



Colorado
Crane
Conservation
Coalition, Inc.

2023 Impact Report



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A Letter from the President



Dear Friends,

I am both proud of the work that CCCC accomplished in 2023 and excited about our future!

This past year we significantly expanded our educational programming to raise “crane awareness” and to teach children and adults about our Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes. As a result, we succeeded in reaching thousands of people with our crane educational programs, more than in any previous year since CCCC was founded in 2012.

Our on-the-ground habitat improvement program, Crops for Cranes, now includes 195 acres and continues to expand as more farmers opt to participate in this program on behalf of cranes. The cranes have discovered these crops for cranes areas and are making good use of them during fall staging in the Yampa Valley. Our 70-acre Crane Sanctuary that we lease from a crane-friendly farmer attracted more than 200 cranes in early September - just in time for crane-viewing activities that took place during the 12th annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival.

Our live-streaming nest camera project continues to attract an ever-expanding audience. 2023 saw a significant increase in the number of people who both watched the live stream and viewed the highlight videos. Over the three years that the nest camera has operated, there have been more than 40,000 views of the live stream and more than 38,000 views of the highlight videos. The live stream camera project allows the public to witness both the magic and the challenges of crane nesting and to gain a deeper appreciation of this iconic species. It also brings home the importance of wetland habitat for cranes and other wildlife.

The Yampa Valley Crane Festival continues to bring thousands of people into the Yampa Valley to experience the miracle of cranes and to learn about the important environmental issues that impact cranes and other wildlife. In 2023 the



festival consisted of more than 46 individual events that included expert speaker presentations, workshops, bird walks, films, family activities, and more. The excitement generated by the festival helps to attract more people every year to our crane cause.

In 2023 the CCCC board added four new dynamic directors to its line-up (See Board Director section of this impact report). Also in 2023, three long-serving board members who have been integral to the success of our organization stepped down from active to emeritus status. We are grateful for the dedication and service that our board members have given to the “crane cause” over the years. In 2024, CCCC’s Board will continue to provide “big-picture” direction and strategy to ensure that our mission of protecting and conserving Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes and their habitat is fulfilled.

Thank you to our staff, board, volunteers, and donors for your support of CCCC in 2023. We could not do our work without your help. We look forward to 2024 and continuing our efforts to ensure these iconic birds will be here for our children and grandchildren to enjoy and appreciate.

Sincerely,

Nancy Merrill

President
Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition, Inc.





COLORADO CRANE CONSERVATION COALITION

OUR MISSION

Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition (CCCC) conserves and protects the Rocky Mountain Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes and their habitat using science and education to connect people with this iconic species.

GOALS

- 01** Achieve crane awareness, education, and appreciation among people in Northwest Colorado and beyond
- 02** Better ascertain the status of cranes in Northwest Colorado and increase conservation actions
- 03** Have a sustainable population of Greater Sandhill Cranes along the Rocky Mountain flyway with sufficient habitat available for them to thrive

OUR VISION

CCCC is the collaborative leader in fostering long-term sustainability of the Rocky Mountain Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes.



Photo by Morning Light Photography

Crane attire at the Crane Migration Celebration.



Photo by Morning Light Photography

Board Member, Pam Rolfes, presenting at the Crane Migration Celebration



Erin Gelling, Executive Director and Steph Appel, Operations Coordinator at the Yampatika Fall Festival

NEW THIS YEAR

CCCC expanded its staff by hiring its first part-time Operations Coordinator and first Executive Director.

CCCC held its first **Crane Migration Celebration**, an event to celebrate the return of cranes to Northwest Colorado in the spring and to help raise money for CCCC programs. The fundraiser attracted new friends to the “crane cause” and raised over \$9,000 in its inaugural year.

For the second year in a row, CCCC was voted in the top three of non-profit organizations in the Yampa Valley in the Best of the Boat competition.

For the first time, CCCC offered a program to honor all its Crops for Cranes partners, featuring a talk by Clark Harshbarger, Director of Stewardship of MAD Agriculture, a regenerative agricultural consulting company.



