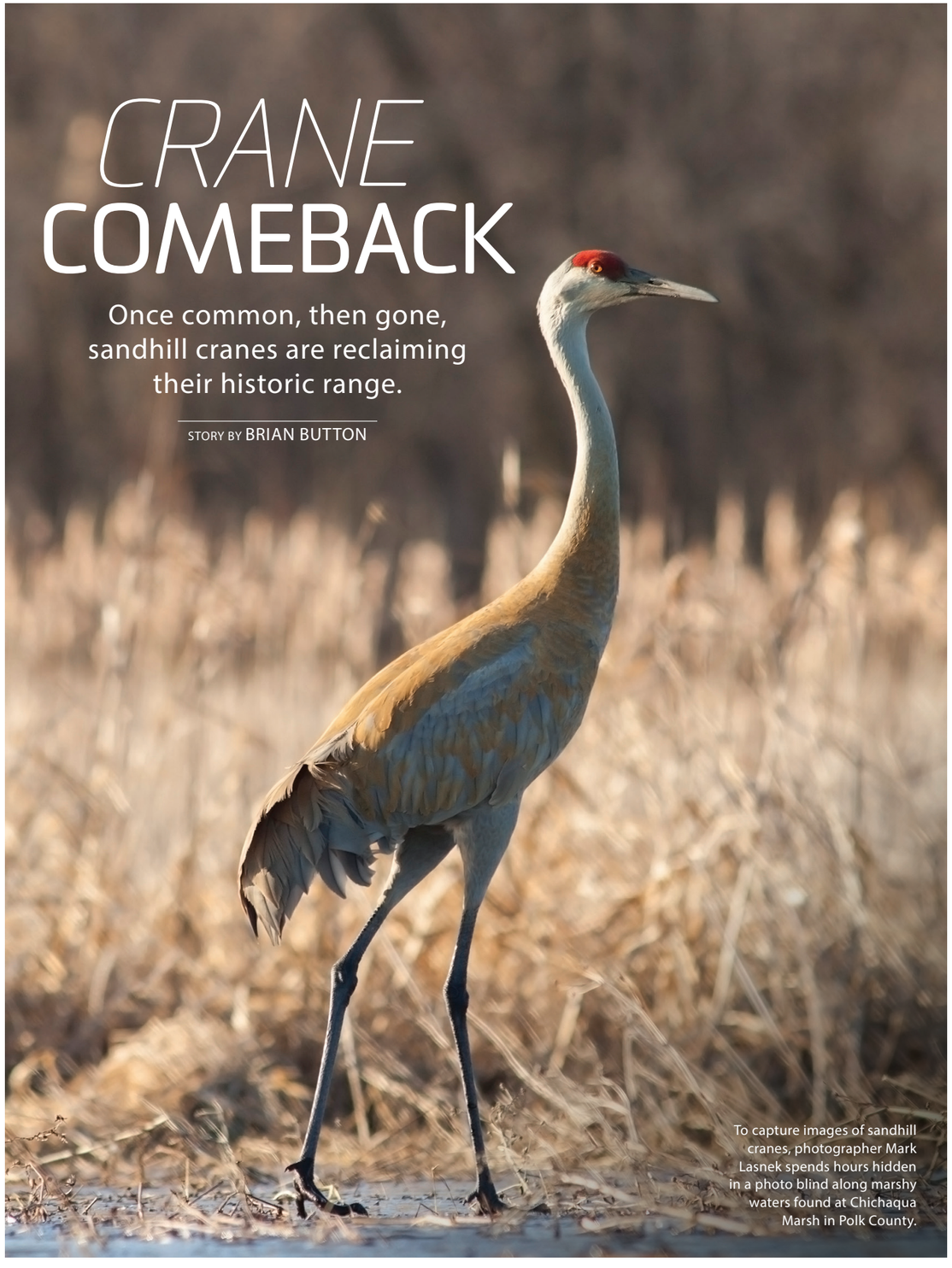
CRANE COMEBACK

Once common, then gone, sandhill cranes are reclaiming their historic range.

STORY BY BRIAN BUTTON



To capture images of sandhill cranes, photographer Mark Lasnek spends hours hidden in a photo blind along marshy waters found at Chichaqua Marsh in Polk County.

