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Why Support a Sandhill Crane Hunt in Wisconsin, Even if You'll Never Hunt One

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To be clear, the Wisconsin Waterfowl Association supports an ethical and science-based hunt of the Sandhill Crane (SHC) in Wisconsin. And now, there has now been legislation introduced in Madison that would initiate the process to get such a hunt approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Biologists will tell us that science supports such a hunt here, as it has elsewhere around the continent. But there are high emotions and now, strong political overtones surrounding the proposal. Whether you're a hunter or not, here's why you might consider supporting the proposal.

The federal population goal for the group of sandhill cranes found in Wisconsin is 30,000 birds. The upper limit (ostensibly, the carrying capacity) was deemed to be 60,000 birds. The current population numbers for Wisconsin's sub-species stands at 95,000 and has averaged 9% growth per year (2000 vs-2021 data). As a result, these birds are having a significant impact on the state's agriculture. Indeed, it was concern for Wisconsin farmers, not hunting opportunity, that led to this proposal.

That said, the sandhill crane is a valued game bird across the continent. Some who are new to this topic may think Wisconsin is leading the way on this issue. But this legislation does not introduce the concept of a SHC hunt for the very first time in this nation. Indeed, sandhills have been hunted in the U.S. for the past fifty years. Seventeen states and four Canadian provinces allow harvest of the bird. And although the Obama administration and US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) made Wisconsin eligible for a crane hunt in 2010, there has been only one legislative action to take up this opportunity—and that never got out of Assembly committee.



In the modern era of hunting, sandhill cranes are managed by the USFWS in the context of the international Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This act seeks to protect the health of the species across their continental range. In this broader context, the USFWS authorized hunting of sandhills in 1961. There are 1.1 million sandhill cranes in the US, according to the latest USFWS survey. Interestingly, two International Crane Foundation staff were on the team that developed the management plan for the Wisconsin SHC sub-species back in 2011 (which made Wisconsin eligible for such a hunt), as was the WI Department of Natural Resource's (WDNR) Migratory Bird Specialist.

Even if the legislature passes such a bill, the DNR must develop and submit a 7-step proposal, the USFWS must consider it, and if approved, the WDNR must implement the necessary steps to comply with federal expectations. Only then will sandhill cranes be able to be legally hunted in the state; that'll likely take a 2-3 year span.

Motivations swirl around the topic of a Sandhill Crane Hunt

Unfortunately, the proposal was introduced with a lot of political overtones, which has not been particularly helpful to focusing on the science-based merits of such a hunt. And even without the overt politics surrounding the introduction of the bill, there would be strong opinions.

There are many motivations for either supporting or opposing a SHC hunt. Organizations or individuals may oppose the hunting any living creature, or they may want to reap political benefit from the divisiveness of this topic, or they may want to grow organizational membership, or raise funds that follow controversies, or support agricultural producers that are being hurt by the very large SHC population. Of course, WWA is not immune to such parochial motivations, but we want to be clear about ours.

After nearly a year of research and discussion with the stakeholders on all sides of this issue, the 7,000-member WWA supports an ethical and science-based hunt of SHC because:

- 94% of our polled membership told us they wanted us to explore such a possibility.
- It presents a long-established and legal hunting opportunity for the state's hunters.
- Science tells us a well-managed hunt will have NO significant impact on the species.
- History shows that migratory game birds benefit from the attentions of conservation-minded hunters.
- Ceding this decision to emotion-based, anti-hunting sentiment establishes a disturbing precedent for the state's constitutionally protected right to hunt, and will ultimately diminish the overwhelming conservation benefit hunters bring to the state and nation.

On what basis should we make such decisions about hunting?

I recently read an opinion piece from a bird organization's board member who is a hunter. At risk of oversimplifying, he more-or-less said that hunters don't need to hunt SHC. The SHC has a storied past and are magnificent creatures, he said. He thought that hunters should respect that there is a lot of emotional support for the crane and just let go of this hunting opportunity.

