

Mississippi Sandhill Crane

National Wildlife Refuge



photo: Scott Hereford



photo: Scott Hereford



photo: Sami Gray



photo: Scott Hereford

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Refuge Facts

- Established: 1975.
- Acres: 19,839 in Jackson County, MS, comprised of three major units: Gautier, Ocean Springs, and Fontainebleau.
- Location: Headquarters is 1/2 mile north of I-10 exit 61 off the Gautier-Vancleave Road.

Natural History

- Mostly open pine savanna habitat, interspersed with bayheads, cypress-tupelo drains, and marsh in outer coastal plain of Mississippi.
- 110-120 endangered Mississippi sandhill cranes.
- Globally Important Bird Area designated by American Bird Conservancy.
- 1/4 wintering population of Henslow's sparrows.
- Wildlife include several grassland and open pineland birds such as Bachman's and other sparrows, loggerhead shrike, redheaded woodpeckers, and kites. Also gopher tortoise, various snakes, deer, fox, bobcat, and more.
- Vast wet pine savannas with tremendous wildflower diversity including pitcher plants, orchids.

Financial Impact

- 17 permanent staff.
- Current budget: 2 million.
- Approximately 3300 visitors annually.
- Numerous local schools and other groups use refuge for educational purposes.

Refuge Purposes

- Provide habitat and protection for endangered Mississippi sandhill cranes.
- Protect and preserve unique and highly diverse savanna plant communities.

- Provide environmental education, interpretation, and wildlife-oriented recreation to refuge visitors.

Management Tools

- Protection and law enforcement.
- Crane reintroduction.
- Predator control.
- Farming for cranes.
- Habitat restoration.
- Prescribed burning.
- Mechanical vegetation manipulation.
- Invasive plant management
- Wildfire suppression, assistance to state and local agencies.
- Education/interpretation.

Public Use Opportunities

- 3/4 mile Dees Trail, 3/4 mile Fontainebleau Trail.
- Wildlife exhibits, video.
- Wildlife observation.
- Wildlife viewing.
- Photography.

Calendar of Events

January/February: Crane viewing tours, Sparrow Walk

April/May: Wildflower Walk

October: Open House, Wildflower Walk

Periodic birding events

Questions and Answers

Why are the sandhill cranes in Mississippi endangered when they are hunted in several western states?
The Mississippi sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis pulla*) is considered a separate and distinct subspecies which is non-migratory and on the brink of extinction.

Although once found along much of the central Gulf Coast, there were only 30-35 birds when the refuge was established in the 1970s. In contrast, some migratory sandhill crane subspecies sustain a huntable population level.

Why is hunting not allowed on the refuge?

Authorizing legislation in establishing the refuge specifically states recovery of endangered species as the primary purpose of the refuge. All other uses must be compatible with that purpose.

What is the purpose of this refuge, other than protecting endangered cranes?

In addition to protecting the highly endangered Mississippi sandhill crane, the management activities on the refuge restore and maintain the largest remaining patches of the unique and highly diverse wet pine savanna. This habitat has one of the highest plant diversities ever described at the ground level, including pitcher plants, sundews, other carnivorous plants, and several rare orchids. These savannas and open pinelands are home to several declining grassland bird species such as Henslow's sparrow, Bachman's sparrow, yellow rails, red-headed woodpeckers, and brown nuthatches. The refuge has been recognized as a Globally Important Bird Area.

The refuge provides several opportunities for recreation and education. Two nature trails provide hiking, wildlife observation, and photography. Local schools utilize the refuge as an outdoor classroom. The refuge hosts crane viewing tours, wildflower walks, and open house events. Refuge personnel and volunteers speak to several groups throughout the year and participate in special events like Earth Day and Migratory Bird Day festivals.

Does the use of fire on the refuge harm wildlife?

Fire used in the right manner is a valuable wildlife management tool. It plays an integral role in the recovery of the Mississippi sandhill crane by helping to restore and maintain diverse pine savanna habitats. Management for other threatened, endangered, or declining species is largely achieved by frequent fire.

Growth of pitcher plants and other savanna species is greatly stimulated by fire. Prescribed fire can convert thick dead undergrowth to succulent green vegetation that is utilized by many wildlife species such as deer, turkey, quail, and rabbit. Most animals are used to these fire-adapted landscapes and are not harmed by prescribed burns as they get out of the way by flying, burrowing, and climbing.

The fire program at the refuge is very large. It provides technical training and support to local fire departments and provides equipment and/or burning expertise to cooperators such as The Nature Conservancy, Stennis Space Center, State of Mississippi, and other refuges in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

How can I become involved in refuge activities?

Join the Southeast Wildlife Conservation Group. The \$20 annual dues help support refuge activities on the Gulf Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Membership application information can be found at:
www.southeastwildlifeconservation.org