

THE VILLAGE BIRDING LIFE

“Unexpected Winter Visitors”

by HSV Audubon

Winter weather often brings unexpected avian visitors to our area. The “rock star”, that would be “Little Rock star”, this winter was an extremely rare sighting of a Snowy Owl that was residing not too far from the Clinton airport. (The previous Arkansas Snowy sighting was in 1955.) Unfortunately the owl hasn’t been seen in weeks. However, another bird species has captured attention. Birders in search of the missing owl found a small flock of Sandhill Cranes in a nearby farm field. They aren’t the only cranes nearby as one of our Village Audubon members saw three Sandhills in a cut cornfield in the Holla Bend Wildlife Refuge near Dardanelle. While Sandhills are always rare in Arkansas, they are not expected in the winter.

In many ways, Sandhill Cranes are the 180 degree opposite of an owl. Owls are squat, secretive and silent except when calling for a mate or staking out territory. Cranes are tall, very long legged, highly social and unusually noisy. Owls are not migratory by nature but can move great distances in search of food. Sandhill Cranes, with some minor exception, spend the winter in California, New Mexico, Texas or Mexico and move to the northern tier states or well into Canada for nesting. Physically cranes are similar in appearance to the Great Blue Herons that we often see here on the Village waterways. Even though you might hear someone refer to a heron as a crane they are not related species. Cranes often spend the night in shallow ponds but typically feed on grain in large, open fields. Herons typically roost in trees and feed on fish and other aquatic wildlife.

Sandhill Cranes have a long, fascinating history. It’s possible that Sandhills may be the only current bird species that once flew among the dinosaurs. Aldo Leopold writes in his *Sandhill County Almanac*, “Our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene...he is the symbol of our untamable past...” Sandhill Cranes were revered by the native Americans and many tribes had myths that featured them. As with much other wildlife, the cranes did not fare as well with America’s European settlers. Their grain based diet did not endear them to farmers and they were hunted and shot as pests to point that fewer than a thousand survived at the end of the 1940’s. Now, with increased protection, the Sandhill population is estimated at about a half million.

Even though we have no documented observations of Sandhill cranes in the Village, it is likely that some pass over during migration periods. Some of large farm fields near the Village would make a suitable resting place. If you’ve never experienced a Sandhill’s haunting and loud trumpeting call, keep your ear attuned this Spring. You just might be in store for one of Nature’s true treats.

We encourage anyone seeing what they think is an unusual bird to take a picture (it’s amazing

how helpful even a bad picture can be) and please contact an Audubon member.

As always HSVBIRDS.ORG has a lot of information about everything you'd like to know about birds and some of Nature's other wonders. You will see on the website that HSV Audubon has available a Village birding checklist. It lists over 200 species of birds that might be seen in the Village, when they might be seen and how common they are. It's a great way to keep track of the birds at your feeder.

HSV Audubon meets the 2nd Friday of each month, except in the summer, at 10:00 at the Coronado Center. Guests are always welcome to join us in our love and pursuit of birds and all things Nature.

Photos by Vic Prislipsky