

## Sandhill Crane 2022: Vicki Penziner-Matson Natural History Expedition



*Led by: Wendy Tori, Jose I Pareja, Jaime Coon, Jennifer Shamel ('23), Hannah Grushon ('23), and Sylvan Gilkey ('25)*

### **Sandhill Crane Trip – 2022 Report**

[URL: <http://www.earlham.edu/vicki-penziner-matson-field-trips/> ]

After a few years on standby due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an eager and enthusiastic group of Earlhamites and families embarked on a Vicki Penziner Matson natural history expedition to Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife area and the Indiana Dunes. The goal - to watch the Sandhill cranes migration and learn more about the natural history of the dunes and Lake Michigan.





The group met early in the morning on Saturday November 12. The temperature for the weekend had suddenly dropped after being in the high 60s for some time, ranging between 22F-40F and mostly remaining in the thirties. A little snow was expected on our drive East and then North of Indianapolis. We were a little nervous about the cold but ready for the adventure! Our group gathered at 7:15am in the Center for Science and Technology (CST) lobby, the newest building on campus. There, we circled up and introduced each other and learned a little more about the place we were heading. Wendy shared with the group about Vicki's passion for nature, her love for capturing nature through a lens, and how this journey honors her. We are so grateful for the generosity of friends and family who established the fund that makes this opportunity possible for the Earlham community. After we learned a little more about each other, we jumped in the vans and headed east to Indianapolis and then north to Jasper County. We layered up, prepared our scopes, and loaded our three Earlham vans.

Participants included faculty, alumni, students (from various years and majors), and Earlham family and friends, for a total of 27 people. Some drove their personal cars, however, most of us drove in our 12-passenger Earlham vans.



After 2.5 hours of driving, and careful maneuvering through the snow by our fearless drivers – Katie, Jaime, Wendy, and Jose, we stopped for a quick restroom break. Each expeditioner received a pack of three cookies recently baked and purchased in our local Richmond winter farmer's market. We then

stopped again near the Meadow Lake Wind Farm where Jaime, Wendy, and Jose talked about wind energy, land use changes, the Kankakee reclamation project, farming, and the impacts of these endeavors on that place and nature. Everyone's adventuresome spirit perked up as we were learning about this place, while the wind was blowing and our vans were acting as barriers to protect us from the chill. After this short stop, we then drove north to Jasper-Pulaski State Fish and Game Area, arriving around 11:45 am. This area is an ideal stopover site for migratory birds like Sandhill cranes. Upon arrival, Wendy gave introductions on how to use binoculars and shared information about the Sandhill Crane migration, their natural history, and courtship rituals. Just a week prior to our trip, the park had recorded 3000+ cranes on site. A few days before our trip we learned that the number had spiked to 7,000+. We were excited, our chances of seeing an amazing "construction of cranes" during sunset that day was going to be high and the weather indicated that we would be clear of snow..



We spent a brief moment on the observation deck parking area fine-tuning our binocular skills while observing some cranes. We then jumped in the vans and drove around the surrounding fields. The goal was to drive slowly around the rural roads outside the refuge to observe flocks of cranes feeding in agricultural fields. We had some amazing views of the Sandhill Cranes. We spotted a few large groups of Sandhill cranes of around 300+ and 1000+ individuals very close. We witnessed many individuals foraging, some practicing mating displays and others were parachuting down to join the group.

After roaming the roads we drove to our parking and lunch spot where we had lunch at around 2 pm. After lunch, we drove back to the rest area to use the restrooms and were welcomed by the sighting of a red headed wood-pecker - spectacular! We then went to a trail close to the marshes and lakes on the refuge for a nice short hike. At around 4:30 pm we ended in the public viewing platform to watch the



cranes aggregate on a large pasture and the nearby cornfields. Noel Pavlovic and Sara (both Earlham alums) joined us. Noel went on the first Vicki-Penziner Matson field trip in 1975. As we were walking to the viewing platform we observed many groups of cranes arriving from feeding areas and in all directions. It was amazing. Many groups of cranes flew right over our heads in V-shaped formations to reduce energy costs while flying, others cranes were in pairs, while others in clumps. It was spectacular to experience this commotion of sandhill cranes flying to gather in the shallow marshes to spend the night. Many on the trip had never seen a crane or this aggregation before, nor witnessed so many birds flying by with the sunset contrast in the horizon. Before we were ready to depart we saw, but most importantly heard, a group of around 2000+ cranes reallocate to a close-by location in the same area. The sound they made when doing this left many of us in awe. All in all a total of more than 7,000 cranes.



After experiencing this amazing display, we followed the back roads to our night accommodations. We had a great time together, enjoyed a warm meal (thank you, night cooks and chefs). Some of us played games, others read books, while others just found a nice cozy spot to lay down and relax. What a good day!

The following day, after a delicious breakfast (thank you morning crew) we headed north to the Indiana Dunes Lakeshore. We had a great introduction to the park by Noel who has worked in the dune area for more than 30 years. His enthusiasm, love, and knowledge of nature in this area was amazing and contagious. During this amazing hike through sand trails and carefully designed stairs, we conquered the top of at least one of the “mountains” in the Park. While doing this we experienced some amazing nature-scapes and learned more about natural history and succession in the area. We then headed to the lakeshore, and enjoyed some running down the dune hill while daring the cold waters of the Michigan lake not to flood our shoes. It was so much fun. Toward the end of this leg of the trip the group had a hearty lunch picnic time in one of the State Park’s shelters before heading back to Richmond.



Many, many thanks to Michael Penziner, Laurence Matson, and other family contributors for making this trip possible! \*\*

Thank you also to the wonderful group of people who went on the trip this year. Everyone's enthusiasm, ready to engage attitude, and good spirits made this experience delightful. We hope that everybody had as much fun as we did.

