

# FAR AWAY CRANES

Lawrence H. Walkinshaw, world renowned student of cranes, describes, in an original article on page 66, the nesting of Sandhill Cranes on Banks Island, in the Northwest Territories, one of the northernmost nesting localities ever recorded for the species. Which of the many cranes that pause to rest at the Last Mountain Lake Sanctuary, we wonder, are on their way to those northern reaches, more than 1500 miles farther north? Incidentally, Dr. Walkinshaw is the author of *The Sandhill Cranes*, a notable book published in 1949 as Bulletin No. 29, Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. That study was the result of 15 years' investigation of Sandhill Cranes, that took the author from Alaska to Cuba.

The experimental hunting of Sandhill Cranes in Saskatchewan last fall aroused considerable interest and controversy. Somehow, in the midst of discussions regarding depredation problems and the table value of cranes, a greater aspect was overlooked. Hunters and non-hunters alike need to be shown the value of these birds as a spectacle of nature, not merely as a game bird. As James Fisher reminded us when he visited the Last Mountain Lake Sanctuary in 1959, there are thousands of people who have never seen thousands of cranes at one time. We need to view cranes as Aldo Leopold did, as described in that marvelous book, *Sand County Almanac*:

"High horns, low horns, silence, and finally a pandemonium of trumpets, rattles, croaks, and cries that almost shakes the bog with its nearness, but without yet disclosing whence it comes. At last a glint of sun reveals the approach of a great echelon of birds. On motionless wing they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh . . . .

"A sense of time lies thick and heavy on such a place. Yearly since the ice age it has awakened each spring to the clangor of cranes. The peat layers that comprise the bog are laid down in the basin of an ancient lake. The cranes stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history. These peats are the compressed remains of the mosses that clogged the pools, of the tamaracks that spread over the moss, of the cranes that bugled over the tamaracks since the retreat of the ice sheet. An endless caravan of generations has built of its own bones this bridge into the future, this habitat where the oncoming host again may live and breed and die . . . .

"...our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millenia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men.

"And so they live and have their being — these cranes — not in the constricted present, but in the wider reaches of evolutionary time. Their annual return is the ticking of the geologic clock. Upon the place of their return they confer a peculiar distinction. Amid the endless mediocrity of the commonplace, a crane marsh holds a paleontological patent of nobility, won in the march of aeons, and revocable only by shotgun. The sadness discernible in some marshes arises, perhaps, from their once having harbored cranes."