Have you ever heard a loud bugling call coming from a distant pasture or wetland on your property? Perhaps your property is home to a pair of Florida sandhill cranes. Listed as State Threatened on Florida’s Endangered and Threatened Species List, Florida sandhill cranes are a non-migratory subspecies of sandhill crane that reside in Florida and southern Georgia year-round.

**Distribution and Habitat**

Florida sandhill cranes can be found in a variety of native habitats including herbaceous wetlands, prairies, and open pine forests. Cranes also readily use human-altered habitats including pastures, golf courses, airports, and sod farms. For breeding habitat, cranes need shallow, freshwater marshes between 5-13 inches deep. Upland pastures and prairies adjacent to wetlands also provide important cover habitat for flightless young.

**Identification**

Cranes are gray overall with reddish skin on their crowns. Similar to herons, cranes have long legs and long necks; however, cranes can be distinguished from herons in flight by their outstretched necks and fast wingbeats.

**Biology**

Florida sandhill cranes are monogamous breeders and mate for life. Females generally lay 2 eggs in a ground nest, made of stems and twigs, that is surrounded by water. Young cranes, called colts, are precocial and are able to walk within 24 hours of hatching. Unlike herons and egrets, cranes do not “fish”. Rather, cranes are omnivores that forage on seeds, grain, berries, insects, small mammals, snakes, lizards, frogs and crayfish.

The Florida subspecies of sandhill crane is usually observed in pairs or small groups. In winter, large flocks of migratory sandhill cranes that breed

**Quick Notes**

- Florida sandhill cranes are listed as State Threatened.
- Cranes need shallow, freshwater marshes for roosting and breeding habitat.
- Crane chicks are precocial, meaning they are born with down feathers and can walk shortly after hatching.
- Cranes benefit from “wildlife-friendly” fence designs.
- Avoid feeding cranes. In Florida, it is illegal to intentionally feed sandhill cranes.
in the Great Lakes region join the Florida population, increasing the number of cranes in Florida by fivefold.

Management Needs

Florida sandhill cranes need flooded marshes to nest. Water depths between 5 and 13 inches from January through April creates optimal nesting habitat for cranes. Landowners can provide nesting habitat for cranes by strategically placing culverts that maintain or restore natural hydrology on their properties. When creating ponds, create a shallow end and plant native marsh vegetation to create a breeding area for cranes.

Maidencane (*Panicum hemitomon*), pickerelweed (*Pontederia cordata*), and smartweeds (*Polygonum spp.*) are great choices for native plantings. Routinely apply prescribed fire to minimize woody encroachment into wetlands. Mow or graze cattle to create and maintain open areas for cranes to forage. Avoid or minimize fertilizer, herbicide, and pesticide use near wetlands.

Fencing

When erecting a fence, make an effort to use a wildlife-friendly fence design. For example, a 3-strand smooth or barbwire fence is much easier for a crane to cross compared to a chain link or woven wire fence. Where woven or chain link fences are necessary, a framed walk-through crossing (24” high x 18” wide) could be placed to facilitate the movement of cranes and other wildlife while still managing livestock movement.

**Do Not Feed Cranes!**

In Florida, it is illegal to feed sandhill cranes. Feeding sandhill cranes can alter their normal foraging behavior and potentially lead to harm. For example, if cranes are fed and learn to associate people with food, they may seek out human garbage to feed on and become entangled in the trash. Furthermore, if cranes frequent urban areas in search of food they may be more likely to crash into powerlines or other aerial hazards. Cranes attracted to yards may also have a tendency to frequently cross roads. Many sandhill cranes unfortunately die from vehicle collisions every year. If you have unintentionally attracted sandhill cranes to a food-source (e.g., bird feeder), remove the source of food until the cranes stop visiting the site. If you would like more information on Florida sandhill cranes, contact your local landowner assistance biologist.