

# KEEP YOUR EYE TO THE SKY

The Sandhill cranes start arriving in the Platt Valley between North Platt and Lewellen Nebraska as early as February. It just depends on the weather and the availability of food. Within a few weeks some half million or so Sandhill cranes will fly through Nebraska on their way to their nesting grounds in the Northwest Territories of Canada, Alaska and Siberia. Some cranes will remain and settle into the land between the rivers just west of North Platte. It is a true spectacle of nature. This migration has taken place for many millennia, certainly long before man is thought to have inhabited the plains. Fossil records indicate that Sandhill cranes have been part of Nebraska's history for a long time, perhaps 10 million years. Far longer than even the Platte River has been here, think about that concept.

Sandhill cranes raise one brood per year. Egg-laying can begin as early as December or as late as August. Both members of a breeding pair build the nest using plant material from the surrounding areas. Nest sites are usually in marshes, bogs, or swales, though cranes will occasionally nest on dry land and they may even select an area close to a Golf Tee Box at Tatum Ridge. The female lays 1 to 3 (usually 2) eggs that are oval-shaped and dull brown with reddish brown markings. Both parents participate in incubation which lasts 29 to 32 (though usually 30) days. The chicks hatch covered in down and open their eyes very soon after hatching and are able to leave the nest within hours. The parents brood the chicks for up to 3 weeks after hatching and feed the young intensively but with decreasing attention until they reach independence at 9 or 10 months old. After leaving their parents the chicks form nomadic flocks with other subadults and non-breeders and they remain with these flocks until they form breeding pairs when about 2 years old. Sandhill Cranes live around 7 years but can live as long as 21 years. Sandhill Cranes maintain a strict diet but are mainly herbivorous, often eating various types of food based on availability.

Sandhill Cranes often vigorously defend themselves or offspring which are not able to avoid ambushes as easily as their parents. When attacking potential avian predators they fly up at the predator and kick with their feet. When facing mammalian predators, they move toward the predator with their wings open and their bill pointed towards it. If the predator persists, the often hissing crane will attack, stabbing with their bill (which is powerful enough to pierce the skull of a small carnivore) and kicking with their feet.