

WINTER IS FOR THE BIRDS

Photographing Sandhill Cranes at Bosque del Apache, NM

While we find Sandhill Cranes throughout the Midwest between spring and late fall, visiting one of their southern winter habitats provides quite a different spectacle. Traveling to Bosque del Apache, NM, a Federal Wildlife Management area along the Rio Grande River, the distant rumble of thousands of birds heralds our arrival. A cacophony of sound signals something great is about to appear: It is the magical chorus of up to 17,000 Sandhill Cranes and 100,000 Snow and smaller Ross's Geese that characterizes one of the most abundant regions for wildlife in the Southwest. Capitalizing on carefully maintained maize (corn) fields and a series of ponds fed by irrigation canals, huge numbers of these migratory cranes and geese visit Bosque del Apache from early November through to mid-February to feast on remnant maize and vegetation before they return to their northern breeding grounds.

Sandhill cranes move among several areas throughout the refuge during the day to feed, rest, and socialize. Social behavior includes at least ten different types of calls, various postures, and elaborate dances for everything from joy to courtship. Seeing the sunset "Fly In" and the dawn "Blast Off" is an experience never to be forgotten. Occasionally, one may also see "puffs" of Snow Geese, thousands rising into the air, sometimes within 10-20 feet of the refuge paths. The sounds of wings and geese talking is a fantastic, almost primordial experience.

Cranes have been around for about 34 million years; they are among the world's oldest living birds and one of the planet's most successful life-forms. The particularly successful sandhill crane of North America has not changed appreciably in ten million years. Cranes are the Bolshoi of animal dance; they dance for all kinds of reasons, not just courtship. Humans have imitated their dances for many millennia; along with possibly language, dance is one thing they are credited with giving us.

This presentation will review some of the highlights of three week-long January trips and show some of our thousands of photos. It will review the history of cranes, their migration routes and mention other crane habitats worth visiting.

Photographers **Wolf** and **Linnea Koch** travel extensively; their interests in photography and history have taken them to many sites in European countries, and throughout the US. Dr. Koch, a Sterling resident, is a consultant to the oil and petrochemical industry and has been a professor of chemical engineering. He lectures on energy-related topics and offers various historical presentations. Linnea Koch is a graphic designer and photographer, known for her photos of local landmarks; she has documented the first decade of the Whiteside County Barn Tours with multimedia DVDs and has produced numerous interpretive signs on historic landmarks in the Sterling area. Linnea is an Illinois Master Gardener with a special interest in native shade plants, and has given many presentations on local landmarks, shade gardening and some of the wonderful gardens here and in Europe. Together, the Kochs teach photography seminars: ***See with an Artist's Eye*** covers art, expression and the essential aspects of digital photography technology, ***Capturing Birds & Other Wildlife with Your Camera*** extends the first presentation to photographing fast moving subjects, while ***Taking Great Travel Photos*** is a short workshop which includes suggestions on cameras and other lightweight equipment suitable for travel.