



Melvin's Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*): An iconic migratory species returns to the Atlantic Seaboard

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ABSTRACT

In November 2014, independent observers in five northeastern states documented the migratory flight of 24 Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) along the Atlantic seaboard of North America, the largest flight of that species recorded in the region in over 200 years. The breeding location of these cranes was discovered in 2000 by Dr. Scott Melvin and monitored for more than a decade, but their migratory route was unknown until now. Tragically, he passed away in July 2014 and did not live to witness the historic flight. Now that the route and timing of the fall migration of Melvin's Sandhill Cranes has been documented for the first time, birdwatchers of the eastern shore may (with any luck) monitor their movements in subsequent years, and in so doing honor his memory.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) is a large, charismatic species in the bird family Gruidae that once migrated in large flocks along the Atlantic Seaboard of North America (e.g. Kalm 1770, Barton 1799). The species rapidly disappeared from the eastern shore during the early 19th century, and breeding populations were extirpated by the time that northeastern states began compiling official checklists (e.g. Coues 1883, Brewster 1901, LeTourneau and Morrier 1993). Approximately 200 years later, Melvin (2002) published the first unambiguous breeding records of Sandhill Cranes in Maine and New England. He proposed that their recolonization of the region after such a long absence was prompted by an increase in the population of the mid-west subspecies *G. c. tabida* and its subsequent eastward range expansion (e.g. Drewien and Lewis 1987, Lovvorn and Kirkpatrick 1982, Tacha et al. 1992). Melvin (2002) wrote, "Whether an actual population of breeding Sandhill Cranes becomes established in Maine or elsewhere in New England remains to be seen." Scott Melvin passed away on July 11, 2014, by which time the population had grown to approximately 30 individuals. Nothing is yet known of the timing and routes of their migration, or their wintering locations.

In late November 2014, independent observers in five states (Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania) documented the southbound migration of a migratory flock of 24 Sandhill Cranes from their breeding ground in southern Maine — near the site of Melvin's (2002) discovery — south along the Atlantic Seaboard (Fig. 1). To my knowledge, it was the largest migratory flight of Sandhill Cranes reported along the northeastern coast of North America in two centuries.

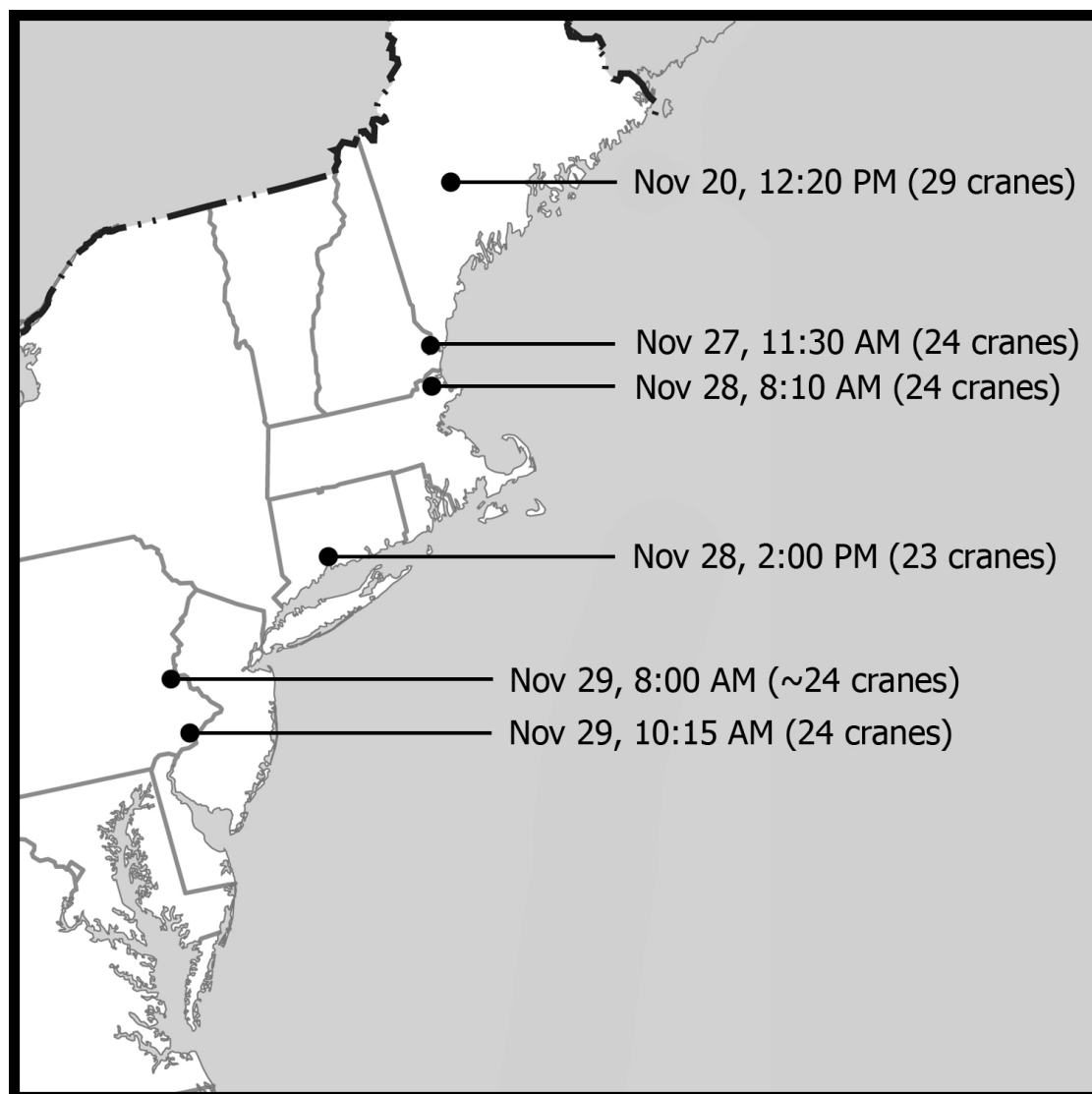


Figure 1. Map of the northern Atlantic Seaboard of the United States, with date, time, and location of six independent observations of a large flock of Sandhill Cranes, November 20–29, 2014.

