

SANDHILL CRANE HUNTING INFORMATION

Sandhill cranes are exceptional game birds that migrate into Arizona during the winter. Southeastern Arizona is the annual wintering ground for 25,000-45,000 cranes every winter. Cranes are very charismatic birds and make excellent table fare. Known as the “ribeye of the sky”, these birds can be very challenging and exciting to hunt. Crane hunting in Arizona follows the 3 rules of 3:

1. There are 3 hunting zones - The 3 hunting zones you can apply for are a) the Multi-Unit area of 30A/30B/31/32, b) Unit 28, and c) Unit 29. However, you will only be drawn to hunt in one of them.
2. Individual hunts are only 3 days long – Each hunt is only 3 days with 1 day in between until the next new hunt starts. Be sure to check the hunt dates since they don’t follow conventional start dates like other species do.
3. Hunters can only harvest 3 birds maximum – If successfully drawn, you will be issued 3 separate tags, one to place on each bird you harvest. The tags can be affixed to either a leg or around the neck. In addition, hunters need to be aware that one fully feathered wing (or head for Sandhill cranes only) must be left attached to all harvested Sandhill cranes until they reach their final destination.
 - a. Please note: If you are successful with drawing tags and are unable to go hunting, consider surrendering your tags or using [Point Guard or Point Guard Plus](#) prior to the close of business the day before the start of your hunt.

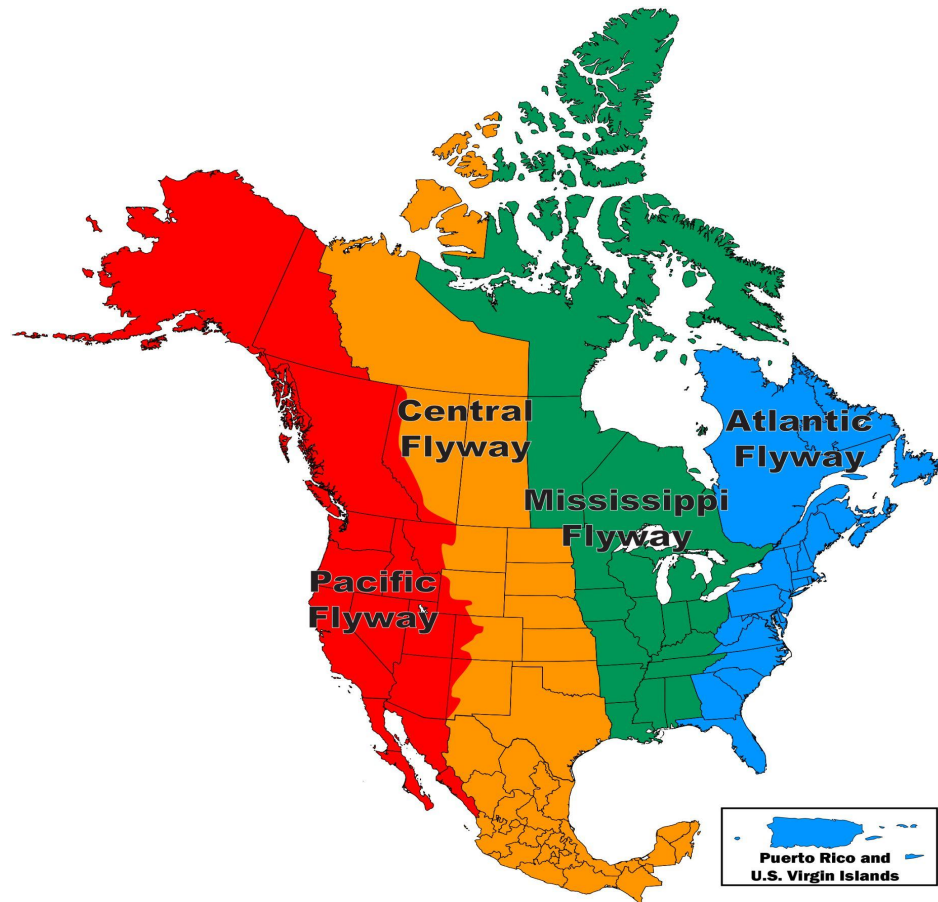


Figure 1. Administrative flyways designated by US Fish & Wildlife Service in managing migratory birds across the United States and its territories. *(credit: USFWS public domain)*

