

Marsh madness: 'Craniacs' flock to annual Sandhill Crane Festival

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LODI — Did you know if you see a long-legged bird in a tree, you can be sure it is not a sandhill crane? That's because the crane's back toe is too short to grip the branch.

Had you visited the 21st annual Sandhill Crane Festival over the weekend at Lodi's Hutchins Street Square, you might have learned that little fact and several more about the fascinating large-bird species that calls San Joaquin County home every winter.

"If we can successfully teach people a little bit about the cranes, we will gain more people who will be in a position to help conserve them," said Ken Nieland, retired director of the Micke Grove Zoo and current chairman of the 16-member all-volunteer steering committee that organizes the crane fest.

Nieland, who has been involved with the festival since Day One, was inspired to do something to share the wonder and magic of the sandhill cranes' annual migratory return to the wetlands west of Lodi by the words of an internationally acclaimed conservationist:

"In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught." The quote is from Baba Dioum, a forestry engineer from Senegal who was addressing the 1968 meeting of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in New Delhi, India.

The two-day weekend festival, preceded Friday by special tours and a dinner for "Craniacs," is intended to deepen people's understanding of the unique birds whose very existence depends on the viability of the Delta habitat that supports thousands of sandhill cranes from September through February.

"Sandhill cranes have been migrating for millions of years. They're one of nature's unique spectacles and it's all within 15 to 20 minutes of downtown Lodi," Nieland said, referring to the Isenberg Crane Reserve along Woodbridge Road west of Interstate 5.

“The sound, the sight. It’s all pretty special,” he said.

And as the festival — that remains admission-free thanks to its sponsors, revenue from vendor sales and about 1,100 visitors participating in a variety of scheduled tours — goes on year after year, Nieland believes it is having a positive impact.

“We’ve grown a bit each year. This year is as healthy as it’s ever been,” he said, noting that an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 attended to view the art show, listen to featured speakers Gary Ivey and Kate Marianchild, purchase a hard-to-find birding item, or sit in on a presentation with live raptors.

The latter caught the attention of 10-year-old Reid Satterfield of Sonora. As he was leaving with his parents, he shared some of his newfound knowledge — not about sandhill cranes, but about the wisest of the raptors.

“Owls can’t turn their eyes. They can only turn their heads,” Reid said.

There you have it — another little fact you could have learned had you attended the Sandhill Crane Festival.

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