



Sandhill Crane



Soon the Sandhill cranes will fly south for the winter.

Birds of Barrington: SANDHILL CRANE

IS THERE ANY SOUND more attention-catching than the bugle of the sandhill crane? Loud, deliberate, trilling, it is apt to emanate from the skies above any clear day in November as flocks of sandhill cranes, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, fly south to wintering grounds in the southern part of our country.

To be sure, sandhill cranes do not only pass through the Barrington area. They have graced the countryside during summer months for the past 20 years or so. The first known nest in Barrington, possibly even in Lake County, was made at Citizen for Conservation's Flint Creek Savanna 19 years ago. The combination of wetlands and upland prairie at that preserve is a perfect recipe for breeding cranes. They can forage in the prairie for insects and invertebrates and can hide effectively in the matrix of native vegetation in the marshes.

For many years, the breeding pair sheltered its offspring, known as colts, on one of the floating islands constructed, planted, and launched by volunteers into the ponds at Flint Creek Savanna. The water surrounding the islands discourages

raccoons and other predators from disturbing the family. In the daytime, the cranes often stroll through the yards of the Savannah subdivision, looking for insects and vegetable matter, and safe from local coyotes. Vigilant neighbors alert each other so that dogs and other pets do not harass the cranes.

In recent years, pairs of sandhill cranes have nested at sites throughout the Barrington area. I bike frequently on local roads and always keep alert for their profiles, especially in farm fields and horse pastures. The cranes are hardly inconspicuous: they stand three or more feet tall on long legs, with long necks and tail feathers gathered into a sort of trailing bustle. Their plumage is mostly grey, though washed with rust during breeding season, contrasting with a bright red forehead and cheek patches. The cranes walk in regal fashion, typically unhurried and deliberate, bending every so often to glean grain or other edibles from the vegetation beneath.

But it is in autumn, especially in November, that sandhill cranes are most conspicuous. When I used to walk to the end of our driveway to col-

lect our children from the school bus on late October and November afternoons, my heart would soar at the sound, and then the sight, of scores of cranes flying in loose formation overhead. Theirs is truly a call of the wild.

Aldo Leopold, the unparalleled nature chronicler and conservation philosopher and practitioner, said it this way: "When we hear [the crane's] 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." I write in hopes that all of us will experience this month the thrill of sandhill cranes overhead. 

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Wendy Paulson is a teacher and naturalist who has lived in the Barrington area for over 40 years. She revived the Nature Lady program in District 220 schools, started and directed the education program for Citizens for Conservation, and has led regular bird walks in Barrington and Chicago, as well as in New York City and Washington, D.C. She currently teaches the Birds in My Neighborhood, a program she helped start with Openlands in Chicago Public Schools.