

# Monitoring Sandhill Cranes

## On the Douglas Lake Plateau

*Alan Burger – Nicola Naturalist Society*

Few wildlife experiences in the BC Interior are as thrilling as hundreds of Sandhill Cranes taking flight and circling overhead, with their bugling calls and elegant flight filling the air. The Douglas Lake Plateau near Merritt is a major stop-over site for the cranes that pass through on the interior flyway. The late Rick Howie estimated that up to 25,000 cranes stop over on their spring northward migration. The importance to cranes was a major reason why this area was declared an Important Bird & Biodiversity Area (IBA) more than 20 years ago. At 1,552 square km, this is the largest inland IBA in BC. The Nicola Naturalist Society, based in Merritt, is

the custodian of this IBA, along with the Kamloops Naturalist Club.

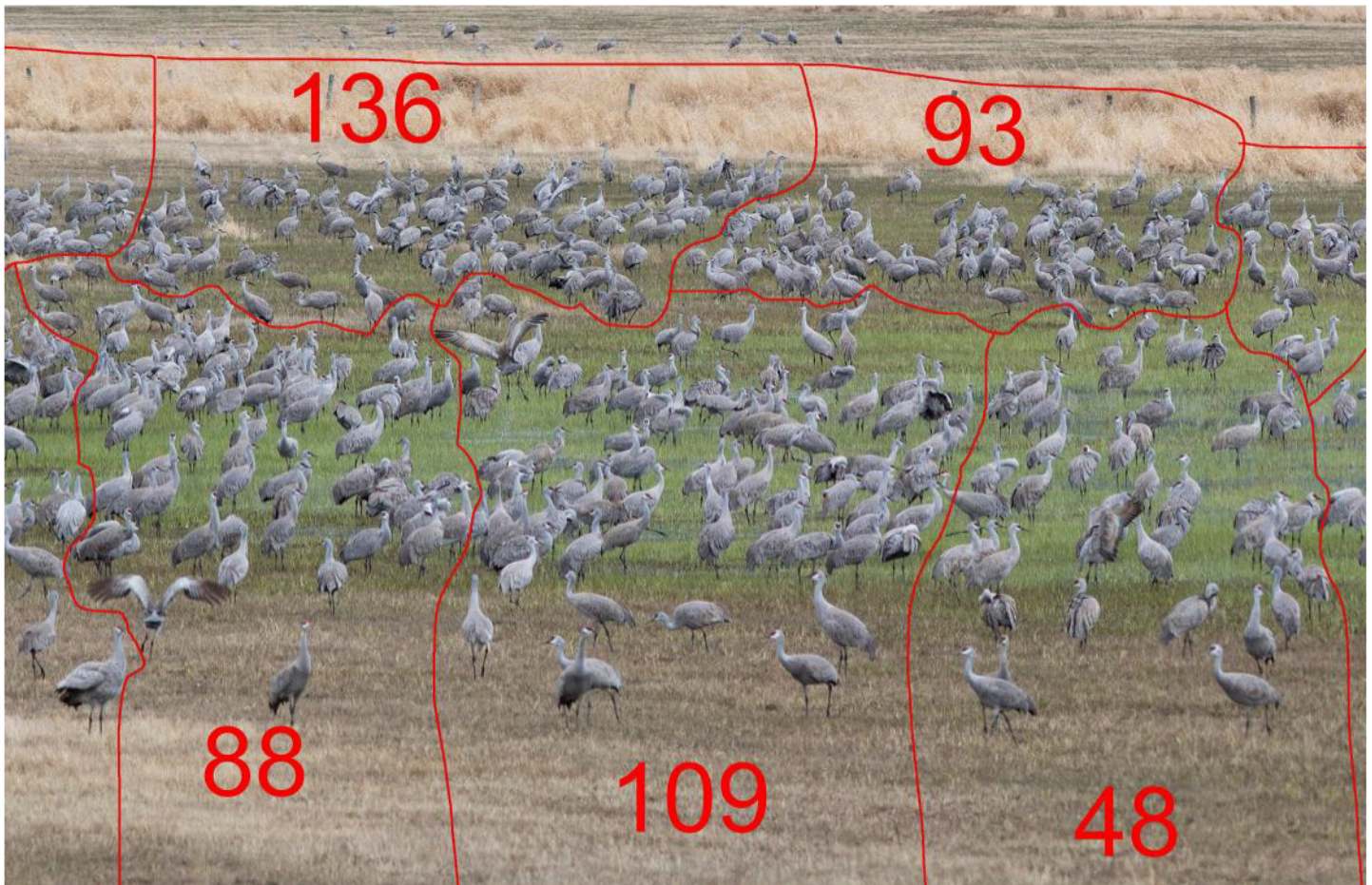
For many years the Nicola Naturalists led sporadic trips to the plateau to look for cranes, with varying success. In 2019 we tallied over 8,000 cranes on one visit, with a single flock of over 7,000 cranes. But the following year, on the same weekend, we found only two cranes! So in 2024, with funding from the BC Nature IBA Program, we started more intensive surveys.

