

# FIRST ARIZONA RECORD OF COMMON CRANE

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The first record of a Common Crane (*Grus grus*), a Eurasian species, in Arizona was reported in May 2017 at Mormon Lake in Coconino County. It remained at this lake through September 2017. In 2019 a Common Crane was reported 11 May through 31 August at Mormon Lake. The 2017 record has been reviewed and accepted by the Arizona Bird Committee (Rosenberg et al. 2019), and the 2019 bird has been accepted as the same individual.

The Common Crane is a widespread crane found in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Breeding occurs across northern Europe and northern Asia, from Norway on the west to Siberia on the east. Nonbreeding populations are found as far west as Morocco and to southeastern China. A resident population exists in Turkey (NatureServe and IUCN 2017, Figure 1). Preferred habitat for both breeding and nonbreeding birds is small ponds or lakes, wet meadows, and other wetland areas (Cramp and Simmons 1980).

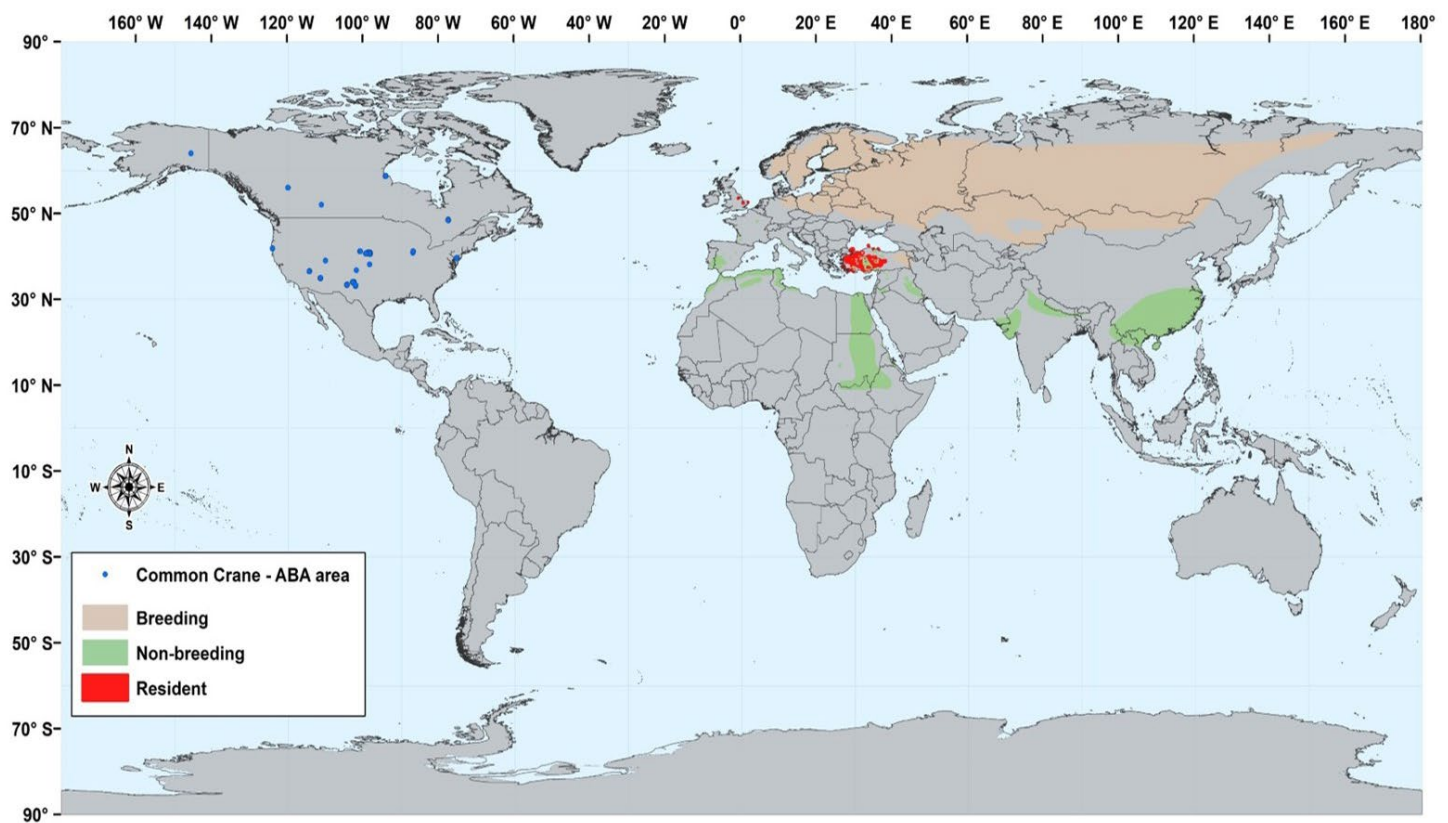


Figure 1. Common Crane Distribution

Cramp and Simmons (1980) stated that the Common Crane range in western Europe has had a “marked” decrease since the Middle Ages. They attributed this to the draining of nesting areas. Since 1950 improved habitat protections, recolonization in previously inhabited areas, and designation as a protected species have resulted in a dramatic increase in the overall population (Prange 2005). Although its range has decreased, it continues to be extensive enough, along with the increase in its already large population, to give it the status of a species of “Least Concern” (BirdLife International 2016, NatureServe and IUCN 2019).

