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SANDHILL CRANES WINTERING IN JACKSON COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

By James C. Lewis

THE SANDHILL CRANE (*Grus canadensis*) winters regularly, though in variable numbers, in Jackson County, southwestern Oklahoma, and in adjacent parts of Wilbarger County, Texas. This important fact has only recently come to light. Nice, in her *Birds of Oklahoma* (1931) listed two races of *G. canadensis*

SANDHILL CRANES MIGRATING SOUTHWARD

Watercolor drawing by George Miksch Sutton based on observations in the Black Mesa country of Cimarron County, Oklahoma, in the fall of 1932. Reproduced through the courtesy of the owner, James L. Norman, of Muskogee, Oklahoma.

(*tabida* and nominate *canadensis*), calling each a "transient," and mentioning (*fide* W. E. Lewis) that the larger of the two, *tabida*, "sometimes" overwintered near Gate, Beaver County, at the eastern end of the Panhandle, when the weather was "mild" (p. 48). Sutton, in *Oklahoma Birds* (1967), stated that Sandhill Cranes overwinter "occasionally" (p. 150), and listed January and February dates (given also in Nice) on which J. C. Camp saw the species in Washita County, southwestern Oklahoma, in 1911 (p. 153). Careful measurement of specimens collected by me makes it clear that three races—*tabida*, *rowani*, and nominate *canadensis* —pass through western Oklahoma in migration. Whether all three of these overwinter regularly in southwestern Oklahoma remains to be determined.

Sandhill Cranes inhabited parts of Jackson County, Oklahoma, and of Wilbarger County, Texas, throughout the severe winter of 1968-69. From discussions that I had with Wesley Webb, Ranger of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, with Charles Boynton, Ranger of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and with several local ranchers, I became convinced that some Sandhill Cranes overwinter regularly in this part of the Southern Great Plains. In the winter of 1968-69 the cranes roosted in the shallow waters of the Prairie Dog Town Fork and Salt Fork of the Red River and along Gypsum Creek. I found that there were at least eight roosts either in or adjacent to Jackson County, Oklahoma. Several of the larger roosts were in such isolated areas that either a 4-wheel-drive vehicle or a several-mile walk was required in reaching them. One roost had been used every winter since 1941—the year in which the present landowner had purchased the property—and other roosts appeared to have had an equally long history of use. Two roosts that were first used in the winter of 1965-66 had been used each winter since that time.

The typical daily pattern of wintering cranes started with flight at daybreak from the roost to the feeding fields. Some cranes left the roosts singly, but most of them left in groups of up to several hundred birds during a 30- to 60-minute period. They flew directly to the feeding fields, which were from 0.5 to 12 miles from the roosts. Wheat, shocked or "combined" maize, and pastureland in which hybrid maize x Sudan-grass had been planted were the most commonly used feeding areas. Crop depredation was not a problem during the winter of 1968-69, but in earlier years a few ranchers had complained about crane-damage to sprouting wheat and shocked maize.

Feeding activity declined by mid-morning, when some birds flew to nearby ponds or streams to drink. Others returned to the roosts to drink and loaf there. During the middle of the day large flocks occasionally took part in high spiralling flights for up to 30 minutes before returning to the feeding areas. The afternoon feeding period ended with a flight to the roost after sunset.

Oklahoma's first crane hunting season in modern times opened on 14 December

1968 and continued into mid-January. Most of the hunting pressure occurred the first few days and very few hunters participated. The known harvest for the season was eight cranes in Jackson County, Oklahoma, and 12 cranes in Wilbarger County, Texas—a harvest believed by local game rangers and by me to constitute about 80 to 90 per cent of the actual kill within the circumscribed area the cranes inhabited. Removal of this small number represented about 1 per cent (or less) of the total number of cranes present on 14 December.

