

Kentucky Ornithological Society

c/o Scott Marsh
4401 Athens-Boonesboro Rd.
Lexington, Kentucky 40509

April 8, 2011

Commissioner Jonathan Gassett
Ky. Dept. of Fish and Wildlife Resources
#1 Sportsman's Way
Frankfort, Kentucky 40601

Dear Commissioner Gassett:

This letter is a follow up to the meeting between members of your staff and members of the board of the Ky. Ornithological Society (hereafter "KOS" or "the Society") in early February. First of all let me thank you again for taking the time to assemble members of your staff to meet with us; the Society's board greatly appreciated your efforts to allow us to discuss this complex topic with you directly.

As noted in the meeting, the Society is a non-profit organization devoted to the enjoyment, study, and conservation of the state's birdlife. KOS is composed of approximately 250 members, most of whom reside within the state. The Society maintains a cooperative and productive partnership with the Ky. Dept. of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR), through which several conservation goals of mutual concern have been pursued. Many of our members hold Kentucky hunting and fishing licenses, Wildlife Management Area user permits, and/or volunteer for various state and federal fish and wildlife survey and research projects. In recent years, a significant amount of your State and Tribal Wildlife Grant funding "match" has come from volunteer hours logged by our members.

The members of the KOS board listed as signatories at the end of this letter oppose the establishment of a Sandhill Crane hunting season, and we formally request that KDFWR withdraw its proposal. In the following narrative, we will provide some background on our perspective and reiterate the points upon which our opposition is based.

Background

We understand that one of the most important components of KDFWR's mission is to provide hunting opportunities. KDFWR traditionally has been out at the front in providing such opportunities (e.g. elk restoration), and we recognize your interest in continuing that. We totally respect KDFWR's emphasis on creating and maintaining hunting opportunities, and we recognize the right of anyone to hunt game species under prevailing state and federal regulations. We also understand the need for hunting seasons to control some species, e.g. White-tailed Deer. It is also important to recognize that because KDFWR operates under the framework of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, the wildlife of the Commonwealth belongs to all of its citizens, not just those who take advantage of the opportunity to harvest it (i.e., your "customers" as you put it).

Although the Sandhill Crane is considered a game species, we oppose the establishment of a hunting season on individuals of the "eastern" population. In addition to having some reservations about the "science" upon which the flyway-wide quotas were based (generally being in agreement with the points outlined by the International Crane Foundation, a well respected, internationally known conservation partner), our opposition to the hunting season proposal is rooted in the role that we believe this species can play in broadening constituency for wildlife conservation in Kentucky if it remains unhunted.

The non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts' perspective and role in decision-making

In regards to those expressing opposition to the crane hunting season, we recognize that for many people the issue boils down to a philosophical one. And while in a philosophical debate there is really no right or wrong, there are perspectives on both sides of this issue that need to be respected. We also acknowledge that there are hypocrisies on both sides that must be put aside. We all draw the lines at arbitrary points along the spectrum from consumptive to non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts, and we believe that perspectives should be considered relevant whether someone eats meat or not, whether someone cares to kill for sport or not, etc. We recognize and respect that everyone makes individual choices about these things.

We are disheartened that the non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts do not have more relevance and that they are regarded as outsiders/non-constituents, or as you put it, not your "customers." The North American Wildlife Conservation Model suggests that the voices of those who have an interest in *not* hunting Sandhill Cranes should be afforded as much consideration as those who have an interest in doing so. To brand the non-consumptive enthusiasts as non-supportive is simply unfair. An example of the voluntary contributions made by non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts is the approximately 65,000 Nature License Plates that are sold each year in Kentucky. The vast majority of people who purchase these plates are probably not sportsmen (there are three plates more likely chosen by sportsmen — Ducks Unlimited; Kentucky League of Sportsmen; and Quail Unlimited). At \$10 per plate, that's \$65K (1/10th of total receipts) that likely goes to KDFWR each year from non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts.

