

#10 Julie Baker 10/4/2017

The Michigan Songbird Protection Coalition is an all-grassroots coalition of concerned citizens who have come together to help protect traditional non-game birds in Michigan.

In November 2006, after our elected officials and politically appointed members of the Natural Resource Commission ignored the will of the people, more than 1000 organizations and businesses worked together throughout the state and confirmed your constituent's wishes on the ballot. 69 percent of registered Michigan voters agreed, and all 83 counties voted to protect a non-game bird as a traditional non-game protected bird - as it had been for over 100 years in Michigan.

The Sandhill crane has also been a protected non-game bird in Michigan for 100 years and once again, voters, organizations, and businesses are coming together to keep Sandhill cranes protected as a traditional non-game species.

Due to human hunting pressure and agricultural conversion of wetland habitats, by the 1930s, Sandhill crane numbers were reduced to about 50 breeding pairs in small, isolated fragments within Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (Henika 1936, Walkinshaw 1949).

Since then, the Sandhill crane has been protected by sound scientific non-game management policy and has received private citizen funds donated through Michigan's Non-Game Fund - and beyond - to help recover the species to current wildlife-watching levels.

Michigan is at the northern most breeding range of the Eastern Population and because Sandhill cranes are slow to reproduce and successfully recruit young into the population, it took decades and decades to finally see Michigan's population level out at a more stable and natural carrying capacity - a level suited for wetland breeding habitats that remain in Michigan.

Biologists note, that even beyond the lack of research and the inconsistencies of reliable long-term population studies within our flyway and Michigan, an annual recruitment rate of between 5 and 10 percent is required to maintain the current population level.

The Sandhill crane is a genetically vulnerable species due to the population bottleneck it was forced through by severe fragmentation and massive genetic loss. Recent genetic research confirms that even cranes within 60 miles of each other can be genetically unique from each other, creating geographically stratified breeding areas that are genetically important (U of WI).

Because of this, researchers warn that a recreational hunting season in the northern breeding states, such as Michigan, could easily wipe out these unique breeding populations and eliminate the surviving genetic variation through yet another bottleneck crisis (Source: University of Wisconsin, US Fish and Wildlife Service, et al.). This matters because the more genetic diversity, the more adaptable to change and the survival of a species to overcome deadly diseases and environmental changes and threats.

Researchers also warn that numbers alone cannot predict a population's biological stability - especially when a susceptible population has passed through a bottleneck that has likely affected the fitness of their genetic structure.

While complaints about crop conflicts are sometimes cited as justification for opening a sport hunting season on cranes, it is widely understood by wildlife biologists and agencies that a hunting season would not provide direct assistance to areas temporarily impacted by spring crop issues (Ad Hoc Eastern Population Sandhill Crane Committee, 2010; et al.).

2.4 million acres are planted with corn in Michigan. At its peak in 2013 and 14, Michigan only issued 85 depredation permits to address crane conflicts. And in 2015, only 74 permits were issued – a decrease of 13 percent from the two previous years (MI DNR).

Affected farms have several additional options beyond lethal solutions. The most proven effective of all options being Avipel Shield, a non-toxic seed coating for corn planted near prime wetland habitats, can prevent even the necessity for lethal federal permits and actually costs less than the toxic lead shot used to kill cranes – lead that would be deposited onto crop-growing soils.

Michigan citizens are celebrating their enjoyment of Sandhill cranes living again throughout the state and near their homes.

A 2016 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey (Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation) confirms that nationwide, wildlife watchers outnumber hunters by more than 7 to 1, and outspent hunters by nearly 3 to 1.

We, as the majority of Michigan citizens, do not want our elected officials to again ignore our voices by passing House Resolution 154 as an orchestrated special interest narrative to encourage a politically appointed panel - that is not most representative of Michigan voters - to again dismiss and marginalize stakeholders who want to keep Sandhill cranes protected as a traditional non-game species in Michigan – as they have been for 100 years.

Our statewide grassroots coalition urges each member of this committee to uphold your constituents' wishes and the peoples' interest in continued buy-in of respected and responsible non-game management policy by voting NO on House Resolution 154.

