

GUEST ESSAY

What We Can Learn From This Magnificent Migration

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NASHVILLE — Last week, waking up on the day my husband and I planned to visit Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, outside Decatur, Ala., my very first thought was, “Today I get to see the cranes!” I don’t remember the first time I heard the distinctive burbling cry of the sandhill cranes rolling overhead during the spring migration, but I’ve been looking for a free winter morning to see those cranes up close ever since. Immense flocks of sandhills — 15,000 at Wheeler alone — spend winter at several wildlife refuges within a few hours’ drive of Nashville.

The trailer for “Wings Over Water,” a short film released last year and still playing in IMAX and giant-screen theaters, brought the cranes back to the top of my wish list. Gorgeous footage captures the crucial role that North American prairie wetlands play in the lives of both humans and birds, including the sandhill crane.

Cranes look like prehistoric creatures, and indeed, the majestic sandhills — standing nearly four feet tall and mostly gray, with a startling crimson crown — are among Earth’s oldest bird species. And one potential bonus of seeing sandhills in winter is that highly endangered whooping cranes, the only other crane native to North America, migrate with them, overwintering in the same wetlands.

Whooping cranes declined so precipitously during the last century that the total population once numbered only 21 birds. They are now protected by the federal Endangered Species Act. Two recognized subspecies, the Mississippi sandhill crane and the Cuban sandhill crane, are also endangered, largely because of habitat loss. But overall, the sandhill cranes are in good shape, for now, numbering some 650,000, according to the American Bird Conservancy, and their numbers are increasing.

One of winter’s greatest pleasures is the way birds flock up when the territorialism of nesting season gives way to the need for safety (and, for songbirds, warmth). Gathering in great numbers sets many avian eyes and ears to the problem of detecting predators, simultaneously reducing the odds that any one bird will be picked off. Predators, of course, know exactly where they will find prey — that’s why bald eagle populations increase around wetlands where cranes and shorebirds overwinter — but for defenseless birds, combining forces when the trees are bare is a way to compensate for a season offering fewer places to hide.

As we were driving south on I-65 heading for Wheeler, my husband noticed a murmuration of starlings in the distance, and reflexively I reached into the back seat for my binoculars. No binoculars and no camera with the zoom lens, either. Both were still on the kitchen table.

No matter. I went mainly for the collective anyway. I'm a hopeless sap for collaboration in every possible expression — orchestra and choral performances always bring tears to my eyes — and the starlings did not disappoint. Swirling and wheeling, the flock first appeared as a dark cloud on a sunny day. Then it reshaped itself into a trapezoid, reformed again as a rolling wave and finally as a river that poured out of view as we drove.

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge is a 35,000-acre sanctuary that encompasses both banks of the Tennessee River. The refuge includes a vast range of habitats: bottomland hardwood forests and upland piney woods, open water and open fields, creeks and rivers, shorelines and sloughs, backwater and embayments. All are managed to provide habitat for a range of creatures, migratory and resident: 115 species of fish, 74 species of reptiles and amphibians, 47 species of mammals and more than 300 species of birds. Wheeler is the easternmost national sanctuary of the Mississippi flyway, the great migratory corridor that runs up the center of the country.

The refuge also includes 3,500 acres of cropland planted by local farmers growing corn on shares. During the harvest, farmers leave part of their crop in the fields as food for cranes and other birds. But it's primarily the wide range of wetland habitats that brings the cranes to North Alabama. An enormous array of life depends on wetland ecosystems, but we are losing wetland habitats even faster than we are losing the rainforest, according to the Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, a national nonprofit that works to safeguard vulnerable reptile and amphibian species, in part by protecting or restoring the habitats they depend on.

Despite the large number of reptiles and amphibians that call Wheeler home, all the people we met were clearly there for the cranes. The visitor center (which is currently closed for renovations) and its immediate environs are set up to make viewing the cranes and other waterfowl as convenient as possible, with a wildlife observation building and a giant wildlife photography blind. The place was crawling with people carrying camera lenses as long as my arm.

Having no camera and no binoculars, we simply stood at the water's edge and watched. A man equipped with a long lens told us there was a whooping crane among the nearest group of birds, and I looked hard for it in that huge flock. I believe I saw it when a group of cranes lifted into the air — from a distance, one bird seemed whiter and slightly larger than the others — but of course, I couldn't be sure.

In the end, I didn't mind that I had neither camera nor binoculars. I found what I came for: the heart-lifting sight of thousands of birds in perfect community. New groups kept flying in to join the waders, while other groups rose together to move just slightly farther down the shore. My husband kept laughing at their ungainly landings, but all I could see was the magnificent way they moved in concert — stalking knee-deep across the water, advancing in the same direction; burbling and rattling as they headed toward the same area; rising and banking, their elegant necks outstretched, their wide wings turned at exactly the same angle, glinting in the sun. The starlings above the highway were a lovely warm-up act for the sandhill cranes.

Not everybody rejoices in the flocking behavior of birds. Perhaps Hitchcock's celebrated horror film released 60 years ago this year turned generations of moviegoers against birds forever. Maybe it's only that large numbers of birds produce large amounts of droppings. But think of those extravagant murmurations of starlings, the way they draw swirling pictures in the air: It's impossible not to marvel at their beauty. Watch a falcon enter the frame and the way the birds fly more closely together at the edges of the collective, and suddenly those murmurations are more than beautiful.

Or think about the way migrating cranes take turns flying at the head of the group, sharing the wearying responsibility of fighting air currents and allowing the others to draft. Think of how they show the younger birds the way to their nesting grounds, following the same routes toward home. How is it not possible to find a lesson here for our own kind?

Birds don't exist to teach us anything — they have their own purposes and their own complicated lives — but we are fools if we can't learn something important for our purposes, too, for our own complicated lives, in their dazzling, life-sustaining cooperation. How sensible it is for a fragile species, having no fangs and no claws, to share resources. How wise to turn to one another for help.

Already the sandhill cranes at Wheeler are beginning to disperse. Every day now, groups of them open their impossibly wide wings and rise as one. They bank and turn and keep rising, heading north. For the rest of winter and on into early spring, they will pass over Nashville, calling to one another as they fly. Earthbound, I'll be listening.

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