

Sandhill cranes have become a greater presence at SOS over the past several years. Since 2001 the number of cranes brought to SOS for help has steadily increased from a handful each year to almost 100 in 2008. This significant increase has revealed a need to better understand the crane population in Florida so that educational efforts can be more acutely focused on their safety. 90% of Sandhill cranes coming to SOS are primarily injured in one of two ways: impact by golf balls or hit by car. The remaining 10% of injuries are from monofilament line, gun shot or some type of trash wrapped around their bills or legs. The most heart breaking injuries are leg fractures from the golf ball impact. When the legs have been impacted most likely it must be amputated, rendering the bird unable to walk. With the increasing numbers of cranes arriving with these serious injuries, we struggled to find an alternative to euthanizing them.

Director Lee Fox and Lynn Zablo developed a way. Six (6) sandhills, with permission from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, were able to preserve their ability to walk and survive with sufficient quality of life and reside at SOS as part of our educational program. As these birds are very large, the solution had to be strong and stable. They developed a prosthetic leg made of 2" PVC pipe attached to a 1/4" PVC pipe with a sink stopper taped to the bottom to give the bird sufficient leg length as well as a sturdy circumference to stand on. The first sandhill struggled for a month before she was able to get up and stay up on her own. She remained highly motivated to try, and when she achieved the goal, she walked confidently as if it were her real leg and foot. We named her "Chrisie" because she started walking Christmas Eve 2007. What a gift that was for Chrisie, Lee, Lynn and SOS staff.

It has been 31/2 years since Chrisie was brought to SOS. While some cranes have



*One of our sandhill cranes wearing a custom-fit prosthetic leg by the world-renowned designer, Kevin Carroll, MS, CP, FAAOP and his son, Michael, after hearing of Lee Fox's work in this area. Carroll has helped thousands of prosthetic consumers across the world. His commitment to improving prosthetics has placed him at the forefront of numerous breakthroughs.*

thrived with their prostheses, others have had to be euthanized. Many require days or weeks of tube feeding four times daily, patterning and training them to walk again. This is a very labor intensive process, however, worth the effort as they are an extremely valuable educational tool.

SOS has recruited assistance from Kevin Carroll, world-renowned Prosthetic Designer, to help design a more comfortable fitted prosthetic for our six sandhills cranes. Kevin has a wide range of experience in this area, having designed specialized prosthetics for our vets coming home from Iraq with amputations and for children in Ethiopia who have lost limbs from bomb blasts. He is also well-known in the animal world for a prosthetic tail he designed for Winter, the baby dolphin at Clearwater Marine Science Center in Florida. Thank you Kevin.

Clearly, while prostheses are a great help for SOS's six cranes, they are not the complete answer to long-term assistance for these beautiful birds. We need to know much more about the sandhill crane population in Florida in order to more effectively prevent injuries and educate people about living in harmony with them.

Because they are not on the endangered species list, there have been no in-depth studies of Florida sandhill cranes distinguishing them from migrating sandhills. We know there is a year-round population estimated at 4,000 – 6,000 birds, with many more who come from northern climates to winter here. SOS has requested and received permission from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Atlanta, Georgia to do a study of the sandhill cranes at SOS to determine their state of origins. Some important questions include:

- Are the behaviors that lead to injury more prevalent among migratory or year-round birds?
- Do they react differently to living in captivity?
- Are they interbreeding or remaining as distinct populations?

Because it is not possible to tell migratory from year-round cranes by looking at them, deeper studies are required. To assist with this study, Cornell University, in Ithaca, NY., has agreed to help us determine where some of the migrating sandhill cranes have come from. They will be doing testing on feather samples to measure hydrogen, carbon and oxygen to determine their specific diet and where in the country those dietary elements are found.

#### **DO YOU KNOW?**

- Sandhill cranes grow to 3-4' high, weigh 7-10 lbs. and may have a wingspan of 6'. At 6 lbs. they are extremely underweight.
- They mate for life and each help care for young "colts".
- Newly hatched "colts" may grow as much as an inch a day.
- The red crown on the crane's head is bare skin, not feathers.
- They may live as long as 20-25 years in the wild. However that was before their habitats were changed into condo's, golf courses, apartment on golf courses, and office complexes.