

An Audubon of Kansas Position: Safeguards for Whooping Cranes Need to be Restored



Article and Photos by Ron Klataske

One of the most discouraging aspects of conservation advocacy is the fact that substantial successes seldom stand for long without attempts by other interests to dismantle them. That proved to be the case in 2012 when the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism's Secretary and the Commission chairman decided to scrap important safeguards for Whooping Cranes established by the KDWP Commission in 2005. The idea promoted and implemented was that change the shooting hours for Sandhill Cranes from "one-half hour after sunrise to 2 p.m." to make it now from "sunrise to sunset."

Following the shooting of three Whooping Cranes by a group of Sandhill Crane hunters near the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge in November 2004, the KDWP Commission modified the shooting hours to reduce the prospect going forward that hunters would again mistake the federally endangered Whooping Cranes for the more abundant Sandhill Cranes. The hunters claimed that they mistook the Whoopers for Sandhill Crane shooting around sunrise.

In 2005 the commission changed the daily opening of shooting hours from sunrise to a half hour after sunrise to provide for a bit more light on normal days. We urged that change in the regulations and applauded the commission's approval as a vital safeguard for Whooping Cranes. On many occasions when the glare of the early morning light is behind the birds they all appear as silhouettes. Aside from a difference in color with Sandhill Cranes generally gray with some brown coloration and adult Whooping Cranes white with black wingtips and juveniles modeled white and rusty, they fly the same and are shaped the same. They also roost in the same areas and frequently fly together.

Allowing shooting of Sandhill Cranes in low-light conditions in places where both species fly together and congregate to roost has been, and will again be in Kansas, an accident waiting to happen. In most cases mistakes, carelessness or vandalism of this nature are not discovered or revealed, but when it occurs it will be costly to our wildlife legacy and prospects for recovery of this endangered species. The approach to shooting a protected species is often half-jokingly characterized by the phrase, "shoot, shovel and shut up." Shoved into the reeds, the remains of even birds as large as these are dismembered, eaten and dispersed by scavengers within a night or a few days.

Collisions with powerlines are the largest known mortality factor for migrating Whooping Cranes. Intentional and accidental shooting is also a factor, possibly much greater than is known. Retaining the 2005 to 2011 shooting hours for Sandhill Cranes would have served to reduce the risk of mistaken identity by otherwise honorable (and KDWP&T sanctioned hunters) who cannot distinguish one crane silhouette from another and/or are overly anxious to shoot.

During the discussion at the April commission meeting it was argued by the two audience proponents (one a Wichita outdoor writer and the other a KWF spokesman) that mistakes like that aren't likely to occur again because everybody knows that Whooping Cranes are protected. And, in order to get a permit one has to pass an online questionnaire!

Confidence in the theory that these provisions will keep all hunters from becoming overly anxious was disproved within a couple weeks of the meeting. Tragically, two spring turkey hunters were

Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words.

— Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 1949

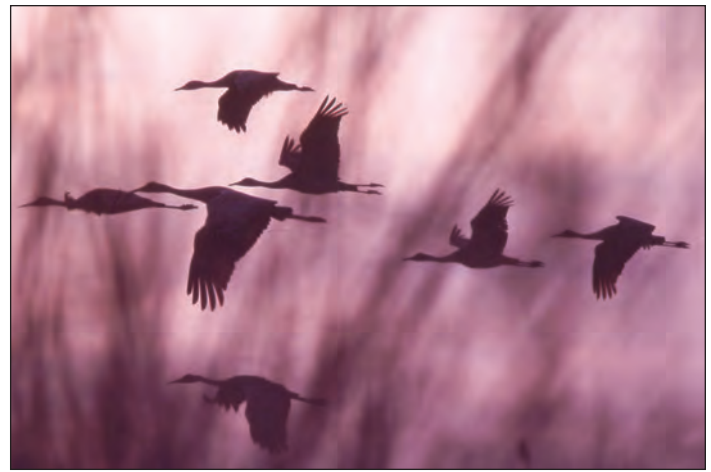
shot by their hunting companions when they mistook them for Wild Turkeys. One hunter was shot a second time, perceived to be a wounded turkey. One young hunter was killed. If tragedies of this magnitude cannot be prevented by mandatory hunter safety courses, how can we conclude that an online questionnaire will prevent the shooting of Whooping Cranes when shooting of Sandhill Cranes is allowed in low light conditions and/or when the birds are silhouettes against a sunrise or sunset?

