

Thousands of sandhill cranes migrate through NW Indiana each fall.



Sandhill Crane Migration

Story by Cheryl Wooten | Photos by Indiana Department of Natural Resources

Last fall, while driving through Jasper County, I had an interesting experience. Along the highway, in almost every harvested cornfield, there were thousands of big gray birds! And they were making quite a noise--a cacophony of trumpeting, rattling and croaking.

Not being an Indiana native, I had no idea what type of bird I was seeing with their long legs, heavy gray bodies, red foreheads and

long, pointed bills. Fascinated, I pulled over alongside a cornfield to listen and watch. A few locals honked at me, annoyed that I was slightly in their way and probably wondering why I was stopped. To them, there was nothing unusual going on. This field full of noisy birds was quite normal, something that happens every year and certainly not something worthy of pulling over for. But to me, this beautiful natural phenomenon was a sight to behold.



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They're very social and like to dance!



What I had experienced for the first time is the annual migration of the sandhill crane, a bird that can weigh up to 10 pounds, can have a wingspan of more than five feet and live over 35 years in the wild.

Indiana just happens to be in the center of their migration path and northwest Indiana is considered a key staging area for rest and feeding. Young cranes learn the migration route from their parents as they head south to spend the winter in Florida.

Between October and December, northwest Indiana residents have the unique opportunity to view up-close one of Indiana's greatest wildlife spectacles at the Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in Medaryville, about 45 minutes southeast of Valparaiso. Thousands of cranes, the eastern population of the greater sandhill crane, stop there to roost in the area's shallow marshes and hunt for food. Their diet consists of insects, reptiles, amphibians, nestling birds, small mammals, grains, seeds and berries.

The best time to view sandhill cranes at Jasper-Pulaski is in mid to late November where upwards of 12,000 or more cranes per day can be seen. At sunrise, the

magnificent, noisy flocks rise from their marshy roosts and fly to Goose Pasture. Viewers will be entertained by the cranes' lively interactions including much gabbing and dancing before they fly out to feed in surrounding agricultural fields. Then again at sunset, the cranes reconvene in Goose Pasture to talk and dance, then return to the marshes at dusk.

In the United States, there are very few large wetland areas still in existence which makes the Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area such a valuable location. When visiting Jasper-Pulaski, stop by the self-service check station and sign in, then head to the Goose Pasture Viewing Area which has stationary viewing scopes for those without binoculars or cameras.

And don't forget to watch for the cranes next spring when they'll come through again, croaking and trumpeting on their way back north.

Visit the Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area at 5822 Fish and Wildlife Ln, Medaryville, Indiana. For more information see www.wildlife.in.gov.

Sandhill cranes fly with their legs trailing behind.

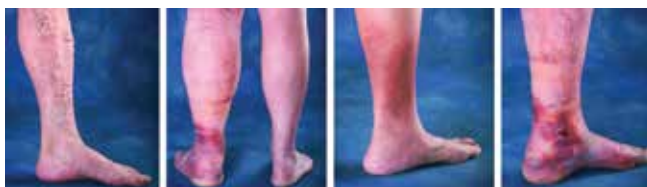


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