

## October 2010: Meditations on Cranes

When most of us here in Maine think of cranes, we might envision the tall, elegant white birds depicted in classic Asian art. Or, depending on how well-traveled we are, we might picture the big flocks of sandhill cranes that gather on the Platte River in Nebraska during migration. Nebraska's Rowe Sanctuary even has a "crane cam" by which I—and thousands of others around the world—vicariously enjoy the raucous celebration of the birds' passage each spring. Or we might think of the endangered whooping crane, which has been slowly brought back from the brink of extinction thanks to hand-raising by humans and the assistance of ultra-light aircraft leading the year's young to their wintering grounds in place of parent birds. But few of us think of cranes in Maine.

And yet, they're here. Not only here, but breeding. Last year there were six pairs of nesting sandhill cranes in Maine, and probably more in 2010, according to wildlife biologist Ron Joseph. Although most sandhill cranes breed in the Midwest and West, the first nesting pair in New England was found ten years ago in central Maine. Apparently they liked it there, because they've been nesting in Maine ever since, and have expanded into New York and western Massachusetts, as well.

Why are they coming here? Why are we so blessed? Ron's theory is that the birds are spreading east from their breeding stronghold in upper Midwestern states because the territory there is "saturated," all available habitat already occupied by nesting cranes. He thinks that pioneering cranes have ventured northeast to freshwater wetlands suitable for nesting, near agricultural landscapes, where they can feed. He knows of pairs nesting in Messalonskee Marsh, marshes around Great Pond, and the Smithfield Flats along Route 8. The first birds reported in 2000 were ironically observed in a field next to Sandhill Road in Smithfield. They must have seen the street sign and decided that was where they were supposed to be.

Not having done much birding in the Midwest, I saw my first sandhill crane here in mid-coast Maine—a single bird gleaning amid the corn stubble in a field off Route One in Warren in early October 1999. Perhaps that migrating bird was the advance guard for the pair that came back to Maine to nest the following spring. Ron conjectures that if the Maine birds continue to nest successfully, the state population might increase more rapidly than those few nesting pairs would lead us to believe.

The crane is being seen more often throughout the state, usually in farm fields or as fly-overs. As I type this, a birder in Sidney reports on the Maine Birding list-serv that three cranes flew over her yard this morning. They've been spotted in Aroostook County farm fields where barley is grown for the Anheuser-Busch brewery. Ron himself recently had one fly about 100 feet over his head while on the Morse River in Phippsburg. Around here, birder friends have reported seeing them in Belfast, Camden, Monhegan, and Vinalhaven. Ornithologist Peter Vickery tells me that the Smithfield-area birds may linger into December, so keep

an eye out this fall for a bird much bigger than a great blue heron (which is sometimes erroneously called a crane) and with a voice like nothing you've ever heard.

On a Maine Audubon outing led by Ron a few summers ago, we observed several pairs of cranes, one pair hanging out in a horse pasture, unfazed by several horses, and the other lingering on a front lawn near Smithfield Flats. Imagine looking out the front window to see two four-foot tall dapper grey birds with red faces gracing your yard! As we watched them from a safe distance through binoculars, they shifted from the yard to a nearby hayfield, one calling in flight. Although I had listened to recordings, and of course heard them on the crane cam, hearing that loud, rolling, primal cry in real life almost moved me to tears. It's a true song of the wild, one I never expected to hear from a roadside in Maine. And to hear it while watching a majestic bird with a six-foot wingspan flap slowly past made it all the more amazing. Those big wings have power: the sandhill crane regularly flies a mile up in the air and is capable of traveling at altitudes of up to 20,000 feet.

In central Wisconsin in 1937, Aldo Leopold wrote, "When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men." In terms of evolution, the sandhill crane is apparently one of the most ancient bird species—so it's a literal tie to a past that we can't even fathom. No wonder its call is so evocative.

In his masterful and moving paean to cranes, *The Birds of Heaven*, Peter Matthiesen also attributes to the birds a greater meaning in the context of the disintegration of our natural world: "These elegant birds, in their stature, grace, and beauty, their wild fierce temperament, are striking metaphors for the vanishing wilderness of our once bountiful earth." Of the 15 species of cranes in the world, 11 are threatened or endangered. Cranes are found on all inhabited continents but South America. As Matthiesen posits, "Since most crane species are cosmopolitan in range, they offer an opportunity to protest the stunted industrial (hence political) vision behind the broad range of unrestrained, often senseless activities, from war to the ill-advised building of great dams, that degrade or destroy what is left of precious habitats around the world—precious not only to cranes and other wildlife but to our inheritors and their children."

Seen in this light as canaries in the coal mine of the planet, the proliferation of the sandhill crane in Maine can only reflect positively on the natural landscape we've sustained here. Squeezed out of the Midwest, the crane is coming here and reproducing. This beautiful creature, revered and admired in cultures across the world as a symbol of good fortune and grace, has chosen this place in which to expand its range. May its presence bring us only good things.