

# 2024-25 Sandhill Crane Hunter Participation and Harvest Report

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Photo: Martha M. Teal

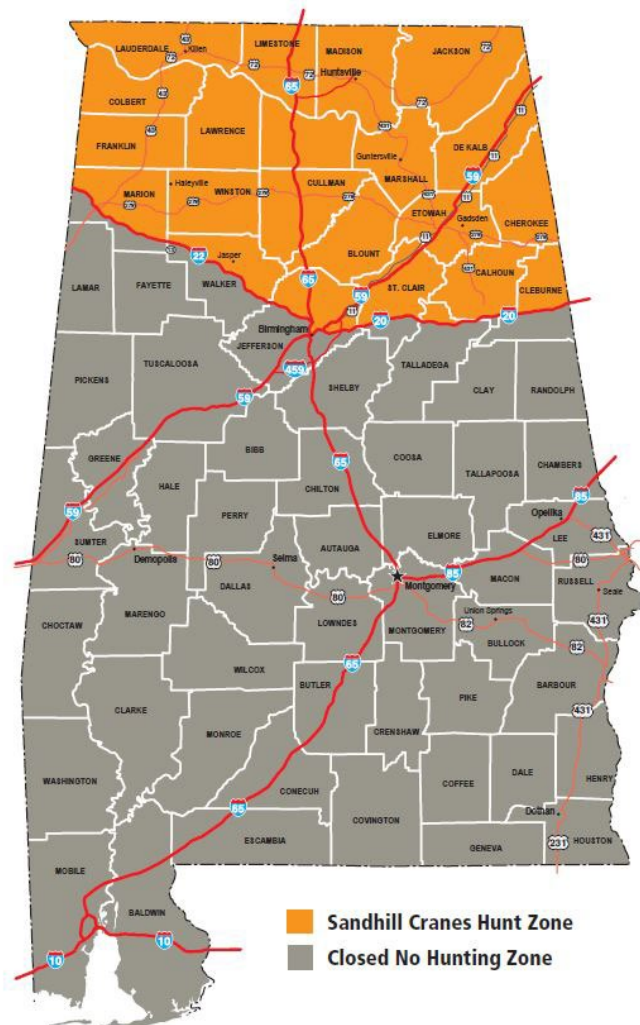


## **Introduction**

The 2024-25 season marked the sixth hunting season for sandhill cranes in Alabama. The Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) requested 750 permits and 2,250 tags, same as the previous season, based on guidelines from the Management Plan for the Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes (Van Horn et al. 2010). Due to the limited number of permits and tags, an online registration process and computer automated drawing was instituted to randomly select 750 hunters to receive one sandhill crane permit with three (3) tags per permit. The open application period for permits occurred September 4-25, 2024; a total of 934 people applied. The drawing was held on September 25, those selected were required to pass an online regulations and identification test. A timeline of one week was provided to complete and pass the online test and confirm their permit acceptance, or they were disqualified from receiving a permit. If a disqualification occurred, an alternate hunter was subsequently promoted to receive the permit and subjected to the same test and qualification process. This process resulted in 718 permitted hunters for the 2024-25 season. All permitted hunters were emailed a permit, which they had to print, keep on their person while hunting, and fill out once cranes were harvested.

The 2024-25 Alabama sandhill crane season dates spanned from November 29, 2024 – January 5, 2025, and January 13 -26, 2025, a 53-day season with a 7-day closure during the “Festival of the Cranes” at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. The daily bag limit, season bag limit and possession limit remained at three cranes per hunter for a total maximum allowed harvest of 2,154 cranes in the state. Shooting hours were from sunrise to sunset to ensure adequate light conditions for proper identification. The sandhill crane hunting zone was defined as the area north of Interstate 20 from the Georgia state line to the interchange with Interstate 65, then east of Interstate 65 to the interchange with Interstate 22, then north of Interstate 22 to the Mississippi state line, excluding the remainder of the state (Figure 1).

## Limited Quota Sandhill Crane Hunting Zones



**Figure 1.** Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Sandhill Crane Hunt Zone.

### Season Results

Of the 718 permitted hunters, 670 (93%) fully completed the mandatory post-season hunter survey. Four hundred and ninety-nine (75%) hunters participated in at least one hunt, while 171 (25%) did not attempt to hunt (Table 1). A total of 442 birds were harvested, 374 (84.6%) adults, 61 (13.8%) juveniles, and 7 of unknown age (1.6%). During the season 22 cranes were wounded and unable to be retrieved. Two hundred (40%) hunters were successful in harvesting at least one crane. The average harvest was 2.2 birds per successful hunter.

