

# Crane Time

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Received November 2023

Accepted for publication November 2023

Published May 2024

## Abstract

This essay is a pedagogical parable. It tells a poignant story of transformative learning in community and immersed in place. Sometimes we struggle to achieve new learning and insight. It requires patience, discipline, and determination. And then, somewhat miraculously, when both internal and external conditions are just right, a fog can lift that allows us to see through new eyes. Something of profound beauty emerges, which as it turns out, much to our wonderment, has in fact been there all along. This is “Crane Time.”

- Paul Freedman

**Keywords:** *place based education, transformative learning, experimental education, cranes*

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At 4:45 in the morning, I looked out over a questionable scene. Brooke, a former student, and I had planned to meet at the gate of Rowe Sanctuary this mid-March morning to see if we could see some migrating cranes. For the last two days I'd been trying to convince my fellow educational researcher, who had no interest in birds and didn't know, nor probably cared, about the difference between a Sandhill Crane and sparrow, to come along to see the potential spectacle of the Spring Sandhill migration in Nebraska. Brooke told me seeing the cranes this early was a gamble but I'd gone ahead and spent most of whatever friendly respect and social capital I had on a venture this morning.

We'd driven to Rowe Sanctuary on the Platte River in Eastern Nebraska. The sanctuary had only one access road, a mile or so in, where a group of five wooden blinds, long thin unpainted wooden buildings with a door facing the road, and a long series of shuttered windows controlled by ropes and pulleys looking out on to a narrow open oxbow in the Platte River.

It was still dark when Brooke met us at the heavy gate and I held a flashlight so she could get her keychain up to the lock, get the right key, and release the hasp so we could push the gate aside and enter. This was the only date I had as Miles (co-researcher) and I were on a two-day visit to a series of five rural schools in Eastern Nebraska.

The wind woke me up twice overnight and it was cold in the room when I got up. Strong winds from the north and cold temperatures were probably not going to make for an ideal day for viewing birds. Brooke had already told me that numbers were still low on the sanctuary and these strong cold winds had been hanging around for a while, keeping the numbers low. This weather pattern was probably keeping the cranes south waiting until the weather improved.

Sandhill cranes are very large, they dwarf a great blue heron. They stand nearly five and a half feet high with long graceful wings. They are famous not only for their migration, but also for the mating ritual that involves an intricate graceful dance where the pair prance, intertwine their necks and bounce ten or twelve feet in the air. They also have a stirring trumpet of a voice that sounds like something that came straight out of the Pleistocene epoch. It is a haunting and unmistakable call.

I'd seen Sandhills before in Central Florida (a separate population on the east coast flyway) and I'd also run into some of this Midwestern population in Aransas National Wildlife Refuge just south of Corpus Christi in Texas and also, in all places, Big Bend National Park on the northern edge of Chihuahuan Desert. I spotted a flight of seven Sandhills gliding up the thermals a mile and a half above sea level in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend.

Along with their size and voice, there are two other notable attributes of the Sandhill and their close relative, the Whooping Crane. The bi-annual Crane migration takes them North to South across almost all of North America. The Midwestern populations leave their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America in spring and move

north to their nesting grounds in the High Arctic on Hudson Bay. These flyways, often navigated at night using stars, probably date back into the Ice Ages as cranes looked for areas to safely raise young.

Their migration covers some 3,500 miles each way. The Platte River is a little less than half-way but many cranes come to Rowe nonstop from Central America. They then start off another non stop to the High Arctic nesting grounds. Central Nebraska, home to many hog farms, has an abundant source of corn left in the fields after harvest. The other notable attribute of the cranes are their numbers. Rowe Sanctuary has recorded upwards of 350,000 Sandhills spilling out of the little oxbow on the Platte River right in front of the narrow wooden blind with shutters where we were huddled in the cold.

All of this information fueled the gamble I took with Miles that morning. Maybe, only a few cranes would show up, but maybe...

I was definitely having some questions about my gamble as I pulled my woolen cap down over my ears with the cold wind still blowing through the open shutters in the blind. At 5:00 a.m., I could see a faint glow rising in the East. I wasn't sure it was really the sun coming up, I just might have just wanted the sun to be rising and some more warmth. Brooke chatted with us about reports she'd gotten over the last week about the cranes and their whereabouts. A couple of hog farmers with harvested corn fields had seen a few small groups but there was very little activity on the sanctuary itself. As Brooke talked, I tried to ask some tactful questions to prepare Miles for what seemed like an impending disappointment when the sun did finally rise.

Actually looking at Miles, I couldn't tell if he was still awake. He'd warned me ahead of time that he wasn't a "morning person." He was currently folded up into the corner of the blind, trying to stay warm, or sleep, or both. Brooke and I caught up on some of the students from our program as we waited for the sun. The sanctuary was deathly silent. I imagined any birds that were around were hunkered down into some protected corner like Miles. Eventually, when we ran out of people to talk about, Brooke added matter-of-factly, "Gee, we usually have a Great Horned Owl or Barred Owl calling this early. I don't hear anything today." Clearly, the signs weren't good. The cold prairie wind beat against the shudders of our blind.

Fifteen minutes later, still chilly and cold, I had to clear the tears from my eyes when I brought up binoculars to scan. The sun was clearly rising and gradually I could make out a gray smoky fog or mist coming off the Platte and getting caught in the branches of the trees near the river bank. I could just begin to make out some long indistinct shapes or lines that seemed to run along the fetch of the river. It was an unusual time to be out and it was really beautiful out there. I reassured myself that even if we were too early for the cranes, it was nice to be out here this early in the day.

