

## Unit 8: Crane Migration

**Nicole Arcilla:** This is, I think, without a doubt, one of the most spectacular migrations that you can witness in North America, if not the most spectacular. There's just something really uplifting and inspiring about them, and people all over the world have felt that way. They're kind of impossible to resist.

**Kirk Summers:** When the cranes arrive, it's the first sign the spring's coming. And then, soon after, the baby calves will be coming and hitting the ground, and the grass greens up. It's the start of the best time of year for me.

**Nicole Arcilla:** Cranes have been in the world for tens of millions of years, and they've been doing this migration for at least 10,000 years. From what we know, each individual crane will spend about three to four weeks here, and they're doing a behavior that's common with many other water birds called staging. They're kind of fattening up for the rest of their journey, and then they're also kind of meeting up with their friends, with their mates, with family.

**Andrew Caven:** They start doing certain social behaviors here for the first time. They get up in there. There's a gigantic lift off off the river, and it is actually deafening. So, then they go out and then go to their feeding areas in the cornfields. They're usually, they're gone before we put seed in the ground, so we really coexist pretty well.

**Nicole Arcilla:** And for the cranes, it's a breakfast buffet all day. All day all-you-can-eat buffet.

**Andrew Caven:** The cranes have adapted to where the grain is very important to their diet now. We're probably really only leaving about 250 pounds of corn that the combine isn't getting, and then the cows are cleaning up part of that, but the cranes are thriving on that little amount that we're leaving.

**Nicole Arcilla:** They are some of the world's most successful birds in terms of how long they've been around on this planet, and I think eating—they're eating corn even though it's only been around for a hundred years, which is a tiny portion of their evolution. It's another

measure of their resilience and their opportunism—they're taking advantage of a new food source.

**Andrew Caven:** Today, in the Platte River Valley, about 95 percent of their caloric intake is from corn. It provides them calories, but it does not provide them nutrients or protein and some essential minerals. They get that from these wet meadows.

**Nicole Arcilla:** So even though sandhill cranes are doing well, they, of course, face threats just like every other species. The number one threat region-wide for them is the loss of wetland habitat and loss of habitat in general.

**Andrew Caven:** We really need these meadows, and that we're to a point where we have to preserve the last few percent that remain along the Platte and elsewhere. So, we are working to restore these prairies, and also with multiple objectives in mind, to improve habitat for cranes but also these other grassland and wetland birds.

**Nicole Arcilla:** With the cranes, they can't really shift away from this river. They really need this river system. These birds are adapted to water, and they need that, and water obviously is affected by climate.

The jury is kind of out on how climate change will affect sandhills, but we know that their migration has advanced. They're arriving about 30 days earlier than they did 20 years ago. That's a very rapid shift. They can deal with all sorts of changes, but they need water, and they need wetlands at the end of the day.

**Andrew Caven:** I think they're resilient, but I think that it's not really about them. It's about this whole great plains water bird ecosystem that is on the verge of something very dangerous if we don't really put our foot down and stop it.

**Nicole Arcilla:** So just because the cranes are abundant, it doesn't mean they're not fragile. They were over-hunted, and they lost a lot of habitat going into the 1930s, and the U.S. actually legislated to protect them and other native birds. Sandhill cranes can be hunted. They, in fact, are hunted in almost all states except Nebraska where we are now, but it's always under strict conditions. So, I think the success of these birds is a combination of their own natural resilience and also the fact that humans have acted to help them, to protect them.

They're a symbol of hope because of their own success on their own terms, and they also symbolize what humans can achieve when we work together. Their success is our success.