

Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition

2021 Annual Report

Jan. - Dec. 2021



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PHOTOGRAPHY

A letter from our President

Dear Friends,

As we celebrate our 10th year, we are proud to recount the many achievements of this past year as outlined in this annual report. We have come a long way since 2012 when we started out as a small group of conservation-minded volunteers and bird lovers who opposed the idea of a limited hunt of Greater Sandhill Cranes in Northwest Colorado. Today we have become a leading voice for crane conservation of the Rocky Mountain population of Greater Sandhill Cranes.

Over the past 10 years, Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition (CCCC) has greatly expanded its programs in support of our mission of protecting and conserving Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes and their habitat through education and science. Our annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival continues to grow in number of participants and events and in its impact on public awareness of the threats that cranes face today. In addition to the four day festival, hundreds of children and adults have gained a better understanding and appreciation of this iconic species through our school, camp and community education programs, through our numerous contests, and through our webinars. Our Crops for Cranes program has expanded every year since 2015 and provides needed nutrition for cranes in Northwest Colorado during the staging season. Our Crane Nest Camera has added to the scientific knowledge base about crane breeding and has provided an intimate look for thousands of viewers all over the world into the miracle of crane nesting.



Athena and chick - the Nest Camera crane family

We have accomplished all of this (with more to come), thanks to your interest and support. As you read this report, I hope you share in our pride for all we have achieved in 2021. Much work remains to be done. With your on-going assistance, CCCC will continue in our efforts on behalf of cranes during the coming year and beyond. Together we can ensure that these amazing birds will be around for future generations to enjoy and admire.



Sincerely,

Nancy Merrill
President
Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition, Inc.

Staff and Volunteers

New Staff: Program Director

In January 2021, CCCC hired its first full-time Program Director, Erin Gelling. Erin's responsibilities included implementing new and long-standing educational programs, organizing volunteers, helping to coordinate our annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival, and assisting with our new livestream Crane Nest Camera. As Program Director, Erin has succeeded in taking our organization to a whole new level.



Erin started with CCCC in 2014 as a volunteer helping with the annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival. Erin has a strong background in avian wildlife, botany, and environmental education. She completed her undergraduate degree in Ecology and Natural Resources and is finishing her Master's thesis in Rangeland Ecology. Since 2008, she has worked with a variety of birds, including songbirds, shorebirds, Sage-Grouse, and Sandhill Cranes. She is a Certified Interpretive Guide and has worked as a naturalist and guide. A New Jersey native, Erin moved to Northwest Colorado in the fall of 2010 and enjoys living in the beautiful Rocky Mountains. She is thrilled to be a part of CCCC and working to grow the organization.

Volunteers

The backbone of CCCC is our more than 80 volunteers who help with a variety of events throughout the year. Volunteers help with our largest event, the annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival, by assisting with workshops, crane-viewings, bird walks, the Crane Yard Art Auction, the festival store, and the information desk. Volunteers also assist with our educational programs such as our 3rd grade interactive presentation. With the start of the livestream Nest Camera this year, volunteers helped monitor the activity on the nest camera. Our organization would not be what it is today without the support of our dedicated volunteers.



New This Year



New this year, **Greater Sandhill Crane Week** (March 1-8), was officially proclaimed in both Routt and Moffat Counties. This proclamation served to bring attention to the return of our Greater Sandhill Cranes from their wintering grounds in New Mexico and Arizona.

Crane Week banner on Lincoln Ave in downtown Steamboat Springs

In May, our organization partnered with the Historic Hayden Granary to complete a 3-story **Sandhill Crane mural** on one of the silos at the Hayden Granary. Artist Dan Toro completed the painting of both a standing crane and a feeding crane in just a few weeks. This mural has sparked innumerable conversations both among locals and visitors about these iconic birds that breed and stage near Hayden, CO.



Artist Dan Toro working on the mural



New this year, CCCC presented three **free webinars** about various aspects of crane biology that were viewed across the country. Each webinar focused on a specific crane topic - nesting, chick-rearing, and fall staging and migration. To date, nearly 300 people have watched these webinars. They remain available for viewing at our website: coloradocranes.org/webinars.

In coordination with Yampatika, CCCC initiated a new program for adults entitled **Cranes, Birds, and Wetland Critters** near Steamboat Springs, Colorado. This walk combined crane education along the Yampa River with a bird walk. Attendees learned about crane nesting, chick-rearing, fall staging, and the importance of the Yampa River for cranes in Northwest Colorado, all while attendees enjoyed birdwatching with an expert birder.



New This Year

In spring 2021, we launched our **Sandhill Crane Nest Camera**, a livestreaming camera focused on a known Greater Sandhill Crane nest in the Yampa Valley. This Nest Camera captured dramatic moments in the crane nesting cycle. It allowed the public to view the cranes in the process of building their nest, laying and incubating two eggs and defending their eggs against numerous predators over the course of 30 days. The camera revealed the moment of hatching of one of the eggs and the first two days in the life of the newly-hatched crane chick.



Specific moments from the Nest Camera were recorded and made into 24 highlight videos. There have been over 8200 views of the livestream camera and over 8000 views of the highlight videos to date. These highlight videos remain available on our website and YouTube channel and will continue to teach people about the nesting cycle of these remarkable birds for years to come. The Nest Camera project not only increased the public's awareness of cranes but also added to our scientific knowledge of Sandhill Cranes during the nesting season.



Though our pilot year for the Nest Camera was successful, we experienced some glitches that caused the livestream to go down. We asked for your help in improving the nest camera project for 2022 and you responded! Thanks to 47 donors, we raised \$7500 to improve the nest camera experience for next year. We anticipate the nest camera will continue to raise awareness and add to our scientific knowledge of Sandhill Cranes for years to come.