PHOTOS LEFT AND RIGHT BY MARK LASNEK

Before first light, photographer Mark Lasnek is often already laying on his stomach in a marsh. There, he quietly bides his time. "Be patient and wait for the birds to come in," he says.

On this early spring morning, temps were in the upper 20s. Moments earlier, Lasnek broke holes in the transparent ice sheen that formed overnight to put out duck decoys in hopes of photographing waterfowl.

Then he snuggles head first into his photo blind, covered up with grasses. Lasnek is hiding out in an old layout blind used for goose hunts. But instead of laying on his back for hunting, he is on his stomach, at water's edge to photograph ducks at eye level. "I have a hole cut at the bottom just big enough to get my camera lens through," he says. He will often stay there, concealed, until about 10:30 a.m.

Not having super expensive camera lenses, "I need to be as close as possible," he says.

He will photograph ducks like he does daily for weeks on end. But he will also capture images of another marsh visitor—sandhill cranes.

"I don't get to photograph cranes very often. I was pretty glad to see them. Around here it's not something you see very often." Aiming the lens from water level through that small opening gets him great images, but when they take flight, the awkward angles from laying prone make it "kind of hard to photograph flying sandhills," he says.

Here at sprawling Chichauqua Marsh in northeast Polk County, sandhill cranes hang around him for 30 minutes, sometimes just 15 yards away—too close to shoot with his fixed focal point 300 mm lens.

"Usually sandhills stay out there all summer," he says. "A nesting pair. Sometimes there are four or five out there, it just depends."

Despite recent population comebacks—nesting in about 40 counties and sightings in another 49 counties, for most Iowans, sandhill cranes are still a rare oddity to see.

It wasn't always so. Thousands were seen in Hancock County along the Iowa River in 1871, and Dallas County in the 1860s and Latimer in Franklin County in 1884. Such sightings were reported for numerous counties with smaller groupings across much of the state. But by 1900, overhunted and with eggs prized by collectors, the species stopped nesting in Iowa.

A freshly hatched sandhill crane can stand and walk within hours. Another egg shown here will soon hatch, too. Sweet Marsh in Bremer County attracts photographer Karl Fliris of New Hampton and others, including past contributing Iowa Outdoors writer and photographer Kip Ladage.

PHOTO AT LEFT BY KARL FLIRIS

THE RETURN OF NESTING

"There was a long gap until 1992," when finally Iowa nesting was documented again at Otter Creek Marsh in Tama County, says Doug Sheeley, a natural resources manager with Polk County Conservation.

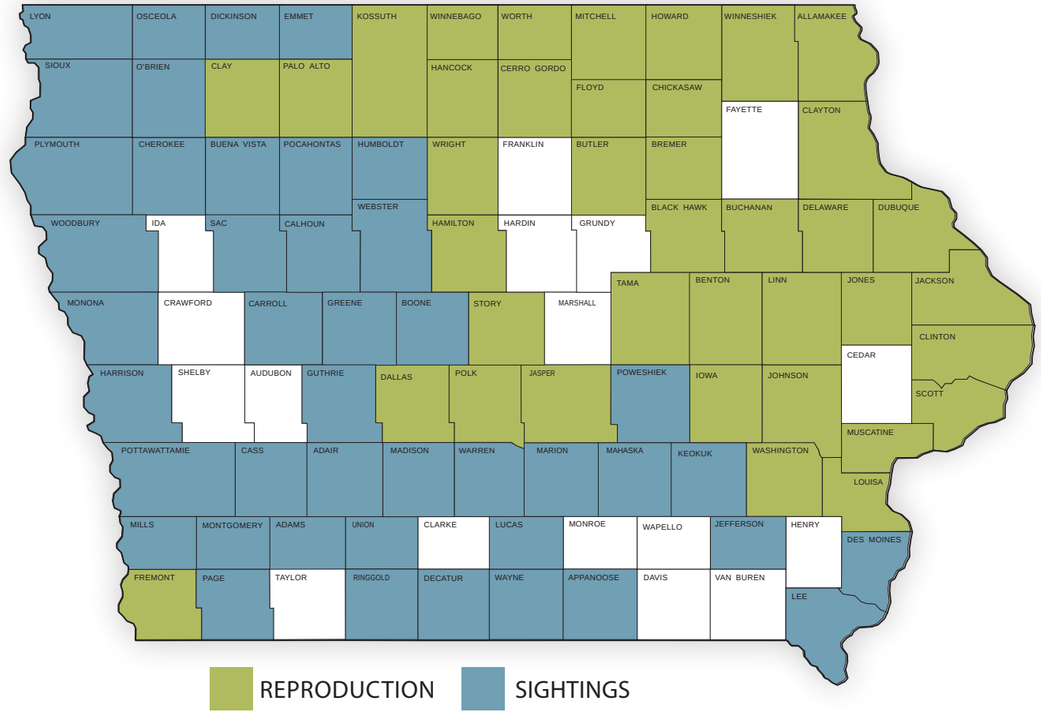
He says up to six nesting pairs breed at Chichaqua, where Polk County staff and volunteers do a crane count every April in collaboration with the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisc. (To help volunteer, contact the PCCB at 515-323-5395.) A number of counties participate—check with your local conservation board.

