



Each fall, sandhill cranes flock by the thousands to Crex Meadows Wildlife Area near Grantsburg. As they prepare for landing, their long legs extend as their wings scoop air, braking the big birds to a graceful touchdown.

A graceful touchdown

THE CRANES OF CREX MEADOWS.

Story and photos by Don Blegen

As the November sun drops in the west, the vehicles parked along the Main Dike Road of Crex Meadows Wildlife Area begin to empty. Some of those getting out of their vehicles are holding binoculars. Others set up tripods topped with spotting scopes or cameras with bazooka-like lenses.

The sandhill cranes they have come to see or photograph are starting their evening return to the marsh, having spent the day feeding in area cornfields within a radius of 10 miles or more. They are coming back to the safety of the marsh area to “roost” for the night. Tomorrow, at first light, they will return to those fields to fatten on more corn. If the corn is harvested, they will pick up the ker-

nels missed. If unharvested, they will go after the standing corn. Not surprisingly, farmers in the area hope to get their corn picked before the cranes come south on their fall migration.

The cranes come flying to the marsh in flocks of a dozen birds or more in the same V-formations as ducks and geese. Sometimes, they are in smaller family groups of only three or four. The birds

set their wings and glide, losing altitude. As they approach for a landing, they tip their bodies back to increase wind resistance. As they slow, their long legs extend as their wings scoop air, braking the big birds to a graceful touchdown. The air is full of crane calls, a loud, resonant, burbling sound that can be heard from a mile away, now ringing out from hundreds of the big birds. Crane music. One has to actually hear this wild, primeval sound coming from hundreds of throats, because mere words cannot do it justice.

Most of these cranes do not summer here. They are visitors from the North, staying at Crex in Burnett County, just north of the village of Grantsburg, for about a month before they continue on to winter homes in the Deep South.

Last March, on the way north, they joined hundreds of thousands of other cranes along the Platte River in Nebraska,

also for about a month, feeding and fattening on waste kernels in the Nebraska cornfields. They were preparing for the long trip to their nesting grounds. Some would stop a bit here at Crex, and some would even stay to nest here.

The spring Platte gathering is far larger than the fall gathering here in Crex. There may be more than half a million cranes in March along 50 miles of the Platte. Most of the cranes in North America gather there in the spring, but not in the fall.

In autumn, they follow different migratory patterns and gather in other places, like Crex Meadows, before heading to the Deep South. They come from northern Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin, from the provinces of Canada, Alaska and even, believe it or not, from eastern Siberia.

In those northern places, each pair built a nest last spring in a marshy area and laid two eggs. They incubated those eggs until they hatched into two gangly chicks called colts. It takes 10 weeks for a colt to fledge and, if they are very lucky, both will survive to migrate south. But usually only one survives to make the trip.

Come late September or early October, when the weather turns nasty, they begin their autumn journey. Cranes are strong fliers but they like to conserve their energy, waiting for a north wind. When that wind finally comes, they fly up and up, to 1,000-2,000 feet or more, and then let the fierce winds push them south with

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a minimum of effort, conserving their energy.

In early November there are close to 10,000 cranes roosting in Crex. The word “roosting” is a bit misleading because they do not spend their nights in trees. Rather, they stand ankle deep all night in shallow water surrounded by deeper water, or on small islands. This makes attacks by predators like coyotes or raccoons difficult and surprise attacks virtually impossible.

The cranes have increased their numbers in recent years. In 1936, it was estimated there were only 25 breeding pairs in Wisconsin. There are far more now.

As the sun drops further toward the horizon, groups of cranes come in from all directions. They have been coming to Crex for as long as anyone can remember. Cranes are an ancient bird and there is fossil evidence that they have been migrating across the continent for at least a million years. The 30,000 acres of Crex make up a diverse wildlife area:

partly marsh, partly forest, partly prairie, partly ponds and lakes. Some of it is refuge but most of it is open to hunting and trapping. All of it is set aside as permanent habitat for wildlife.

Crex is a wildlife paradise. There are wolves, mink, beavers, coyotes, raccoons, otters, fishers, bobcats, black bears and deer. Rare trumpeter swans nest here, as well as eagles, ospreys, herons and more than 100 other bird species.

An estimated 100,000 visitors come to visit Crex every year. A big percentage of them come in the fall to see the flocks of sandhill cranes fly into the refuge at sunset or out at sunrise and hear their wild music reverberate and resonate across the marshes.

Some cold night, probably in early December, the ponds will freeze and the cranes will depart. The sunsets and sunrises will then be silent. They will remain so until late March or early April, when the first cranes leave the Platte River, catching southerly winds and heading north. Some of them will come here on their way and crane music will once again ring across the marshes. Some will stay to nest here, but most will keep heading north — to Canada, Alaska or even eastern Asia, to begin the ancient nesting cycle once again. ❧

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On a cold night in early December, as the ponds begin to freeze, the cranes will depart for their wintering grounds in the Deep South.