2023 CCCC HIGHLIGHTS



EDUCATION

937
Adults & children participated in our community & school educational programs



AWARENESS

1,722+
Adults & children benefited from our crane awareness programs



12TH FESTIVAL

2,492
Adults & children attended the 12th annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival



NEST CAMERA

60
Days of livestream



SCIENCE & CONSERVATION

59
Highlight videos

50+
People involved with crane conservation & monitoring projects during nesting, chick rearing, and fall staging



80+
Volunteers

2 
Paid Staff

1,930 
Facebook followers

4
Classes

5th graders participated in the interactive wetlands model at the 2nd annual Yampa Youth Water Festival in September

93
Students

361
3rd Graders & Teachers

The 3rd grade fun, interactive presentation reached 18 classrooms throughout Routt & Moffat Counties in April & May

483
Adults & Children

The Crane Educational Program reached library groups, senior groups, festival attendees, Yampatika camps, and other organizations.

5
Contests

- Crane Creative Arts Scholarship Contest
- First Crane Sighting Contest
- Crane Photo Contest
- Crane Coloring Contest
- Festival Poster Contest

314
Participants

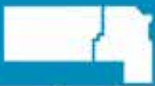
1,000+
Crane Art Viewers

Crane Art Project - a spectacular photo of cranes placed in 5 different community buildings throughout the Yampa Valley to increase community awareness

405+
People Reached

- From attendees at:
- Earth Day Celebration
 - Steamboat Springs Farmer's Market
 - Yampatika Fall Fest

12th Annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival



2 Counties



4 Days



4 Free films



5 Speakers



46 Events

25,754
Livestream views

▲ 300%
Viewership increase from 2022

13,563
Highlight views

▲ 60%
Highlight view Increase from 2022

#1 Video 
"Athena Defends the Nest from a Raccoon"

1,583 Views

2ND
Annual fall staging count conducted by 8 volunteers

195
Acres dedicated to the Crops for Cranes program

10
Volunteers participated in a wet meadow restoration project



756 
Instagram followers

2,000+ CRANES & THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE impacted by our conservation & educational programs

CCCC focuses on education through interactive presentations to people of all ages. We educate people about cranes, their habitat, the threats they face, and why cranes are important.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

CCCC educates Yampa Valley residents about cranes through **community programs** throughout the year. This year, CCCC presented a fun and engaging program to 16 adults at Casey's Pond about the wonderful characteristics of cranes. CCCC also presented an interactive program to 27 children ages 5-8 through the Yampatika summer camps focused on how cranes are part of the wetland food web and how they find food within a wetland.

For the second year, CCCC participated in the **Youth Water Festival**. During the Water Festival, four 5th grade classes totaling 93 students and teachers from across the Yampa Valley were taught about wetlands using CCCC's unique interactive wetland model. Students learned about the different types of wetlands, the importance of wetlands to cranes, components of wetlands (including cranes), how wetlands function, and what happens when wetlands are destroyed by development.



Interactive Wetland Model at the Youth Water Festival



For the third year CCCC successfully offered the public a view of nesting cranes through our livestream **Nest Camera** that is used both as an educational and scientific tool. We had over 25,000 views of the livestream and over 13,000 views of the 59 highlight videos created this year. Thousands of people watched Rocky and Athena, this year's Nest Camera stars, and sent comments and questions to our comment board. Viewers witnessed the cranes battle for their territory and navigate the lingering snow as the nesting season was delayed. Viewers also watched the cranes build their nest higher after rising water levels threatened the nest. And viewers watched the hatching of two chicks, Cinnamon and Sage, who were followed for a few weeks after hatching. All the highlight videos from the nest camera remain available on our website and YouTube channel and will continue to educate people about Sandhill Crane nesting for years to come.



PROGRAMS ACROSS THE U.S.

This year, CCCC was asked to present at numerous crane festivals and birding organizations across the United States. CCCC's Executive Director presented at two separate crane festivals, Monte Vista Crane Festival in South Central Colorado and Lodi Crane Festival in Lodi, California. Both presentations used videos from our livestream Crane Nest Camera to showcase Sandhill Crane behavior during the nesting season. These two presentations reached more than 250 people.