BRIEF HISTORY

Migratory game birds, like sandhill cranes, doves, and waterfowl, are managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 4 zones across the USA, called Flyways. Arizona is a member state in the Pacific Flyway (Figure 1) and was the first state in the Flyway to permit sandhill crane hunting in 1981. Arizona hosts birds from both the Rocky Mountain and Midcontinent populations (RMP and MCP respectively) as they migrate here to winter in southeastern Arizona and parts of New Mexico (Figure 2). The MCP is much larger, numbering in the hundreds of thousands of birds (and currently approaching 1 million birds in recent years) and managed with no upper limit on population numbers, while the RMP is smaller in number and managed for population levels between 17,000-21,000 birds because numbers above this range increase crop damage and human conflicts on their breeding grounds in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Thus, while we get birds from both the RMP and MCP, sandhill crane permit numbers for harvest in Arizona are annually based on RMP numbers on their breeding grounds. Consequently, when crane numbers are greater than 21,000 birds up north, the USFWS increases the number of permits available to hunters to bring the population back into the objective range. Because Arizona's permit numbers are driven by the number of RMP birds harvested here rather than the total number of cranes harvested, we don't offer open seasons or over-the-counter hunts for cranes like neighboring New Mexico or states with more liberal hunts do.

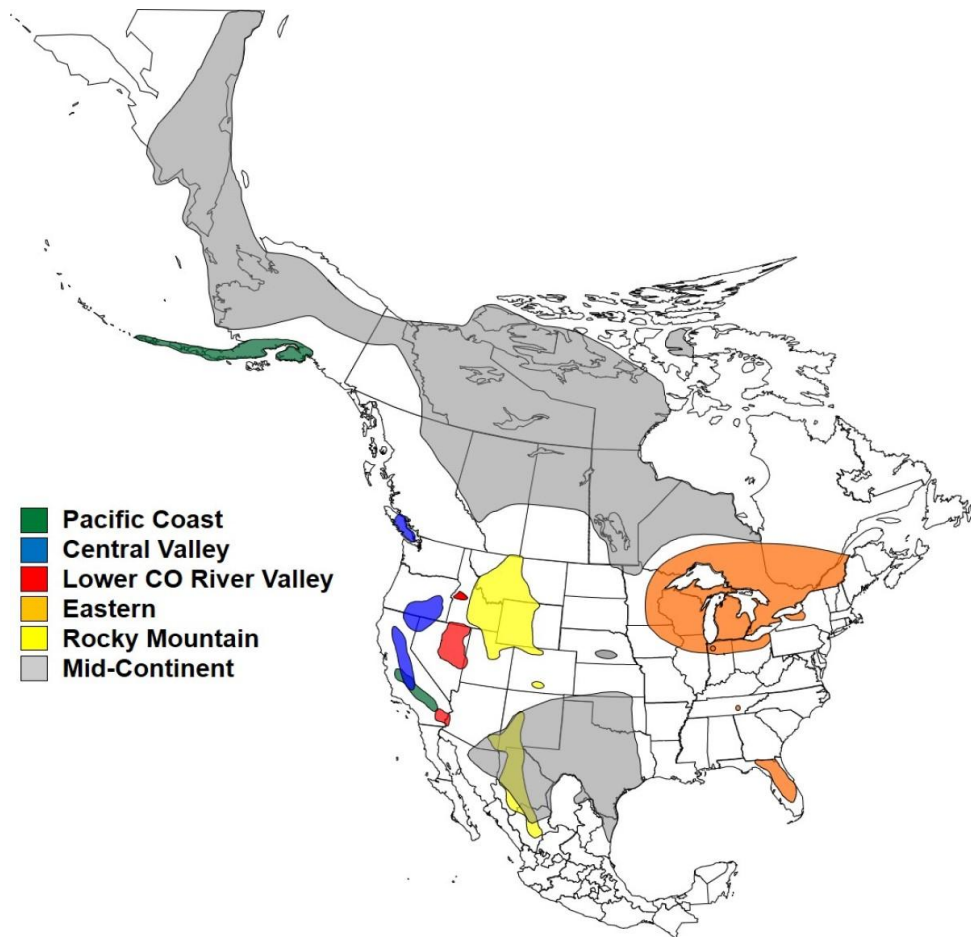


Figure 2. Six designated populations of sandhill cranes used in managing sandhill cranes in the USA. Note the Rocky Mountain (in yellow) and Mid-Continent (in gray) populations that winter in southeastern Arizona. (credit: Kammie Kruse, USFWS)