I had some lingering guilt about the pep talk I'd given Miles a couple of times in the days before we set out on our adventure. It is hard not to overemphasize the extraordinary numbers of cranes that have been recorded. Who wouldn't want to see that many cranes? I knew when I told him that "we might be too early and might not see any cranes," – these words would float away on the wind. I hoped that what would stick was the possibility of seeing thousands of dancing, trumpeting birds that were only here for a little while each Spring.

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Time moved on; the trails of smoke coming off the river began to stretch out down the flow of the river and up into the trees on the bank. The rising sun cut into the chilly wind. I could feel it was probably going to be a warm day by the time we got to our appointment at 11:00 a.m. I helped Miles adjust his binoculars correctly and went over aiming them and focusing them should anything come into view. I struggled to stay with the plan. "Maybe we should just abandon this and go hunt up a really good breakfast," I said to myself. I thought a good breakfast might help Miles forget the whole episode. As with all natural history viewing, they can be fantastic when things show up but a stunning flop when they don't. I was new to Crane time, but I'd been teaching outdoors long enough to stick with it for another fifteen minutes. I'd suffered through enough failures to wait a little longer. I comforted myself with the thought that though it might be cold, at least it wasn't raining.

Brooke's tone wasn't encouraging. She seemed like she was getting more and more resigned as the long narrow shapes out in front of the blinds were still undefinable and had become only a little less washed out, even through my binoculars. They looked as if they were covered with willows or other scrubby bushes. I kept one eye on the clock throughout our adventure and it was almost 7:00 a.m. Miles and I needed to leave between 7:30 a.m. and 7:45 a.m. to have time for breakfast before our scheduled meetings. The sun was now a yellow disk with waves of smoky clouds passing over it. "This is a beautiful sunrise!" Miles said with enthusiasm. The brightness in his voice allowed me to release some of my guilt about suggesting this wild goose chase to the wind.

Gradually around 6:45 a.m., there was enough light to start to see some details closer to the

water. The heat of the sun burned the fog away. I got my binoculars up and scanned over the water to see if I could see any signs of movement or maybe just a few cranes roosting so I could point them out to Miles. I scanned but saw nothing. Brooke and Miles had nothing to report either. The bank and river were clearing off by the minute. If there were cranes out there, we probably had our best chance to see them in the next ten or fifteen minutes.

I was feeling more desperate as I continued to scan. I scolded myself. "What were you thinking? We get up at 4:30 a.m. to see absolutely nothing." Suddenly, I heard a Carolina Wren and then a Purple Finch calling. I quickly pointed them out to Miles.

Then suddenly, I saw something else moving on the sandbar in front of me and then heard the distinctive trumpet of a crane calling not far away. Without any warning at all, every inch of the sandbars and shoreline started to move and come to life. What I'd mistakenly taken as willows covering the sandbars were in fact Sandhill cranes packed shoulder to shoulder, possibly making their own windbreak? In a few seconds, I'd gone from a desperate search for just one crane to the realization that there were hundreds, probably thousands, of silent motionless cranes just a stone's throw in front of us. I glanced over at Miles, he was swiveling back and forth with his binoculars trying to capture the sheer number of cranes that had just appeared.

Cranes were everywhere. The river was suddenly a gigantic exercise class for migrating cranes. Everywhere birds were slowly coming to life, stretching, craning their necks, extending their long wings, and shaking out a creak or two in their hollow bones. They bounced, trumpeted, clapped

their bills together, generally shaking off the cold. There were so many cranes that most of the river had disappeared. The whole frame of the blind was filled with bouncing cranes flying up ten feet testing the air and then gracefully drifting down to earth. The trumpeting chorus was stunning.

As the sun burned through the mist, more cranes emerged. As far back as I could see were solid cranes, a half a mile, maybe more, waking cranes shifting and swaying, warming themselves in the rising sun. Brooke said, "Wow! There are a lot of cranes out there!" I asked her as I scanned back and forth over the mass, "Do you have any idea of how many we are looking at? Ten, maybe twelve, thousand?" Brooke answered quickly, "Easily ten, probably closer to fifteen thousand, and it looks like more could probably be in the river as part of the reach is blocked off from us at this blind." The conversation in the blind had dwindled down to breathless sighs and a group of meaningless superlatives, "Incredible!" Unbelievable! "Did you see. . .?" "Totally Amazing. . .!" These exclamations weren't addressed to anyone in particular, they floated out randomly into the ether joining the chorus of cranes.

I'd never seen anything to compare to this experience. Five hundred, far away snow geese on Lake Champlain seemed small in comparison. The cranes were right in front of us and active. It was like a light switch suddenly turned on and islands just started swaying, dancing and the trumpets came out. Time flew by. Very suddenly it was 8:45 a.m. I reported the time to Miles who immediately offered to give up breakfast for more time in the blind. I agreed.

## Author Bio

**Ben Williams** received his EdD from Harvard Graduate School of Education. He taught for many years at Goddard College and Union Institute and University. With his wife, Libby Case, Ben taught with the Audubon Expedition Institute, converting a school bus and travelling the country and building his seemingly endless trove of hilarious and profound place-based learning adventures. Ben saw every experience as an opportunity to teach and equally an opportunity to learn. He never hesitated to give those around him his full attention. Conversation, storytelling, music, and humor were the food for his soul, allowing him to create community and a sense of place no matter where he was. Ben Williams passed away on October 21, 2023.