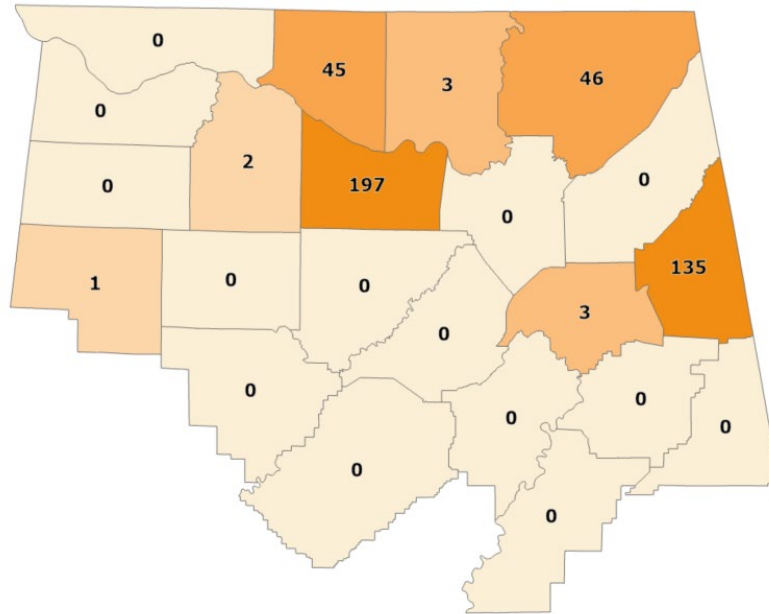
**Table 1.** Number of sandhill cranes harvested by harvest number and hunter effort for hunters that hunted at least one day during the 2024-2025 season.

| <b>Birds<br/>Harvested</b> | <b>Hunters</b> | <b>% of Total<br/>Hunters</b> | <b>% of Successful<br/>Hunters</b> | <b>Harvest<br/>Frequency</b> | <b>Days<br/>Hunted</b> | <b>% of Total<br/>Hunt Days</b> | <b>Average<br/>Days Hunted</b> |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 0 Birds                    | 299            | 60%                           | 0%                                 | 0                            | 941                    | 64%                             | 3.2                            |
| 1 Bird                     | 65             | 13%                           | 33%                                | 65                           | 168                    | 12%                             | 2.6                            |
| 2 Birds                    | 28             | 6%                            | 14%                                | 56                           | 67                     | 5%                              | 2.4                            |
| 3 Birds                    | 107            | 21%                           | 53%                                | 321                          | 282                    | 19%                             | 2.6                            |
| <b>Total</b>               | 499            |                               |                                    | 442                          | 1458                   |                                 | 2.7                            |

A total of 431 (98%) cranes were harvested when hunters were primarily hunting for sandhill cranes. Only one bird (0.2%) was harvested when hunters incidentally harvested a crane while waterfowl hunting (308 hunt days) or other game species (6 hunt days; primary target species was not reported for 10 birds). Of the 1,458 total hunts, 517 (36%) resulted in hunters harvesting at least one crane. A total of 6,004 hours were spent hunting sandhill cranes, with the average length of a sandhill crane hunt being 4.12 hours.

