



Alabama Division of Wildlife and
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Sandhill Crane Study Guide

Species Information and Identification

Migratory birds are protected by federal and state law. Certain species have regulated open hunting seasons, while others do not.

Sandhill cranes are one of the largest birds to have a regulated open hunting season, but several other large wading birds are present in Alabama and may be encountered while hunting sandhill cranes.

Besides sandhill cranes, great blue herons and great egrets will be the most commonly observed species during the sandhill crane season.



Sandhill Crane



Great Blue Heron



Great Egret



Whooping Crane

Although not common, whooping cranes are another large wading bird that may be present while sandhill crane hunting. In recent years, whooping cranes from the experimental population have begun to winter in Alabama in low numbers, averaging 12 individuals per year.

Due to the protected status of these other large wading birds, it is important for sandhill crane hunters to be able to identify their target species before attempting a shot.

Four species are easily identifiable under normal hunting conditions and can be distinguished by the following features:

Sandhill Crane



Adult sandhill cranes are gray with red on top of their head. Immature sandhill cranes are gray with a rusty brown or pinkish hue on the feathers, the top of their head is brown or dull red.

Standing about 4 feet tall, with a wingspan of 6 feet, sandhill cranes are large birds. They can be found in groups of various sizes but are often seen in small groups ranging from a few birds to large flocks of hundreds of birds.

While in flight, their necks will be extended to the front with their legs and feet outstretched behind their body.



Great Blue Heron



Many people misidentify great blue herons as cranes, but they are a different family of wading birds altogether.

Great blue herons are commonly found year-round throughout Alabama. They typically do not stray far from water, most often seen standing on the edge or in shallow water on any type of waterbody.

Great blue herons have a blueish-gray body with a white head and black stripe through the eye. They have a similar stature as cranes but are noticeably slimmer.

Hérons are easily distinguished in flight since they fly with their necks folded inward toward their bodies and legs extended backward.

These birds are most often observed alone.

Great Egret



The great egret is a large wading bird that is completely white, except for the black legs and feet and yellow bill. They are slightly smaller in stature than cranes.

Egrets are easily distinguished in flight since they fly with their necks folded inward toward their bodies and legs extended backward.

These birds are often observed alone or in small sparsely spread groups.

Whooping Crane



Adult whooping cranes are white with black wing tips and red on top of their head. Immature whooping cranes are also white with black wing tips but have varying amounts of light rusty brown on their head and body. Whooping Cranes are slightly larger in stature than sandhill cranes, standing over 5 feet tall, with a wingspan of 7 feet. Whooping cranes are normally seen as single birds or perhaps in a small flock. While in flight, their necks will be extended to the front with their legs and feet outstretched behind their body just like sandhill cranes.

Two populations of migratory whooping cranes are recognized in North America by the USFWS, one wild migratory population, and one experimental migratory population. The wild migratory population of whooping cranes breeds and nests in Wood Buffalo National Park in northern Alberta and southern Northwest Territories in Canada. These birds migrate south and winter at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in coastal Texas. Along their migration route they make several stops through multiple states that have a sandhill crane hunting season. This population continues to grow and has expanded from 15 birds in 1941 to 505 birds in 2018.

The other migratory population, the eastern migratory population, is designated as an experimental population. This population is a result of reintroduction efforts from captive reared birds. These birds were raised under special conditions with handlers wearing crane costumes as to not habituate birds to human interaction. These birds were released at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin and were trained to follow

an ultra-light aircraft to Chassahowitzka National Wildlife in Florida. Once this migratory pathway was established, young birds were released with established adult pairs and aircraft are no longer used. Currently there are 101 whooping cranes in the eastern migratory population. Several of these birds stopover or winter in Alabama each year.

Hunting is not currently listed as a threat to the whooping crane population, but collisions with manmade objects, predators, disease, habitat destruction, severe weather, loss of genetic diversity, and poaching are real threats.

Hunting Tips

Sandhill cranes tend to flock together and can be found in small groups (2-10) up to large flocks of over 100 birds. Whooping cranes are sometimes found within flocks of sandhill cranes.