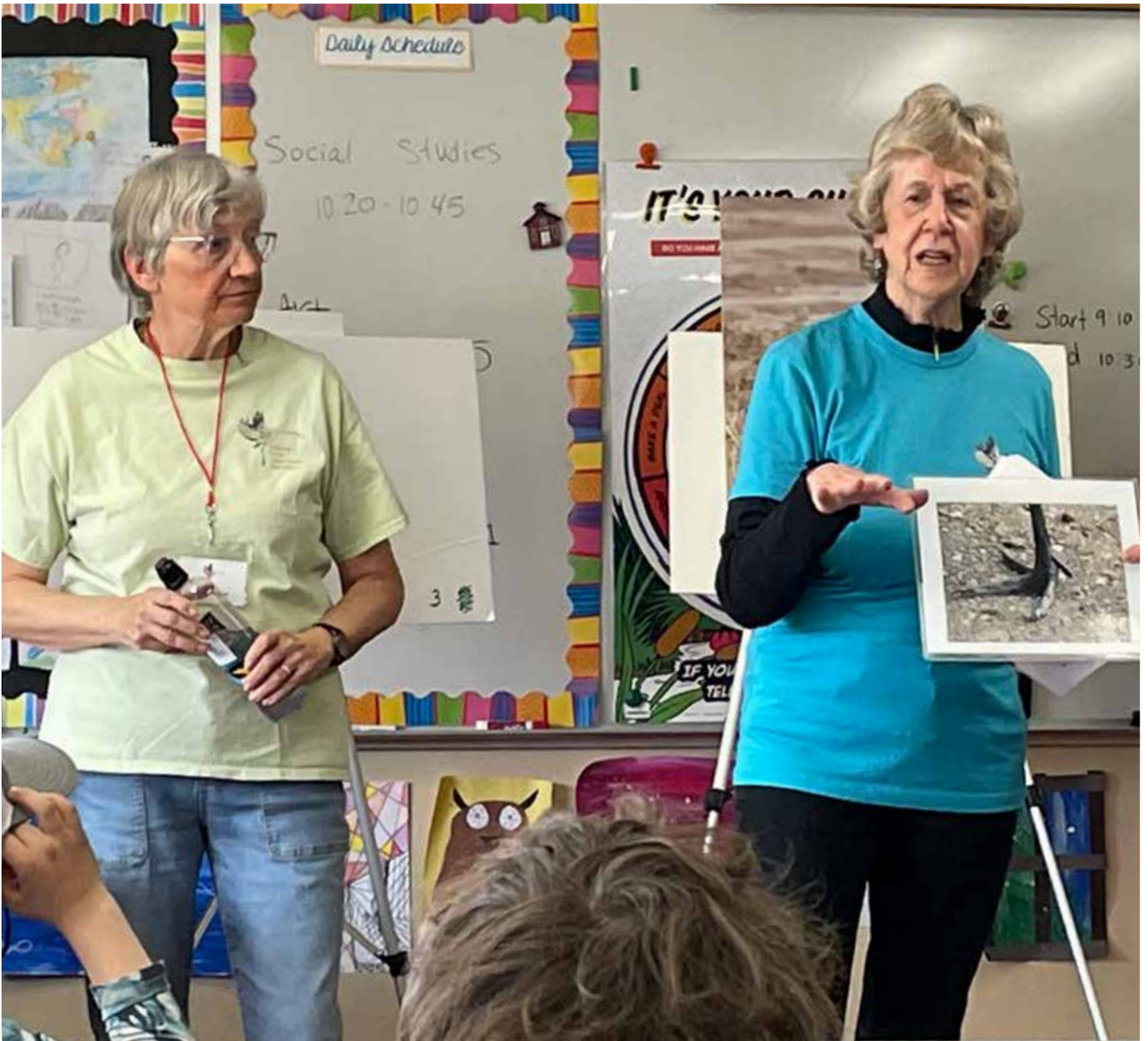
CCCC also presented to Colorado Field Ornithologists and Evergreen Audubon about Sandhill Crane conservation in Northwest Colorado. The same presentation was given at the 12th annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival, reaching more than 150 people.

SCHOOL PROGRAMS

For more than 10 years, CCCC has educated 3rd grade students in the Yampa Valley through an interactive and fun presentation about Sandhill Cranes. This year, our **3rd grade program** reached 360 students in 18 classrooms throughout Routt and Moffat Counties. This program teaches students about the cranes' life cycle and unique physical characteristics, threats that cranes face, and how to tell cranes apart from other large birds.



Gisela Garrison and Nancy Merrill present to the Maybell 3rd grade classroom.