The funding allowed us to hire a contractor, Opal Charters, who lives on the Upper Nicola Band Spax'mn Reserve within the IBA. We set up a 32 km monitoring route on the public road and divided this into eight sections to determine the key habitats for

the resting cranes. We did both morning and evening surveys – the cranes usually arrive in the late afternoon or evening, spend the night resting, preening and feeding and then, around 10:00 the following morning, take off to resume their northward migration. Opal covered the week-days and our club volunteers did the weekend surveys.

Between 7 April and 7 May in 2024 we tallied 11,557 cranes on morning surveys and 6,342 cranes on evening surveys. Along the survey route, 92% of the cranes were counted in one large pasture near Chapperon Lake. The Douglas Lake Ranch managers call this the "Big Meadow" which they deliberately flood each spring to promote

*Below: An example of photos used to count sections of large flocks of cranes. Photo by author.*





summer growth of grass for their cattle. The mix of wetland and grassland seems ideal for the cranes. Cows wander freely among the cranes and even cowboys on horseback don't panic the cranes. This is an excellent example of how range management can benefit both ranchers and wildlife: "What's good for the herd is good for the bird".

How does one count a flock of several thousand cranes moving about on the ground? We take high-resolution photos of sections of each flock and stitch these together in Photoshop to cover the whole flock. We then divide up the panorama photo into manageable sections and laboriously count cranes in each section. Flocks of cranes passing overhead are counted in the same way.

But in 2024 we evidently missed a few days with cranes, so in 2025 we planned an expanded survey, focused on the more-reliable morning counts. Funding this year came from a Club Support Grant from BC Nature and BC Naturalists' Foundation and a grant from the BC Field Ornithologists. We again hired Opal Charters to do the

weekday surveys and our club covered the week-ends.

Between 29 March and 9 May 2025 we tallied 18,713 cranes. This is a minimum estimate for the plateau, because we couldn't access all the likely stop-over sites and some cranes were hidden behind vegetation in our census photos. So Rick Howie's estimate of 25,000 cranes coming through the Douglas Lake Plateau is likely quite accurate. The Douglas Lake Plateau IBA is on the cusp of becoming a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) because, in addition to its importance for cranes, it is also a haven for many rare species like Lewis's Woodpecker, Burrowing Owls, Badgers, Great Basin Spadefoots and many more.

The Nicola Naturalists thank our sponsors for the funding, the Douglas Lake Cattle Company and the Upper Nicola Band for their support of this



*Cranes in flight by author (above) and Loekie van der Wal (below)*

project, and Opal Charters and our many club volunteers for their dedication to the project.



## ...And on the Subject of Cranes

In March 2025, the Eastern Migratory population of Whooping Cranes was estimated to be 70 individuals. Just sixteen of these are wild-hatched and the rest are captive-reared. But in May, nesting was being observed, and the first two chicks had appeared.

The eastern population of migratory Whooping Cranes was created as a failsafe in case of disaster hitting the Wood-Buffalo population. Careful counting of that parent population was discontinued after 2023, but it had at that point risen to 536. The relatively high count doesn't mean we should relax, but we can be far more optimistic than in 1941 when the total world population comprised 21 individuals.