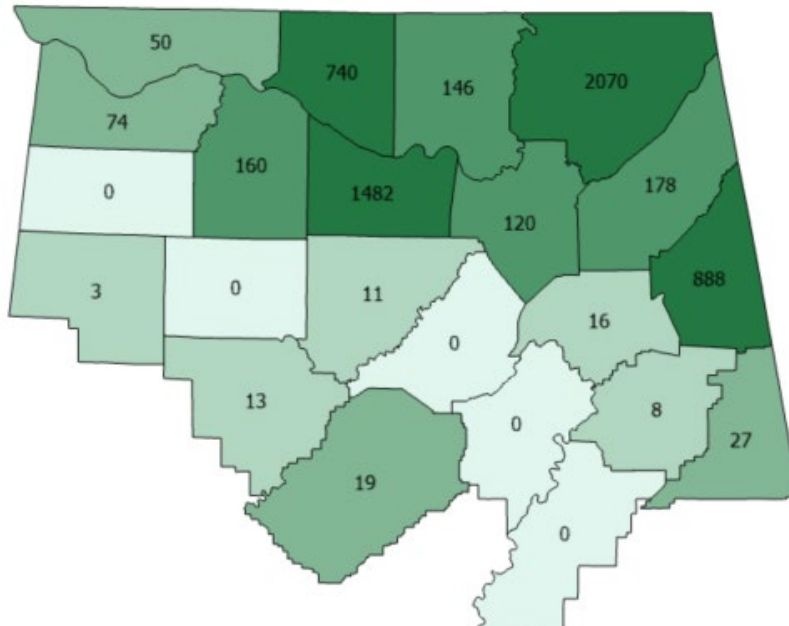
Cranes were harvested in 8 of the 22 counties within the Sandhill crane hunting zone (Figure 2). Hunter effort (i.e., hours hunted) and harvest of sandhill cranes was highly correlated in counties that encompass the three main sandhill crane wintering areas in North Alabama; Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Morgan County (n=1,482; n=197) and Limestone County (n=740; n=45), the Jackson County Waterfowl Management Areas and Refuges in Jackson County (n=2,070; n=46), and Weiss Lake in Cherokee County (n=888; n=135).

## Sandhill Crane Harvest by County 2024-25



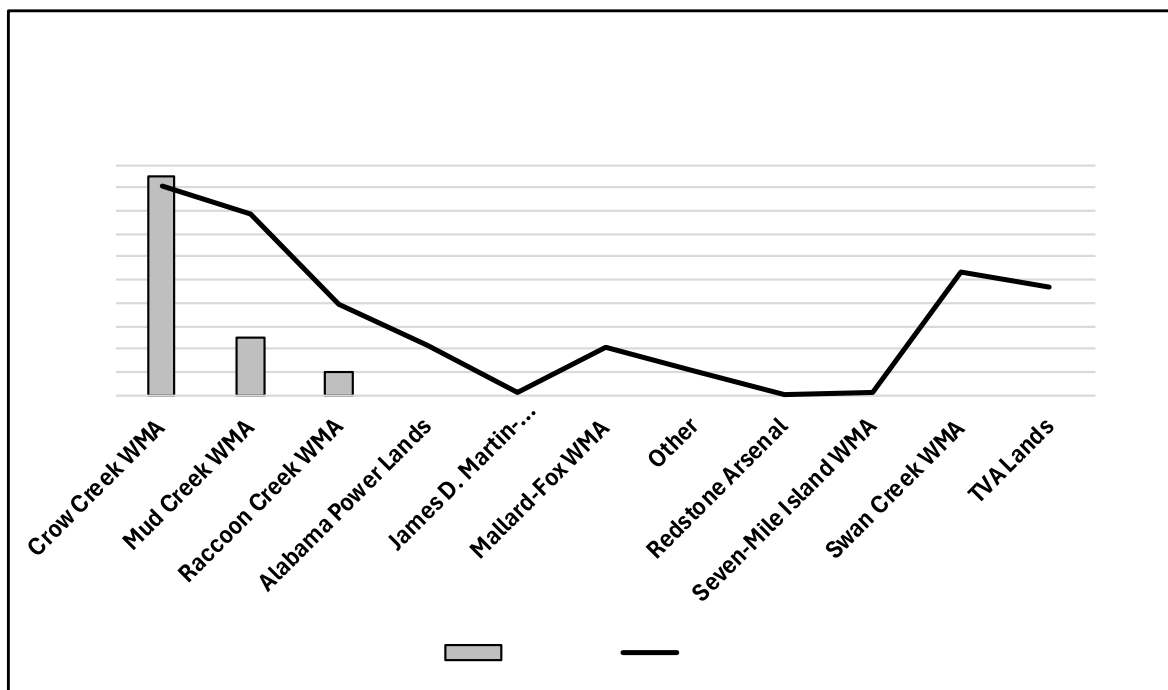
**Figure 2.** Sandhill cranes harvested by county in Alabama during the 2024-2025 season.