Gisela Garrison and Nancy Merrill present to the Maybell 3rd grade classroom.

Awareness

CCCC focuses on awareness through annual contests directed at children, teens, and adults and through outreach events. Awareness helps instill appreciation and love of Sandhill Cranes and generates action to conserve cranes and their habitat.

CCCC reached thousands of people through awareness and outreach events this year, including **Yampatika's Fall Fest, Welcome Tent at the Farmer's Market, Earth Day Celebration, 4th of July Parades,** and annual contests.

During **Fall Fest**, more than 130 families and children learned about crane migration with a fun migration game that follows our Yampa Valley cranes as they migrate south to New Mexico.

CCCC had a booth at the **Earth Day Celebration** and Farmer's Market, both in Steamboat Springs, and connected with more than 250 locals and visitors to spread awareness about Sandhill Cranes and the threats that they continue to face today.

CCCC donated five framed art photos of Sandhill Cranes by photographer Abby Jensen to community buildings across the Yampa Valley as part of the **Crane Awareness Project**. The photos were hung in prominent places to raise awareness about these local iconic birds.

In September, CCCC worked with the Bud Werner Library to display a children's crane book, ***A Busy Week for Salvador the Sandhill Crane***, in **StoryWalk®**. Pages of this delightful book were showcased on stands placed along the core trail in Steamboat Springs. The StoryWalk® encouraged reading, getting outside, and awareness about cranes.

You can watch the 4th of July Dance here:



4th of July Parade Dancers in Steamboat Springs



StoryWalk® display pages along the Core Trail in Steamboat Springs, CO.

The first week of March was again proclaimed **Greater Sandhill Crane Week** in both Routt and Moffat Counties. This proclamation increases awareness of cranes as they are returning to the Yampa Valley.

Learn more by watching here:



Cranes Arrive in the Yampa Valley for Greater Sandhill Crane Week

By Erin Gelling



"Sandhill Soulmates" by Leilani Ward, the winning entry in the Visual Arts category for the 2021 Creative Arts Scholarship Contest.

Greater Sandhill Cranes are iconic birds of the west. You may have noticed these tall gray or rust-colored birds around the Yampa Valley during spring, summer, or fall. Sandhill Cranes are considered to be one of the oldest living bird species, dating back 2.8 million years. They are large, lanky birds with loud bugling calls that can be heard up to 2 miles away. They are also considered one of the best dancers in the animal kingdom.

Greater Sandhill Cranes spend their entire lives in the Rocky Mountains. They breed in Wyoming, Montana, Utah, Idaho, and the northwest corner of Colorado. They spend their winters in New Mexico and Arizona.

In early spring, Sandhill Cranes return to their breeding grounds including the Yampa Valley. They find a suitable wetland and create a large simple nest placed on the ground and generally surrounded by water. They lay 2 eggs in their nest and both parents help to incubate the eggs for about 30 days. Soon after the chicks hatch, they leave the nest with their parents and forage in the fields nearby their nest.

Sandhill Crane chicks can see and walk soon after hatching, and this helps them to quickly leave the nest and escape predators. Crane chicks grow at an alarming rate, almost 1 inch every day within the first few months. This rapid growth helps the young cranes to become as tall as their parents by the time they start flying, almost 3 months after they hatched.



By summer's end, crane chicks are now called colts and they can fly. Cranes from all over the Yampa Valley join together in "staging" areas near Steamboat, Hayden, and Craig to rest and feed. When staging, cranes spend their days in the agricultural fields and spend their nights roosting in the rivers, such as the Yampa River. During the day, cranes feed in agricultural fields, gaining energy by eating waste grain crops. This staging time in the fall is critical for them to gain the energy needed for their southern migration to their wintering grounds.

In the 1970s, cranes were listed as state endangered as the population was significantly reduced. However, the cranes in Colorado have made a comeback, though are still listed as a Tier One Species of Concern in Colorado. Habitat loss and fragmentation, climate change, and human disturbances continue to threaten cranes and other wildlife.

Greater Sandhill Crane Week is March 1-8. This week was created to spread awareness of Sandhill Cranes and to welcome the cranes back to the Yampa Valley. Several activities are starting in March in celebration of cranes:

First Crane Sighting Contest. The first person to spot a Sandhill Crane in the Yampa Valley and to document their sighting with a photo or video can submit their entry as part of this contest. A prize will be awarded to each individual with the photo or video of the earliest sighting in West Routt, North Routt, South Routt, Steamboat Springs, Craig, and West Moffat. This contest has already started and continues until there is a winner in each category.