"People are extremely excited to see cranes. In fact, we get people out here just to see cranes. I don't know, there is something about sandhill cranes. It gets me excited, too. They have a unique, primitive call. A harbinger of spring. They are a fun reminder that spring is coming. It just strikes something in you," he says.

For these natural acres in Polk County, the first immature crane was spotted in 2007, "so they've been nesting out here for some time." He says studies at Drake University show this marsh could support up to 24 nesting pairs. "It speaks to the importance of large-scale landscape level restoration for species like sandhill cranes that need large areas like this to successfully breed and reproduce."

For the DNR's avian biologist Anna Buckardt Thomas, "Sandhill cranes are just a really cool bird. They make fun noises, have courtship displays and have really strong pair bonding. They are also the tallest bird in Iowa." In general, their population declined largely due to overhunting and habitat loss. But as our nation's hunting laws changed, the species rebounded. And protecting and restoring Iowa

SANDHILL CRANES IN IOWA 2021



wetlands and grasslands has again provided breeding areas.

Marshes and wetlands are vital to nesting sandhill cranes. Cranes not only nest there, but roost in water overnight to avoid land predators. Cranes need adjacent prairie to feed on seeds, vegetation and grains. Chichaqua holds old Skunk River oxbow channels, backwaters, marshes and wetlands, plus sandy upland hills with reconstructed prairies and native prairie remnants that provide the habitat variety cranes require. Nestled in the northeast corner of Polk County, this magnificent wildlife area provides more than 8,388 acres.

For photographer Lasnek, "The cranes make a prehistoric type sound. It's hard to describe. It's neat when you don't get to hear it often. They are so different sounding. I can imagine if you lived where thousands of them lived, they'd drive you nuts," he jokes.

Other areas also have nesting sandhills. Sweet Marsh in Bremer County attracts photographer Karl Fliris of New Hampton and others, including past contributing Iowa Outdoors writer Kip Ladage. Fliris also finds cranes in Chickasaw County, too.

Fliris captured an image of a young sandhill crane, called a colt, on the back of a parent. "I had never seen one that tiny before so it was pretty amazing. I just was so surprised to actually see one that little. It was one of those wonderful nature moments where you go out hoping to see something, probably in reality expecting not to see much, and then you end up seeing something neat."

Cranes mate for life—which can mean two decades or more—and stay with mates year-round. They choose partners based on dancing displays—outstretched wings, bobbing of heads, bowing and leaps into the air. The oldest sandhill crane on record was at least 36 years, 7 months old. Originally banded in Wyoming in 1973, it was found in New Mexico in 2010.

Young sandhill cranes have advantages right out of the egg. Young hatch with feathers, open eyes and the ability to walk within hours. Many ground-nesting birds are this way, versus songbirds that nest in trees and have young without feathers or open eyes. Ground nesters face more predators, so being mobile soon is an important adaptation. It is vital for cranes, as usually only two eggs are laid and often only one chick survives.

PHOTO AT LEFT ISTOCK.COM; COLT: DNR FILE PHOTO

SECRETS OF SANDHILL CRANES

Young sandhill cranes have advantages right out of the egg. "Their young are precocial," says Buckardt Thomas, who explains that means young hatch with feathers, open eyes and the ability to walk within hours. "They are pretty much ready to go and can leave the nest within a few hours of hatching, but they stay with parents quite a while," she says. Many ground-nesting birds are this way, versus songbirds that nest in trees and have young without feathers or open eyes. Ground-nesting birds face more predators, so being mobile after hatching is an important adaptation. It is vital for cranes, since usually only two eggs are laid and often only one chick survives.