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Report: 86 million Americans watched wildlife in 2016, a 20 percent jump from 2011

9/8/2017



People watch birds at the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana. Photo by Brett Billings/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The U.S. Department of the Interior announced a new report this week by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that shows that 101.6 million Americans — 40 percent of the U.S. population 16 years old and older — participated in wildlife-related activities in 2016, such as hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching.

The survey illustrates gains in wildlife watching — particularly around the home — and fishing, with moderate declines in the number of hunters nationally. The findings reflect a continued interest in engaging in the outdoors. These activities are drivers behind an economic powerhouse, where participants spent \$156 billion — the most in the last 25 years, adjusted for inflation.

The survey, the 13th in a series conducted nearly every five years since 1955, shows that the most substantial increases in participation involve wildlife-watching — observing, feeding, and photographing wildlife. The report indicates these activities surged 20 percent from 2011 to 2016, from 71.8 million to 86 million participants during that time. Expenditures by wildlife watchers also rose sharply — 28 percent — between 2011 and 2016, from \$59.1 billion to \$75.9 billion. Around-the-home wildlife-watching increased 18 percent from 2011, from 68.6 million in 2011 to 81.1 million participants in 2016. More modest gains were made for away-from-home wildlife watchers: a 5 percent increase from 2011 to 2016, from 22.5 million to 23 million participants.

The survey includes this chart showing the estimated number of birdwatchers:

Bird Observers: 2016

Total Bird Observers: 45.1 million

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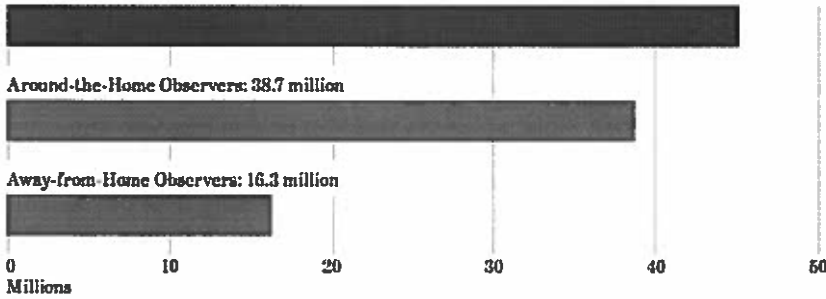
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The survey defines wildlife watching as participants either taking a "special interest" in wildlife around their homes or taking a trip for the "primary purpose" of wildlife watching. Wildlife-watching activities such as incidentally observing wildlife while gardening are not included.

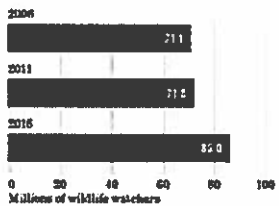
Away-from-home participants are defined as those who travel a mile or more from home to engage in wildlife watching, and around-the-home participants are those who engage in wildlife watching less than a mile from home.

Nearly all people who watched wildlife did so around the home. Of the 61.1 million around-the-home participants, feeding wildlife was the most popular activity. Almost 59.1 million individuals, 69 percent of all wildlife watchers, fed wildlife around their home. Over 43.8 million people (51%) observed wildlife and 30.5 million (35%) photographed wildlife around their home. Nearly 11.4 million (13%) visited parks or natural areas to view wildlife and 11 million (13%) maintained plantings or natural areas for the benefit of wildlife within a mile of their home.

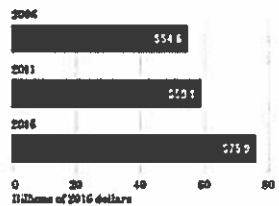
About a fourth of all wildlife watchers took trips a mile or more from home to observe, photograph, or feed wildlife. Observing wildlife was the most popular activity, with 19.6 million participants, 83% of all away-from-home wildlife watchers. Over 13.7 million people (58%) photographed wildlife away from home, 4.9 million (21%) enjoyed feeding wildlife while on trips.



Wildlife Watchers: 2006-2016



Wildlife Watcher Expenditures: 2006-2016



Average Wildlife Watcher Expenditures: 2006-2016



As shown in the charts above, overall expenditures due to wildlife watching increased 28% from 2011 to 2016 and 39% from 2006 to 2016. The amount of trip-related expenditures decreased 38% from 2011 to 2016 and 25% from 2006 to 2016. From 2011 to 2016 and from 2006 to 2016 spending for wildlife-watching equipment did not change significantly (-1% and 3%, respectively). The category that explains the overall increase is special equipment expenditures (ATVs, campers, boats, and other high-cost items), which went up 173% from 2011 to 2016 and 166% from 2006 to 2016.

