

MIGRATORY STOPOVER FOR SANDHILL CRANES

Approximately 23,000 - 27,000 Sandhill Cranes migrate biannually through the San Luis Valley (SLV). The length of their stay in the SLV depends on habitat conditions along the migratory route.

The Rocky Mountain population of Greater Sandhill Cranes spend more time in the SLV than at their wintering and breeding grounds. In fall, cranes typically arrive in mid-September and leave by early November. Peak migration occurs in early October. In spring, cranes typically arrive mid-February and leave by early April. Peak migration usually occurs in early March.

BEST CRANE VIEWING SITES

Food availability is a large factor in the distribution of cranes in the SLV. During migration cranes primarily feed on small grains such as barley and wheat, but they will also supplement their diet with roots, seeds, invertebrates, and small vertebrates found in wetlands. After early fall when the barley has been harvested on privately-owned fields, cranes and waterfowl spread throughout the Valley taking advantage of this food source. After months of foraging on private fields little food is left for the subsequent spring. Grain fields on the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge are mowed in the spring to provide food for birds when it is more limited on private lands.

The Alamosa NWR receives less crane use than the Monte Vista NWR. However, use is increasing due to an increase in farming efforts to the east of the refuge. The observation area on the Bluff Overlook Drive may offer views of loafing cranes during mid-day and cranes traveling to and from roost sites in the morning and evening.

BEST TIME TO VIEW

Cranes are fairly habitual and predictable. Visitors aware of their daily patterns can find good places to observe these birds throughout the day.

Feeding

Cranes feed in agricultural fields from sunrise to mid-morning and again in the late afternoon to sunset. In spring, most cranes forage on the Monte Vista NWR. The refuge farm fields can be viewed from:

- Wildlife viewing pull-outs south of the Monte Vista NWR Office and county road 8S
- County roads 2E and 7S

Loafing

During mid-day (10 am to 4 pm) cranes can be found in wet meadows and other uplands on and near the Monte Vista NWR, where they loaf and occasionally feed on roots, tubers, invertebrates, and other food. Cranes will loaf in a variety of habitat types and do not always use areas with water. Good places to watch loafing

Cranes on the Refuge are:

- At the pull-offs on the west side of Hwy. 15
- On county roads 2E, 7S, and 3E

Roosting

In the evenings and through the night cranes use shallow open water to roost. Most roost sites are closed to the public. However, you can still see cranes fly in and out of roosts at sunrise and sunset. Good places to view these flights on the Monte Vista NWR are:

- The wildlife viewing areas on 8S and on Hwy. 15
- The area near the intersection of county roads 7S and 2E
- The Refuge auto-tour route. The tour route is open from sunrise to sunset. The refuge strictly enforces the sunrise to sunset rule. Public activity on the auto-tour route will disturb roosting cranes, exposing the birds to a variety of hazards.

SUB-SPECIES

Three sub-species of Sandhill Cranes visit the SLV: Greater, Lesser, and Canadian. The three sub-species look very similar and are difficult to differentiate. The Greater is larger and lighter gray than the Lesser and Canadian.

In the fall of 1999, the Rocky Mountain population of Greater Sandhill Cranes was estimated to be 18,000 to 21,000 birds. Ninety-five percent of these use the SLV in the spring and fall to refuel before moving on to the breeding or wintering grounds.

The majority of the Rocky Mountain population breeds in the greater Yellowstone area including Grays Lake NWR, in Idaho. Most winter in the Rio Grande Valley at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge near Socorro, New Mexico or farther south.

Although Lesser and Canadian Sandhill Cranes frequent the Valley, only about 3,000 - 5,000 of each subspecies normally migrate through.

NATURAL HISTORY

Cranes live from 20-30 years and breed at about 2-5 years old. Sandhill Cranes mate for life. Pair bonds are formed and reinforced with a “dancing” behavior (hopping and flapping the wings) that can be seen in the spring.

