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## The Sandhill Crane in the Everglades

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## GENERAL NOTES

**The Sandhill Crane in the Everglades**<sup>1</sup>.—The Florida Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis pratensis*) occurs from southeastern Georgia through Florida (Walkinshaw 1973, *Cranes of the world*, Winchester Press) but is scarce at the southern tip of the peninsula in Monroe and Dade Counties (Williams 1978, pp. 36-37, in *Rare and endangered biota of Florida*, University Presses of Florida, Gainesville, Florida). Consequently, little is known about the status of cranes resident in extreme southern Florida.

From April through July 1981, aerial censuses were conducted by helicopter over the wet prairies, shallow marshes, and inland mangrove swamps of extreme southern Florida, which are primarily in Everglades National Park and the Big Cypress National Preserve. Because Florida cranes are characteristically sedentary within their home range (Nesbitt and Williams 1973, *Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Game Fish Comm.* 27: 332-335; Williams 1978), birds occurring in summer, usually in pairs, were considered to be residents. In April through June, cranes were counted during censuses of Cape Sable Sparrows (*Ammospiza maritima*) that covered transects 1 km apart. Parts of the census were flown nearly daily. Additional censuses on 1, 14, and 23 July covered the inland edge of the mangrove swamps, marsh patches, and the interface between mangroves and inland marshes. I also analyzed 154 observations of cranes reported in and near Everglades National Park from 1947 through 1981.

The overall distribution of cranes can be estimated best by combining results from the censuses with various reported observations of cranes. The last 6 years of such information are summarized in Figure 1. Pairs of birds have been observed repeatedly in Shark Valley, near Mahogany Hammock, and in Taylor Slough, all of which are areas heavily visited by people. Cranes were also reported from the southern Big Cypress Swamp near Ochopee and along the west coast, inland of the mangrove swamps north of Broad River. During the aerial censuses of 1981, 24 cranes were found within the census area (Fig. 1). The aerial censuses located cranes in each of the areas where they were expected, except near Mahogany Hammock and in Shark Valley. However, a pair was observed at Shark Valley repeatedly during the census period but was not seen from the air. Most of the cranes were in two areas, near Ochopee and north of Broad River. One pair was found east of Taylor Slough. The concentration of cranes (Fig. 1) near Ochopee appears to recur. In 1981, it occurred during very dry conditions and extensive fires, which covered much of the Big Cypress Swamp. Normally, these cranes probably occupy prairies scattered throughout the southern part of the swamp. Based on these data, 26 is my best estimate of the minimum number of resident cranes in extreme southern Florida in 1981.

All cranes found during the aerial censuses were in freshwater marshes near the interface of inland marshes and coastal mangrove swamp, apparently the primary habitat for cranes in extreme southern Florida. This conclusion is substantiated by other reported observations of cranes, 54% being in similar habitat. Cranes also occur in rocky, high-elevation Everglades habitat (23% of observations) especially near Shark Valley, in marsh habitat east of the Everglades in and near Taylor Slough (16% of observations), and in prairies in the southern Big Cypress Swamp (3% of observations).

<sup>1</sup>Editorial processing of this manuscript was handled by associate editor William B. Robertson, Jr.

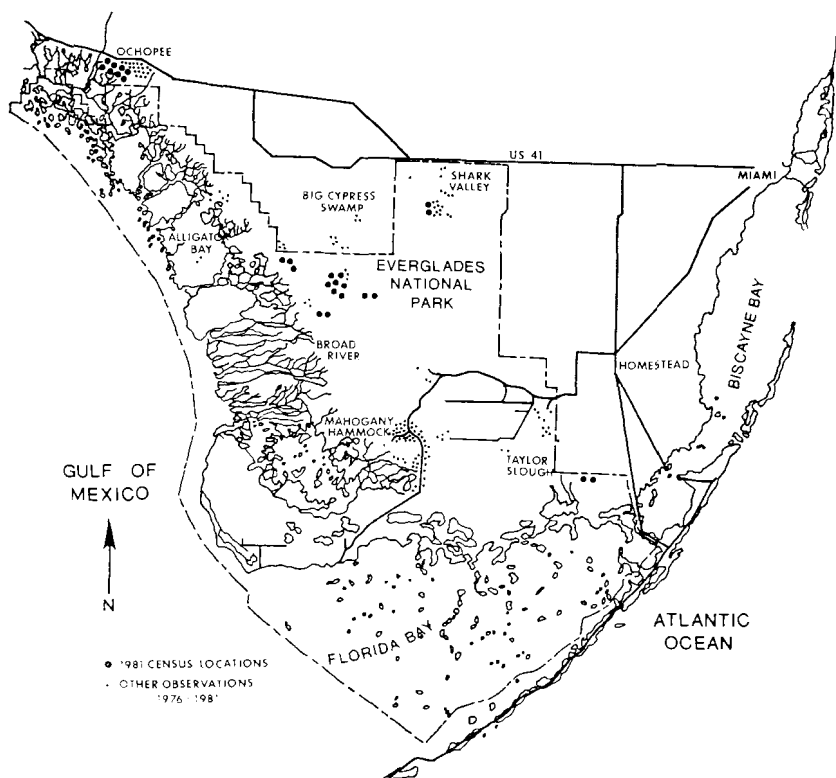


Fig. 1. Locations of Sandhill Cranes observed in the Everglades.