All North American reports fall within the range of latitudes of Common Crane in its natural locations. Common Cranes reported in North America very likely migrated with Lesser Sandhill Cranes (*Antigone canadensis canadensis*). Both species breed in Siberia where the occasional Common Crane joins a flock of Lesser Sandhill Crane and sometimes migrates with them to winter grounds in North America (Brazil 2009, Howell et al. 2014).

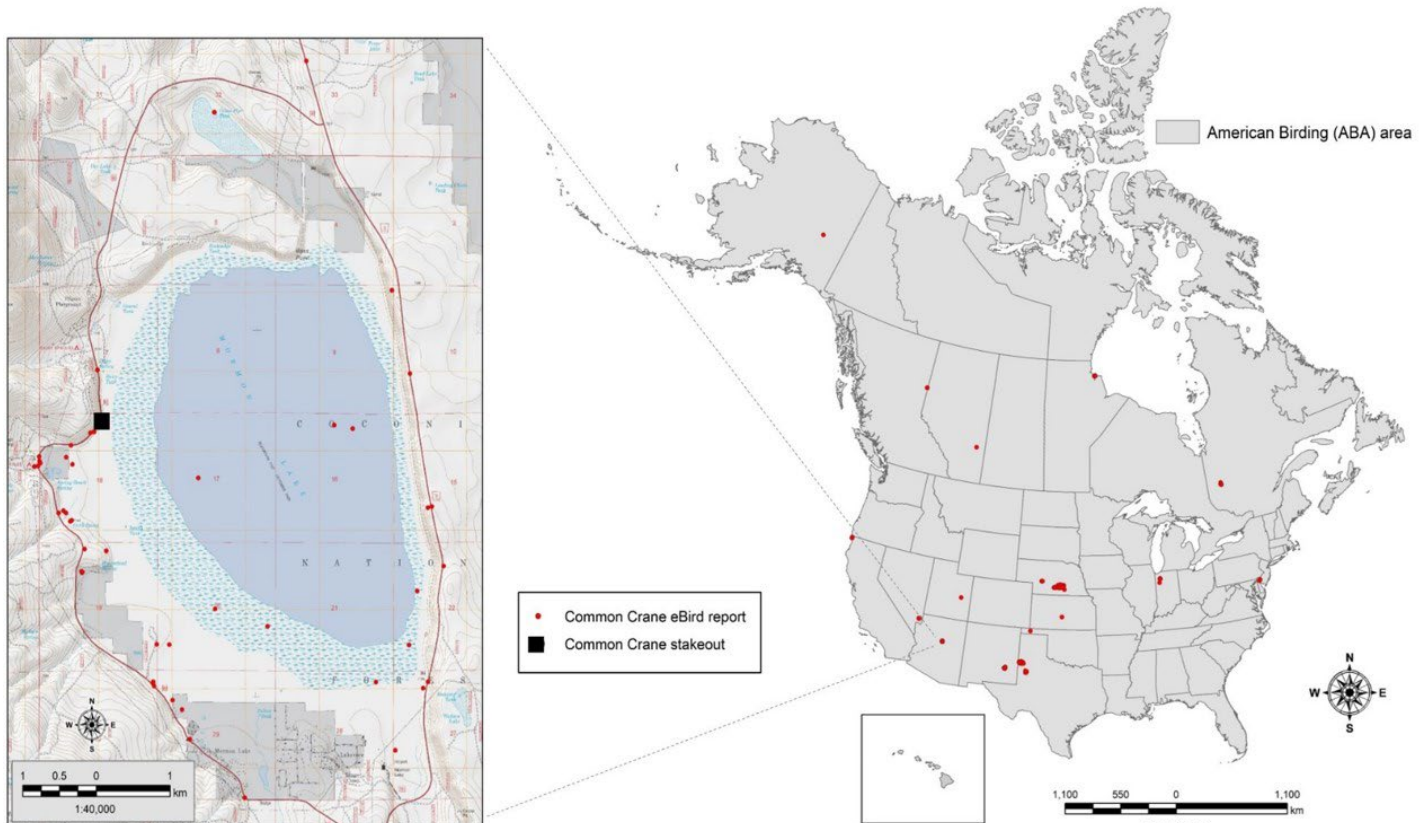


Figure 2. Common Crane sightings at Lake Mormon

The Mormon Lake Common Crane was discovered by Kathryn Hart on 4 May 2017 on the west side of the lake, at what is now known as the Common Crane stakeout (Figure 2), while she was trying to get a closer look at a group of gulls. She saw the crane far out on the grassy flat surrounding the lake. The distance to the bird, along with heat shimmer, made it difficult to see the bird clearly and identify it. She believed it to be a Sandhill Crane because there had been several reports of one at the same location the previous year. She took a photo of the crane, which she submitted with her 4 May eBird report (Figure 3; Hart 2017). It was next reported early on the morning of 5 May by Roger Sleeper, who identified it as a Common Crane. After hearing about the confirmed Common Crane sighting, Hart reviewed her photos from the previous day and was elated to see that her "Sandhill Crane" was in fact a Common Crane. News of the Crane quickly spread through the birding community. There were 159 eBird reports of the bird in the first 10 days after being found, indicating the interest in this bird (eBird Basic Dataset 2019). It was seen over a wide-ranging area but was mostly found in the marshy areas west and south of the lake. A single sighting was also reported at Grass Flat Tank, just north of Mormon Lake. The crane was reported regularly through the summer with the final report on 6 September. The bird returned in 2019 when it was first reported 11 May (Sleeper 2019) and continued through 31 August.



Figure 3. Common Crane, 4 May 2017. Photo by Kathryn Hart

Low water levels in Mormon Lake may be the reason the bird did not return in 2018. Data from the Mormon Lake Remote Automated Weather Station (RAWS), downloaded from the Western Regional Climate Center (WRCC 2020) indicate that increased late winter and spring precipitation may be a factor in providing the desired Common Crane marshy habitat. Summer precipitation may not be an important factor, as both 2017 and 2019 had lower values than their respective previous years (Table 1).