Crane Book for StoryWalk®. Stroll over to StoryWalk® along the Core Trail near the Stockbridge Transit Center in Steamboat Springs to read *A Busy Week for Salvador the Sandhill Crane* by Margie Carroll. This children's book has rich photography that documents the first week in the life of a crane chick. StoryWalk® is presented by the Bud Werner Memorial Library. This book will be displayed during March.

Coloring Contest. Our annual Coloring Contest kicks off on March 1st! Stop by the Bud Werner, Oak Creek, Hayden, and Craig Libraries to pick up a coloring page, or download and print the page from our website. Children of all ages are welcome to draw and decorate the coloring page and submit it for the chance to win a prize. Entries are due August 18, 2022.

Photo Contest. Get your camera ready! Our annual Photo Contest is open to both amateur and professional photographers and includes photos of Greater Sandhill Cranes in the Yampa Valley and throughout the Rocky Mountain Population. Photos due August 18, 2022.

Creative Arts Scholarship Contest. Our crane inspired Creative Arts Scholarship Contest is open to Routt and Moffat County high school seniors to earn money for continuing education. Students can submit entries in one of two categories: **Written Art**, consisting of a nonfictional essay or fictional story of 750-1500 words or a group of three poems; or **Visual Art**, consisting of a painting, sketch, photograph, or digital art. Entries are due by March 25, 2022.

Crane Nest Camera. In mid-April, our Sandhill Crane Nest Camera will take center stage. Last year was the pilot year for the nest camera, but we still acquired amazing footage of Sandhill Cranes during the nesting season. Join us for our 2nd season of the nest camera as we tune into Hocky and Athena and their nesting journey. The livestream is available on our website and will be on display at the Bud Werner Memorial and Oak Creek Libraries.

Yampa Valley Crane Festival. Join us for the 11th annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival happening Sept. 1-4, 2022! Join us for guided crane-viewing, bird walks, speak a child's activities, live raptors, and more. Many events are free but some require a small fee and registration.

Be on the lookout for cranes from March to September throughout the Yampa Valley. Learn about all these contests and activities and about Sandhill Cranes on our website: coloradocranes.org. Contact us with any questions: info@coloradocranes.org.



"Sandhill Crane Couple" by Debbie McCullin, winning photo in Category 2 of the 2021 Photo Contest.

Read the Article here:



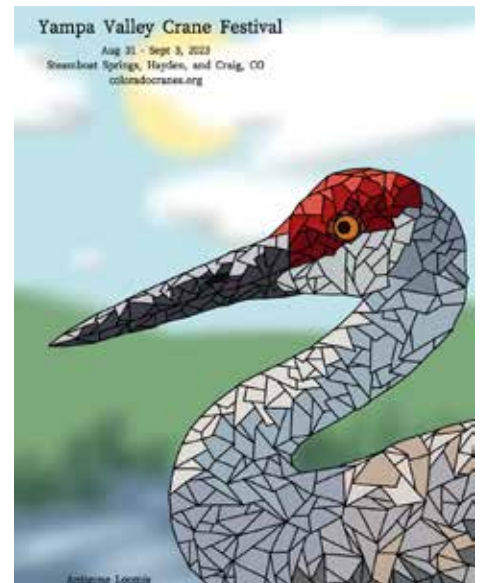
Contests



CCCC holds **5 annual contests** for children, teens, and adults to raise awareness of Sandhill Cranes. The contests are: First Crane Sighting Contest, Crane-inspired Creative Arts Scholarship Contest, Yampa Valley Crane Festival Poster Contest, Crane Photo Contest, and Crane Coloring Contest.

01

The **Yampa Valley Crane Festival Poster Contest**, aimed at 10-15 year-old children, encourages the arts, promotes our Yampa Valley Crane Festival, and creates awareness about cranes in the younger generation. We received 12 stunning entries from across the United States. The winning poster was created by a 14-year-old girl who lives in the Yampa Valley.



The winning poster was created by 14-year-old Antigone Loomis who lives in the Yampa Valley.

