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## THE SANDHILL CRANE IN A MICHIGAN MARSH

BY LAWRENCE H. WALKINSHAW

In a great marsh, the "Big Marsh", as the farmers call it, in Calhoun County, Michigan, I remember boyhood days when I penetrated its heart searching for marsh birds, regardless of warnings from my father concerning the large number of rattlesnakes to be found there. Only once do I recall observing the Sandhill Crane. That was in September, 1921, when three of these birds were seen, slowly flying, high overhead, as we worked near its edge. Even then I questioned the authenticity of the man's word because so many farmers, and others, give this name to any large, long-legged bird which might be seen.

Nine years passed, when once again I roamed the heart of the same marsh, searching for large white herons which were so abundant in the larger marshes that summer. The search was so uneventful that I was about to return when a loud honking, wild to its very depth, resembling a wild goose note, sounded from behind a small peninsula in front of me. It required only a short time to reach the opposite side of that peninsula where I looked closely over the marsh to see and hear nothing more. After a few minutes of waiting the same wild honking, seemingly a part of the great marsh, sounded closer and in only a short time three large birds, with necks outstretched flew slowly down the marsh, from where their voices carried back through the stillness of the August afternoon. At last I had found the Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis tabida*).

To the south a rolling field stretched back away from the marsh, forming a natural observation point for the greater part of the clearings. Here I returned with friends and on two different occasions observed not three, but eight and six birds respectively. This was much more than I had ever expected, and I determined to return and search the area for a nest the following spring.

May 3, 1931, found me in search of cranes. The water was below normal for this time of the year but the wading was hard, and



time and time again I nearly went in over my hip boots, but at last I reached the tamaracks of the opposite side. Here I rested for a few minutes then climbed a small tamarack to gaze across on a cultivated field on the other side only about a quarter of a mile distant, so I elected to again cross the largest marshy area, the one which I had just crossed. The sun swung low over the trees as I neared the starting shore, tired and discouraged for not a crane had appeared. But surprises are always in store for one interested in birds and when I had nearly reached the small peninsulas of bushes extending from the shore two Sandhill Cranes rose within a few rods of me and, flying in the late afternoon sunshine, circled to the east then flew down the marsh in a few minutes, the distance which I had covered in half an hour. The brown of their plumage was noted as they flew, due to the extraordinarily good light from my position. The rolling call resounded from the north, then, as if the birds had been talking, one arose and returned toward where I stood motionless since they had flushed, and instead of climbing higher into the air she dropped to the ground only a few rods in front of me, where I was amazed to see that large bird droop her wings and with a quivering motion try to distract my attention from the area where she had first flushed. The day had progressed so far that I decided to return later and verify the location a little better. On May 5, with two scouts, I returned early in the morning and had just cleared the bushy shore when a single crane arose and, calling loudly, flew down the marsh. I walked right to the nest, a large mound of sedge which contained two large drab-colored eggs, spotted and streaked with long splotches of brown, lavender, and darker buff. The nest, about three feet in diameter, built among the sedge and cattails, was about six inches above the water, which was only a few inches deep. I remained only long enough to examine the structure without touching it or its contents, but did observe at the end of the marsh three cranes nervously clamoring for my hurried departure.

I visited the nest with Dr. Miles D. Pirnie on May 10. We thought particularly of photography and spent just a few minutes in the beginning of a blind of willow boughs in a favorable location to the southeast. After another week had passed I returned to continue the blind only to find that the cranes were gone. There had been quite a little rain during the previous week and the nest was rather wet-appearing and deserted, so I tried the eggs for incubation heat, finding them cold and wet. We hated to leave the eggs for crows and wondered if it were possible for the old birds to return, but search





FIG. 4. Nest and Eggs of the Sandhill Crane in Calhoun County, Michigan, May 10, 1931. The photograph by Dr. Miles D. Pirnie.



as we would no signs of the cranes could be found, so we returned on the following day and took the eggs. These were turned over to the University of Michigan Museum. They measured 94.5x60.75 and 93.5x61.5 mm. The former was of an oval shape while the latter was more elliptical. The embryos had been nearly ready to hatch but were dead. I managed to remove them and they are now in the Battle Creek Public School Museum.

Discouraged over the outcome, I searched for the birds on May 24 and was elated to see two birds nearer the heart of the marsh rise from the reeds and clamor at my appearance with their loud rolling calls, but I did not wish to disturb them, and left them to their belated nesting. August trips in 1931 failed to locate any cranes. However, I was much surprised to find on the shore of a small tamarack bordered lake in Barry County, on September 27, two gray-colored cranes which raised their heads and uttered that loud ringing call. We retreated and left them to the solitude of the little lake suspecting that they were migrating birds.

The winter passed and on April 3 I drove to the "Big Marsh" where I flushed two cranes far out on the swamp before I had barely left the bordering bushes. I counted the days and planned to return on May 1. The marsh appeared deserted as far as cranes were concerned, for I tramped and tramped across the clearings with no results. Fearing the birds had stopped only in migration, I began another round about the marsh. This time a crane glided over the tamaracks and alighted far ahead where he again rose as I approached, leading me on and on.

The day had progressed and I was tired so I retraced my steps, watching a Red-tailed Hawk circle high overhead as I passed his nest in a tamarack tree near where the crane had first appeared. A week passed, then, once again I drove early to the Big Marsh and was surprised to have a Wilson's Snipe fly from a nest of four eggs right at the border of the swamp. I crossed the clearing and was elated to see the single crane almost immediately, trying again to lead me down the marsh. Marsh wrens chattered near at hand and Swamp Sparrows scolded at my intrusion. Across the creek dull booming noises sounded and I knew that the Prairie Chickens were performing not far away. In my search I approached the creek and glancing to the dry grassy area which extended beyond for another mile, observed eleven males strutting and booming only a short distance away; but I must not be distracted so returned to almost immediately flush a crane where I thought I had already walked. Again I gazed at a flat





FIG. 5. The Second Nest of the Sandhill Crane in Calhoun County, May 8, 1932.



