

# The Sandhill Crane Problem

by George F. Ledingham, Regina



*Photo by F. W. Lahrman*

Dr. Peters (on the right) with the author.

When James Fisher, famous British ornithologist, watched great flocks of cranes rising into the air over the north end of Last Mountain Lake on Saturday, August 29, 1959, he said: "This alone was worth coming 4,500 miles to see." Since that memorable day of the A.O.U. field trip, much has been said and something has been done about the Sandhill Crane problem in Saskatchewan. Is it enough?

Since that date, the farmers at the north end of Last Mountain Lake have harvested two crops. The wet weather of 1959 delayed harvesting and the cranes did a lot of damage but they did not cause all the loss which the farmers suffered that year as some like to suggest. The 1960 crops were harvested quickly and grain bins are now full of wheat and open piles of grain are common sights in the fields of the area.

Harvesting of the spring wheat grown in this area cannot normally commence before the first of September. Cranes return to the area in large numbers about the middle of August. In the States there is little, if any, conflict between grain grow-

ing and the cranes since winter wheat can be harvested earlier in the summer. Farmers in the Last Mountain Lake area have already adjusted their harvest methods to minimize the crane damage. Combining standing grain is the common practice in the area because the cranes prefer not to land in standing crops although they may land in an adjoining bare field and walk into the edge of a crop. After crops are harvested the cranes will readily land in the stubble. If a farmer has to swath a field, perhaps because of weeds, he may suffer severe loss if the field is close to a crane roosting area or if threshing is delayed by inclement weather or other factors.

Because of crop damage in the fall of 1959, the farmers held a protest meeting and were able to prevail on the Saskatchewan Wildlife Branch to open the season on cranes so that the farmers could protect their crops.

Naturalists everywhere hate to see another species added to the list of game birds. They especially hate to see the Sandhill Crane added to the list because, of the ten species of the

genus *Grus* occurring in the world, this is the only species which exists in any numbers. L. H. Walkinshaw estimates that there are approximately 200,000 Sandhill Cranes. Other species of cranes, including the Whooping Crane, are extremely rare, or nearly extinct. Man should do what he can to prevent the extinction of any animal or any plant. Putting the Sandhill Crane on the list of game birds would be the first step toward putting another species on the verge of extinction. The cranes have a very slow reproduction rate. They take two years to mature and usually have only one young per pair.

The Saskatchewan Natural History Society at its annual meeting in Moose Jaw, October 17, 1959, passed a resolution requesting that the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources study the problem, taking into consideration the compensation of farmers for damage sustained. The resolution recognized, however, that compensation does not solve the problem. The true solution of the problem as we see it would require extension of the area in which the cranes receive complete protection. In this area crops should be planted and managed to attract the birds and to hold them in the area until the farmers in the surrounding area have had time to remove some or all of their crops. To supplement this programme exploders can be used to scare cranes back to the refuge area. Several short items in the **Blue Jay** have stressed the importance of scare devices. These will work effectively if the cranes can be driven to a refuge where they will not be disturbed. Farmers should use exploders as soon as they swath a field to keep the cranes from starting to feed in the swathed crop.

The Saskatchewan Fish and Game League has views similar to ours. In their September, 1960, **Saskatchewan Afield** there is an eight-page article on "Waterfowl and Agriculture." The article points out how thousands of acres of wetlands have been drained and cultivated and how no provision has been made for the wildlife which formerly occupied these areas. Ten photographs show the damage done by ducks and how the ducks can be fed in the refuges, as they are in the United States, to keep the birds out of

the farmers' fields until these have been harvested. The League places the major responsibility for solving the problems on the federal government since it is the migratory birds which are damaging the crops. The programme to meet the needs of hunters is a responsibility of the province. Although the Fish and Game article is concerned mainly with Mallards the same comments and solutions might apply to Sandhills.

**Canadian Audubon**, March-April, 1960, reports on the Sandhill Crane problem at the head of Last Mountain Lake. The Canadian Audubon Society hopes that a workable solution to the problem can be found and that cranes will always be present in this part of Saskatchewan. Your editor received one letter from a conservationist, Louis Segal of Montreal, expressing his regret that a hunting season with no bag limit had been opened on cranes in 1959 in Saskatchewan.

In reply to a letter from the Honorable A. G. Kuziak, Minister of Natural Resources of Saskatchewan, requesting our Society's views on grassland and other preserves, we suggested that the north end of Last Mountain Lake be developed as a refuge. We stressed the historic value



Photo by F. W. LaGrman

of the area, the oldest bird sanctuary in North America, its excellent recreational opportunities and its potential value as a bird refuge. We suggested that both farm land and water at the north end of the lake be included in a refuge where wildlife would receive complete protection at all seasons. We stressed the proximity of developed beaches and swimming facilities further south on the lake and suggested that only the simplest of facilities be provided in the refuge itself. Here there should be a Lookout Tower and some access roads so that the tourists could view the wildlife of the area. Publicity should be given to the area and provincial highway maps and tourist literature should locate the area and describe the facilities available and also the unique attractiveness of the area.

