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## An Unexpected Sandhill Crane Experience

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On April 24, 2012, I spent some time birding in Saunders County at Memphis SRA, Lake Wanahoo, and various other lakes in the Malmo, Nebraska, area. After seeing good numbers of Pectoral Sandpipers, a few Sanderlings, Willets and Long-billed Dowitchers, I headed over to Redtail WMA in Butler County. I hiked in to the lake area and started counting waterfowl with the use of my spotting scope. Franklin's Gulls started showing up and a few of them stopped just long enough to take a drink, but then quickly took off again to catch up with the rest of the flock that hadn't stopped for a sip on their way north.

While watching all of this activity, I was facing north on a north-facing hillside. I briefly stopped to turn around and look behind me to the south, and I saw a large bird approaching. My first reaction was that it was a Great Blue Heron, since there had been several cruising back and forth over the lake, but then I saw legs sticking out behind the bird and realized it was a Sandhill Crane.

It came in on quite a high flight, and I quickly put my spotting scope on it. I realized it was not a migrant when it began to circle over the lake and tilt its wings to let air out from underneath so it could reduce its height. It continued to drop until it landed on the north side of the lake; I was on the south side. While it was coming down I could see it had something in its beak, but I couldn't determine what it was. It looked a little like a frog, but I never did get a good enough look to determine exactly what it was.

After it landed I watched it through my scope from approximately 250-300 yards away. The crane slowly began to walk to the west along the water's edge next to cattails. It was very slow in its movement and stopped numerous times. I'm sure it saw me, since by that time I was swatting at a group of large blue-green flies to keep them from biting me. The crane continued to walk to the west for approximately 60-70 yards, stopping frequently en route. Never once did it vocalize.

The crane was very brown looking; I suspect this was because it had applied rust-colored mud to its feathers for camouflage. Throughout all of this time it held its prey in its beak. Occasionally it even preened feathers on its back with the morsel in its mouth. Finally, it stood still for at least 5 minutes in one place and then turned and disappeared into the cattails. After that I left Redtail WMA. My total observation of the crane was approximately 45 minutes from when I first saw it approach to when it finally disappeared into the vegetation.

Even though I see thousands of Sandhill Cranes every spring in central Nebraska, seeing this bird in late April in southeastern Butler County only 45 miles from the Omaha metro area was unexpected and exciting, especially since its behavior indicated possible nesting. When I encounter situations of this type I am usually reluctant to pursue the bird to see if it is nesting for fear of disturbing the bird(s) and/or increasing the chances of leading predators to a nest. I returned to the lake several times after this sighting until the middle of May, but I never saw or heard a Sandhill Crane in that area again.