

27 November 2024

Dear Commissioners:

As someone who has studied the Sandhill Cranes in Tennessee for many years and was a contributor on the final management plan for the cranes, I feel it is my responsibility to express my thoughts regarding the proposed hunting season on Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin. I want to make it clear that I am not opposed to hunting, however I do have a concerns about the Wisconsin plan that I would like to express.

A frequent justification given for hunting Sandhill Cranes is that the population needs to be regulated. While it is true that the Eastern population (EP) of Sandhill Cranes has increased in recent decades, there is either no or insufficient evidence that they are overpopulated. With regard to the population estimates of the cranes, I feel there are insufficient data to determine one way or the other whether the EP should be hunted. This is a point I, as well as the International Crane Foundation, raised during the development of the management plan. The target population size of 60,000 seems arbitrary. In addition, the survey methods from which the plan is based vary widely, ranging from dedicated crane counts (breeding, migrating, and midwinter seasons) to Christmas Bird Counts and Breeding Bird Surveys. Since each method has its own advantages and drawbacks, the results cannot be accurately compared. The effort of the various surveys also varies from region to region, adding another confounding variable. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has consistently stated that there is the need for standardized and adequate monitoring of the EP. Without an adequate monitoring system for the EP Sandhill Crane population, it is premature to suggest a hunting season for this population.

One of the major justifications for having a hunt in Tennessee was to reduce crop damage. While Wisconsin may have more of a problem with crop depredation than Tennessee, there is still a question of whether enough cranes can be hunted to reduce the problem. In addition, if people hunt cranes in one area, the cranes will move to another location. Thus, depredation will simply be shifted around rather than alleviated. If crop depredation is truly a concern, then there are non-lethal methods for dealing with the problem, most notably the use of anthroquinone. This taste deterrent has been shown to be an effective and economical way of reducing crop damage by Sandhill Cranes.

Finally, I have concerns about the impact of Sandhill Crane hunting on the recovery of the Eastern population of Whooping Cranes. While I am sure, like Tennessee hunters, Wisconsin hunters will have to pass an identification test before being issued a crane permit, given that Wisconsin is the center of the breeding population, the possibility of a Whooping Crane being shot is likely greater than other places along the migration route. The loss of even a single Whooping Crane represents a significant reduction in the Eastern population, not to mention the money, time, and effort that would have been squandered.

Given the number of unanswered questions regarding Sandhill Crane populations and crane hunting, I respectfully request that the Commission to either vote "no" on approving the hunt, or at least delay the vote until more information to be gathered. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "David A. Aborn". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

David A. Aborn, Ph.D
Professor