

A photograph of a sandhill crane standing in a wetland. The crane is the central focus, facing right. It has a long neck, a long black beak, and a distinctive red patch on its forehead. Its feathers are a mix of light and dark grey. The background is filled with tall, golden-brown grasses and a small pool of water. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

The Valley of the Cranes

Alistair Montgomery

What follows is an account of my first visit to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Reserve (NWR) in November 2006. I made two other visits in 2010 and 2013. Today, 2022, the NWR is recovering from two years of Covid-19 isolation and a drought that has significantly reduced the wetlands water supply from the Rio Grande River. The NWR staff are adapting by constructing levies to reduce leakage to the western desert, delivery ditches to the wetland areas most suitable for plant growth and saving water supplied for commercial sale of alfalfa by the former corn farming partners. NWR employees are growing enough corn to feed the migrating and other birds on reduced acreage. And the birds still come to winter in the valley of the cranes.



The parking lot of the Super 8 Motel in Socorro, New Mexico was cold and deserted at 5.30 a.m. on Thanksgiving morning. We had driven down from Denver the night before over Raton Pass where the road south joins the Santa Fe Trail that once linked America and Mexico. I wiggled the worn key in the lock of my old reliable Buick Park Avenue, jumped in and shut the door against the cold. The engine roared into life and I pulled out into the blackness heading south on I-25. Warm air blasted into the cabin in a few minutes. American cars always have great heaters. I scanned the road signs carefully for the San Antonio exit. If I missed it, it would be 15 miles to the next one.

About 20 minutes later, I turned onto the loop road at the Bosque Del Apache Wildlife Reserve, bore north towards the Flight Deck viewing area and parked on the roadside across from the San Pascual mountains where the sun would rise. It was still pitch black, but I could hear the quiet croaking of many sandhill cranes in the vast Wetland Roost that stretched out before me. It would be light in about 20 minutes, so I hurried to set up my gear.

Then the sun rose, painting the clouds with a deep red hue and shooting long rays behind the hills into the heavens. What a sight! The cold forgotten, my hands leapt out of the warm pockets of my jacket and the shutter of my camera started

clicking. The scene lasted for a whole 5 minutes, long enough to imprint an image in my brain that will last a lifetime.



My wife Barbara and I had come here to attend a photography workshop given by Arthur Morris, whose bird photography I had admired. I had become fascinated with photographing birds ever since my experience in restoring Johnston Atoll in the North Pacific from a military base to a Wildlife Reserve (*Nature Photographer, Summer 2005*). I had recently bought a long lens and switched to digital photography. Now I needed some instruction in unraveling the mysteries of evaluative metering and histograms.

The Place

The Woods (Bosque) of the Apache Reserve is part of the Central Flyway for bird migration between East Siberia and Mexico. It lies in the Rio Grande valley about 80 miles south of Albuquerque, New Mexico and is bordered by the Chupadera mountains to the west and the San Pascual mountains to the east. From time immemorial, the mighty Rio Grande River flooded the bottom lands of the valley each spring creating the vast wetland habitat migrating wildfowl need to flourish. Piro Indians farmed and hunted there more than 700 years ago. The El Camino Real trade route between Mexico City and Santa Fe was established by the early Spanish settlers. Some stayed and farmed in the lush valley through which it passed. In later years, the Apache camped and hunted in the cottonwood and willow woods giving the area its name. As time passed, and civilization marched on, the downstream water flow was depleted by dams and irrigation ditches built to supply water for farming and the ever-expanding settlements to the north. By the time the Wildlife Refuge was created by Executive Order of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1939, the land was parched and the wetlands were gone.

But what Man destroys he can sometimes repair. Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" Civilian Conservation Corp. constructed the first administration buildings and the loop road around the Reserve. Ditches were dug to divert a portion of

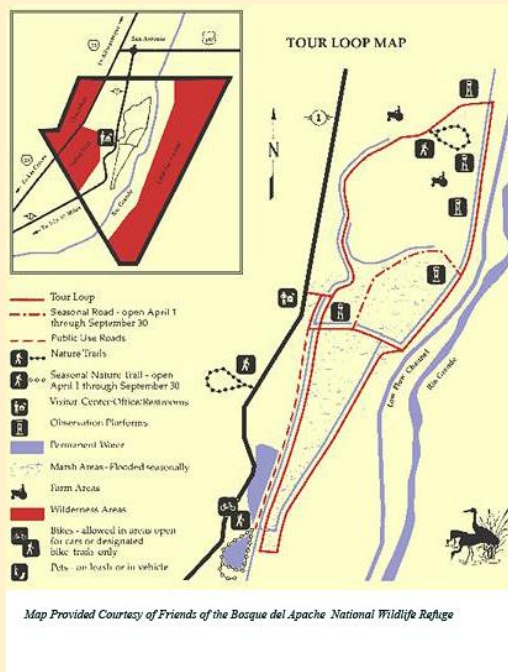
the Rio Grande so that at least part of the bottom lands could be flooded to sustain seasonal wetlands. Large areas were alternatively drained, burnt out and flooded to establish native vegetation. Cooperative farming was introduced to supplement the natural food by growing alfalfa for marketing and corn for the birds. The refuge in 2006 had an area of 51,000 acres with 7,000 acres of bottomland in managed wetlands. And the birds returned in thousands. More than 15,000 Sandhill Cranes, 30,000 Snow Geese, 20,000 ducks of various species and countless Redwing and Yellow-head Blackbirds co-habited the Reserve over the winter months with Bald Eagles, Harrier Hawks, White-crowned Sparrows and many other species.

