper or a mouthful of mouse, but they do not eat plants. These animals are called carnivores (CAR-na-vores). Carnivores have special adaptations to help them catch their food and eat it. Sharp claws and teeth are very important. So is a sharp beak and strong talons. Most carnivores have a good sense of smell to help them find their food. Some carnivores hunt during the day while others take advantage of darkness. Carnivores also come in all sizes from the large polar bear to the tiny shrew. Each is very well adapted to find and eat the kind of food it needs.

If you think about it, you will be amazed at the many kinds of carnivores living right around you. How about the hawk in the tree, or the fox in the park? What about the bat you saw swooping past a streetlight last summer? These are all carnivores. Can you think of some others?

Shall We Dance?

Do you like to dance? So do sandhill cranes. As a matter of fact, most members of the crane family are well known for their courtship dances. Crane dances have inspired many human dancers in the countries where cranes live.

Each spring, when sandhill cranes arrive on their breeding territories, the pair begins courtship. Even though cranes mate for life, courtship is very important. It makes their bond stronger, so they can raise their chicks. Courtship sometimes starts during the spring migration. The pair will call to each other. They give what are called unison calls. During a unison call, both birds call while standing close together. The female begins the unison calls. As she calls two times, the male calls once. Unison calling can go on for a long time. Crane pairs unison call most often in the early morning and again in the evening.

Unison calling often leads to dancing. Crane dancing is made up of leaps, jumps, running, bowing, and wing-flapping. Sometimes, the birds will toss sticks or pull up grass and toss it into the air. Dancing is done by both birds and is most often done together. When one pair of sandhill cranes dances, other nearby pairs of cranes might join in. This behavior can spread through a large group of cranes causing them all to dance.

Dancing is not only done by adult cranes. Young cranes that have not yet found a mate will also dance. Even fairly young chicks have been seen doing a few “dance steps” out in the wetland. Biologists believe that dancing in young birds is important to their development. It helps make them stronger and better coordinated. What activities do you do to become stronger and better coordinated? Like the cranes, maybe you are a dancer, too!



Sandhill cranes dancing.

Look, it's a Heron! Or is it a Crane?



Great Blue heron.

Cranes and herons are both long-necked, long-legged birds that like to hang around where it is wet. Both are grayish and about the same size. So, how do you tell a sandhill crane from a great blue heron?

The first thing to look at is where the bird lives. While both cranes and herons like water, they like water in different amounts. Cranes like wet meadows and marshes as well as the dry areas near these habitats. Great blue herons prefer the edges of open water like rivers, streams, ponds, and lakes. Cranes spend their time on the ground. They build their nests on the ground. Herons, on the other hand, nest in trees and can often be seen perched in a tree.

Food can give you another hint. Herons eat fish and sometimes things like frogs. Sandhill cranes rarely eat fish and spend most of their time eating plants. The yellowish beak of a heron is like a spear. It is long, stout and has a pointed tip. The beak of a crane is dark and long with a blunt tip.

When flying, it is easy to tell a heron from a crane. Cranes fly with their legs and their necks stretched out. When a heron flies, its legs are stretched out, but its neck is looped, holding its head close to its body. This makes the heron look like it is hunching its shoulders. The wingbeats of herons are steady. When flying, cranes slowly bring their wings down, but bring them up very quickly. Bird watchers say that cranes have a "snapping" upstroke.

The head of a heron is long and flat. It is also white with a black stripe above the eye. The head of a crane is shorter and rounded. Sandhill cranes have a white cheek patch and a red forehead of bare skin. So even though herons and cranes look alike, some careful observation will tell you if it is a heron or a crane.



Sandhill cranes.

Calling All Cranes



Noisy cranes landing.

Birds are best known for their songs. Some songs are short. Some are long. Some are easy to remember like the “cheeseburger” call of a chickadee. Others are so complex it is hard to remember them! The call of the sandhill crane is one of nature’s most unforgettable calls. The conservationist Aldo Leopold described the calls of sandhill cranes as:

“High horns, low horns, silence, and finally a pandemonium of trumpets, rattles, croaks, and cries that almost shakes the bog with its nearness, but without yet disclosing whence it comes.”

