

'Craning' for a good look

By Marie Chestney
staff writer

On a hill in Jackson County, there isn't a sign that says, "Rest Stop, Sandhill Cranes."

But you know there's something special about this place because benches dot the rural hilltop. There's got to be some reason why folks gather here on this well-worn hill overlooking a vast watery marsh.

The reason shows up in the sky every fall. That's when great flocks of the four-foot-tall cranes come back to Haehnle on their long trek southward.

The annual migration from north to south starts with a trickle of cranes in mid-October. By Nov. 1, the trickle has turned to flocks, with the evening sky flush with cranes gliding to a stop in the distant marsh.

On some fall days, at least 200 of the big birds with their seven-foot-wingspans can be counted. On one November day in 1980, bird watchers counted a record 1,325 cranes in the bird sanctuary.

By mid-November, the marshland is empty again, the last of the visitors having left on their long flight to Texas, Mexico or California.

And yes, the long-legged, long-necked, long-winged birds drift into the marshes of Phyllis Haehnle Memorial Sanctuary in April on their trip north. But their numbers are few and their stay is short because there's not much to eat at Haehnle in the springtime.

A few of the cranes, the early arrivals or those who grew up in the Haehnle marsh, stake out a claim and stay the summer to rear their young.

BUT MOST move on quickly to other marshy areas in Michigan and Canada. These big birds need a huge area to feed in, whereas Haehnle can

support just a handful of cranes over the summer months.

There's lots of water in the Haehnle marsh, but cranes don't eat fish. They stick to grain, frogs, snakes and insects.

But the fall migration, well, just call it spectacular. The cranes, accompanied by their young, fly in, in large groups. And they don't arrive quietly, either.

With trumpeting, boisterous noises, they glide into the marsh and onto the marsh's flood plain. They roam over the hillside on which the benches sit.

"It's a spectacle at dusk," said Roger Sutherland, biology professor at Schoolcraft College and a bird watcher for many years. "They spread out for miles, eating. The water is shallow and when they come in, it looks like they sink out of sight. But they barely get wet."

The cranes spend their days eating the corn planted for them in nearby fields by local farmers working in cooperation with the Jackson Audubon Society. The society doesn't want the cranes eating the corn of nearby farmers, so a crop is planted each year just for them.

"They're voracious eaters," said Grover Niergarth, a biology professor at Schoolcraft College who also



photos by N.L. PARSONS

Fog offers a thin shroud over the Haehnle Sanctuary where sandhill cranes congregate during their annual migration.

is a bird lover. "They build up their carbohydrate reserves."

Cranes that get to the sanctuary early get to enjoy the rest stop the longest; the late arrivals have just a few days to rest up.

WHILE FATTENING up for the long trip ahead, the cranes wait for two things to happen. One is for their flock to get bigger. For reasons of protection, they like to travel in massive groups.

The second is to wait for just the right air currents in which to take off. Because they are high fliers, the cranes depend on high air currents

to get them to Texas and Mexico.

By mid-November, both of these things have happened, and the last of the noisy, big birds are gone. The countryside around the Waterloo Recreation Area becomes quiet once again.

At one time, because they were widely hunted, the sandhill crane was close to being an endangered species. After being named a protected species, they made a comeback.

The sandhill cranes return to Haehnle each year because there are very few large wetland areas left in southern Michigan for them to use as a stopover.

Most of the small marshy areas left can't support a bird with the voracious eating habits of the sandhill.

In the early 1900s, Jackson County was dotted with marshy areas. These areas attracted huge numbers of ducks — as well as a huge number of duck hunters.

Casper Haehnle was an avid duck hunter who bought land on which to hunt. In 1955, he gave 500 acres of this land to the Michigan Audubon Society as a memorial to his daughter Phyllis.

IN 1957, much to the chagrin of nearby farmers, the state named it a wildlife sanctuary. That designation closed the land to hunting, fishing and trapping.

Since then the society has bought other pieces of nearby land, making the sanctuary bigger.

"Hunters saved Haehnle," said Sutherland, who was "overwhelmed" 20 years ago when he first saw the sandhill cranes at Haehnle. "Farmers didn't drain it because they wanted to shoot ducks. They knew there would be good hunting only if they kept the habitat."

"They wanted to maintain the water levels. In the process, they became good conservationists."

How to get to Haehnle

The Phyllis Haehnle Memorial Sanctuary is near the western fringes of the Waterloo State Recreation Area in Jackson and Washtenaw counties. It's about an hour's drive from Livonia, via M-14 and I-94.

Parking is in a small lot off Seymour Road, but it can be troublesome if a lot of bird lovers show up at the same time. During the migration, many have to park along Sey-

mour, which is a not heavily traveled blacktop road.

Take exit 147 (Race Road) off I-94 north about 2.5 miles to Seymour Road. Turn west on Seymour and go about 1.5 miles to the sanctuary.

After parking, follow the mowed trail near the road to the hilltop overlooking the marsh.

The best times to see the cranes are mid-afternoon to sunset. Bring binoculars.

