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World Center for the Study and Preservation of Cranes

Counting Beyond Cranes: The Annual Midwest Crane Count

By Brian T. Barch, ICF Education Research Associate

“Why are we still counting cranes?”

After 30 years of the Annual Midwest Crane Count now is an excellent time to reflect on the program, and provide a more complete answer to this question. ICF received a 2004-2005 Wisconsin Environmental Education Board (WEEB) grant. In partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point (UWSP), we have been working on a project to explore and develop the Crane Count in greater depth.

The Crane Count is a citizen science tradition that takes place every April. It involves close to 3,000 volunteer participants spread through more than 100 counties in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, and Minnesota. These crane counters look and listen for both Sandhill and Whooping Cranes. They document their observations for two hours, and these observations are compiled in an ICF database.

As a citizen science program, the Crane Count actively

involves people in gathering scientific data concerning cranes. By doing so, Crane Count provides data and other opportunities unobtainable in any other way.

These data become increasingly useful as the Crane Count continues. They provide a long-term picture of abundance, distribution, and population trends. Linked to specific places, these data are often used by citizens concerned about the impact of development on cranes at a given location. They complement ICF’s crop damage studies, and help to demonstrate the relationship cranes have with their habitats. Crane counters report sightings of color-banded cranes, which is of considerable help to our other regional studies.

These are only some of the scientific benefits that arise through continuing the Crane Count. But what do the people involved get out of the project? Answering this question is just as important as the scientific elements of the Crane Count.




Each spring close to 3,000 volunteers participate in the Annual Midwest Crane Count. Here, a flock of Sandhills take off over Crex Meadows in northwest Wisconsin. Photo by Richard Anderson

As a part of the WEEB grant project, ICF queried a sample of participants. Most of the respondents have participated in Crane Count more than six times, frequently with friends or family. In addition to seeing cranes, they reported that strong motivations to count included experiencing the natural world, contributing to a conservation organization, and improving understanding of crane populations. For many counters surveyed, Crane Count has become a tradition. Interestingly, counters emphasized both the scientific accomplishments of the program as well as the intangible benefits of the experience - rather than focusing on only one aspect of the survey.

Looking to the future, questionnaire respondents supported a number of program improvements. Directly addressed in this project were the needs to make historic data more available in a readily accessible format, produce a Crane Count brochure, and develop "Crane Count in the Classroom: A Citizen Science Curriculum for Grades 6-8." Dedicated counters emphasized the significance of these data as well as how important the Crane Count experience is. ICF now has important input as it strengthens the project.

Through the generosity of the WEEB, and a productive partnership with the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point, the Crane Count can better support ICF's mission. ICF's role is to seek and support well-educated decisions by citizens, but not to dictate what those decisions will be.

Jeb Barzen, ICF's Field Ecology Director, in discussing the Crane Count recently commented, "Please understand that data do not make decisions. People do. Good decisions can arise when good data are available for effective input and discussion among people. Our wild resources depend upon both good data and good decisions." Crane counters gather good data. Crane counters can also provide input and discussion to guide those good decisions.

All this helps to explain why cranes, and their counters, still count. 

Get involved with Crane Count!

Volunteers are the most important part of this unique program, and we invite YOU to join over 3,000 other craniacs around the Midwest for the 2006 Crane Count. For more information, please contact the ICF Naturalist staff at 608.356.9462, extension 127 or at naturalists@savingcranes.org.

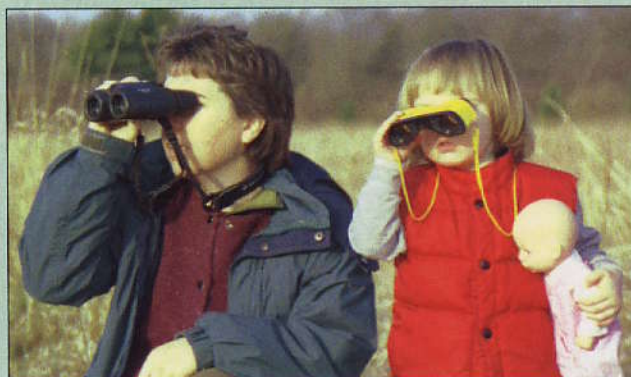


Photo by Bruce Stewart

North American Crane Shirts!



New in our web store, ICF is featuring these stunning cotton t-shirts. The front of the shirt depicts a pair of Sandhill Cranes and a lone Whooping Crane screen-printed in full color—inspired by the painting "North American Cranes" by nature artist Jay Jocham. Take advantage of the introductory price of \$16 for the short-sleeved and \$21 for the long-sleeved. Visit our secure web store to purchase - they won't last long!

www.savingcranes.org Click on SHOP.