FIG. 6. Young Sandhill Cranes. One yet so weak he can hardly stand, the other much stronger. May 15, 1932.



platform of sedge with its two buff-colored eggs and again I hurriedly departed leaving things undisturbed.

E. M. Brigham, Jr., Mrs. Walkinshaw, and I returned the following week with a small blind, cameras, tripods, and other paraphernalia. We left the blind at the edge, and I showed them the nest, empty, with only a few traces of egg-shells. The little ones had hatched as we could tell by the clamoring of two old cranes about an eighth of a mile distant. But, as we stood watching them, a "*peep*" attracted our attention and we located one of the little fellows, a brown ball on two stilt-like legs, several feet from the nest. Later the other was located and we succeeded in getting photographs of the younger birds. Although I was covered and hidden near the nest in a hastily constructed blind for three hours, the old birds would not return so I righted things as much as possible and we left the area wondering what the world would hold in store for the little Sandhill Cranes which came in contact with man so early in life.

In 1933 we visited the region several times. The cranes were not there on March 12, but on the 26th the two birds circled high overhead, then returned to the place from which they rose. On April 16 only one bird could be located indicating that the other bird must be on a nest. The nest was located almost immediately when we arrived on April 30.

This nest, like the previous two, contained two ovate-shaped eggs, but was built in shorter sedge and reeds. The region was much dryer, there being very little water about. It was the type of locality where the Short-billed rather than the Long-billed Marsh Wren was found. Only a short distance from the nest we flushed a Yellow Rail and later picked it up from the reeds where it had hidden. On May 14 the nest still contained two eggs but on the 21st contained the remains of one unfertile egg, crows having probably accounted for the large hole in one side. The cranes uttering their loud rolling call flew about me as I left the marsh. The following morning friends called and wished to see the cranes if possible, so I arranged to accompany them and we had soon flushed the adults some little distance from the nest-site. Here a *peep* attracted our attention and the rich brown youngster was soon located. He was as pleased as we, cuddling down in one's hand to absorb the heat. After a short investigation we retreated, leaving the single little offspring with parents circling overhead. As we left I wondered what other secrets would later be unfolded in this Big Marsh, where the crane's rolling call, the Prairie Chicken's boom, even



the drumming of the grouse can be heard, where few men penetrate during the summer months and where Nature holds her own.

SUMMARY: The nests were large mounds of sedge from two and one-half feet to three feet in diameter and from six to twelve inches in depth. All three nests had standing water about them, but were located at various distances from the edge of the tamarack peninsulas; one was only a few rods while the farthest was five or six times as far. One nest was located among cattails and the large-leafed sedge, while the second was a little nearer the small leafed sedge with cat-



FIG. 7. The "Big Marsh" in Calhoun County, Michigan, where the Sandhill Cranes nested. May 17, 1931.

tails nowhere about. The third was nearer the dryer marshy meadow, there being royal ferns, golden-rod, and small willow saplings scattered throughout the area.

The eggs were two in each case. They were brownish drab in color with markings of darker gray or brown splotched and scrawled over the whole surface, but often thicker about the larger end. The eggs were variations of the ovoid shape and the three which were taken measured 94.5x60.75 mm., 93.5x61.5 mm., and 94.5x60.00 mm. The other eggs were untouched.

The young are covered with a golden brown down when first hatched, deepest on the back of the head and neck along the back and on the wings. They were able to cover some distance from the nest where they were very hard to see if they remained motionless. The entire head was covered with down and this lasted for at least two months. The primaries, secondaries, and coverts of the wings were



well advanced at two months of age. The bill increased in length remarkably during this period as did the length of the legs. They were slaty colored during this entire period. Their call was a quavering peep having an indication of dragging it out in a faint r-r-r-r accent.

The adult birds at all three nests were very brown on the back of the neck, back, and wings, in fact I would say it was the predominant color. One bird was a little larger than the other. The birds observed in Barry County in September, 1931, were entirely gray, much different from the Calhoun County birds during the nesting season.

Migrations. March 27, 1932, and March 26, 1933. September 27, 1931. A farmer who lives near the marsh said that two of the cranes were seen in his cornfield during the mild winter of 1930-31. I can not verify this myself but do know that the man knows the birds.

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BATTLE CREEK, MICH.

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## DIURNAL ACTIVITY OF THE WOODCOCK

BY MARCIA B. CLAY

Over a large section of country in August, 1925, drought was prevalent. In Trumbull County, Ohio, rainfall during that month was only .75 inches, whereas the average rainfall for thirty years amounted to 3.34 inches. My lawn on the slope of the ravine at North Bristol was bone dry, but at the foot of the slope a spring-fed brook still contained water, and though the swampy floor of the ravine showed unmistakable signs of the drought there was still a considerable boggy area.

On August second I flushed a Woodcock (*Philohela minor*) on the slope from under a clump of evergreens in a patch of brambles. It tumbled into the ravine behind a mass of swamp rose. A few days later from almost the same spot I saw a Woodcock fly from an open boggy track leading across the ravine where I am sure it was feeding. The bird disappeared behind a bend of the hill and when I came up it flushed, and again tumbled into good alder cover in the edge of the swamp.

Thereafter I began to watch for this bird, and on August 15 I saw it sitting across the ravine from my yard, under some overhanging





Walkinshaw, Lawrence H. 1933. "The Sandhill Crane in a Michigan Marsh." *The Wilson bulletin* 45(3), 99–106.

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