

Proposed Sandhill Crane Hunt in Alberta

Once again, a new hunt for Alberta's "sensitive" sandhill cranes is being proposed. A previous proposal was turned down by the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development in 2009. But renewed pressure from hunting groups has rekindled considerations to allow crane hunting, this time by the federal government.

A fairly obscure Environment Canada document, *Proposals to Amend the Canadian Migratory Birds Regulations [Including Regulation Proposals for Overabundant Species]*, proposed in December 2012 to allow a limited crane hunt in a number of southern Alberta townships. The principal justifications were increased hunting opportunities and preventing potential crop damage by sandhill cranes.

Sandhill cranes are large, formidable-looking birds which migrate to their breeding grounds in Alberta in the spring. Although their numbers are considerably higher than their threatened cousins, whooping cranes, they are still listed as "sensitive" in Alberta.

AWA has written to the federal government to oppose the hunt on a number of grounds:

- **Continuing vulnerability of sandhill crane habitat.** The Alberta government's report, *General Status of Alberta Wild Species 2010*, states that the sandhill crane is "(v)ulnerable to wetland loss" and so, if nothing is

currently being done to address this vulnerability, the precautionary principle would suggest that introducing a hunt now would be inappropriate.

- **Risk of incidental killing of endangered whooping cranes.** The Alberta government's 2001 report, *Status of the whooping crane in Alberta*, states "accidental shooting due to misidentification and poaching are still of concern." The risk of even one misidentified whooping crane being shot is quite simply too high for such a critically endangered population. It is only to be expected that accidental whooping crane deaths are likely to be under-reported. One might wonder how many of the 34 endangered whooping cranes which disappeared in the fall of 2008 during the southward migration were shot but never reported.
- **Reasonable doubt about the population status of the Mid Continent Population (MCP) of sandhill cranes.** The US Fish and Wildlife Service 2012 report, *Status and Harvest of Sandhill Cranes*, advises that the long-term (1982-2008) trends for the Mid Continent Population(MCP) indicate that harvest has been increasing at a higher rate than population growth. According to Janice Hughes, author of the 2008 book *Cranes: a Natural History of a Bird in Crisis*, "hunting can place undue stress on local populations even if the species as a whole appears plentiful."



AWA opposes calls for a new sandhill crane hunt in Alberta.

PHOTO: © C. OLSON

- **Why is a sandhill crane hunt needed?** One justification for introducing a new sandhill crane hunt is crop damage from migrating sandhill cranes. AWA is aware of just 5 reported complaints of sandhill cranes in crops over the past 10 years. All were from northern Alberta where there is no hunting season suggested. Of course if crop damage was a serious problem it could be addressed without killing members of this sensitive species.

AWA will watch closely to see how Environment Canada responds to the hunt proposal.

- Nigel Douglas