

Sandhill Cranes: A life-changing experience

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

If there is one bird that is responsible for my interest in birds and bird photography, it is the Sandhill Crane.

My interest in photography goes back to my youth. I scanned photo magazines for dramatic landscapes and adventures.

I remember seeing a very dramatic photo of a large group of big birds flying over a marsh against a blazing sunrise in New Mexico.

Years later that photo still resided in my memory.

I learned that the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge is famous for seasonally large numbers of Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese.

I found more photos of thousands of birds erupting from ponds at sunrise and decided that I wanted to see that event. Doing so changed my life.

My friend, Steve, went with me to the Bosque del Apache NWR one cold January morning. We knew where we wanted to be at sunrise thanks to available information provided by the refuge.

We were standing on a frosty deck at the edge of a pond well before sunrise. A few other



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



Sandhill Cranes: The awesome birds inspire festivals around the country.

people were there as we got set up. We could hear a lot of birds in front of us. The stage was set.

As the sun came up, the sky grew brighter. Something triggers Snow Geese to start their day foraging in nearby grain fields and they come off the water as a mass. Thousands of big, white birds flew toward us.

The noise and motion of the group as they flew just feet above our heads was unforgettable. We were stunned.

After the geese were gone, we

found about a thousand Sandhill Cranes still standing in the pond.

Their voices increased and groups of two to five would strain their necks forward and then run as they took off. It takes a bit to get a bird this size off the ground.

This scene repeated itself for about 30 minutes until the pond was empty. Everyone on the deck was gathering up gear to leave. Steve and I looked at each other and knew that we had

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seen something that moved us.

I have repeated that experience several times since. I have been back to the Bosque a few times and it never disappoints.

I have not visited the great concentration of Sandhill Cranes that Nebraska's Platte River enjoys each year but the site is on my bucket list.

Seasonal concentrations of Sandhill Cranes are responsible for several festivals around the United States. There is an annual crane festival at the Bosque del Apache NWR and another in Nebraska. The festivals draw hundreds of people to the area to witness and learn about these great birds and the on-going efforts to preserve habitat and bird numbers.

Here in Washington, the Othello Sandhill Crane Festival is scheduled March 20-22. It's a chance to see up to 25,000 cranes. The festival has tours and lectures and is highly recommended if you have the time.

This is the time of year that the cranes visit north central Washington.

You may see groups flying overhead and hear their loud, trumpeting sound. You may see them dancing in agricultural fields or wading in shallow marsh areas. I hope you get the chance.

Don't forget your binoculars and camera. Good luck.