The Audubon of Kansas Board of Trustees, several of whom are hunters and including two who are Life Members of the NRA, unanimously opposed the change. At the April meeting, Commission Chairman Gerald Lauder asked if the National Audubon Society was anti-hunting. Having worked for National Audubon for 28 years (1970-1998) I indicated that I only knew on one instance when that could be suggested. That was when Audubon opposed the suggestion of some entity that National Parks should be open to recreational hunting.

When it became clear in mid April that AOK and others were going to oppose the change in shooting hours, KDWP&T proponents sought and received on the day of the commission meeting, letters of endorsement from the Kansas Farm Bureau and the Kansas Livestock Association. At the June commission meeting, two commissioners (Debra Bolton and Donald Budd, Jr.) voted to keep the safeguards in place. The five others voted to implement the proposed sunrise to sunset shooting.

Although the thought was that sunrise to sunset shooting would provide more shooting opportunity for Sandhill Crane hunters, it may prove to diminish hunting opportunities in Kansas. With few places to retreat to rest and roost, more of the Sandhill Cranes may be forced to continue their migration earlier.

In the case of Sandhill Crane hunting, I submit that it is wrong for our state agency to permit and even encourage crane shooting in Cheyenne Bottoms proper or on the "shooting line" that is set up on the edge to take birds as they arrive or leave. Shooting cranes at wetland



Crane silhouettes, one view of cranes flying by a hunting blind at sunrise or sunset.

roosting sites is done without respect for this wildlife resource, and in the case of sunrise to sunset shooting hours without concern for either of our crane species. However, since it is now promoted by KDWP&T it isn't against the law. But, we would submit, it is a crime!

There are only a few places--wetlands with shallow waters--in Kansas that are suitable as roosting habitat for thousands of Sandhill Cranes, and Whooping Cranes. The places that are relatively undisturbed are fewer still. Aside from the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, Cheyenne Bottoms is the best available potential roosting and loafing area and it is publically owned by the agency charged by statutes with safeguarding wildlife in the public trust.

The "utilitarian-only" perspective is not entirely new. In 1949 Aldo Leopold wrote that, "Wildlife administrators are too busy producing something to shoot at to worry much about the cultural value of the shooting." Declining revenues due to declining resident game habitat and populations, and declining numbers of hunters, may be a motivation for the agency's quest to promote more shooting opportunities. No investment required.

Without a doubt, Ding Darling and Aldo Leopold would be appalled by the institutional abandonment of the philosophies of conservation and hunting ethics that they instilled in a generation of wildlife professionals and sportsmen. Along with their outdoorsmanship, these philosophies were foundational to their inspirational writings and careers.

Needless to say, the legacy of Audubon advocacy to "Save Cheyenne Bottoms" or sixty years of crane conservation work carries little currency with current KDWP&T leadership. With Audubon opposition to changes in shooting hours, and advocacy of more focus for tourism on the staging of Whooping Cranes during the fall migration, it wasn't surprising that no Audubon representatives were asked to be directly involved in the Eco-tourism Task Force.

We are not sure what can be done to achieve restoration of Whooping Crane safeguards? But we do believe that it is appropriate for constituents to share their perspectives with Governor Brownback, and those who succeed him. Perseverance is a prerequisite for the conservation community, not just in one generation but for generations.



Whooping Cranes on a migratory stop in Kansas.