I appreciate that this author wanted to avoid alienating non- and anti-hunters. I started my research on this topic about a year ago by reaching out to the leaders of organizations that



might come down on the other side of the issue, like the International Crane Foundation and Madison Audubon. It was my hope that together we could avoid wasting limited conservation energy from a circular firing squad on something that will have NO conservation impact on the Wisconsin landscape. There are many more truly significant conservation issues that we should be facing together, shoulder-to-shoulder.

But now, as a leader of a hunting conservation organization, my thinking on this sandhill crane topic

revolves around this question: **“On what basis should we make such decisions about hunting?” What does it mean for hunting to be protected in the state’s constitution if an abundant game species--successfully managed at the federal level, and with Wisconsin population far exceeding management goals--is disallowed for emotional reasons by non- or anti-hunters?**

The sandhill crane is a beautiful animal with a storied past to be sure. But so is the wood duck, the deer, and the turkey. The slope looks awfully slippery to me.

To the degree our society eschews science to make emotionally based decisions on hunting, there will be an erosion of hunter commitment to such species. And to the environment

that sustains them from which all of society benefits. Ignoring the science unnecessarily expands the divide between hunters and non-hunters, making future collaborations on far more significant issues that much more difficult.

Some might snicker at the idea that hunting a game bird might be good for the species, but data supports this claim. In a peer-reviewed meta-study published recently in the journal *Science*, virtually every single bird species in North America is down a cumulative total of nearly 3 billion. In that same timeframe, waterfowl are the only group of bird species that are up an astounding 56%.

We might ask ourselves why are these particular game birds thriving? Indeed, one of the authors of that study suggested “success in waterfowl management can point the way forward” in addressing the decline in other bird species.

For my entire duck hunting life, I have witnessed the scientifically-informed management of waterfowl that includes research into their lifecycle and annual population surveys to inform acceptable harvest levels. I’ve gotten my fingernails dirty in the off-season to improve local habitat. I’ve been one of the tens (hundreds?) of thousands of volunteers who have raised billions of dollars to fund the research and wetland restorations that are the real key to species thriving across their range.

Most recently, I’m proud to say that WWA was a leader in the push to increase the cost of the state’s waterfowl stamp that every waterfowler in the state must purchase, so there will be even more funding available for wetland habitat restoration. 85-95% of waterfowlers supported this fee increase, but it took over 10 years to convince politicians this was the right thing to do. It is this sustained hunter commitment that has yielded the positive results noted in the afore-mentioned study.

You may have heard the old saw: how a chicken ***cares*** about, while a hog is ***committed to***, a bacon-and-eggs breakfast. We all care about the birds we see in our yards or fields. But in overwhelming numbers, bird hunters consistently commit time, talent, and treasure to the creatures they respect as renewable bounty of the land. And migratory game bird species have thrived -- far more than the birds you and I feed in our back yards. Our hope is that non-hunting conservationists will take this truth to heart.

You don't have to take our word for it. Here are the words of Cornell Ornithologists Drs Fitzpatrick and Marra, commenting in the NYTimes on the 2019 meta study that revealed the shocking decline of North American bird populations: "Fortunately, it's not all bad news. Populations of North American ducks and geese have grown by 56 percent since 1970, according to the Science paper, and this is not an accident. During the first half of the 20th century, hunters became deeply concerned about declines in duck populations every bit as severe as those we're witnessing among common songbirds today. The United States and Canada responded with laws to protect wetlands and collaborated with Mexico to safeguard migrating waterfowl. Conservation management became increasingly driven by

science. Private philanthropy, especially by Ducks Unlimited, generated significant financial support for wetlands acquisitions. Millions of additional acres of wetlands were restored and protected by the federal and state governments. The result: Waterfowl populations are booming today."

A SHC hunt in Wisconsin is NOT an issue of conservation concern. But we fear that tribal reactions to this flash point will get in the way of important future collaborations between hunter and non-hunter conservationists. Reaching across divides to find common ground on conservation issues that truly matter should be our collective focus. But this will require enlightened leadership that's willing to risk the wrath of tribal echo-chambers by leading, not following, those voices.