Crane identification can be difficult in low light conditions. That is why WFF has chosen to begin shooting hours at sunrise. Even after sunrise, light conditions may impede accurate identification.



Special consideration should be taken before shooting into groups of cranes. If you are not 100% sure that the bird you intend to shoot is a sandhill crane, or that you will not kill or cripple more than the bag limit, then do not shoot!

Poor light conditions or large groups of birds are no excuse to mistakenly shoot a whooping crane, other protected species, or be over the limit. Be sure of your target! Do not shoot if your only identification feature is a shape or silhouette!

The daily bag, season bag, and possession limits for sandhill cranes in Alabama is 3 per hunter. **The penalty for shooting a protected species or being over the bag limit can be severe and may include loss of hunting privileges, and/or monetary fines.**

Wanton waste rules apply; sandhill cranes killed or crippled shall be retrieved, if possible, and added to the hunter's permit and tagged.

Judging distance is difficult in any bird-hunting situation, especially with large game birds. Due to their large size, sandhill cranes often appear closer than they actually are. To minimize the chance of crippling a sandhill crane, hunters should not shoot at sandhill cranes more than 40 yards away. Taking closer shots will also minimize the chance of mistakenly shooting a whooping crane.

Special Requirements

Sandhill cranes are migratory game birds and therefore fall under federal and state law. Non-license exempt hunters are required to have a current Alabama hunting license and Harvest Information Program (HIP). A wildlife management area (WMA) license is also required if hunting on a WMA.

All drawn hunters must complete and pass the online sandhill crane test. Once completion of this test is confirmed by WFF, the hunter will be emailed their sandhill crane permit. The permit is non-transferable and is required to be on the hunter while sandhill crane hunting. Once a hunter harvests a sandhill crane, they must immediately fill out their permit.

Drawn hunters are also required to complete a post-season sandhill crane survey, as WFF is federally mandated to collect hunter data and provide it to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The survey will be facilitated online and collect information on hunter participation, hunter effort, and harvest information to inform management decisions at the state and federal level. The post-season survey is required for every hunter drawn, regardless of whether a hunter hunted or harvested sandhill cranes or not. Failure to complete the online post-season survey will result in a hunter being ineligible for future draw hunts.

Restrictions

To minimize the chance of non-target species being accidentally shot by a hunter, and to improve visibility and enhance bird identification, the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) has set the shooting hours to begin at sunrise and end at sunset, instead of the customary 30 minutes before sunrise typical with migratory birds.

No person shall take sandhill cranes:

- Prior to sunrise or after sunset.
- With a trap, snare, net, rifle, pistol, swivel gun, shotgun larger than 10-gauge, punt gun, battery gun, machine gun, fishhook, poison, drug, explosive, or stupefying substance.
- With a shotgun capable of holding more than three shells, unless it is plugged with a one-piece filler which is incapable of removal without disassembling the gun.
- With lead shot. Hunters can only use T size steel shot, or smaller or other non-toxic shot and sizes approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- From a sink box (a low floating device having a depression affording the hunter a means of concealment beneath the surface of the water).
- From or with the aid or use of a car or other motor-driven land conveyance or any aircraft, except that paraplegics and single or double amputees of the legs may take from any stationary motor vehicle or stationary motor-driven land conveyance. "Paraplegic" means an individual afflicted with paralysis of the lower half of the body with involvement of both legs, usually due to disease of or injury to the spinal cord.
- From or by means of any motorboat or sailboat unless the motor has been completely shut off and/or the sail furled, and its progress therefrom has ceased.
- By the use of live decoys.
- Using records or tapes of migratory birds calls or sounds, or electrically amplified imitations of bird calls.
- By driving, rallying, or chasing birds with any motorized conveyance or any sailboat to put them in the range of hunters.
- By the aid of baiting (placing feed such as corn, wheat, salt, or other feed to constitute a lure or enticement) or on or over any baited area. Hunters should be aware that a baited area is considered to be baited for 10 days after the removal of the bait and it is not necessary for the hunter to know an area is baited to be in violation.