## Sandhill Crane Hours Hunted by County 2024-25



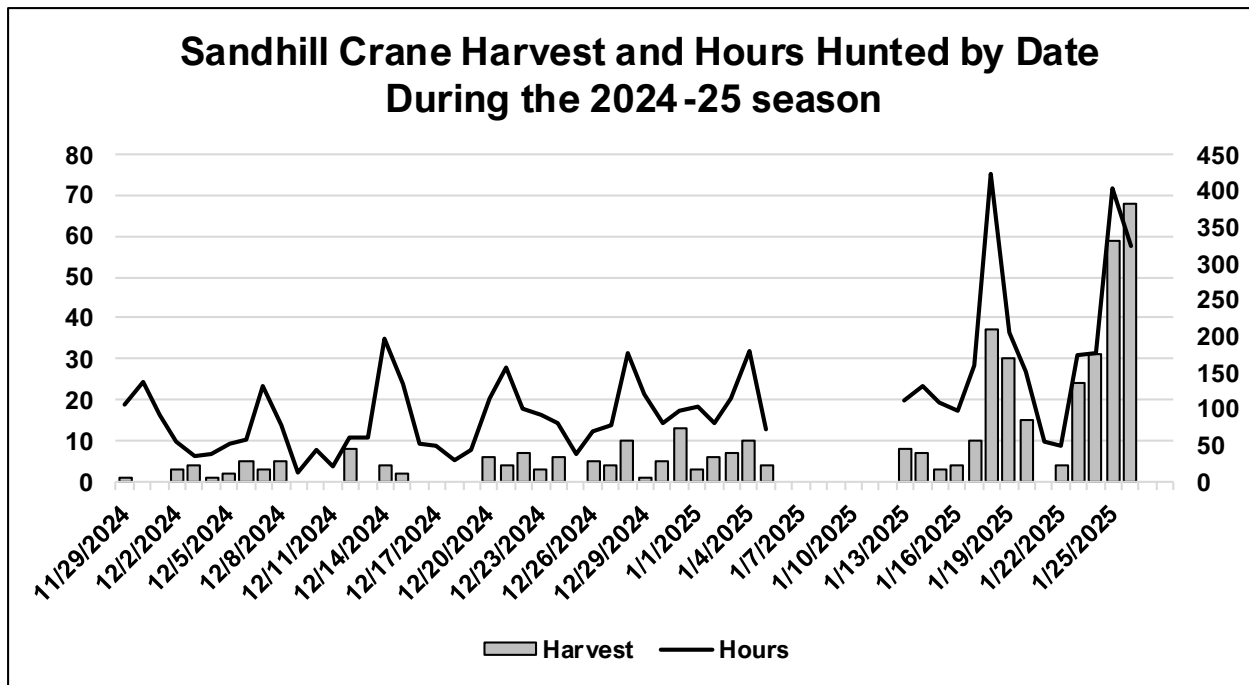
**Figure 3.** The total hours hunted for sandhill cranes in each county in Alabama during the 2024-2025 season.

Of the 442 cranes harvested, 406 (92%) birds were harvested on private land, 26 (6%) were harvested on public land, and 10 (2%) were unspecified. Sandhill crane harvest from public land occurred on three areas that were in the sandhill crane hunting zone. The data indicates there is no clear trend or correlation between the number of hours hunted on public lands and harvest number.



**Figure 4.** Number of hours hunted and harvest of sandhill cranes on public lands in Alabama during the 2024-2025 season.

The 2024-25 Alabama sandhill crane season included 53 days of open hunting split over two segments. Trends in hunter effort, in terms of hours hunted per day, were similar to daily harvest throughout the season (Figure 5). Over the 53-day season, the average hours hunted per day was 112 hours (range: 13 to 424 hours per day), while the average daily harvest was 8.3 cranes per day (range: 0 to 68 cranes harvested per day).