We are aware that some KDFWR staff do not believe that non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts have a track record of providing support to KDFWR and other wildlife management entities. We believe that this is clearly a misconception, especially in light of the fact that many of us have provided support for nongame wildlife funding initiatives such as the Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA) that would have given us that seat at the table. Let us be clear; members of our group are *not* the individuals who failed to support CARA and similar efforts. CARA was defeated largely by the lobby of the manufacturers whose products would have been assessed a fee to support nongame wildlife conservation; there were dozens of wildlife groups (including birding groups) on record in support of the Act.

We strongly believe we deserve a place at the table of "customers" in deciding the future of Sandhill Cranes in Kentucky. We should not be blamed for not having a "dedicated" funding mechanism for nongame wildlife like the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson Acts (that support hunting and fishing, respectively). P-R and D-J funding was passed in a very different fiscal era. It is very unlikely that P-R or D-J would be able to pass in today's political climate (e.g., see what happened to CARA). The non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts are caught in a place where we are destined to remain as long as the fiscal environment remains so contentious.

As unfortunate a reality as it is, we wonder how many sportsmen would voluntarily pay for their annual licenses and voluntarily pay the excise taxes on hunting and fishing gear. An inspection of human nature would yield an answer that says "very few." We believe that voluntary payments for wildlife conservation are as great among non-consumptive enthusiasts as consumptive users, but because we are not required to pay fees like consumptive users, we have no manner in which we can be viewed as your "customers."

Finally, we also ask you to consider how often we as a specific group (i.e., birders) have come to you with a complaint or opposition to any of your proposals. As noted at

our February meeting, we have never before collectively taken issue with the manner in which KDFWR conducts wildlife conservation in our state, but this single issue has awakened a groundswell of like-minded voices to come forward. Their reasoning may differ from person to person, but the message is unified. This is the *first* time in memory that members of our organization are calling and writing to you in large numbers about an issue. We are not on your doorstep at every turn, providing opposition to every action your agency takes. KDFWR oversees hunting seasons on *every one* of several dozen species that current regulations allow; we are asking you to leave just *one* unique species out.

KDFWR's dilemma as we see it

It was interesting to listen to the opening presentation at last winter's town hall meetings. Not one mention was made of watching wildlife or KDFWR's nongame program. These omissions speak to a weakness in the agency's long term planning. Even if only a few non-consumptive constituents were expected among the attendees, it would seem appropriate to touch on everything of importance to KDFWR in that summary presentation. There was a significant amount of time devoted to explaining efforts to involve and increase the base of KDFWR's constituency, especially children; however, statistics show that a flat line in constituency continues. Efforts to engage the future generation begin with the current one. We believe that we will eventually come to find out that it is the *current* generation that is flat lining, not the generation that has a cell phone, iPod, or wii in each hand. It is likely that the trends in all types of outdoor activities will look much worse when that generation really comes onboard.

Conventional attempts to engage a larger base are going stale. The statistics provided in the town hall meeting presentation could have been given 10 or 15 years ago. We believe the trends in hunting are flat lining at least in part because of the perpetuation of a traditional perspective that has led to decisions like this one to propose hunting cranes. The handwriting is on the wall that KDFWR is going to have a very difficult time increasing the current base; instead we firmly believe the base is going to have to be broadened.

To date KDFWR's primary emphasis continues to be increasing opportunities for hunting. For example, within just a couple of years of large numbers of Sandhill Cranes being censused in our region, the Mississippi Flyway Council followed the same traditional path they have taken with every other game species. The "*Management Plan for the Eastern Population of Sandhill Crane*" fell right in line with a culture that immediately prioritized an "objective" to hunt them, and KDFWR has followed in step by quickly proposing a hunting season.

We do not advocate a KDFWR that does not promote and involve the general public in hunting and fishing. It is a significant manner in which many folks remain engaged in their environment and "care" about it; it will remain a very powerful tool for keeping many people involved in the out of doors for many, many years to come. However, we believe it is time to think unconventionally. Over the past two decades KDFWR's role in nongame wildlife conservation in the state has evolved into one that is nowadays quite critical. Back in the 1970s, the agency was focused more narrowly on fish and game management, but with the infusion of federal resources for nongame wildlife and the evolution of a staff and mindset that are geared more toward all wildlife, KDFWR's role is now absolutely essential.

