

# The Dance of the Sandhill Cranes

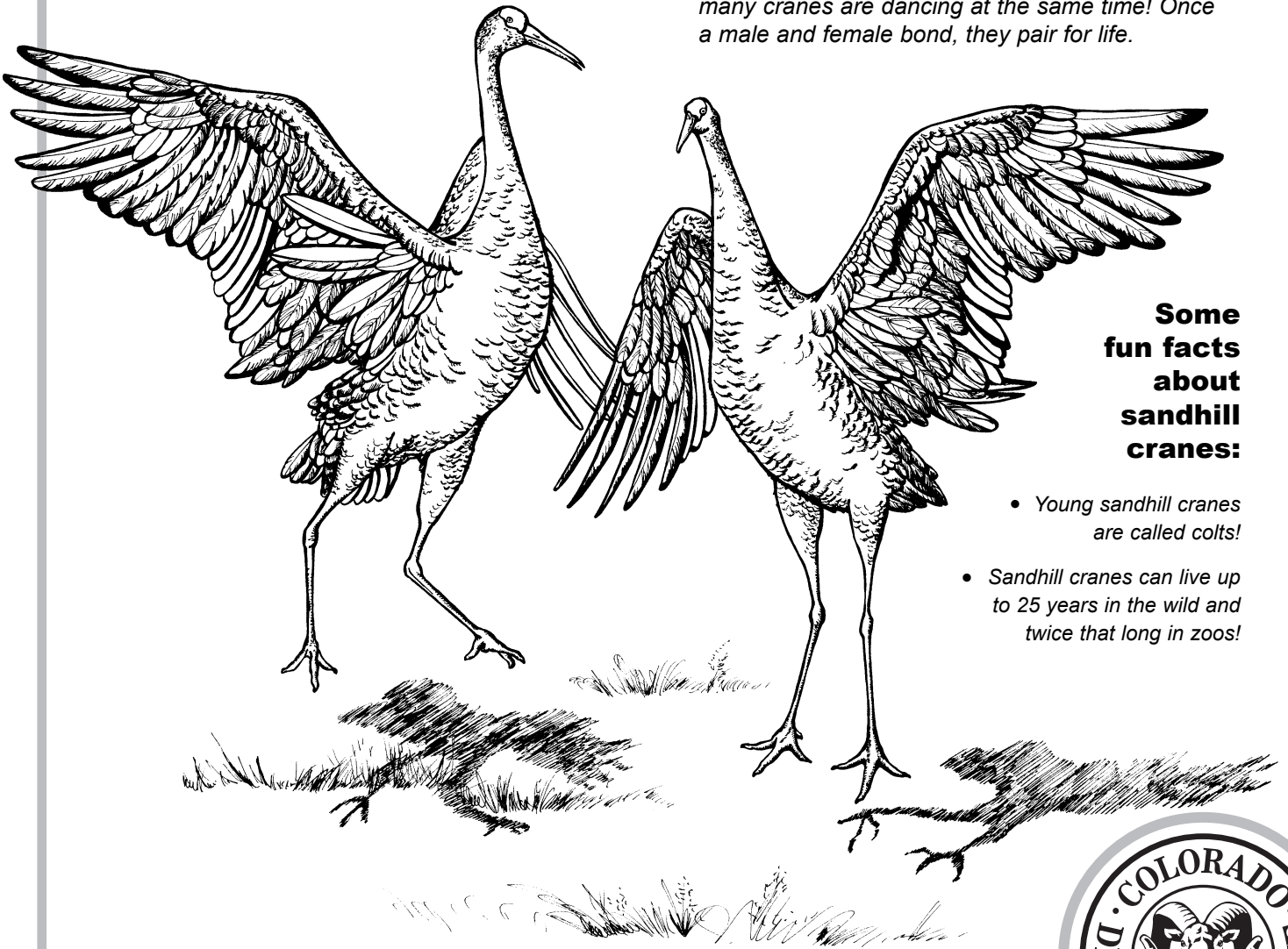
Each February, for thousands of years, greater sandhill cranes have flocked to the San Luis Valley in Colorado. They are coming from their wintering grounds in New Mexico. They will stay until late March or early April. While here, the cranes fatten up on seeds, grain, berries, insects, earthworms, mice, small birds, snakes, lizards, frogs, and crayfish. Then they will fly 850 miles north to their summer breeding grounds in Idaho.

Greater sandhill cranes are gray with white cheeks and a red patch of skin on their foreheads. They have long black legs, long necks, and black chisel-shaped bills. These majestic birds are about

four feet tall with a six foot wingspan. Surprisingly, they weigh only 12 to 14 pounds!

While in the San Luis Valley, the cranes perform their famous courtship dance. It is one of the most interesting animal behaviors. The ritual starts with a deep bow followed by great leaps, hops, skips, turns, and more bows. The cranes toss sticks or grass up in the air, run, and flap their wings. All the while, the birds call to each other with a loud, rattling trill. The male utters a note which is followed quickly by the female's two-note answer.

The sandhill crane dance often begins slowly with just one bird. Then, as the speed of the bird's dance increases, the excitement spreads until many cranes are dancing at the same time! Once a male and female bond, they pair for life.



## Some fun facts about sandhill cranes:

- Young sandhill cranes are called colts!
- Sandhill cranes can live up to 25 years in the wild and twice that long in zoos!