When the cranes returned in August, 1960, the farmers were not able to obtain permits to shoot cranes to protect their crops. The reason given was that there was concern that some Whooping Cranes might be shot. At the same time, it was announced that there would be an experimental open season on Sandhill Cranes in January, 1961, in parts of Texas and New Mexico. In January the Whooping Cranes would be in the Aransas Refuge and there would be no danger of any of them being shot. It was suggested that the population of Sandhill Cranes would be reduced by this hunting season. Meanwhile some farmers continued to shoot at cranes in the Last Mountain Lake area.

The Sandhill Crane problem was discussed in several informal meetings during the A.O.U. conference at Ann Arbor, Michigan. The National Audubon Society decided to ask Dr. H. S. Peters, one of their field biologists from Atlanta, Georgia, to study all aspects of the problem in Saskatchewan and through the States as the cranes moved south and again during the hunting season in January. Since then Dr. Peters has been in Saskatchewan for nearly two weeks, estimating the population of cranes and the extent or possible extent of the damage that they could cause to crops. Fortunately for the farmers, but making Dr. Peters' task of appraisal more difficult, the harvest was

quickly accomplished and the cranes did less damage than usual. We hope to see Dr. Peters' report when his study is completed.

The Canadian Wildlife Service also studied the Sandhill Crane problem again this year. An earlier study by Dr. D. A. Munro, "The Economic Status of Sandhill Cranes in Saskatchewan," was printed in the **Journal of Wildlife Management**, Vol. 14, July, 1950. The 1960 study estimated numbers of cranes on a regular weekly basis from the middle of August to the end of October. It experimented with the use of exploders and with the use of airplanes in the herding of cranes. A brief report illustrated by kodachromes was given to the Saskatchewan Natural History Society on Oct. 22 by Ron Mackay of the Canadian Wildlife Service, Edmonton. Exploders were found to be effective in keeping cranes from crops and will be further studied next year. Aircraft were only effective in herding cranes to roosting areas. Cranes could not be forced to move any great distance with even as many as three planes and so it would be completely impossible to force cranes to migrate on to areas where the crops have already been harvested. Mr. MacKay's report supported the Saskatchewan Natural History Society in its recommendation of the planting of lure crops and the acquisition of further land in the area.

Our society feels that acquisition of additional land for refuge purposes at the north end of the lake is basically sound. To protect waterfowl and cranes in this peculiarly favoured area—so recognized since 1887—we would be withdrawing agricultural land which is devoted primarily to grain production. Every farmer, as well as every economist, is aware of the problems created by the current and growing wheat surplus. An article like Ralph Hedlin's "Wheat acreage must drop" (**Country Guide**, October, 1960), points up the urgency of taking a realistic view of the situation by seeking alternatives to wheat farming. For that reason it seems particularly appropriate to suggest that some of the farmers in the area might be engaged in refuge farming where crops are planted and managed for the sake of our waterfowl resources.

Regina naturalists had the privilege of seeing C. Stuart Keith's film on the cranes of Japan which had been shown earlier at the A.O.U. conference in Ann Arbor. Mr. Keith related his experiences with cranes in other parts of the world to his experiences with the cranes in Saskatchewan of which he writes eloquently in this issue of the **Blue Jay**. It should be said that Stuart Keith, who is doing research on cranes at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, had come with his wife to Saskatchewan to see the Sandhill Cranes, at his own expense.

Several days after seeing Mr. Keith's film a group of 25 people met at the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History to discuss the Sandhill Crane problem. Dr. Peters and Mr. and Mrs. Keith were there, as were also John Livingston from the Canadian Audubon Society, Dr. Solomon and Dr. Gollop from the Canadian Wildlife Service, three farmers, A. Greenfield, A. Nelson and C. Johnson from the head of the lake, V. Jackett, President of the Saskatchewan Fish and Game League, from Yorkton, six members from the Department of Natural Resources including E. L. Paynter, Director of the Wildlife Branch, and his assistant T. A. Harper (who acted as the

chairman of the meeting), four from the Museum staff, one from the Department of Industry and Information, and four representatives of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. At this meeting of September 19, 1960, there was free expression of the different points of view of those present and it is to be hoped that out of this discussion there will come some real solution to the problem.

Many items showing interest in the problem have appeared in the local papers. Mr. G. Humphries and Son, Editors of the **Nokomis Times**, have published many letters on this subject and have also written excellent appraisals of the problem. I am sure that they have done much to make the people of the area more aware of the cranes as cranes, rather than just as pests which destroy the crops. The **Nokomis Times** will deserve much credit when solution to the problem is reached.

All people interested in natural history should be interested in the cranes for their grace and beauty and because they are a part of our natural heritage. Let's help to ensure the future of the cranes. Let's help to develop a refuge for them. Please write to your **Blue Jay** editor expressing your views on this problem.



Photo by F. W. Lahrman

Sandhill Cranes at Last Mountain Lake, September, 1960.