The KDFWR is at a crossroads. The Sandhill Crane is a species that *perhaps* can be both hunted *and* utilized for broadening the constituency base. However, the decision to move forward with a hunting season has obviously alienated a large portion of the

constituency you should be trying harder to cultivate. We submit that there is nothing that *requires* KDFWR to propose a season. We ask “why is it irresponsible on your part *not* to propose a season?” That is, what is the down side to not hunting cranes? And where is the “real” pressure to establish a hunting season? We do not perceive it to be immense. We believe we can all agree that this will likely never be a significant hunting opportunity in the eastern United States. The question is ... is it worth the loss in support from the substantial number of non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts? We sense that there is a real possibility of that happening at a time when they are becoming much more important.

Our recommendation

With this in mind, we ask you to withdraw the proposed hunting season on Sandhill Cranes. We see a withdrawal of the season as a minor diminishment in hunting opportunity that will likely remain minimal. Productivity of nesting cranes in Wisconsin, for example, has peaked and is now on the decline, possibly as birds expand into less suitable habitats. The overall number of birds in the population may soon max out. Withdrawing the season sends a clear message to the largely untapped and currently “isolated” base of non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts. Members of this group are a critical component of wildlife supporters who need to be included. Great Blue Herons, Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, and a number of other species are all similar conservation success stories, but there is no impetus to “hunt” them because they are not defined as game species. You have to understand that in the eyes of many individuals, Sandhill Cranes are an equivalent. We believe that there could be lots of motivation to assist with a variety of non-consumptive wildlife issues, but images of hunting don’t motivate much of the non-consumptive public; rather they turn them off.

KDFWR can certainly choose to follow the traditional path of serving up a new opportunity to the established base, but we do not see that the traditional path has altered the stagnation of the past couple of decades. We believe wildlife conservation will be better served by invigorating a broadened base. Why couldn’t you tell your customers “we would like to do it for obvious reasons, and we believe it could be done without impacting the population, but we are in the early stages of attempting to cultivate a broader base and would like to emphasize Watchable Wildlife opportunities and to do this we do not want to create negative images.” This would seem to be a responsible and inclusive decision.

Furthermore, we take this opportunity to recommend that with assistance from a variety of entities, that KDFWR develop the as yet largely untapped Watchable Wildlife opportunities in Kentucky starting with this species. The Sandhill Crane is a perfect species to place special emphasis on; it *is* huntable, but it is also *extremely* valuable as a tool to broaden the wildlife conservation base. We realize that a lot of thought, time, and resources are needed to get 4000 folks at a crane festival like at Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge in southeast Tennessee or to develop a location where 30,000 visitors come each year to view cranes like at the Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in northwest Indiana. This would obviously take substantial commitment from a variety of entities to achieve.

Finally, we recognize this as an opportunity for *us*, the non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts, to get ourselves more motivated, too. Over the long term we would like to assist in securing better funding for nongame wildlife (particularly birds). We would expect to contribute in developing Watchable Wildlife opportunities that would hopefully result in greater support for wildlife conservation in our state. These are certainly trying times for wildlife, and we all need to take the time to assist one another in common goals.

We recognize that the rhetoric coming from some on the non-consumptive side may not display a respect for the hunting side of this debate; like you, we wish that such discussions could remain respectful, and we hope you will objectively consider our recommendations. We stand ready to support wildlife conservation in Kentucky. In order to reach a constructive resolution on such a contentious issue, one side or the other has to be the first to make a step towards the other. We believe that KDFWR has the opportunity here to allow everyone to rise above the divisive rhetoric. Withdrawing the hunting proposal in order to pursue a different path would be a monumental step in the process. Thank you for your consideration of our perspectives and ideas. We remain available for discussion on the topic.

Cordially,

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Carol Besse, Vice-President
Lee McNeely, Treasurer
Brainard Palmer-Ball, Jr., Corresponding-Secretary
Win Ahrens, Immediate Past President
Ben Yandell, Secretary, Ky. Bird Records Committee
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