02

The **First Crane Sighting Contest** helps create awareness and excitement about cranes returning to their breeding grounds in the Yampa Valley in early spring. This year we had 44 entries. The earliest date cranes were spotted was March 14th in Moffat County.

03

The **Crane-inspired Creative Arts Scholarship Contest** encourages Routt and Moffat County high school seniors to learn about Rocky Mountain Sandhill Cranes and then to create a work of written or visual art that is inspired by these cranes. This year we had 19 entries and awarded a total of \$10,000 in scholarships to the winners of this contest. Both written and visual entries were displayed for the month of April in The Depot Art Center in Steamboat Springs.



04

The **Crane Coloring Contest** creates awareness about cranes for children of all ages inside and outside of the Yampa Valley. We had over 200 entries this year. All entries were displayed at festival headquarters throughout the Yampa Valley Crane Festival.



Sampling of 2023 Coloring Contest Entries

05

The **Crane Photo Contest** is for both amateur and professional photographers and helps create awareness and appreciation of cranes and their environment. We received 39 entries in 4 categories this year. Photos were taken within the Yampa Valley and throughout the range of the Rocky Mountain Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes.

You can see all the photo entries here:



Taking Turns on Their Precious Egg by Sally Thurston



Cranes Go Crazy For Colorado Grass by Randy Weinstein



YAMPA VALLEY CRANE FESTIVAL

We presented a successful 12th annual **Yampa Valley Crane Festival** in Northwest Colorado over Labor Day weekend. The festival is CCCC's largest and most significant program for raising awareness and educating the public about Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes.

The 4-day festival featured 46 events, including 3 mornings of crane-viewings, 4 films, numerous bird walks, several workshops, and free speaker presentations. Five outstanding speakers, all experts in their fields, presented talks on topics including 50 years of crane conservation by the International Crane Foundation, inspiration for writing birder murder mystery novels, cranes of the world, the history of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, and crane conservation in Northwest Colorado. Crane-viewing events featured cranes flying to and from the Yampa River and feeding in the fields, as well as beautiful rainbows.



Rich Beilfuss leads a birdwalk on the Core Trail in Steamboat Springs, CO



Festival participants enjoy an early morning crane viewing with Erin Gelling.



Festival participants partake in the annual Carpenter Ranch Picnic



Crane-viewing during the 12th annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival



Participants spot female Cedar Waxwings while on a guided bird walk.



To close the festival a double rainbow graced the skies.

As part of the festival, we hold a **Crane Yard Art Display and Auction** to help raise “crane awareness” as well as funds for the festival. Twenty-five yard art cranes were beautifully decorated by local artists and auctioned off during the festival. We raised \$5,775 at this year’s auction that will go toward covering the cost of next year’s festival.



The Featured Crane was created by local fabric artist Lynn Wunder.

In 2023 attendance topped 2,492 across all festival events by people of all ages.



CCCC focuses on science to better understand Sandhill Cranes and their habitat and focuses on conservation to improve and restore their habitat in Northwest Colorado.

At the end of August CCCC conducted its second official **Fall Staging Count** of cranes on their staging grounds in the Yampa Valley. Eight volunteers counted 417 cranes in late August. This count allows us to monitor cranes during fall staging over the long-term and also helps us better understand which areas cranes use during this critical time. Cranes arrived at their staging areas later than usual near Steamboat Springs, Hayden, and Craig this year.



Volunteers and scientists partner to create rock dams and wet meadows.

CCCC participates in restoration projects with private landowners, government agencies, and other nonprofits across Northwest Colorado. For the second year, CCCC worked in coordination with the U.S. Forest Service and Yampa Valley Sustainability Council on a **wet meadow restoration** project in California Park. California Park is a Special Interest Area located north of Hayden and important breeding area for Sandhill Cranes. CCCC assisted in building rock dams to create wet meadows along creeks where cranes nest and raise their colts. Wet meadows help to retain water on drier landscapes, creating areas rich in plant and animal life that help sustain cranes and other species and benefit the overall health of the ecosystem.

CCCC is partnering with Colorado Parks and Wildlife on a **Sandhill Crane Nesting Database**. This database will allow monitoring of crane nests and the local population and provide knowledge to help us plan restoration and/or other habitat improvement projects. While still in its infancy, volunteers helped record the location of dozens of crane nests throughout the Yampa Valley.