TYPES OF CRANES

Cranes come in a variety of sizes and are presently divided into 3 categories: Greater, Canada, and Lesser. The RMP is mostly made up of Greater cranes which are the largest form. They stand about 4 feet tall, have a 6-foot wingspan, and weigh 10 or more pounds. The MCP is primarily Lesser cranes, which are the smallest cranes. These birds are about 3 feet tall with a wingspan of 4.5 feet and weigh roughly 7 pounds. The Canada type is intermediate in size, generally overlapping body measurements of Lesser cranes on the high end and Greater cranes on the low end in size.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO HUNT CRANES IN SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA

Sandhill cranes are part of the summer draw cycle in early June and anyone with an active Arizona hunting or combo license can apply for the draw. There are several hunts available in the multi-unit hunt area, several in the Unit 28 hunt area, and 2 hunts in Unit 29. Almost all areas where the cranes loaf, feed, and spend their time in southeastern Arizona are private lands or state trust lands farmed and cultivated by private ranches or landowners. As such, hunters **MUST** plan to coordinate access with private farms and individuals. If you are unwilling to talk to landowners ahead of the hunts, you should not apply for these hunts.

Sandhill cranes are hunted legally by using a 10 gauge or smaller shotgun capable of holding no more than 3 shells. Ambitious hunters may also use bow and arrow, a crossbow, or falconry (with the appropriate sport falconry license). Please refer to Commission Order 24: Sandhill Crane for other requirements and regulations.

SUCCESSFUL HUNTING TIPS

Coordinating access with land owners – Getting permission to hunt fields is essential to crane hunting in southeastern Arizona. Most of the birds that winter here eat grain left over in fields after harvesting or target new sprouts in fields so that's where you can expect to find them most of the time. Don't be afraid to knock on doors and talk to folks to ask for permission to hunt private fields. If you are granted permission, be respectful and clean up everything in the area after the hunt so it's like you were never even there. Also, expressing genuine thanks to land owners after a hunt goes a long way.

One of the largest landowners in the multi-unit hunts is the Coronado Dairy. To date, they have been extremely cooperative in allowing hunters to enter and hunt sandhill cranes on their properties, but access requires coordination with the Dairy at least 2 weeks in advance of your hunt. See the following link to request access for hunting on the Coronado Dairy:

<https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife-conservation/on-the-ground-conservation/cooperative-programs/landowner-relations/landowner-compact-overview/coronado-dairy-and-farm-access/>

Ranches and landowners in all the hunt areas may offer opportunities if contacted in advance by hunters who practice ethical, responsible, and respectful hunt practices to keep access open to all hunters.

Scouting – This is the single most important thing you can do to help your success. You will want to know where and which fields the birds want to be in so you can put yourself as close as possible to them. While birds aren't always consistent in their habits, there's a very high likelihood that if you saw them feeding in that spot today, they'll want to be close to that same spot tomorrow. Also, scouting gives you a lay of the land when you see some birds heading to different fields in case you need to move for the next day's hunt.

Stay Hidden and Don't Move a Muscle – Being camouflaged and hiding in a blind is very important because cranes have some of the best eyesight of any game bird. Whether you build a blind or bring one with you, you'll want to use or add native vegetation to make sure it blends in and does not look out of place. Tumbleweeds are a great start or addition. And don't forget to have a little bit of cover overhead as birds can and do fly directly over you. Be sure to remove anything that is shiny or reflective that might give away your hide (e.g. sunglasses, headlamps, etc.). And don't forget to not move around, even with your face to try and get a look at them coming in. Wait until the last possible moment when they are in range to take your shot.

THE HUNTING ZONES

UNITS 30A/30B/31/32

[MAP]

The crane hunting here can be further divided in 3 major areas: North - I-10 from Willcox to Bonita, Central - area surrounding the Willcox Playa south of I-10, and South - the areas south of Sunizona near Elfrida/Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area.

North

While there is no major roost site north of I-10, some birds do fly north from the Willcox Playa into the fields here. It can take some time to locate which fields the birds are visiting and who to seek permission to hunt from. However, this usually means fewer hunters to compete against and less pressure on the cranes making for a good hunt.