Like sandhill cranes, most cranes are very loud when they call. The unison call of sandhill cranes can be heard up to several miles away!

The reason for their loud and varied call is their trachea (TRA-kee-a). The trachea, or windpipe, is the tube that carries air to the lungs. Your trachea is about 12 inches long. The trachea of a whooping crane is about 4 feet long and loops into the keel of the breastbone. Long tracheas allow cranes to call very loudly and carry the call over a long distance. It also causes different pitches, so the crane can make both high and low sounds. Harmonies can also be added to the crane’s calls.

Sandhill cranes also make other sounds besides their loud rattling unison calls. They make trills, purrs, and non-rattle calls. Cranes use these sounds for things like calling a chick or warning away a predator. They may also call right before flying. Trills and purrs are the first calls that crane chicks make. Some trills and purrs are made only by chicks. By the time a crane is 10 months old, it has its adult voice.



Cranes calling.

Crane Crossword

Words

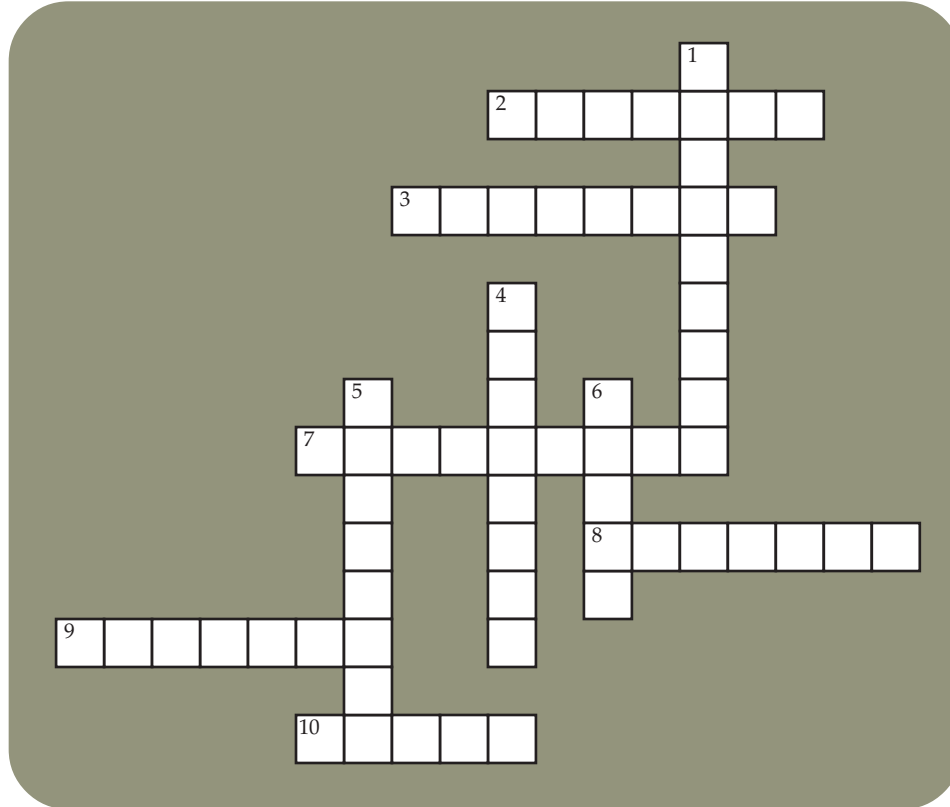
Carnivore
Trachea

Herbivore
Dance

Omnivore
Migrate

Colts
Whooping

Insects
Nebraska



Across

2. Cranes do this before winter.
3. The other crane found in the United States.
7. An animal that eats plants.
8. This part of the body helps cranes call loudly.
9. Sandhill cranes eat these when young.
10. Cranes do this to make their family bonds stronger.

Down

1. An animal that eats meat.
4. An animal that eats both meat and plants.
5. Where the oldest crane fossil was found.
6. This is what sandhill crane chicks are called.

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