For three years CCCC's **Crane Nest Camera** has provided important insights into the behavior of nesting Sandhill Cranes. This year the Nest Camera followed crane pair Rocky and Athena as they defended their territory, successfully nested, hatched two eggs, and raised two chicks named Cinnamon and Sage. This past year the long winter and lingering snow in April delayed the cranes nesting by a full week and the eggs were not laid until April 23. Fewer predators were observed at the nest this year compared to previous years. Both eggs hatched on the same day, May 25, even though the eggs typically hatch one or two days apart. After hatching the family left the nest but stayed near the nest for the first few weeks and brooded the chicks right in front of the camera.



California Park wet meadow restoration.

**You can watch the 2023 Nest
Camera Review here:**





Crops for Cranes

CCCC's longstanding habitat improvement program, **Crops for Cranes**, works with ranchers, farmers, private landowners, and conservation organizations to grow and leave grain crops for Sandhill Cranes during the fall staging season. Sandhill Cranes that stage in the Yampa Valley, especially the young of the year, rely on waste grain crops to provide adequate nutrition for successful migration to their wintering grounds. As grain production has significantly decreased in the Yampa Valley, food supplies have declined during this critical time when cranes are preparing for their migration south. CCCC now has 195 acres devoted to Crops for Cranes across Hayden and Craig, CO.

In 2023 CCCC began leasing and managing its own Crops for Cranes field located near Hayden, CO. CCCC planted about 30 acres of wheat and 5 acres of Kernza, an experimental perennial grain crop that does not require tilling and planting year after year. More than 200 cranes were seen using this property during fall staging.

Learn more about Crops for Cranes here:

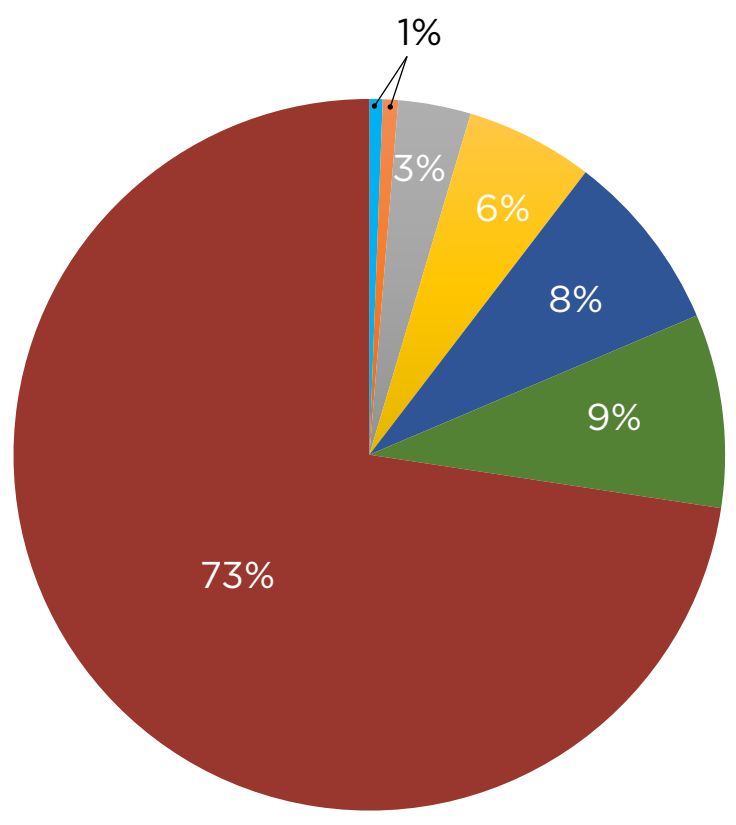






REVENUE SOURCES

- Corporations
- Other Sources
- Fundraising Benefit
- Foundations/Non-Profits
- Sponsorships
- Program Revenue
- Individual Donors



