Crane Dance Performance for Flock — November 2019

"When we hear the call of the crane, we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution."

Aldo Leopold said that, in his classic book of conservation essays — *A Sand County Almanac.* What Leopold was describing was the primeval call from the ancient history of the sandhill crane. These may well be the oldest living form of bird on earth. Bones of the ancestors of the birds you see around you date back several million years. By contrast, we humans have only been around for perhaps 200 thousand years.

I, like Leopold, and like so many of you, thrill to the sound of the sandhill cranes arriving in the fall. My name is Wendy — I'm a biologist who has spent most of her adult life studying cranes in one way or another — and I never tire of learning about them. I also sometimes dance with the wonderful women you see here. But today, I simply want to share a little bit of what I know about cranes, and what these dancers are expressing.

The cranes you see around you have arrived from their breeding grounds in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Pairs, who typically mate for life, spend their summers in the green, wet meadows of Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and Utah. Pairs nest there, raising one or two youngsters if they are skilled and lucky. These young cranes accompany the adults some 800 miles in migration to spend the winter as a family in the Southwest.

Why here? The Pueblo people of New Mexico have a story to explain this: *Once, long ago, a flock of cranes lived up in the clouds. They were quite happy, drinking water from the clouds, and even building their nests there. But one day they decided to visit earth, and drink and eat from the rivers. At the first river, they ate all the fish and frogs and drank all the water till it was gone. They visited a second and third river, and the same thing happened. Finally they went to the Rio Grande, but here they were unable to eat and drink all that was there. "This is a mighty*

*and great river!" said their leader. "We shall make our home here and prosper!" **

The truth portrayed in this folktale is that the Rio Grande Valley indeed provides what these cranes need: food, and shelter, and a safe place to sleep at night: a place where they stand together in groups in the shallow water (often on one leg!).

Humans are quite fascinated with cranes — there are 15 species of cranes around the world, and each species is depicted, often revered, in the cultures endemic to each country. Art, music, literature from folktales to novels — and yes — dance! — every culture embraces cranes. Perhaps it is because cranes exhibit many traits that humans value. They are family-oriented, devoted to their mates and their young.

They are intelligent, and long-lived — my colleagues and I have banded sandhill cranes that were identified over 40 years later in the wild. Cranes survive by their wits — and learning is a key to that long- term survival. When you see these cranes return to us in the autumn, think about how many times some of those birds have made the long journey here … maybe longer than you have been alive!

Cranes are artists too in their own way. In summer — they paint their feathers with the iron-stained vegetation of the marshes to camouflage themselves on the nest. Their calls are appreciated as beautiful, haunting music. And of course, they dance — every species of crane has a unique dance, often interpreted by indigenous cultures around the world.

Why do they dance, you ask? Einstein said — "Look deep into nature, and you will understand everything better." Biologists believe cranes dance to demonstrate strength and prowess to a rival, to impress or show devotion to a mate, to express excitement, to prepare to fly. But — perhaps they also dance, as we do — simply because it is a joyful thing to be alive on this earth.

Wendy Brown, Wildlife Biologist, 2019

* Pueblo Folktale compiled in
The Quality of Cranes: A Little Book of Crane Lore
By Betsy Didrickson (author), Jay Jocham (illustrator), copyright 2010