

FACT SHEET

KY SANDHILL CRANE HUNTING PROPOSAL

Here's the background:

Prior to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, sandhill cranes were harvested in an unregulated fashion, and at the beginning of the 20th Century the North American population had plummeted to an extraordinary low. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (MBTA) established protection for birds from uncontrolled hunting activities, and as a direct result, the crane population began to rebound.

Sandhill Cranes are one of the slowest reproducing birds in North America. This slow rate of what biologists call "recruitment" resulted in a very slow recovery from overhunting.

The Sandhill Cranes that migrate through Kentucky each spring and fall are part of the "Eastern Population" (EP), nesting primarily in southern Ontario, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and formerly wintering primarily in central Florida. In recent years, increasing numbers have not migrated all the way south, but instead have stopped to winter at places like Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge near Chattanooga, Tennessee, and at Barren River Lake in south-central Kentucky.

What's being proposed:

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) has already submitted a draft hunt plan under a federal approval process, though the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Resources Commission has not yet approved any hunt. Under the MBTA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will have to approve any proposed hunt plan for Sandhill Cranes. The KDFWR proposes to allow up to 400 Sandhill Cranes to be shot (harvested) per year, and is based on the "Management Plan For The Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes" prepared for the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyway Councils; a plan whose science has been questioned by the International Crane Federation (which neither endorses nor opposes hunting). A full copy of the ICF critique of the proposed Kentucky Plan and the management plan on which it is based, can be found at <http://kyc4sandhillcranes.wordpress.com/kyfws-and-usfws-documents/>

Among the ICF criticisms of the regional plan are the lack of population modeling for the EP Sandhill Cranes, which could result in an overharvest of the breeding crane population in the upper Midwest, and reliance on the untested assumption that population dynamics for the eastern population of sandhill cranes are comparable to the much larger and less concentrated Midcontinent crane population. Of the Kentucky plan, the ICF additionally expressed concern over the lack of data on the origin of the migrating birds, possibly resulting in disproportional harvest of birds from specific breeding areas, and the lack of details about how public participation would be sought on the decision regarding if and how to hunt cranes. The regional plan contemplated the individual states would involve the public in the decision, yet to date KDFWR has not done so. What feedback was received during general "Town Hall" meetings did not reflect strong demand or support for such a hunt.

Presently, there are no other eastern states proposing a season on the eastern population of Sandhill Cranes. Tennessee's proposal has been put on hold for two years for additional study, and the state of Ohio considers the Sandhill Crane to be Endangered as a breeding species and has not publicly expressed any movement towards a season. In addition, the Indiana Dept. of Natural Resources' Non-game Bird Technical Advisory Committee came to consensus that it was not in favor of supporting establishment of a Sandhill Crane hunting season there.

Why The Rush To Hunt Sandhill Cranes?

The proposal to hunt sandhill cranes is not one that has been advanced due to significant public demand. While opponents of this hunt have been miscast as "anti-hunting" in a campaign by an organization close to the KDFWR to stir up support for the hunt, in truth many opponents of this hunt are hunters themselves, as well as wildlife enthusiasts who believe that the hunt could negatively affect viewing this majestic species, and who question the rush to judgment in light of the lack of population data and modeling.

At a time when state employees are furloughed and the state faces a significant financial crisis, a proposed hunt that will add costs to the agency, will raise no new revenue, and will require significant staff oversight, is imprudent. Additionally, moving forward on this controversial proposal will alienate many potential partners in conservation who are ready and willing to work to develop a "watchable wildlife" program similar to that in other states using this population of migrating cranes as a keystone species, which could broaden public support for KDFWR's mission, and engage an increasingly urban population in outdoor wildlife conservation.

How Can I Provide My Opinion?

The Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Resources Commission voted unanimously on June 3 to approve a 2011-2012 Sandhill Crane hunt plan. The regulation has now been filed with the Legislative Research Commission. **We ask that you please write all members of the Administrative Regulation & Review Subcommittee and ask them to oppose approving this season.** For contact information go to <http://kyc4sandhillcranes.wordpress.com/call-to-action/>

* For more information, visit the website of the Kentucky Coalition for Sandhill Cranes at <http://kyc4sandhillcranes.wordpress.com/>

This fact sheet was developed collaboratively by the KC4SC and Kentucky Ornithological Society with assistance from the Kentucky Resources Council, Inc.