We would like to recognize and thank Wendy, Jaime, and Noel for their enthusiasm and expertise in Natural History of birds, grasses, plants, ecology, and conservation. Thanks also to José-Ignacio for all his work organizing, orchestrating, and keeping the group on schedule. Katie Breslin for her amazing driving skills and, most importantly, a big THANK YOU to our student leaders who attended, Jennifer and Sylvan, who were key in making this trip happen.

Keep an eye out for other coming Penziner-Matson field trips!!!

Wendy Tori, Jose-Ignacio Pareja, Jaime Coon, Jennifer Shamel ('23), Hannah Grushon ('23), and Sylvan Gilkey ('25)

*\*\*Expenses for the trip (e.g., rental vans and food) were covered by the Vicki Penziner-Matson Fund. Vicki's love of the natural world inspired her parents and friends to establish this fund, after her unexpected death near the end of her senior year at Earlham in 1973. The income from the fund is dedicated to offering natural history field trips. These trips are community-wide events, open to staff, faculty and students (alumni, emeriti, etc.) alike.*

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Selected comments from some of our participants.

*I had fun this weekend. I enjoyed this trip, talked with new friends and colleagues. It was so cool. Thank you! (Javier Orduz)*

*I had such a great time adventuring with new and old Earlham friends this weekend. It was wonderful to botanize ecosystems I'd never experienced, and make memories with such a warm community (Jalen)*

*Thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to go on this trip. I don't know if ever would have seen all those cranes or that part of the Indiana dunes otherwise. (Ben)*

*I've never had the opportunity to see so many animals in the wild like this! It was a truly magical experience. (Macky)*

*I had so much fun with others and loved seeing the birds! Thank you! (Sara)*

*Michael, thank you so much for providing us with the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors and learn a little bit about nature in Indiana! As an Earlham alum, I'm very glad I joined this trip. I learned many new interesting things in the last couple of days and met new people. So, thank you! (Gaby Chacón)*

*I'm so grateful for the opportunity to share the love of the environment with my daughters who came with me on the trip. The joy of watching my fifth grader view sandhill cranes has impacted both of us deeply. And for my preschooler it gives her a sense of wonder and curiosity. (Colleen)*

*Thank you so much for this opportunity Michael, we had so much fun and as international students we got to see a landscape we have never seen before. The Sandhill Cranes were beautiful and Michigan Lake was amazing. (Zohaib and Armen)*

*Thank you for your continued support of these amazing natural history expedition trips. Our Earlham community greatly appreciates this chance to be outdoors together in remembrance of Vicki. It is always a pleasure to plan this trip for our Earlham family. This program is such a gift to Earlham. Thank you. (Jose I Pareja and Wendy Tori)*

*Thank you for providing this chance to go and see the sandhill cranes as they migrate! It was so amazing to get to see it so close, when I typically can only see them from afar. I love learning about birds and their behavior, and this was a wonderful chance to do that. (Sylvan Gilkey)*

*Thank you for supporting our trip. The arrival of the giant flock of sandhill cranes was breathtaking. Additionally, I very much enjoyed the huge dunes that we visited on Sunday. Marching up and down the dunes was not only good exercise, but reminded me of growing up in southwest Michigan. (Evan Coon).*

*This was my first time helping to lead a Vicki Penziner-Matson trip since I started working at EARlham during the pandemic, and it certainly won't be my last! What an amazing opportunity to come together as a community to share in a love of natural history and outdoor exploration. Thank you for your support. (Jaime Coon)*

*Thank you for the opportunity to immerse myself in nature and allowing me the chance to gain new experiences and create new friends! On this trip I was able to learn so much about the wildlife that lives right in my backyard. That was the largest group of birds I have ever seen, and no picture could ever do it justice! (Jennifer Shamel)*

*I have never gotten to witness a migration of that scale. Getting to see thousands of animals all going in the same direction at the same time was beautiful, and a good visual representation of how nature functions at scales that are hard to comprehend, and I am grateful for this experience. (Nathan Brophy)*

*As a faculty member who isn't from Indiana, I'm so grateful for this opportunity to explore the landscapes and skies of this state and do so in fellowship with my colleagues and students. I have now seen thousands of sandhill cranes, learned about Indiana's native grasses and walked the dunes to Lake Michigan, just to name some of the highlights of this experience. I feel rejuvenated and inspired not only to discover more of Indiana's landscapes and wildlife, but also to make it possible for others to do so, as you have with this tribute to your daughter. Thank you. (Belén Villarreal)*

*The Sandhill Crane trip in 2019 was my first opportunity to go on an off campus trip and, because of COVID, it was my only one for a long time. I am thankful to be able to go on this trip one more time before I graduate and be reminded of all the reasons that I chose to major in biology. (Abby Shuck)*



## LIST OF FAUNA AND FLORA

### Avifauna:

Canada Goose Mallard Wild Turkey Killdeer Ring-billed gull Great Blue Heron Red-tailed Hawk Sandhill Crane (7000+) Rock Pigeon Red-bellied Woodpecker Red-headed Woodpecker Downy Woodpecker	Blue Jay American Crow American Robin European Starling Tufted Titmouse White-breasted Nuthatch Black-capped Chickadee Northern Cardinal Dark-eyed Junco American Goldfinch House Sparrow
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### Distinctive trees, grasses, and shrubs of the area:

Black Oak, Pin Oak, White Oak, Quaking Aspen, Sassafras, Cottonwood, Jack Pine, White Pine, River Birch, Winterberry Holly and Buttonbush, Sumac, Marram Grass, Yellow feathergrass, Big bluestem, Little bluestem, Switchgrass, Sugar Maple, Norway Maple, Cottonwood and way too much invasive exotic Oriental Bittersweet