A more detailed report of findings containing final estimates will be available in December 2017.

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10/4/2017

Hunting Wisconsin sandhill cranes could threaten their diversity, survival

By Brian Bienkowski (<http://greatlakesecho.org/author/brian/>) | February 13, 2012

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Wisconsin sandhill cranes have bounced back from near extinction and a lawmaker wants people to hunt them.

But a soon-to-be-published University of Wisconsin study found that the birds are a diverse bunch. Their genetic diversity strengthens their population and researchers worry hunting could eliminate it.

“We’ve found a lot of genetic distinctiveness in small, local populations,” said Mark Berres, an assistant professor of animal sciences at the university and leader of the study. “If you open up a hunting season, you could easily wipe out these populations and all of that genetic variation.”

Berres and his team found substantial genetic variation in both the Wisconsin birds and the greater eastern population, which is all of the sandhill cranes east of the Mississippi River. Even groups as close as 60 miles to each other have varying genes.

Generally, the more genetic diversity, the better off you are as a species, Berres said.

A uniform gene pool is more susceptible to diseases. As diseases, like West Nile virus and Avian Influenza, spread, bird populations with diverse genes are more resistant.

Genetic diversity also helps populations survive environmental changes.

“The climate is changing, and how these birds can adapt is dependent on their genes,” Berres said. “If there’s only a small amount of birds with genes that could adapt to climate change, than the greater population is at risk.”

Meanwhile Wisconsin state lawmaker Rep. Joel Kleefisch, R-Oconomowoc, is proposing a sandhill crane hunting season. His bill is a response to farmer’s complaints about the birds eating corn and other seeds. Minnesota is the only Great Lakes state with a sandhill crane hunting season.

Many environmental groups oppose Kleefisch’s bill. But crop damage is very real, said Karen Gefvert, director of governmental relations at the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, which supports a hunting season.

“A lot of farmers have had tremendous crop damage from sandhill cranes,” Gefvert said. “They (cranes) either pull out the seeds, or the fresh shoots, and eat them.”



*Sandhill cranes eat corn and other seeds from farmers fields.
Photo: zenia (Flickr)*



Joel Kleefisch, a Republican in the Wisconsin Assembly, wants a sandhill crane hunting season. Photo: wisconsin.gov

The federation doesn't compile statistics on crop damage. But Wisconsin farmers can only be reimbursed if crop damage is from a species that can be hunted, so it's hurting state agriculture, Gefvert said.

Wisconsin sandhill cranes consisted of about 25 breeding pairs in the 1930s. Today, there are about 20,000 of the birds.

Berres said that they definitely impact farmers' fields, especially corn. But the 20,000 number is misleading.

"When you say there's 20,000 in Wisconsin, it sounds like these birds are just everywhere," Berres said. "But, historically speaking, that's just a drop in the bucket."

Numbers alone don't predict a population's stability, Berres said.

Researchers still don't fully understand sandhill crane breeding patterns. The birds don't reproduce as young or as often as other birds though.

Long-term research by the International Crane Foundation has shown a decline in their reproduction, said Jeb Barzen, director of field ecology with the foundation, which hasn't taken a stance on the hunting bill.

But Barzen said hunting would not solve the crop damage problem. The foundation recommends farmers treat their corn with a plant-derived substance, Avipel, to discourage the birds.

And many farmers do, Barzen said. In 2006, 14,000 acres were treated with it. That number shot to 76,000 acres last year.

The treatment doesn't harm the birds. It upsets their guts when they eat it, so they eventually avoid the seeds.

And while some farmers use the treatment, others have already picked up their guns. Gefvert said about 73 permits were issued for farmers to shoot sandhill cranes in 2011.

Regardless of how the bill plays out politically, Berres hopes his research is considered before people start blasting them out of the sky.

"The genetic stuff I'm doing is filling in part of the picture," Berres said. "Some people will say, 'what's a few hundred birds out of 20,000?' Well, we really don't know."

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