

The Flight From Boredom to Inspiration

By Emma Jones

The dirt road, the road I was very familiar with. I have taken this road almost a hundred times. This ride chases the wetlands and directs you past Fortification Rocks. Though that might be the most fascinating part of the drive to most, to me it is what is at the bottom of the rocks: the Greater Sandhill Cranes. This road leads to trails, trails that lead you towards promising picturesque views, maybe a herd of elk, stomping loudly on top of the bucolic landscape or maybe a group of eager hikers as they make their way up the captivating mountain. But for me, it isn't what I see on the mountains, it is what I see before. I was a teenage girl, annoyed with the thought of her family and heading outdoors, too stubborn to really take in the effect the cranes would have on me.

"Get off your phone and look outside" my mother harped, irritated at me for choosing social media over nature.

I was missing the kick off to my senior year, the first football game. This was the game I had been looking forward to since I was a freshman, the game where only the seniors attend the Pregame tailgate. The smell of barbeque, matched with time with my friends. 'I can't believe I have to miss this' I sighed.

The cracked highway leading to my grandparent's house was long and boring. It was speckled with boulders that crept closer to the road each time we traveled it, blocking Denver from my eyesight. Denver, my social mecca, home to my friends and the big game. My grandparents left the big city five years ago when they retired. I was still getting used to this drive, though I recognized every curve, leading to the rural part of Colorado.

"What am I missing mom? That rock over there? Did it turn magically into the football game I'm missing? Or that group of trees, did they transform into my friends? I didn't think so. It's the same boulders; it's the same mountains." I fired back at her and her request.

"You should really try enjoying nature instead of making me feel miserable," she replied, dismissing my frustration.

As we edged closer to their house, my mother decided to stray from our typical route. We went past a collection of orangish rocks in a rugged, strange formation.

"Mom, where are we even?" I asked annoyed, though in reality I was just curious.

"We are passing the Fortification Rocks. I had to find something to show you since everything is so *boring*" my mother stated in a dramatic, exaggerated tone.

As different as the rocks were, something else caught my eye. Surprised, I looked closer to the grassland around me that harbored a flock of exquisite looking birds.

"Mom, what kind of birds are those?" I eagerly questioned as I tried to discover the answer on my phone, proving to her my phone did have a purpose.

The odd size and unique characteristics of these birds created an image that I've never seen- the lengthy curved neck followed by black, piercing eyes surrounded by a striking color of scarlet red which led to a long, sharp looking black beak. I tried to take in more of their beauty until they suddenly flew away, expanding their magnificent wings, forming a V shape.

"I'm surprised you care about those," she snarked. "Those are called the Greater Sandhill Cranes. Ask your grandparents about them when we arrive."

We finally pulled into their driveway. They stood outside, waving to us. I remember they would always greet us eagerly with perfect timing.

As soon as we sat down to catch up, I decided to ask about the beautiful birds I saw. "Grandma, I saw some cranes on the way here." I stated.

"*The Greater Sandhill cranes.*" my mother interrupted.

"Yes, *The Greater Sandhill cranes,*" I corrected, glaring at my mother. "Could you tell me about them?"

My grandparents both glanced at each other, smiling. "Well, what about them do you want to know?" my grandmother asked.

"Anything you have," I asked inquisitively, "I just thought they were so elegant and beautiful, and I would like to know more about them."

"Your grandfather and I believe the Greater Sandhill Cranes were the ones who inspired us to explore this area and to move to the Yampa Valley." she began. "A few years into our marriage, we were both so busy that I barely saw your grandfather. We needed to spend more time together, so I suggested we go on an adventure. I decided a weekend of hiking and camping in the cool Fall air was what we needed. Now, I hadn't been camping in a while and neither had your grandfather, so at first he wasn't too happy about that. But after continual begging, he caved in and agreed to go. We invited some friends and traveled to Yampa River State Park."

"Not a bad trip." my grandfather recalled.

"The drive in was so eye opening. Going up Rabbit Ears, we were in awe of its beauty. We had no idea this part of Colorado was so breathtaking. The valley was painted with vibrant fall colors highlighted by the dark green needles of the pine trees. The fall season is the perfect time to visit Colorado. As we drove through Steamboat and past Hayden to the campsite, we couldn't believe the landscape. It was so different and spread out than Denver." She explained.

"As soon as we arrived and after we set up our tent, we saw a group of birds in the distance. We weren't quite sure what they were. So, we moved a little closer to get a better view. As we got closer, we were treated to our first glimpse of the majestic creatures. We found a nearby park ranger and we asked him the name of these wonderful birds. He explained to us

they were a sedge of the Greater Sandhill Cranes, only found in Colorado's Grand, Jackson, Moffat, Routt, and Rio Blanco counties. He mentioned we were lucky we came in the fall, as they stop here before migrating South. We stood speechless admiring the beauty of these birds."

"Aren't they spectacular?" My grandfather exclaimed.

We all nodded. "So different," my grandmother sighed, "We went hiking many places on that trip, looking for more of the Greater Sandhill Cranes. On the way to hike Black Mountain, we saw the cranes next to the peculiar landmark, Fortification Rocks. I guess you have never seen those rocks, have you?" she asked.

"We actually drove by them on the way here. I haven't been to Black Mountain, though." I answered.

"Why, we will have to take you sometime!" suggested my grandfather.

My grandmother nodded and continued, "We hiked and went on several adventures when we were much younger. But, once we had your mother and uncle, we never really had much time to go back. We did try to take your mother and uncle as much as we could. Remember?" she motioned to my mother.

"Yes. The thought of camping didn't interest me at first, but once we explored several of the outdoor activities in this part of Colorado, I fell in love with camping and being outside. You should give it some thought." my mother suggested to me.

"We have done a lot since we've moved here." My grandfather chimed in. "We have floated the Yampa River and went boating at Elkhead Reservoir several times. You never run out of activities to do here." My grandfather stated, smiling at my grandmother.

"And all because of the Greater Sandhill Cranes." my grandmother laughed.

As we spent more time at their house throughout my senior year, we ended up taking those hikes I never thought would interest me. After I spent more time outside with my mother and grandparents, I realized that being outside wasn't as bad as I made it out to be. We floated the Yampa River a couple times and saw several sedges of the Greater Sandhill Cranes. They would come and go as they pleased, using the Yampa Valley as their nesting ground. As these cranes travel around in close groups, they inspire me to spend time with my family and cherish the time we have together.

After graduating and moving from Denver, I now realize the importance of family and friends. The cranes inspired me to spread my wings, travel, dance, and escape the comfort of the big city. Most importantly, they inspired me to explore Northwest Colorado. I now live in the moment and not through social media. So, as I step onto the trailhead, ready for my next adventure; I put my phone in my backpack pocket, zip it, look up, take a deep breath and enjoy Mother Nature's beauty. I am thankful for that boring ride and the chance sighting of the flock of exquisite looking birds, the Greater Sandhill Cranes.