The black and white markings on the head and neck clearly indicated an adult Common Crane (Figure 4). Although the identification was never in question, the provenance of the bird was (Rosenberg et al. 2019). Because this species has been known to be held in captivity in North America (Nelson et al. 2013), it was possible that it was an escapee. The lack of leg bands, no recently reported escaped birds, and recent accepted records in California (2011-12), Nevada (2013), New Mexico (2014-15), Utah (2017) and Texas (2011-12) led the Arizona Bird Committee to unanimously accept this as the first Arizona record (Rosenberg et al. 2019). Howell et al. (2014) suggest that all recent western North America records through 2011 may represent only 4 individuals. The longevity of the species (Howell et al. 2014) makes it possible that the Mormon Lake bird is one of the prior reported birds.

It is generally thought that bird species follow specific migration routes and have ranges that do not vary greatly. However, Collins et al. (2015) reported that the ranges of the 3 western North America populations of Greater Sandhill Cranes (*Antigone canadensis tabida*), which are managed as unique populations, have been found to overlap one another and that individuals from one population will comeingle with another population. It is therefore possible that cranes aren't as regimented in their migratory pathways as once thought. This suggests that the Mormon Lake Common Crane could have joined a migrating group and eventually associated itself with a population whose range includes the Southwest.

Nearly all Common Crane reports in the contiguous United States are from October through early May. There was a single Common Crane reported in western British Columbia from 3 July to 9 September 2011. The Mormon Lake bird was first reported in early May and the last report was in early September. These are the only occurrences of this species in the contiguous United States during the summer months (Rosenberg et al. 2019). As previously noted, Common Cranes will sometimes join Lesser Sandhill Cranes migrating to their wintering areas in North America but presumably migrate back to their breeding grounds in Siberia. It is unclear why the Mormon Lake bird is spending the nesting season away from its traditional breeding grounds. Coincidentally, the 2011 California bird was first reported on 5 May but it stuck around for only 4 days.

	2016	2017	2018	2019
<b>January</b>	20.07	92.71	25.65	49.02
<b>February</b>	12.19	51.05	46.48	165.35
<b>March</b>	10.41	39.37	26.67	45.72
<b>April</b>	20.83	3.05	1.52	8.64
<b>Total</b>	63.5	186.18	100.32	268.73
<b>May</b>	32.77	17.53	7.11	73.15
<b>June</b>	8.64	0	4.83	0.51
<b>July</b>	95.76	74.68	119.8	2.29
<b>August</b>	133.6	39.62	64.26	1.02
<b>September</b>	27.43	11.18	13.97	5.33
<b>Total</b>	298.2	143.01	210.06	82.3
<b>October</b>	16.0	0	81.79	1.52
<b>November</b>	63.75	3.56	0.25	87.12
<b>December</b>	151.89	0	27.69	94.74
<b>Total</b>	231.64	3.56	109.73	183.38
<b>Annual total (mm)</b>	593.34	332.75	420.11	534.41

Table 1. Monthly precipitation (mm) values from the Mormon Lake RAWS weather station.



Figure 4. Common Crane, 6 May 2017. Photo by Steve Valasek



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