

Chick fight

IN THIS BATTLE, JUST ABOUT ANYTHING GOES.

Story and photo by Bill LaFleur

I don't know if you've ever seen chicks fight before. But if you have, you know that they can get downright nasty. Anything goes. This isn't a swing-and-slug guy's fight. No, chicks get down and dirty. They scratch, claw, kick. You name it. Anything goes.

I experienced a chick fight in person once and it had all the above mentioned drama, but also teetered on becoming a fight to the death.

I had been filming a sandhill crane nest whose two eggs were ready to hatch any day. I thought it was strange how the female crane was sitting, and that one egg was outside the nest fully exposed next to her. I've seen this before, and had speculated the reason was to delay both eggs hatching at once.

Fortunately for me, on the morning I arrived I knew something was different by the body language of the pair. The male crane came up to relieve the hen from night duty. But she was uncharacteristically not ready to get up. She remained seated for quite a while and then when she did finally stand, there was a newly hatched chick (colt).

Her mate, in a touching moment, bent his head down for his first look at his

newborn. They both remained standing for some time before the hen finally went off to feed. She wasn't gone long, though, and hung around the nest site while the mate sat and the chick kept popping out from underneath his feathers. This peek-a-boo game went on for a couple hours before the male stood up exposing the newborn chick and the other still unhatched egg.

The chick was gaining strength by the minute as it would stumble around, falling forward and then backward like a drunken sailor. Finally, like an Olympic swimmer, he eased off the low platform nest into the water and swam like a duckling to the nearest high ground. Before long, the male and his chick disappeared.

All was quiet on the home front then, until during the night when the other egg hatched and the colt popped in and out of the hen's breast feathers walking

around the edge of the nest. The chick once tried to crawl up on the sitting hen's back like a loon chick, but it wasn't quite strong or agile enough to make it. To have succeeded, would have been the ultimate shot for a wildlife photographer and reward for many hours of time and patience. With a little luck and one more "umph" he would have been on the hen's back and I would have had the shot of a lifetime.

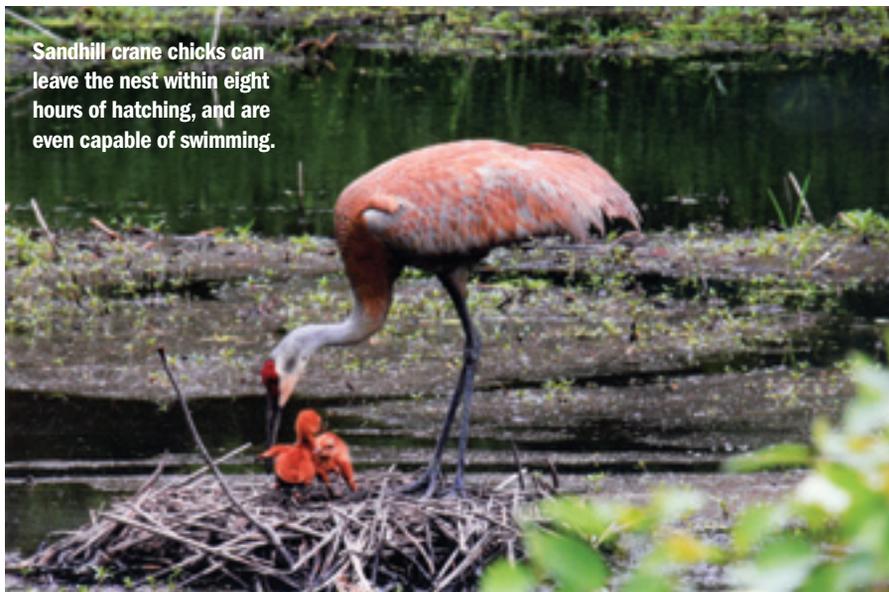
But it wasn't meant to be.

As the chick was gaining strength, popping in and out from under the hen and walking around the nest, the mate and sibling returned. This is unusual and could spell trouble. They were not supposed to return. This is the reason there is a day or two delay in the incubation of cranes and birds of prey. There is fierce sibling rivalry between chicks often resulting in the firstborn killing the second. Whether the fight is over food or the strongest to survive, the parents do little to intervene.

As the grudge match unfolded, I watched the firstborn climb up on the nest and eye-up his sibling. For the first time, they both romped around the nest playfully going in and out between the legs of the standing hen and her mate just a few feet away. The stronger firstborn was more aggressive and then, when push came to shove, things turned nasty.

Crane chick fights are intense as each chick has every intention of killing its sibling. There is no tapping out — if they can deliver a fatal blow, they go for the kill. The firstborn thrust and pecked violently at its sibling, sometimes coming right off its feet to deliver a damaging blow that luckily either missed or just glanced off. The adults, heads down like referees, made no attempt to stop the savageness. There also was nothing I could do but look on as it is nature's way.

This scene unfolded for nearly a minute until the firstborn tired and the sibling shrugged its head with no blood drawn, only sporting a sore head and body from being hammered on. Moments later they both acted as if nothing had happened. They then romped around for a while until the firstborn decided to leave the nest again, along with the adult male, leaving the sibling bruised and battered and very lucky to be alive.



Sandhill crane chicks can leave the nest within eight hours of hatching, and are even capable of swimming.

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