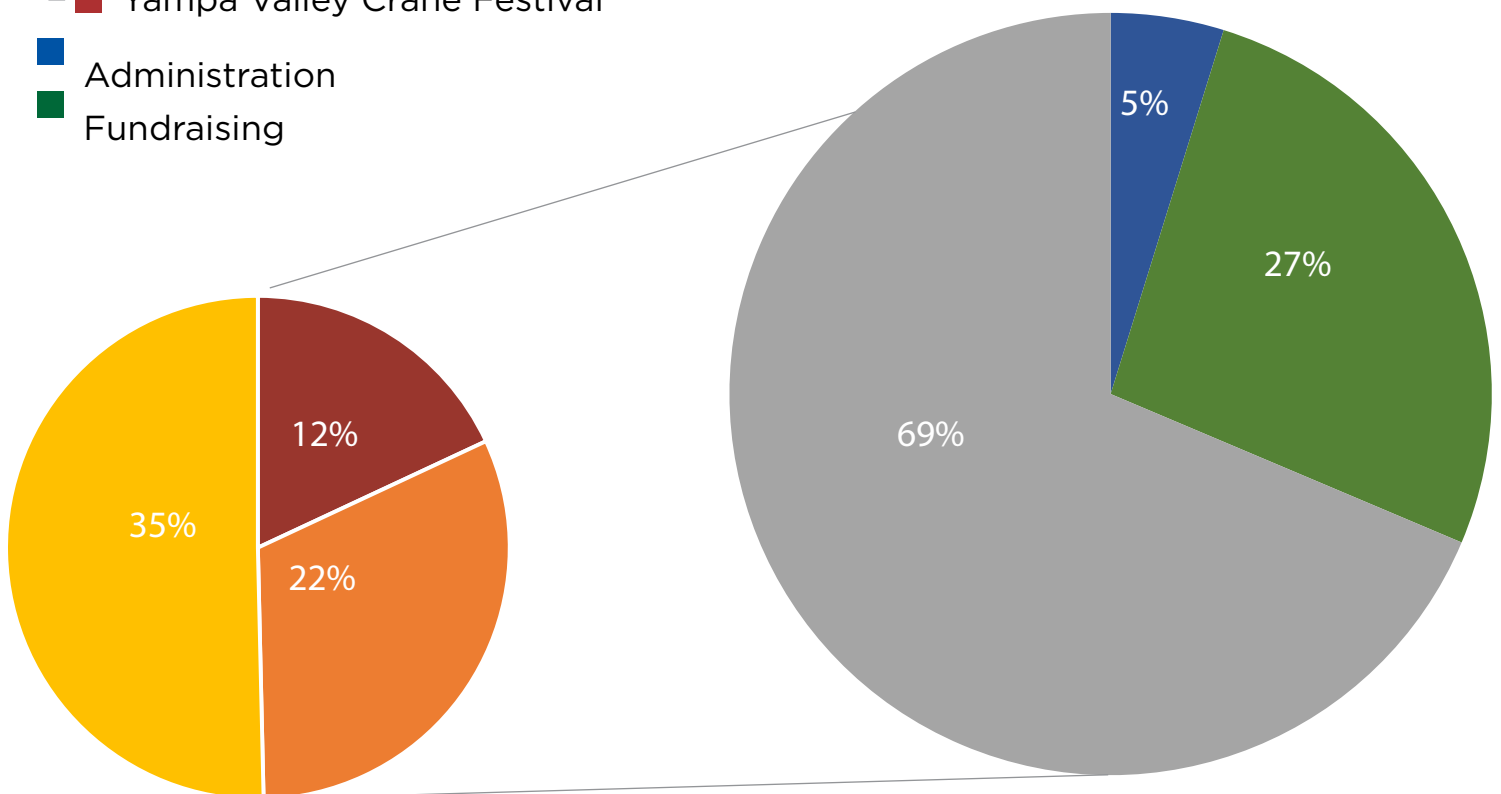
The Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Gifts are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

CCCC will continue to provide the public with new opportunities to learn about Sandhill Cranes and the threats that they face today. We also will continue to add to the scientific knowledge base in order to better protect cranes and their habitat. To do so, we rely on the generosity of volunteers, sponsors, and private individuals.



REVENUE USES

- Programs
 - Conservation and Research
 - Education and Awareness
 - Yampa Valley Crane Festival
- Administration
- Fundraising



CCCC

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STAFF

Erin Gelling, Executive Director
Steph Appel, Operations Coordinator

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Thank you!





*Colorado Crane
Conservation Coalition,
Inc. works to conserve and
protect Rocky Mountain
Greater Sandhill Cranes and
their habitat through science
and education.*



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