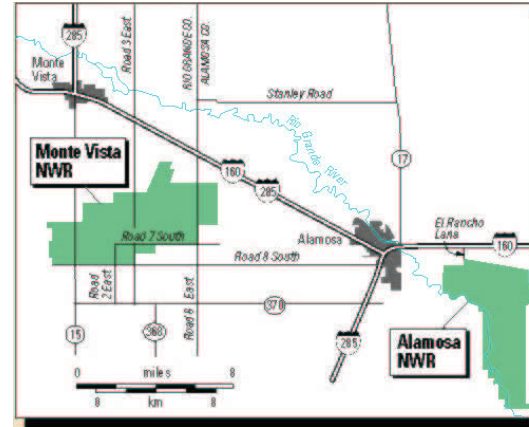
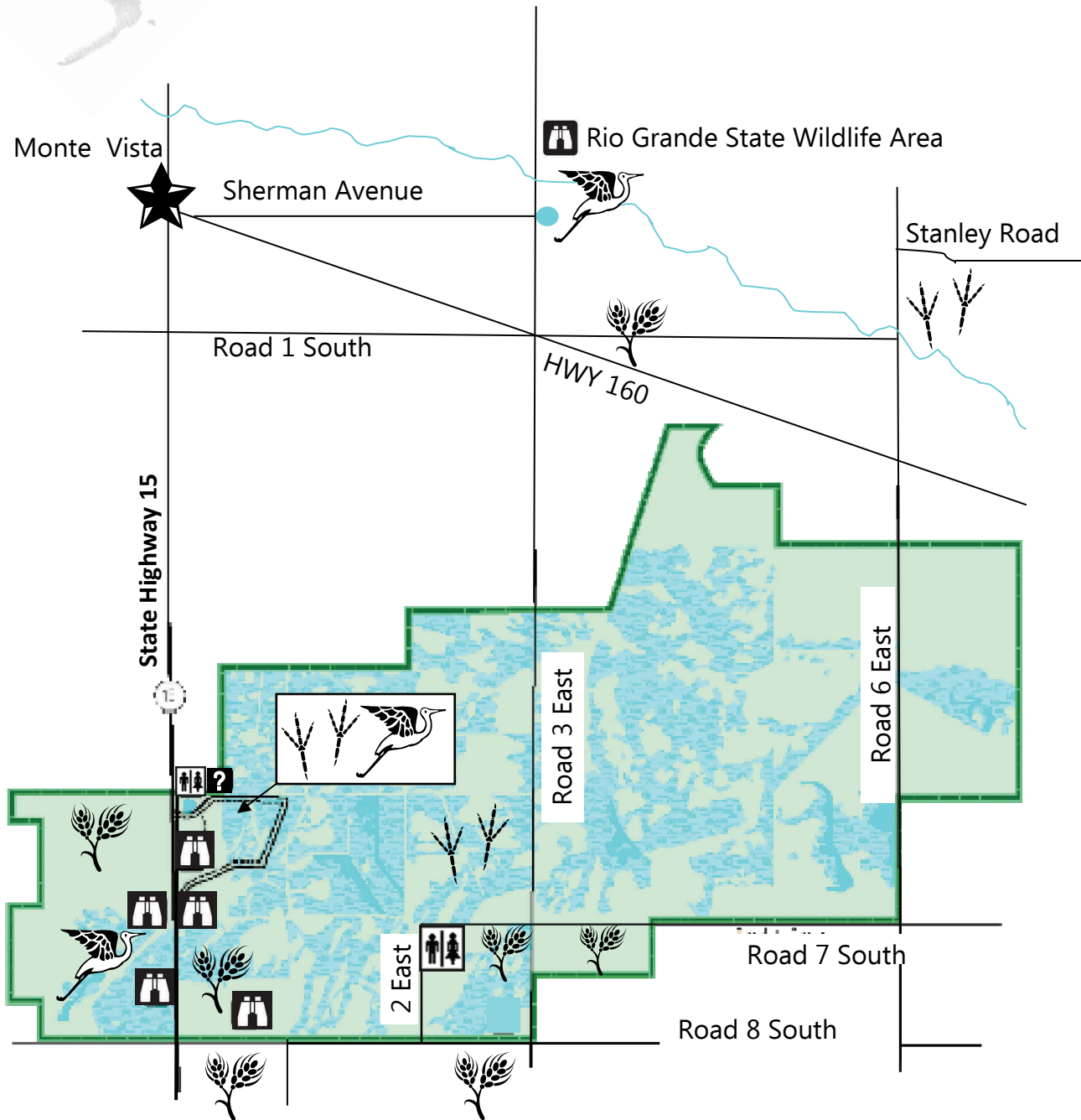
Sandhill Cranes build large ground nests primarily in wet meadow habitat and both sexes incubate eggs. As with most cranes, Sandhill Cranes lay two eggs but usually only one chick will leave the nest.

In the fall, crane family groups- two adults and one juvenile- leave the breeding grounds. The juvenile stays with the parents through the summer, fall, and winter and will accompany the parents on the northward migration. In route, breeding adults begin renewing pair bonds and the juvenile leaves (or is forced out of) the family group.

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Spring Crane Viewing Map





U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service


*Monte Vista
National Wildlife Refuge*


Spring Crane Viewing


Feeding Areas:
 Refuge farm fields and private grain fields near the refuge, sunrise to 10 a.m. 4 p.m. to sunset.

Loafing Areas:
 Wet meadows and a variety of other habitats 10 a.m.– 4 p.m.

Roost Sites:
 Places to View cranes entering and leaving the roosts.

Wildlife Viewing Areas


Rest Rooms


Information


We hope you enjoy viewing cranes in the San Luis Valley. Please remember-crane roosts are closed to the public to protect



Artwork by Kelly Ortiz