

SANDHILL CRANE WINTERS AT WHITEHALL, N. Y.

JOSEPH A. MUNOFF

On March 25, 1967, following directions received from Mrs. Dora Bullock of Glens Falls, Harry Goldman and I went to see a Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) reported at Mountain View Farm near Whitehall, N.Y. (*Kingbird* 17(2):113, May 1967). We were pleasantly greeted by Mrs. Kenneth Woodruff who, with her husband, runs the 130-acre dairy farm owned by her father, Robert Hatch. She pointed to a gray shape on stilt-like legs standing at the far edge of a four acre patch of corn—my first Sandhill Crane. To see one of these birds in New York State is indeed a rarity! According to Reilly and Parkes (*Preliminary Annotated Checklist of New York State Birds*, New York State Museum and Science Service, 1959), except for one recent sight record in 1948, no Sandhill Cranes had been reported since the 1880's. However, in Nov. 1966 one was reported at Delhi, N.Y. (*Kingbird* 17(1):36, Jan. 1967).

The crane's robust, grayish body rested on long legs. Its long neck functioned as a periscope among the tan cornstalks. In silhouette it reminded me of the Great Blue Heron. However, the Great Blue Heron is less robust of body and in flight carries its neck in a loop with the head drawn back, while the crane flies with its neck extended forward and legs backward. The crane's bald, reddish forehead and the tufted rear feathers which curved downward served to substantiate the identification.

We watched the crane through field glasses for approximately 15 minutes. All during that time, the bird "tip-toed" its way back and forth along the far border of the cornfield that it had claimed as its own. Eventually the crane walked in among the cornstalks and disappeared from view. It did not reappear, so we headed for home.

On April 4 I decided to check the crane. This time I had an opportunity to talk with Mrs. Woodruff, who had been "keeping an eye" on the bird since sometime in February, and find out about the activities of this rare visitor.

Due to unusually muddy conditions on the Hatch farm last autumn, the Woodruffs were unable to use their tractor and so were forced to leave standing a four-acre area of corn. Once or twice in January, Mrs. Woodruff noticed "something" down in the cornfield which can easily be viewed from her house. It was not until one day in February, however, that she was able to positively identify the silhouette of the large crane-like bird walking among the cornstalks. Eventually the news of the discovery attracted many birdwatching enthusiasts, some of whom accurately identified the large bird as a Sandhill Crane. Probably the first person to identify this bird was John Brooks, Conservation Officer from Whitehall. As the days passed and Mrs. Woodruff's interest in the crane grew, she noticed that the bird lived according to a daily routine.

The cornfield is bordered on all sides by open meadows containing absolutely no cover. Early each dawn, Mrs. Woodruff could easily locate the crane because it would always be in the same spot (as proved by the trampled down snow) in the center of the open meadow to the west of the cornfield. This was where the bird evidently spent each night. After the full arrival of dawn, the bird began each day with the ritual of flying around the edges of the cornfield two or three times. After convincing itself that "all was safe" the crane would land in the meadow,

but nearer to the corn stalks. It would then proceed to *walk in* among the corn stalks. It always entered the corn in this manner and was never seen to fly and land *in* the cornfield. As the days began to lengthen, the crane's routine continued to coincide exactly with the rising sun.

The morning feeding usually lasted about two hours and corn was no doubt its mainstay. The bird's appetite seemed to vary with the weather, for on cold days it spent most of its time eating among the cornstalks. On warmer or sunny days, the crane would spend more time in the "night spot" in the open meadow.

Regardless of the variation in its daytime activities, in the late afternoon of each day the crane repeated the aerial survey of the cornfield exactly as it had in the morning. Once again convinced that all was well, it would then retire to the "night spot" in the open meadow.

According to Forbush and May (*A Natural History of American Birds*) the Sandhill, like other cranes, will eat such morsels as the roots of plants, tubers (including potatoes), corn and other grains and seeds. The menu is often rounded out with whatever mice and insects the crane can catch. Insofar as Mrs. Woodruff was able to observe, the Sandhill on her farm ate mostly corn and might have supplemented its diet with mice which frequent the cornfield.

The dairy barn on the Hatch farm is located about three hundred yards from the cornfield, on the opposite side of the highway. The area behind this barn is a low meadow which becomes temporarily flooded each spring. Also, behind the barn is a farm pond. On the night of March 31, the ice "broke" in both the meadow and the pond. The very next day (April 1) it was noticed that the crane had altered its daily pattern. Now, instead of spending all of its time divided between the cornfield and the meadow, the bird included in its routine daily trips to the open water areas behind the barn. The crane's new activity consisted of much probing with its bill along the water's margin with a subsequent reduction of time spent in the cornfield. However, corn still continued to be its mainstay and the "night spot" in the meadow continued to be used.

One day, early this spring, a large, robust hawk (perhaps a Red-tailed Hawk) perched in a large tree overlooking the cornfield where the crane was feeding. The crane immediately walked out into the open meadow where it began to pace nervously back and forth to the tune of its own cries of protest. Periodically, the Sandhill Crane would smartly jerk its wings together above the body level. This display went on for at least one hour! Finally, the hawk got the message and left the area.

Similar displays of protest with Crows and, more recently, Redwinged Blackbirds have been observed and the result has been the same as in the hawk episode.

In her frequent walks down the highway with her pet dog, Mrs. Woodruff has often been observed by the crane. It would seem that the bird has come to recognize her for she has been able to approach the crane more closely than any other person. Most strangers cannot approach within a hundred yards of the crane. However, a few exceptional "bird stalkers" have cautiously sneaked to within almost 100 feet of the bird.

Mrs. Woodruff's closest approach, however, was perhaps an accident. Once, she had not been able to see the bird for three days. Fearing for its well-being, she and the dog went down to look among the cornstalks. When well within the cornfield, suddenly, without warning, up came the periscope-like, small head and long neck—distance, twenty feet! What did the crane do? It turned and calmly walked away, quite unruffled.

Biology Instructor and Chairman of the Science Dept., South Glens Falls Senior High School, South Glens Falls, N.Y. Home Address: 66 Hudson St., South Glens Falls, N.Y. 12801.