

# *On Black-tipped Wing*

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The iconic whooping crane stands as North America's tallest bird. Their striking, predominantly white plumage is complemented by a touch of black on the flight feathers and conspicuous red facial skin. Their range once extended vast distances across the continent, but in more recent times, they've bred exclusively in western Canada and wintered in Texas. From numbers in excess of 10,000, by 1941 the population had dwindled to a mere 15 individuals.

While this remarkable species is among our most endangered, it also embodies a remarkable conservation success, rebounding from near extinction to a population of nearly 1,000 today. Today, a reintroduced population migrates from Wisconsin to Florida. Conservation efforts have ingeniously employed crane puppets to instill whooping crane behaviors in young birds and used small aircraft to guide them along their migration routes.

Recently, my wife and I seized the opportunity to visit the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in hopes of sighting a whooping crane. The local community has wholeheartedly embraced these magnificent birds, evident in the numerous prominent signs in the town and the impressive modern Visitors Center. While a sighting after breeding season seemed unlikely, we headed to the nearest observation tower, ready to wait. The area teemed with hundreds of ducks and a few trumpeter swans, but there was no sign of a whooping crane. Then, my wife noticed a head poking up over the reeds, approximately half a mile away. It vanished as quickly as it had appeared, but we kept our binoculars trained on the spot. Eventually, a majestic white bird emerged, displaying a telltale red on its face—a whooping crane!



While whooping cranes are not known to visit Sudbury, their grey, slightly smaller cousins can sometimes be spotted. Approximately the size of a great blue heron, sandhill cranes are renowned for their spectacular migratory patterns, with notable sites in New Mexico and Nebraska. Common in other parts of the country, they are a rare in the Northeast, which hosts only a few breeding sites (none of which are in Middlesex County). Despite the slim odds, there have been a couple of sightings in Town, including one this past March near the Davis Farm Conservation Land.

Keep an eye out in early spring for migrating sandhill cranes, whether soaring high above or gracing farmland with their presence. Their distinctive bugling calls and characteristic cross-shaped flight are unmistakable, a privilege and wonder to behold.

Habitat diversity promotes species diversity. In addition to protecting the forests and wetlands of the Town's conservation lands, the [Sudbury Conservation Commission](#) also plays a pivotal role in preserving agricultural land in Sudbury, owning several properties that are leased to local farmers. These lands provide essential habitat for all manner of flora and fauna, including migratory birds like killdeer, sparrows, and of course, the occasional sandhill crane.