In 2021, **CCCC greatly expanded its educational programs for children.** We engaged a total of 170 new children through several different venues. CCCC worked with **Totally Kids summer camp** in Hayden, Colorado, teaching more than 60 children, ages 6-11, about cranes, crane chick-rearing, and crane dancing. CCCC also worked with **Yampatika's summer camp**, engaging 19 children, ages 5-8, in a program about crane nesting and chick-rearing. All of these summer programs made use of fun, interactive games as a way of learning about cranes.

Additionally, CCCC coordinated a **high school field trip** with a Steamboat Springs science teacher to view Sandhill Cranes on their staging area near Hayden, Colorado. We brought over 100 freshman and sophomore biology students into the field to learn about crane behaviors and physical characteristics while observing live cranes in their natural habitat.



Kids 7-8 years old learning about how cranes raise chicks

Educational Programs

Our long-standing **3rd grade program** is a fun, interactive presentation that we offer to every 3rd grade classroom in Routt County. This year, due to the pandemic, we were unable to present this program in person. Instead, we created a video version of this program and made it available to the public through our website and the Bud Werner Memorial Library website. This video has had 616 views to date. It remains available today for everyone to enjoy at: coloradocranes.org/crane-facts/crane-calls.

Sandhill Cranes of Northwest Colorado



Our **Crane-Inspired Creative Arts Scholarship Contest** provides the opportunity for high school seniors in Routt and Moffat counties to learn about cranes and to earn scholarship money for continuing education. Seniors in Routt and Moffat County are invited to submit a crane-inspired work of art in one of three categories: Written Art, Visual Art, or Performing Art. The work must be original and accurately reflect the behavior and biology of Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes. This year, in honor of our 10th anniversary, CCCC awarded \$10,000 in scholarships to the winners of this contest.

Winning entry in Visual Arts category
by Leilani Ward

Our **First Crane Sighting Contest** that launched with Greater Sandhill Crane Week helped raise awareness of the returning cranes. We received numerous entries for this contest from all over the Yampa Valley. The earliest date cranes were seen was March 13th near Hayden, Colorado. This contest helps to raise awareness about cranes while welcoming them back to the Yampa Valley.



Kathy Simpson



Our annual **Crane Coloring Contest** educates and excites children about cranes by inviting them to color and submit their coloring page for the chance to win a small prize by age group. Each year a local artist creates the coloring page that features Sandhill Cranes in their natural habitat. This year we had over 200 entries from children ages 3-18 from across Colorado, the United States, and even the world! This year, for the first time, we also held contests for, and gave prizes to, two different groups of disabled adults.

Educational Programs

Our annual **Photo Contest** invites photographers, both amateur and professional, to submit photographs of cranes in one of four categories: Yampa Valley Cranes (amateur), Yampa Valley Cranes (professional), Rocky Mountain Cranes (amateur and professional), and Altered Reality photos of Rocky Mountain Cranes. We had 44 entries this year and gave away \$300 in certificates and \$900 in prize money across the four categories. This contest helps to spread “crane awareness”.



“We’re Wingin’ It” by Anita Merrigan
1st Place in Amateur Division

In 2021, we held our **10th annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival** in Northwest Colorado. The festival is our most important activity for raising awareness of our Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes and for educating the public about the threats that cranes continue to face today. Despite the pandemic, we held a successful, in-person festival with over 44 events, including 5 expert speakers. This year attendance topped 2,130 across all events with 60% of attendees coming from outside the Yampa Valley area.

Nature Walk
event at
festival



Abby Jensen

Abby Jensen

Cranes flying
during crane-
viewing event



Morning crane-viewing
event at festival



Keynote speaker Rich
Beilfuss from
International Crane
Foundation

As part of the festival, we hold a **Crane Yard Art Display and Auction** to help raise “crane awareness” and to raise funds for the festival. Every year 25 yard art cranes are beautifully decorated by local artists and end up in private yards and public places all over Colorado and beyond. This year, a beautiful crane quilt was also donated to us for the auction. We raised \$7,700 in this year’s auction that will go toward covering the cost of next year’s festival.

“Cranetopia Mama” by
Victoria Rudolph



Science Programs

Our **Crops for Cranes** program, initiated in 2015, is an on-the-ground, habitat improvement program that works with ranchers, farmers, private land owners, and conservation organizations to leave grain crops for Sandhill Cranes during the fall when the cranes gather or “stage”. The 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.



Cranes using a Crops for Cranes field
Abby Jensen



Organic wheat being planted at Yampa River State Wildlife Area

However, the production of local grain crops (wheat, oats, and barley) has decreased significantly in the Yampa Valley over the last 50 years. This has resulted in reduced food supplies available to the cranes during fall staging. Recent research highlights the importance of agricultural grain crops in close proximity to roosting areas (such as the Yampa River) for Sandhill Cranes during fall staging and migration.

Through our Crops for Cranes program, we work to ensure cranes have sufficient food during this critical time. This year, we successfully planted 4 new acres of organic wheat near Hayden, Colorado. Since 2015, we have planted over 100 acres of grain crops to help the cranes.

Every year in late August, we conduct crane **fall staging counts**, just prior to the Yampa Valley Crane Festival. These counts help us monitor long-term population trends in the valley. The counts enable us to identify the areas that the cranes use every year, as well as identify any new staging areas. This year we counted 753 Sandhill Cranes near Hayden, Colorado at peak fall staging. Most of these cranes consisted of pairs that breed in the Yampa Valley.

Cranes staging near Hayden



Erin Gelling



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.

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



Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition

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