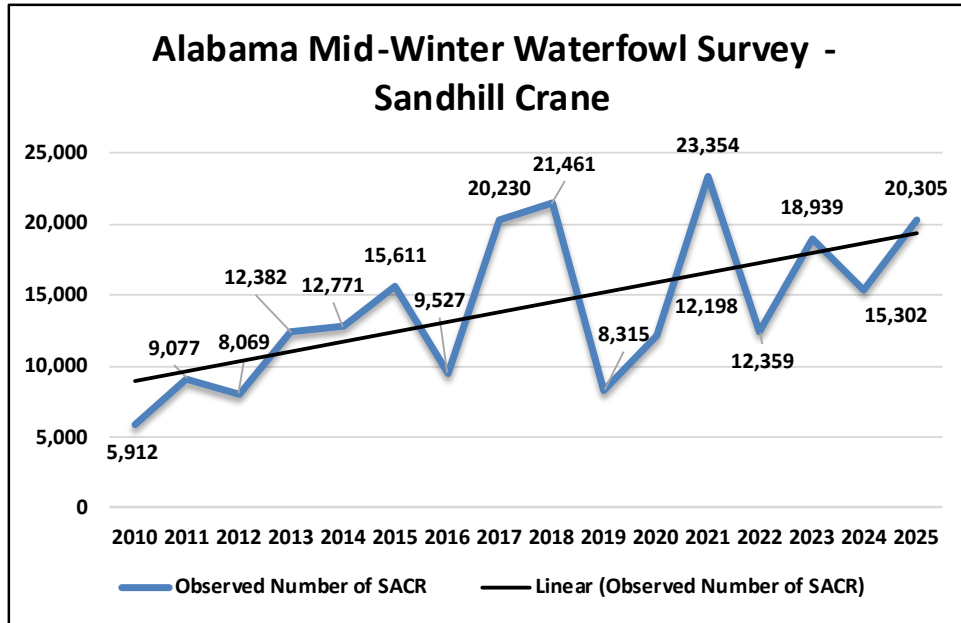
**Figure 5.** Total number of hours hunted and harvest of sandhill cranes for each day of the 2024-25 season in Alabama. The Sandhill Crane hunting season was closed January 6<sup>th</sup> through the 12<sup>th</sup> 2025.

### Discussion

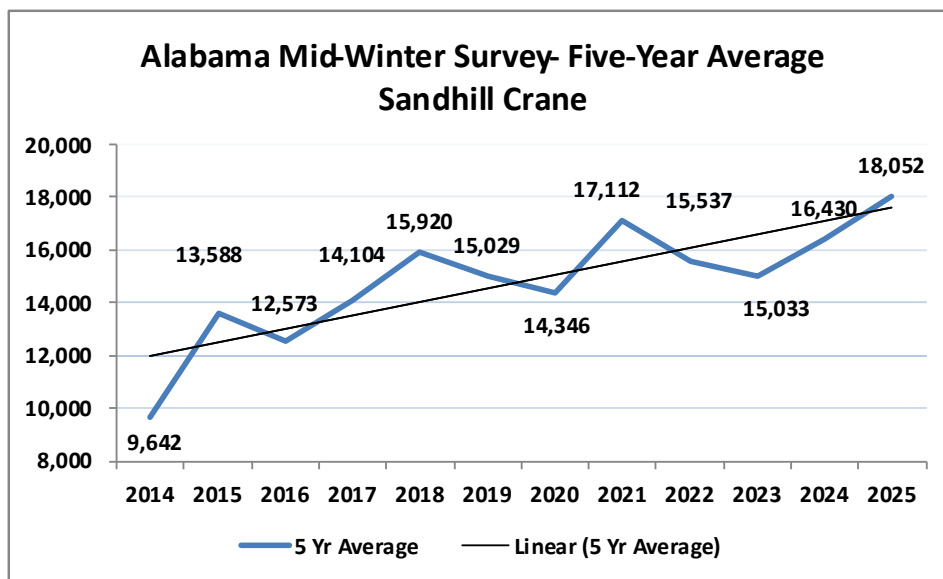
The 2024-25 Alabama sandhill crane season was the second operational hunting season after the first four experimental seasons during 2019-2023. During the 2024-25 season Alabama hunters harvested the most sandhill cranes per season so far with 442 cranes and a harvest percentage of 20.5% (2,154 tags). This season also had the highest number of hunters to date who harvested at least one bird (200 hunters). In addition, 22 sandhill cranes were reported to be wounded and not retrieved resulting in only a 5% crippling loss.

There were no reports of any illegal sandhill crane harvest or any whooping crane incidents during the 2024-25 Alabama sandhill crane hunting season.

The annual Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey (Jan. 8<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025) totaled 20,305 sandhill cranes, a 32.7% increase from the previous year's survey of 15,302 (Figure 6). The 2025 survey total was also 12% above the 5-year average of 18,052 (Figure 7).

