

Eastern Population Sandhill Crane Hunt Plan

Introduction

Sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) are the most numerous of the world's cranes with a total population size likely exceeding 600,000 birds (Tacha et al. 1992, Meine and Archibald 1996, Sharp et al 2009). Migratory populations of sandhill cranes have a broad breeding range extending across North America from coast to coast in Canada and the northern United States (U.S.).

The breeding, migration and wintering range of the Eastern Population (EP) of greater sandhill cranes is located within the Mississippi and Atlantic Flyways. The EP sandhill cranes are currently not hunted while the Mid-Continent Populations of sandhill cranes are hunted in the Central and Pacific Flyways under the direction of a management plan for those populations (Central Flyway Council 2006).

The EP has rebounded from near extirpation in the 18th and 19th centuries (Walkinshaw 1949, 1973; Leopold 1949). By the 1930s, only 25 breeding pairs were recorded in Wisconsin (Henika 1936). Since that time, hunting regulations along with the protection, restoration and management of wetlands have allowed this population to increase to a level that exceeded 30,000 sandhill cranes by 1996 (Meine and Archibald 1996). The cranes have also adapted to change by nesting in smaller wetlands and feeding in agricultural fields.

It should be recognized that at current EP population levels, sandhill crane impacts to agricultural are resulting in the annual issuance of 200-300 kill permits each year in Mississippi Flyway states and over 100 additional kill permits being issued in Ontario. While these are kill permits issued in the spring to specifically address agricultural damage, the issuance of these permits has already established an annual take of cranes within the EP with no notable impact on population growth.

The EP crane population has shown significant growth over the past 30-40 years. While there is no survey designed to provide a population estimate for the EP, four separate regional or statewide surveys provide documentation of the growth of the EP. These surveys along with distribution data and local surveys combine to provide a picture of a significantly increasing and expanding population of sandhill cranes in eastern North America.

With a growing sandhill crane population, there is an increased interest among the hunting public to institute a hunting season for sandhills in the Mississippi Flyway. Three populations of sandhill cranes are hunted in 11 states and three provinces in the Central and Pacific Flyways, with many hunters from more eastern states traveling to the Central Flyway to harvest ducks, geese and sandhill cranes. As the population of these highly visible birds increases in the home areas of these hunters, they want to hunt them locally. Minnesota is currently exploring hunting the portion of the mid-continent population which inhabits the northwestern corner of Minnesota. This would be the first sandhill crane hunting within the Mississippi Flyway in nearly 100 years. However, as noted above as many as 200-300 EP sandhill

cranes are being shot but not utilized each year as part of agricultural damage control activities.

This harvest strategy is consistent with the objectives and rules stated in the EP management plan.

Harvest Strategy

This harvest strategy outlines the plans for hunting the EP of sandhill cranes in Tennessee for the 2011-2012 late waterfowl season.

The vast majority of sandhill cranes wintering in Tennessee utilize an area centered around Hiwassee Refuge north of Chattanooga. A small number of cranes are wintering in West Tennessee but have not reached huntable numbers at this time. This hunt plan designates all lands in TWRA Regions 3 and 4 as the sandhill crane hunt zone. Lands outside this zone will not be open for the taking of sandhill cranes in the 2011-2012 season.

Based on the EP Management Plan, Tennessee can apply for a number of permits that is 10% of our 5-year average, high winter count of cranes. The most consistent data to use for this calculation will be the mid-winter count. The most recent 5-year average TN count for the period 2007-2010 is 22099 sandhill cranes. This will allow TN to apply for 2200 permits for harvest.

Sandhill cranes are expected to be difficult to hunt and will require the purchaser to invest in a certain amount of equipment in order to successfully pursue them. Also, huntable areas will likely be limited as most of the cranes utilize private land.

The distribution of permits will be via computer draw. Based on our allocation of permits, TWRA is allowed 2200 total permits. TWRA will issue approximately 733 permits to hunters. Each permit will be for the harvest of three sandhill cranes. This is thought to be the best way to allocate the permits due to uncertainties in how the cranes will react to hunting pressure, the costs of pursuing cranes, and other unknown variables during this inaugural hunt. Hunters will be issued tags and harvested cranes must be tagged and checked in at a TWRA check station.

2011-2012 Sandhill Crane Hunting Season.
∞ Permits will be distributed via computer draw or handheld drawing.
∞ The Quota will be 733 permits (each worth three cranes)(Reasons listed: lack of places to hunt, fewer hunters to deal with during first year, landowner permit issues).
∞ Hunting will occur in TWRA Regions 3 & 4
∞ Hunting season will coincide with the late Waterfowl Season.
∞ Cranes must be tagged and checked in at a TWRA Checking station.

Considerations/Problems
∞ May want to extend dates to begin season earlier before the cranes get "educated".
∞ When are crane events? Should we have hunting when crane event is going on?
∞ We may have an issue with landowners and a limited number of permits and permit requirements allowed by the USFWS. We are limited on the number of permits.
∞ I discovered that the USFWS will not have a loophole allowing landowners to hunt cranes without a permit. They will have to go through the same process to get a permit as everyone else.
∞ Are there enough hunting areas and what are they? Will private guide services pop up?
∞ May want to be very restrictive on hunting zones to reduce

potential landowner permit issues.
∞ What will we do regarding whooping cranes? Education is the key. Provide handouts with ID materials to permit holders.
∞ May want to do hand held drawing to keep most of the permits in the hands of hunters from that area.
∞ Computer draw may result in a high percentage of hunters from other parts of the state that either will not hunt or will not know/have a place to hunt.

