

When They Take Flight

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Growing up in the Riverside neighborhood of Steamboat Springs, my affinity for sandhill cranes and wetland habitat has deep roots. My tiny house on Honeysuckle Lane is oddly situated between two swaths of wetland marshes. Some people build fences of wood and metal links to mark their property. Not me. I grew up with a fence of cattails. Always a light sleeper, I begged my parents to let me go outside and watch the birds in the early morning hours. After promises of standing a safe distance from the wetlands, my parents finally agreed. In my pajamas and muck boots, I would cross the dewy grass of my front lawn and stand at the boundary between settlement and nature, and I would listen. Each day, a symphony of life played its primal concert for me. Until one morning, the symphony played its cymbals. A booming, rattling bugle permeated the air, a prelude to flight. Seconds later, I watched the graceful ascent of two massive sandhill cranes. Necks elongated, wings outstretched, the cranes burst in soaring synchronicity. That morning, the morning the cranes shared their gallant call and primitive flight is imprinted in my memory. Years later, I would remember that morning when the cranes' habitat and livelihood were in grave risk.

When I was ten years old, the wetland that welcomed each new day for me was taken away. Though my parents tried to explain to me how the land was owned and then sold to Habitat for Humanity, an organization that builds houses for families without homes, I couldn't help but feel that a part of me had been slated for destruction. While my family and other concerned families were assured that a wetlands swap had occurred, a wetland area miles away from me was being preserved while the wetland adjacent to me could be filled, I cried at the loss. While I understood that people needed homes and that affordable homes in our area were rare, I worried for the cranes. I knew enough about migration and breeding grounds by this point in my young life to know that building on these wetlands was a direct affront to these old, habitual creatures. The day the massive payload trucks irrevocably dumped tons of fill dirt on the wetlands is another day I will never forget. I felt helpless to stop this human imposition on what I considered a natural sanctuary. In the months ahead, a new threat to the cranes would impose itself on the Yampa Valley, and I worried that those who spoke for the cranes would be silenced once more.

In the spring of 2012, it came to my attention that a sandhill crane hunting season was being proposed to the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission. The proposal was to issue

twenty to fifty annual hunting licenses for a short season that coincided with the migration of cranes through Colorado. In 1973, Colorado had placed the sandhill crane on the list of endangered native species. As a result, targeted conservation efforts were enacted, and the crane population made a notable recovery. In 1998, the sandhill was de-listed as an endangered species and ranked instead as a “species of special concern”. Now, less than fifty years after they were deemed endangered, hunters wanted the chance to kill them for sport. I grieved at the possibility of what I considered to be an unthinkable injustice. To my ten-year-old mind, this was incongruous to everything I had been raised to respect and believe about humanity’s responsibility to cherish the natural world. Fortunately, I was not alone in my thinking.

That spring, a grassroots effort was established to unite the voices of those who wanted to protect the sandhill cranes. That spring, people wrote letters to our newspaper and raised community awareness about the crane, a ten-million-year-old species. They spoke about the historic and respected role that the crane plays to North American first-nation tribes and many Asian cultures. Our community learned that sandhill cranes often mate for life and these partners typically produce one offspring each year. Momentum built and the Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition was formed to spearhead the effort to defeat this proposal. People on both sides of the issue garnered petitions arguing for their side’s perspective. While the pro-hunting camp levied 150 signatures, the anti-hunting alliance collected a critical mass of 2,000 signatures. The efforts of concerned Yampa Valley citizens on behalf of the sandhill cranes were realized and in June of 2012, the proposal was dissolved. Though I was only ten years old at the time, this successful conservation effort, orchestrated and organized by concerned citizens, made a lasting impression on me. More importantly, it made an enduring impact on the sandhill crane population and the wetland habitat that bless our region.

Whenever circumstances are fortuitous and I see cranes in flight, I remember three things: the morning I witnessed their majestic flight, the deep loss I felt when I watched the irreversible filling of a wetland, and the relief and pride I felt when the crane hunting proposal was defeated. The cranes deserve our reverence, consideration, and appreciation. As a community, we should consider ourselves fortunate to share this unique valley with the sandhill crane.