



Alberta Wilderness Association
"Defending Wild Alberta through Awareness and Action"

February 11, 2020

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**Re: Establishing a hunting season for Sandhill Cranes in Alberta
Proposed Amendments to the Canadian Migratory Birds Regulations**

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) does not support the proposed Sandhill crane hunt in Alberta. Although AWA has no objection to hunting when it is demonstrably sustainable, we believe there is reasonable doubt that this would in fact be the case with Sandhill cranes. AWA has provided feedback on a proposal to establish a Sandhill crane hunt a number of times and the same concerns and reasoning for not allowing the hunt in Alberta persist.

There is no new evidence to indicate that the hunt would be sustainable, and therefore no sound basis for bringing this proposal forward. There also has not been a demonstrable need to manage this species through a provincial hunt. AWA is concerned that the pressure of hunting could result in negative impacts for the mid-continent population, and threaten the long-term stability of this sensitive species. Ensuring the security of this species and its habitat is of vital importance in maintaining Alberta's biodiversity. AWA is also concerned about the potential risk this could have for other species of crane; the Eastern flyway is a migratory route used by both Sandhill and Whooping cranes, which could pose an increase risk to Whooping cranes through hunter misidentification.

Limited reproductive success coupled with hunting pressure could contribute to population declines

The species is known to be limited by delayed sexual maturity, and lower reproductive success. While it is estimated that the addition of a hunting season in Alberta will increase Canada's harvest by 5%, AWA believes it is still difficult to determine the full extent harvesting will have on the mid-continent population.

Sandhill cranes do not become sexually mature until ≤ 3 years of age, with pair bonds demonstrating limited nesting success until much later in life¹. It has also been documented that a fraction of

populations, approximately 25%, never succeed at reproducing², and that newly formed pair bonds, regardless of previous nesting experience, are significantly less productive than pair bonds that had nested together for ≥ 3 years³.

If Sandhill cranes cannot successfully recruit new adults to recover individuals lost from previous hunting seasons, the population will have fewer viable adults for subsequent breeding seasons and this could potentially result in a regression of population growth. AWA believes that there is not enough definitive scientific evidence provided to suggest that a hunting season for Sandhill cranes in Alberta would be a sustainable harvest, and be without long-term impacts on population dynamics.

Cumulative effects must be considered in wildlife management

Acknowledged as a sensitive species in Alberta since 2005⁴, there are intricacies within Sandhill crane populations that make them susceptible to disturbances, which add complexity to managing this species for game purposes. As a migratory species, Sandhill cranes require a multitude of wetland habitats that are contiguous across our province in order to successfully complete their annual cycle, and we know the availability and quality of these wetlands continue to decline across the province of Alberta^{5,6}.

During migration, Sandhill cranes require wetlands throughout the boreal forest and prairie pothole region of Alberta for the purpose of staging. Literature has confirmed that for migrant species with especially long trips, the quality of staging sites is of key importance in that it allows birds to store enough fat and protein to help them reach their wintering grounds⁷. Sandhill cranes subsequently return to these wetlands for staging, breeding, and nesting in spring and summer months.

AWA believes the precautionary principle must be applied. Realizing the rate of wetland habitat loss and alteration because of human activities, Sandhill cranes could become increasingly limited by the amount of habitat available. Hunting pressure could potentially increase the intensity of negative impacts already occurring on population growth. The additive pressure from hunting must be factored in conjunction with other environmental stressors under a cumulative effects approach to effectively recognize the potential impacts to Sandhill cranes.

Risk of incidental killing of endangered whooping cranes

Accidental shooting of whooping cranes due to misidentification or poaching are valid concerns for this hunting proposal. AWA believes that the risk of even one misidentified whooping crane being shot is too many.

AWA does not support the proposed Sandhill crane hunt in Alberta. There is a lack of defensible scientific data to demonstrate it would be sustainable in Alberta, and not negatively impact the province's overall biodiversity.

AWA appreciates the opportunity to provide comments for the proposed amendments to the Canadian Migratory Birds Regulations, and commends the Canadian Wildlife Service Waterfowl Committee for making this consultation process inclusive to all stakeholders. We have focused our letter on the proposed change that would allow Sandhill cranes to be hunted and feel strongly that this hunt must not be allowed.

Founded in 1965, AWA strives to help Albertans understand the intrinsic values that wildlife and wilderness provide, and encourage communities to participate in conservation initiatives that will ensure a legacy for future generations. With 7,000 members and supporters in Alberta and across Canada, AWA is dedicated to conserving Alberta's wilderness, and advocating for conservation strategies that protect our nation's biodiversity.

Sincerely,
ALBERTA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

cc'd: Director of Wildlife Management and Regulatory Affairs Division (ec.scf-oismiggi-birds-cws-miggamebirds.ec@canada.ca)

- ¹ Tacha, T.C., S. A. Nesbitt, and P. A. Vohs. 1992. Sandhill crane. A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, eds. The birds of North America. No.31. Acad. Nat. Sci., Philadelphia, Pa., and Am. Ornithol. Union, Washington, D.C. 24pp.
- ² Nesbitt, S.A. 1992. First Reproductive Success and Individual Productivity in Sandhill cranes. J. Wildl. Manage. 56:573-577.
- ³ Nesbitt, Stephen A. and Tacha, Thomas C. 1997. Monogamy and Productivity in Sandhill Cranes. North American Crane Workshop Proceedings. 228. (<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nacwgproc/228>)
- ⁴ Government of Alberta, 2017. Alberta Wild Species General Status Listing (<https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/ad0cb45c-a885-4b5e-9479-52969f220663/resource/763740c0-122e-467b-a0f5-a04724a9ecb9/download/sar-2015wildspeciesgeneralstatuslist-mar2017.pdf>)
- ⁵ Bartzen, B.A., et al. 2010. Trends in agricultural impact and recovery of wetlands in prairie Canada. Ecological Applications, 20(2): 525-538
- ⁶ Wetlands and Wetland Loss Working Group, 2016. *Wetland Loss in the Peace-Slave Watershed*. 1-31
- ⁷ Barter, M. and Minton, C. 1998. Can Pre-migratory Weight Gain Rates Be Used to Predict Departure Weights of Individual Waders from North-Western Australia? The Stilt. 32:3-59