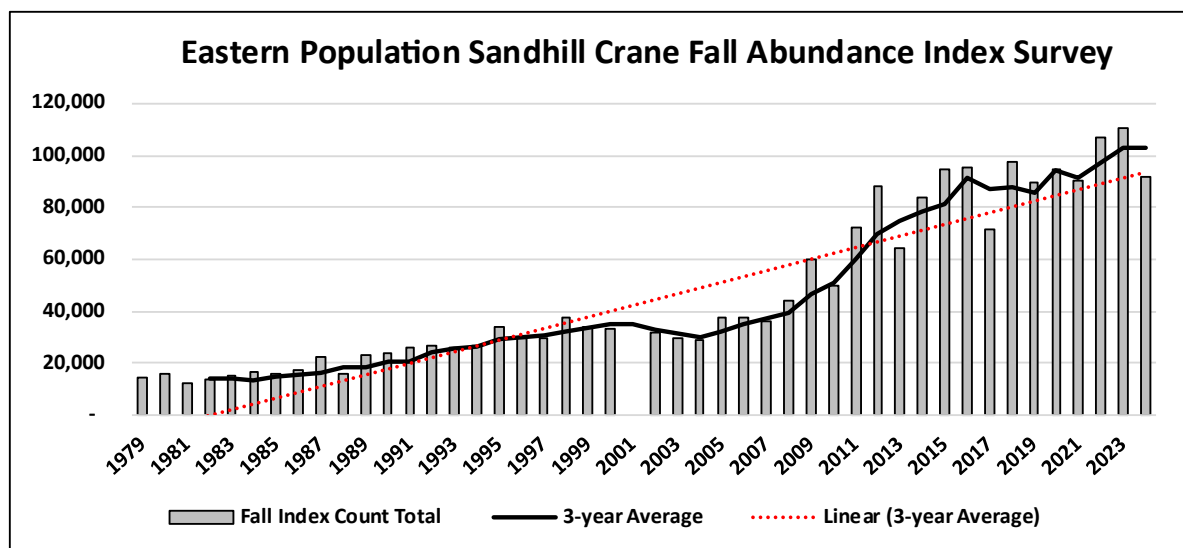


**Figure 6.** Observed number of sandhill cranes (SACR) during the Alabama Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey (2010-25).



**Figure 7.** Five-year average of sandhill cranes (SACR) observed during the Alabama Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey (2014-25).

There continue to be three states with open hunting seasons for the Eastern Population of sandhill cranes (Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee). Harvest on this population remains extremely minimal, during the 2024-25 season in all three states combined 1,311 cranes were harvested (Seamans 2025). The 2024 Sandhill Crane Fall Index Count totaled 91,485 birds, with a three-year average of 103,098 birds (Seamans 2025; Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Eastern Population of sandhill crane Fall Abundance Index Survey (1989-2024; Seamans 2025).

### Comparison of Hunting Seasons

The number of permits and tags allocated to hunters increased from the first four experimental seasons during the last two operational seasons (2023-24 & 2024-25; Table 2). During this second operational season (2024-25) the number of permitted hunters who spent at least one day hunting increased by 48 hunters (11%) from the 2023-24 season. In addition, the number of hunters that harvested at least one bird increased by 45 (29%) and the total harvest increased by 120 birds (37%).

**Table 2.** Comparison of Sandhill Crane Hunting Seasons in Alabama

| Season         | Permits | Tags  | Number Who Hunted | Participation Percentage | Successful Hunters | Success Rate | Total Harvest |
|----------------|---------|-------|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 2019-20        | 400     | 1200  | 297               | 74%                      | 138                | 46%          | 291           |
| 2020-21        | 400     | 1200  | 314               | 79%                      | 178                | 57%          | 391           |
| 2021-22        | 400     | 1200  | 296               | 74%                      | 119                | 40%          | 234           |
| 2022-23        | 400     | 1200  | 287               | 72%                      | 122                | 43%          | 265           |
| 2023-24        | 750     | 2250  | 451               | 60%                      | 155                | 34%          | 322           |
| 2024-25        | 718     | 2154  | 499               | 69%                      | 200                | 40%          | 442           |
| <b>Total</b>   | 3,068   | 9,204 | 2,144             | 70%                      | 912                | 43%          | 1,945         |
| <b>Average</b> | 511     | 1,534 | 357               | 71%                      | 152                | 43%          | 324           |

## **References**

Seamans, M.E. 2025. Status and harvest of sandhill cranes: Mid-Continent, Rocky Mountain, Lower Colorado River Valley and Eastern Populations. Administrative Report, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Lakewood, Colorado.

Van Horn, K., T. White, W. Atkins, T. Cooper, R. Urbanek, D. Holm, D. Sherman, D. Aborn, J. Suckow, K. Cleveland, and R. Brook. 2010. Management plan for the Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes. Mississippi and Atlantic Flyway Councils, Madison, Wisconsin, USA.