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San Luis Valley Sandhill Cranes



DAVE GIBSON



Amazing sights near Monte Vista, CO

by Dave Gibson

For some, the first robin or the emergence of a pasque flower might be looked upon as a harbinger of a new beginning. I usually consider the appearance of the initial broad-tailed hummingbird on May 1st the start of a very short spring, quickly followed by summer. But in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, the season more closely coincides with the calendar as up to thirty thousand sandhill cranes converge from mid-February through mid-April.

Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge, south of Monte Vista on Highway 15, harvests grain fields at this time of year to provide forage for the migrating greater, lesser, and Canadian sandhill cranes. The greater cranes are larger and lighter in color than the others and constitute eighty percent of the cranes you will see. Most of these breed in the greater Yellowstone area and winter in the Rio

Grande Valley, namely Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico, the lesser cranes summer in the Arctic, and the Canadian cranes in Canada. Cranes live to be twenty to thirty years old and mate for life. Both sexes tend to the two eggs, of which only one usually fledges. During spring migration, with a sense of urgency about them, pair bonds are established. Courtship dances ensue, characterized by a wild hopping motion and flapping of wings.

From sunrise until mid-morning, and again from mid-afternoon until sunset, the skies are filled with cacophonous flocks of sandhills commuting to and from the surrounding agricultural feeding grounds. In between, they may frequent wetlands to supplement their diet with roots, tubers, or invertebrates. They sometimes go nowhere at all, preferring the sanctity and plenty the fields supply.

Monte Vista hosts the twenty-third annual Monte Vista Crane Festival from March 10th through March 12th and offers a variety of programs throughout those days. Sunrise, sunset and raptor tours,

along with a Birder's Breakfast and a showing of the movie "March of the Penguins" are among the offerings. For information and reservations call (719) 852-2731 or the Chamber of Commerce at (719) 852-2731.

If you have time during the week, you might want to plan your visit before or after the festival for a more intimate wildlife experience. Other bird species occurring at the refuge include: great horned owl, northern harrier, pie-billed grebe, common snipe, American coot, horned lark, snowy egret, common merganser, red-tailed hawk, red-winged blackbird, black-crowned night heron, cinnamon teal, northern shoveler, ring-necked pheasant, and if you are extremely fortunate, whooping crane.

The sight and sounds of vast, never-ending waves of presaging sandhill cranes returning to roost at sunset is unforgettable. While winter may not be prepared to relinquish its icy grip just yet, it is almost spring at a place near here.

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