Some population decline was evident as winter advanced. One roost was deserted in January and three others in February. One roost that remained active throughout the winter contained 400 cranes on 1 December; 250 on 26 December; 55 on 18 January; and six to 12 birds in March. Periodic counts gave some idea of the decline in wintering birds (Table I), but these were not

Table I
Daily Counts of Sandhill Cranes in Jackson County, Oklahoma, 20 November 1968 to 8 March 1969

Month	Day	Number of Cranes	Month	Day	Number of Cranes
November	20	2,600+	December	29	559
	30	250	January	2	476
December	1	1,393		3	200
	2	416		4	300
	13	250		17	150
	14	800		18	865
	15	777	February	15	13
	16	546		16	74
	26	650	March	1	313
	27	266		2	200
	28	439		8	385

complete counts. A day's census usually consisted of counting birds as they left or returned to a roost and of checking the numbers of birds in known feeding fields. November and early December counts would certainly have been higher had the location of some of the roosts and feeding areas been known to me at that time.

In my opinion the population decline was due largely to the moving farther south of some cranes as food became scarce and weather more severe along the Red River. Migration northward started at winter's end. No cranes were seen north of Jackson County, Oklahoma, until late February 1969. On 27 February several thousand cranes were seen migrating northward over Ellis County, Oklahoma. Cranes were not seen on the ground at the Washita National Wildlife Refuge, in Custer County, Oklahoma, until 8 March.

The behavior of the cranes in southwestern Oklahoma reflected the fact

that the winter of 1968-69 was more severe than that of 1967-68. On 28 January 1968, 21 cranes were still present on the Washita refuge; in the winter of 1968-69, on the other hand, the last sizeable group (34 birds) was seen at that refuge on 23 November. Two birds seen on 2 December were the last seen at that refuge until late February, when migrating birds began passing over.

This variation from year to year in the length of time Sandhill Cranes spend in southwestern Oklahoma in winter seems to be fairly typical. According to census data supplied through the courtesy of Refuge Manager Lee Marlett, of the U. S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife, cranes were still present on the Washita refuge in January in 1963-64, 1964-65, and 1966-67. In 1965-66, a severe winter, cranes were last seen on that refuge in late November.

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EXTRALIMITAL SAGE THRASHER RECORDS FOR OKLAHOMA

By William A. Carter and Jack D. Tyler

IN THE BLACK MESA country of northwestern Cimarron County, Oklahoma, the Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*) is a regular transient in both spring and fall; in early fall it is sometimes abundant there. In the "A-11 pasture" southwest of Boise City, Cimarron County, R. C. Tate found a nest (4 eggs) on 13 June 1920; on that date he saw also three adult birds (Tate, 1923, *Proc. Oklahoma Acad. Sci.*, 3: 49; Nice, 1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, p. 141). Oddly enough, the species has never been reported from Texas County or Beaver County. In the main body of the state it has been noted infrequently in fall and winter, records for the following counties having been considered valid: Greer 1, Custer 1, Canadian 1, Oklahoma 2, Cleveland 3, Murray 2; at least one specimen has been taken in each of these counties except Oklahoma (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma Birds*, p. 426).

Three specimens have been taken in and one sighting reported from Oklahoma east of the Black Mesa country since the publication of *Oklahoma Birds*. On 11 March 1967, in mesquite and buffalo grass pastureland 4½ miles west and ½ mile north of Snyder, in Kiowa County, J. D. Tyler took a male; this specimen (UOMZ 6081) is in the bird collection at the University of Oklahoma. On 4 October 1968, among tall grass along a fence about 15 miles south and 7 miles west of Ada, in Pontotoc County, W. A. Carter and Larry P. Mays took a male with incompletely ossified skull; the stomach contained one field cricket (*Gryllus* sp.); the skin (EC-B-245) is in the biological collections at East Central State College in Ada, Oklahoma. On 28 November 1968, near a granite knoll in sand sage grassland along the North Fork of the Red River 8½ miles north and 2½ miles east of Tipton, in Tillman County, J. D. Tyler took a male with in-