OBSERVATIONS

NOVEMBER 20, 12:20PM

Louis Bevier of Fairfield, ME, observed and photographed a flock of 29 Sandhill Cranes in Norridgewock, ME (<http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S20616325>). He wrote: "Max count of flock here, presumably the same 27 plus a couple from Route 2 field. Report by a local says that exactly 30 are around. Photos show all 29."

On December 1, Bevier posted to the Maine Birds listserv: "Although I wasn't around, I do know that the big flock of Sandhill Cranes lingering in Somerset Co., Maine, was present into the week of Thanksgiving. On Wednesday night the 26th, the entire area where these cranes roost and spend the day foraging was blanketed with over a foot of snow. It makes a lot of sense that Jason Lambert's sighting in New Hampshire would be this group pulling up stakes and dragging the kids south for the winter. The flock included at least 6 immature birds (possibly a few more) in family groups, and the

cranes tended to move in one group of 24 and another of 5 during movements to and from their roosting site. We think the large flock in Somerset County is likely local breeders and their young, mainly because they have had this pattern of foraging in the pastures and cornfields here and then moving to the same roosting area over several years."

NOVEMBER 27, 11:30AM

Mike Thompson and Jason Lambert observed a flock of 24 Sandhill Cranes in Hampton, NH. (<http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S20714322>.) They wrote: "Exceptional count for NH and getting pretty late. Initially heard, but admittedly took a while to place the vocalization. I can't say it was something I was expecting to hear in late November in NH. The flock appeared over the trees from the west and circled towards the south. They were in view for several minutes, allowing for a frantic run back to the car for the camera. Possibly some of the large flock from Maine? Almost certainly the same flock seen in Newburyport, MA the following morning and later that afternoon in New Haven, CT."

NOVEMBER 28, 8:15AM

Derek Lovitch observed a flock of 24 Sandhill Cranes in Newburyport, MA, and at 9:00am his sighting was posted to the Mass Bird Listserv via Steve Grinley: "Derek Lovitch left a message at 8:13 am that approximately 24 SANDHILL CRANES flew over Route 95 at mile marker 85.3 just near the Newburyport border as he and Jeannette were riding north. The birds appeared to have taken off from a field on the east side of the road that contain about 1000 Canada geese [Common Pastures?]. Derek said that the birds were flying low, in a southerly direction, and couldn't tell if they were leaving the area or if they might put down elsewhere else."

NOVEMBER 28, 2:00PM

Rev. Dana L. Cambell, Don Morgan, Jim Cortina, and Sulemann Kahn observed a flock of 24 Sandhill Cranes from the Lighthouse Point Park Hawkwatch in New Haven, CT. Later that day, Morgan recalled the excitement of the moment in a post on the CT Birds listserv: "...we spotted a flock of "Canada Geese" up high against a cloud. But they didn't look or act like Canadas. At first just a bunch of birds - no line or "V" formation, and they were flying strangely, bobbing around a bit. When we got scopes on them it became apparent they were NOT Canada Geese. I remember saying "They CAN'T be Sandhill Cranes. They ARE Sandhill Cranes!" After several quick counts, 23 of them! There was no doubt, easily visible in the scopes although too far for pictures (I tried but the camera wouldn't focus on them). After we first saw them they did form a couple of loose lines before heading a little to the north and directly across New Haven harbor."

NOVEMBER 29, 8:00AM

Boomer M. Wadařka of Levittown, PA, observed "about two dozen" Sandhill Cranes at Nockamixon State Park, PA. Boomer wrote privately to the author (MRH): "I thought we were being invaded by Pterodactyls when they flew over Nockamixon State Park...I'm used to seeing herons here but they usually fly solo."

NOVEMBER 29, 10:15AM

The author (MRH) and Randy Philips observed a flock of 24 Sandhill Cranes in Philadelphia, PA, and subsequently posted the following to the DVOG facebook page [sic]: "This morning at 10:15, a flock of ~24 SANDHILL CRANES (!!!!) flew over East Park reservoir and turned west, flying west along the Schuylkill. I was at Sedgely Woods, near the old Cliffs estate. The flock flew directly over my head in a chevron shape, calling loudly as they passed. I had some friends who were on the other side of the forest who also saw the cranes, and celebrated with me when we met back up. The birds were about

10-15m above our heads when they passed over, and then slowly gained altitude as they flew upriver."

IN MEMORIAM: SCOTT MERRILL MELVIN (1953–2014)

Dr. Scott Melvin was a leading expert on the migration ecology of the Sandhill Crane, that had conducted his masters and doctoral research on that topic at the University of Wisconsin. On December 1, his friend and colleague Louis Bevier wrote, "Sadly, the person who knew these New England Sandhill Cranes best and would have taken great delight in this story passed away over the summer. Scott Melvin found and described the first nest in New England (Melvin 2002). Scott tracked the population increase in Maine and returned here every year to follow his favorite birds. We often wondered about where the Maine population wintered, and this story would have intrigued him." Donations in his memory may be sent to the International Crane Foundation (<https://www.savingcranes.org>).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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