During the census of 1981 no young were seen. Because the spring and summer were dry, finding no young supports the observation that nesting in southern Florida is delayed when traditional territories and nesting ponds are too dry (Williams 1978). Walkinshaw (pers. comm.) has found this to be the case in central Florida. In other years nests have been seen in southern Florida in March, and obviously dependent young have been seen in April and May. Nesting in central Florida begins in January through April (Walkinshaw pers. comm.).

Cranes in southern Florida appear to use areas traditionally. Cranes have been observed over many years in the general area of Taylor Slough and near Mahogany Hammock where, in the latter case, I have examined 62 reports of birds spanning 30 years. During the census of 1981, neither of these pairs was found in its most frequently observed location. However, a pair was seen near Taylor Slough, which, along with the concentration near Ochopee, suggests that the birds move around to accommodate seasonal habitat conditions, especially changing water levels. The Mahogany Hammock pair has been seen along the roadside, primarily during the high water season (45% of the observations of cranes there were from October through December). At this time the elevated road edge probably provides the most suitable foraging area available.

If the resident crane population in Florida is about 3000 breeding birds (Williams 1978), the population in extreme southern Florida is relatively miniscule, less than 1%. Additional birds occur in southern Florida in the northern Big Cypress Swamp and northern Everglades (Thompson 1970, Auk 87: 492-502), but by far most cranes reside farther north in the state (Walkinshaw 1976, Proc. Int. Crane Workshop 1:1-18). The cranes of southern Florida may show ecological affinities to the Sandhill Cranes of Cuba and so may merit comparative study. The Sandhill Crane can be considered a rare resident of extreme southern Florida, where a minimum of about 2 dozen occur in Everglades National Park and the southern Big Cypress National Preserve, hopefully protected there by continued habitat preservation.

I thank Oron L. Bass, Jr., who flew the Cape Sable Sparrow census, and Paula C. Frohring, who participated in subsequent censuses. I appreciate the advice of Stephen A. Nesbitt, William B. Robertson, Jr. and Lawrence Walkinshaw who reviewed and commented on the manuscript. I also thank Dottie Anderson and Dee Childs for typing.—JAMES A. KUSHLAN, *National Park Service, South Florida Research Center, P.O. 279, Homestead, Florida 33030.*

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**Sandhill Cranes prey on amphiumas.**—On Sunday morning 6 December 1981, I stopped along the park drive in Myakka River State Park to obtain photographic slides of a Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) family group feeding. Two adults and a young sandhill of the previous Spring were actively foraging in a marsh.

The cranes flipped vegetation aside and rapidly probed the mud. After watching this behavior for approximately ten minutes I observed one crane catch a two-toed amphiuma (*Amphiuma means*) about 0.5 m long. It appeared to stab the amphibian with its bill several times and shook it vigorously prior to swallowing it. Intrigued, I continued to watch the cranes feed and in the next one-half hour observed them catch four more amphiumas and what appeared to be a striped crayfish snake (*Regina alleni*).

A cursory search of the literature on Sandhill Cranes did not provide descriptions of similar feeding behavior. Much smaller vertebrates, invertebrates, and plant materials are generally described as the primary fare of these birds. ROBERT L. DYE, *Division of Recreation and Parks, Department of Natural Resources, Myakka River State Park, Rt. 1, Box 72, Sarasota, Florida 33583.*

Fla. Field Nat. 10(4): 76, 1982.

**Spin walking by a Wilson's Phalarope.**—On 11 July 1981 at approximately 1000 EDT Helen and William Dowling and I were observing shorebirds at Duda Farms near Belle Glade, Palm Beach County, Florida. We were in a draining field that had no vegetation and very little water. The behavior of a Wilson's Phalarope (*Steganopus tricolor*) in winter plumage attracted our attention. For three minutes this phalarope simulated the whirling motion that phalaropes make in water during feeding, but with no water nearby. It whirled around and around in the same direction and in one spot on damp muck. Propelling itself by using its feet in a stamping motion, this spinning bird held its body well off the surface of the ground. We noticed no feeding during or after this whirling action. As no other Wilson's Phalarope was in the immediate area, this whirling bird was not interacting with another phalarope.