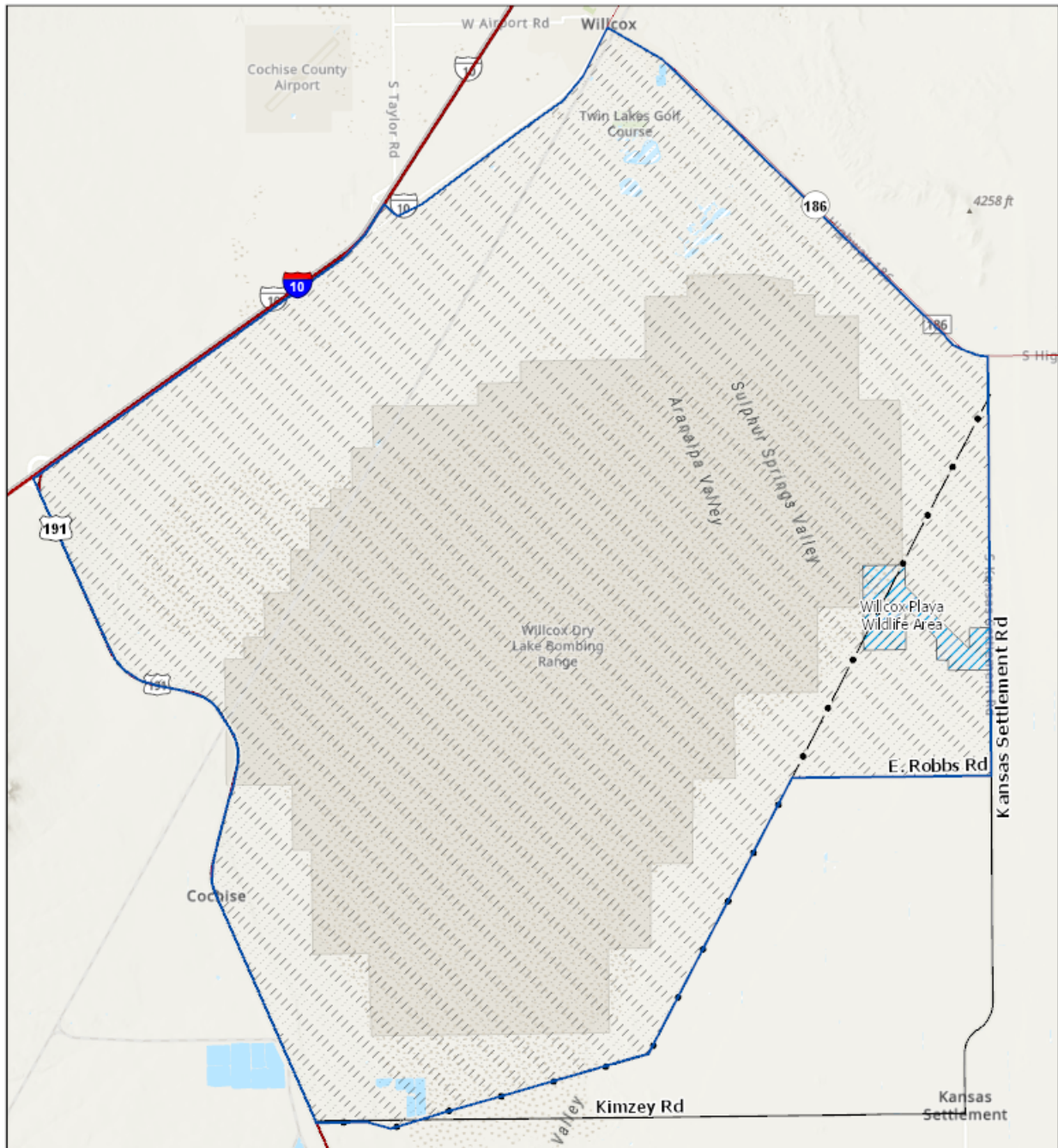
Central

The major roost site for cranes in this area is the Willcox Playa Wildlife Area within the greater Willcox Dry Lake Bombing Range. While the Dry Lake area is closed to hunting (see map below) the agricultural lands outside the boundaries are open.

There are a number of different landowners surrounding this area, including ones who farm on leased State Trust Land. While it isn't required, if you plan to hunt on one of the farmed State Trust Land parcels, it is still a good idea to seek permission to hunt there.

The [Coronado Dairy](#) is one of the private landowners in the Central area and has a large land holding of crop fields to the southeast of the playa. In partnership with the Department, they provide access to hunters provided you submit a release form and follow all the farm rules. Visit the [webpage](#) early and follow the instructions to gain permission if you would like to hunt here.

Willcox Playa - Outlined Area Closed to Crane Hunting.



South

The major roost site for cranes in this area is the Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area which is closed to all sandhill crane hunting. Birds will generally fly out of the Wildlife Area to the East and North around dawn to feed in farm fields. Scouting and seeking landowner permission is of utmost importance for success on this hunt. Decoys and calls can be very effective when hunting this area.