Soon after hatch, they can climb on the back of a parent to rest. The parents guard the chick, having them on their wings. That colt the photographer viewed may have just "popped up on the parent's back and it's just hanging out there," says Buckardt Thomas.

And those prehistoric, distinct calls adults make? That long neck helps resonate sound. "It is definitely part of their ability to make the distinct sound, called bugling. They have these sounds that kind of work off of each other and harmonize together in a really beautiful sound," she says.

All having long legs and long bills, cranes differ from herons and egrets in their diet. "Sandhill cranes are omnivores, so they'll eat lots of plant materials, waste grain, seeds and wetland plants. They'll also eat invertebrates and small vertebrates, so they have a more varied diet and aren't necessarily restricted to eating other animals and fish the way herons and egrets are," she says. "I've seen sandhill cranes even eat acorns."

The long legs of a crane help it roost overnight in water—a river, marsh or wetland—to avoid predators.

Cranes preen and cover their feathers with soil and take on the natural hue of the area. Generally grey in color, they often have brownish tinges on their feathers picked up from surrounding soils. When they molt, gray plumages return until that rusty, soil color rebuilds throughout the year as they recoat with soils. It may aid as camouflage or perhaps it's akin to a dust bath. "There are a few theories on what is going on with that," says Buckardt Thomas.

Cranes evidently still have some secrets, but where Iowa birds migrate and seek habitat will become better known. The DNR and Iowa State University have begun to put GPS units on cranes to track movement.

"It's a small-scale pilot study that began in 2020," says Orrin Jones, DNR waterfowl biologist. "It will help answer some very basic questions about cranes that nest in Iowa," he says.

Four cranes currently carry GPS units. A fifth crane outfitted with a GPS is no longer is alive. So far, data shows after leaving Iowa, cranes migrate to Wisconsin, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Indiana and Florida.

DNR wildlife staff prepare to capture a young sandhill to affix a tracking device to monitor movement.

To help collect more data, DNR scientists are honing crane-capturing skills, the first step in attaching a GPS unit on the upper portion of their legs. "They are very wary and difficult to catch. And they are a handful when caught," says Jones. "We are really just learning how to capture cranes. We are lucky to get one bird at a time. It is pretty challenging. Long hours and a lot of labor," he says. In summer, DNR crews use lights at night in wetlands to hand-capture birds with nets. A second strategy catches colts before they are able to fly.

Matt Garrick, research specialist from the DNR's Clear Lake office, says it's the first time the DNR has placed tracking devices on sandhill cranes and hopes the study will

help shed some light on the behavior patterns of these birds.

"We're trying to learn more about Iowa cranes, the habitat they use here, where they nest and their migration habits," Garrick says.

For Jones, cranes are "very interesting, charismatic birds and we're just beginning to understand what we can learn from this project and the future questions we might answer. The study is all very preliminary. We have some very basic questions that we don't have a clear understanding of," he says.

Data shows two cranes left Iowa for Wisconsin, where they "probably met larger flocks to learn migration routes," says Jones. They then made a direct flight, flying just west of downtown Chicago, funneling past the lower end of Lake Michigan to a large natural area in Indiana. "I was a little surprised for them to make such a concerted effort to get there," says Jones.

In Iowa, cranes have an interesting story. "I suspect there are probably more cranes here than we estimate. We don't have robust information yet. I wouldn't be surprised that their distribution is wider than we thought, too. It's a unique success story," he says. Unlike many species once found in Iowa, cranes are recolonizing their historic Iowa range without re-release. They are moving back on their own accord. And Jones hopes to see the trend continue as he and other DNR staff continue to learn more about the habits of cranes in Iowa and their migrations.

GET INVOLVED

Support cranes and other wildlife species, research, habitat and more by donating online to the Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund at https://programs.iowadnr.gov/donations. To mail a donation, please send checks to: Iowa DNR, Attn: Kim Rasler, 502 E 9th Street – 4th Floor, Des Moines, IA 50319. Checks should be made out to "Iowa DNR." In the memo line specify "FWTF Wildlife Diversity."

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