



Birds in Flight

Story and photos by Ed Breen

It is a rite of passage that occurs twice each year – spring and fall—and has for thousands of years, long before we or any other humankind where here to observe. Certainly long before Indiana became a destination.

It happens in the fields and farmlands and wetlands of northwest Indiana, that vast, flat expanse of Jasper, Pulaski, Newton, Benton and Lake counties, this stopover by the Sandhill Cranes in route from Florida and Mexico and Central America on their journey north to Wisconsin and Minnesota and the Dakotas and Canada for the coming summer months. In autumn the course is reversed as these majestic birds flee the frozen north for the tropics.

And for those intrigued by the flight, their trumpeting, and their form both airborne and on the ground, there is no better observation point than the Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area, maintained by Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

It is 110 miles northwest of Marion, at Medaryville, a wide-spot-in-the-road sort of town on U.S. Highway 421 north of Monon and south of Michigan City.

But the great birds, the Sandhill Cranes, are not restricted to the 8,142 acres set aside by man for their use and protection. On any given evening in March or April or in the late autumn they swoop to a landing and dine in the fields for miles, whether north or south – and maybe east or west — of the state-owned fish and wildlife area. After all, they were doing this long before either DNR or the farmers arrived to disturb the landscape along their flyway.

Acquisition of the land by the state began in 1929 and it has slowly been developed for both the active outdoor enthusiasts the more passive observer of the wildlife.

The cranes stand up to three feet tall and have a wing span in flight of five to seven feet. They have red foreheads, white cheeks, and long, dark, pointed bills. In flight, their long, dark legs trail behind.

An elevated viewing stand outfitted with telescopic optics is located just off of Ind. 143. There is no charge, although donations are welcome and both parking and viewing are handicapped accessible. The site is one of 24 maintained by the Fish and Wildlife service of Indiana DNR.

Best time for viewing some of the 10,000 birds who pass this way semiannually? Early morning and late afternoon.