You can view the cranes at the Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area live on our crane camera by clicking [HERE](#).

UNIT 28

[MAP]

The overwhelming majority of crane hunting in Unit 28 occurs on private agricultural land. If you are drawn here it will be vital to scout, contact land owners, and secure permission in order to hunt. Be respectful of the land you are hunting by picking up all shells/trash and leaving no trace that you were even there.

Hunt Info

While a few birds can be located every year in the Gila Valley around the Safford area (they can be much harder to locate and hunt), most birds are generally located along the Gila River between the New Mexico state line and the town of York. Most of the birds will be keyed in on corn (or other grains) left on the ground after the harvest, or simply fields where they can gather grit or safely roost or loaf. The cranes will often travel between the fields in New Mexico and Arizona daily depending on the crops available. Sometimes the birds will spend most of the day in New Mexico. Don't fret, as some will pass back into Arizona. You just have to be prepared and ready for when they do. If you have access to decoys and calls, this is a good time to use them. If not, hopefully you have scouted them before the hunt to place yourself where they want to go.

UNIT 29

[MAP]

Unit 29 is a relatively new hunt to provide an opportunity to harvest transitory birds that move between the Sulphur Springs Valley in Arizona and farm fields near Lordsburg, New Mexico. It can be hit or miss if, where, and how many birds may be here or passing through on any given day. This is why only a small number of tags are offered here. Scouting is key.

Hunt Info

The cranes mostly use the farm fields near the towns of Bowie and Portal, however some birds can and do roost near earthen livestock tanks in the desert areas. Scouting and seeking permission if needed in advance of your hunt will be crucial to your success.

CHECK STATIONS (R12-4-308)

Hunters need to be aware that every third year (e.g. 2023, 2026, 2029, 2032 ...) the Department has a MANDATORY CHECK OUT for successful hunters. All birds harvested in the general Sandhill crane hunts during hunt numbers 9000 – 9012 and 9501 – 9504 need to be taken to a check station. It is preferred that hunters bring their cranes to the check station whole and intact to collect weight, sex and other biological measurements from the beak, legs and wings. However, hunters should not allow their birds

to spoil. The measurements collected during check station years will determine the State of Arizona's crane hunting allocation for the next 3 years, so it's critical to collect these measurements.

AFTER THE HUNT

Regardless of hunts falling on a check station year or not, **all hunters**, including those who did not hunt or were unsuccessful, are asked to complete an online questionnaire at the end of their hunt. Your harvest information is critical in maintaining Arizona's ability to hunt and harvest Sandhill cranes! Please do your part in preserving this hunt opportunity by filling out the hunter questionnaire. In order to maintain an accurate harvest database, you may receive a follow up telephone call or email if we have not received your questionnaire by late-December. The Sandhill crane hunter questionnaire can be found [HERE](#).

HOW TO PREPARE AND COOK CRANES

The one thing that surprises people the first time they try crane is how "beefy" or "beef-like" they taste and cook like. Also, some cuts can be surprisingly tender. It's why they've been given the nickname "Ribeye of the Sky".

In general, crane skin is very strong and thick when compared to other birds and most hunters don't concern themselves with plucking the bird. But if it's something you want to try, give it a go. Just be sure to coat the skin in oil or butter to help it crisp up while cooking.

Now most hunters will break the bird down into several parts: the breasts, breast tenders, thighs, and drumsticks. Here are some of the best cooking options for each piece.

Breasts – Just like their nickname suggests, treat these pieces just like you would a nice steak. Seasoned, then seared or grilled, that's it. Simple and delicious.

Tenders – First thing you'll want to do is remove the tendon that runs the length of the meat. The small strips of meat make for great snacking either cooked hot and fast or breaded and fried.

Thighs – These have a lot of uses that are only limited by your imagination. You can prepare them any way you would a chicken thigh, or you can cube it up for stew meat and is even great ground up for burgers or sausage.

Drumsticks – The most difficult part of drumsticks is that they have lots of tendons and some are almost bone-like. The trick is to braise them or cook them in a crock pot until you can pull the meat off easily. Use it for tacos or add barbecue sauce for a pulled crane sandwich.

There is a little bit of meat on the lower wings, but we can tell you that plucking those primary flight feathers is a tough job. You can much more easily cut the meat out and use it like tenders.

Now if you are really an adventurous eater, cranes have very large internal organs like the heart, gizzard, and liver. These can make dishes like paté, fried gizzards, grilled heart, or gravies.