The Experience

A visit to Bosque is akin to being in an aviary without the cover. In his book "*On Ancient Wings*", Michael Forsberg describes his visit there as:

"After years of lying on my belly or sliding on my butt trying to make myself look like a bush or a tree to get close to these birds [Sandhill Cranes], I couldn't believe I could just drive up alongside them".

The reserve has many visitors, particularly during the Crane Festival that runs in November every year. But the experience of being in the midst of so much wildlife, in my mind, more than compensates for the crowds.



The famous Bosque “blast off” where masses of Snow Geese become airborne at once can be experienced in three principal areas; at the Flight Deck, the Farm Area and at the southern end of the Reserve. We spent virtually all the *Birds as Art* course at these locations shown on the loop map.

The Flight Deck overlooks the wetlands where cranes and snow geese roost at night out of reach of land predators. The approaches and the Deck itself are popular spots for photographers. You need a very early start to get a space, at least an hour or more before sunrise, particularly on the Deck. The sunrise behind the San Pascual mountains provides wonderful opportunities for backlit photographs with a range of saturated colors from yellow to red as the birds gather to migrate to their day feeding area. The cranes start to move slowly through the marsh on their stilt-like legs, picking up their feet and placing them carefully as though walking on eggs before taking off at a run. The stark leafless tree in the middle of the marsh might sport a bald eagle or two, preening themselves while waiting for the sunrise. Then the Snow Geese will all come off in a rush breaking the silence with the furious beating of

wings and blanketing the sky. Now is the time for panning and slow shutter speeds to capture the movement of the mass migration to the day feeding areas.

When the sun finally came up it was time to move to the farm area. The corn sowed for the birds is cut down at this time of year to provide winter fodder.

Thousands of snow geese dotted with cranes gorge themselves in the harvested area paying little attention to the cutting operation going on behind them. Every so often the honking becomes more agitated as they crowd together until at some crucial point they hit the air in a mass you can't see through. They'll circle the field, spread out and land again and the whole process will be repeated about every half hour. It's hard to tell whether it's the competition for the juicy bit your



neighbor has that causes them to crowd together, or the tractor behind them. I suspect the former.



The Farm Area is a great location for flight photography of single or small groups of birds using fast shutter speeds for pin-sharp images, or moderately slower speeds to impart movement to the wings. For the geese blast off I used ISO 400, 1/80 sec. at f20 to

retain the movement of the wings at a focal length of 550 mm focusing in the center of the flock (it all happened so fast!) For sharp in-flight shots of landing geese retaining some wing movement I used 1/640 sec., f9 at the same ISO.

Normally, I set my camera for aperture priority, but shutter priority is a better choice for photographing birds in flight. You can always dial up the ISO rating to get the depth of field you want.

My favorite area 'though was the golden marsh at the south end of the reserve.

There were large groups of snow geese and American pintail ducks there with

frequent sightings of harrier hawks and coyotes prowling the marsh for an evening meal. But the blast off of thousands of yellow head and redwing blackbirds was the most exciting spectacle of all. I'm a certified diver and have often marveled at the ability of a school of fish to turn in an instant as one. I never expected to see the same behavior in birds in flight. The blackbirds would come off the grass in a cloud like a dust whirlwind, move a few feet, settle down then repeat the process every few minutes.



They moved closer with each take off, oblivious to the forest of telephoto lenses arranged along the road like an artillery barrage. Then all at once they were gone. These southern marshes are a spectacular setting at the end of the day when the

light softens and groups of cranes are framed by gold-tinged clouds as they return home to the roost. I often used panning shots at 1/40 sec., f25 and ISO 400 to create a soft backdrop of yellow clouds like undulating waves in the ocean.



On the day we would drive back to Denver we spent some time wandering round the visitor center buying some books and taking photos of the southwest flora and the ubiquitous white crowned sparrows. We sat in the open courtyard for a few more moments, basking in the warm autumn sun, reluctant to leave.

A few weeks later, Raton Pass was hit by a massive snowstorm that killed hundreds of cattle and closed road between Colorado and New Mexico. Winter had come to the Valley of the Cranes.

Information

An update on the restoration of the Wetland Roost that started in August 2022 is here:

<https://www.fws.gov/story/2022-08/reshaping-bosque-del-apache-climate-ready-future>

Call the site at 575 -835-1828 to check on current conditions before your trip. I guarantee it will be the experience of a lifetime.

Michael Forsberg's book on the history and migration routes of Greater and Lesser Sandhill Cranes is a wonderful read and beautifully photographed. It is sponsored by the National Audubon Society, the International Crane Foundation and other Institutions and published by:

Michael Forsberg Photography

Lincoln, Nebraska

www.michaelforsberg.com

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Visit the Photo Gallery to see more photos at:

<https://www.alistairmontgomeryjourneys.com/bosque-del-apache>