

## Photographer and writer share the true story of a gosling adopted by sandhill cranes

*A goose raised by cranes is at the root of a new book for children about love, acceptance, and belonging.*

By **Kate Seitz** | August 14, 2025 | Reading Time: 5 minutes

Share:    



Fam, sandhill crane sibling Sam, and one of the crane parents. (Gary Noren)

When an unusual avian family showed up in their Green Lake neighborhood, writer Martha Harding and photographer Gary Noren decided to celebrate the family rather than focus on their differences. What they witnessed over several seasons is the subject of their new book, *Fam: The Remarkable Story of a Canada Goose Adopted by Sandhill Cranes*.

Four years ago, Noren was inside his home, looking out at the quiet bay of Green Lake in Chisago City, MN. The long-time photographer had his telephoto lens nearby when he spotted a sandhill crane family near the water and began taking pictures.

Harding joined him in watching the birds and noticed one of the two sandhill colts looked unusual. At first, she thought it might be sick. Soon, however, they realized that the odd duck out, so to speak, was a Canada gosling. And the crane adults were parenting both youngsters as if they were both cranes.

Alloparenting, or the care of offspring by individuals other than their biological parents, is very common among humans. While we know alloparenting occurs among other species, documentation varies.

Only a handful of times in recent history has there been a documented Canada goose adopted by sandhill cranes. In all but one of the cases, the gosling or goose didn't survive or its outcome is unknown. ([Smithsonian Magazine](#) recently reported on another gosling/crane family.)

## **The family's first year**

Harding and Noren knew they were witnessing something special. They began posting photos of the crane family almost daily on their Facebook pages. As word spread, friends and acquaintances began asking questions about the family and requesting more photos.

Over the course of that first season, Harding and Noren witnessed the cranes teaching the two youngsters how to feed themselves by digging insects out of

the lawn. The gosling's short, flat beak made insect foraging a challenge, so the family fed it grubs they dug up and visited nearby corn fields to eat.

The adults also taught the adolescents to paint their feathers with mud to blend in with their surroundings. As the summer progressed, the family spent more and more time practicing flying in order to be ready to migrate south for the winter.

When a large group of migrating sandhills passed over Green Lake in November, the entire crane family flew up and joined in. Harding and Noren wondered if they would ever again see the gosling, whom they had named "Fam."



*Fam and family in hay field. (Gary Noren)*

## **The second spring**

There was still ice on Green Lake when all four members of the sandhill crane family returned the following spring. Harding and Noren were surprised and relieved, and quickly resumed their pattern of photographing and posting about the birds on social media.

The sandhill yearling, whom they had named "Sam," left the family and joined up with a group of other one-year-old cranes. Fam tried to stay with his

sandhill parents. When they built their nest and the female laid two eggs, however, Fam was shooed away and went off on his own.

After the eggs were poached by a predator, the parents allowed Fam to come back. The goose spent his days meeting and swimming with other waterfowl on Green Lake, including other Canada geese. At night, he returned to the nest with his parents.

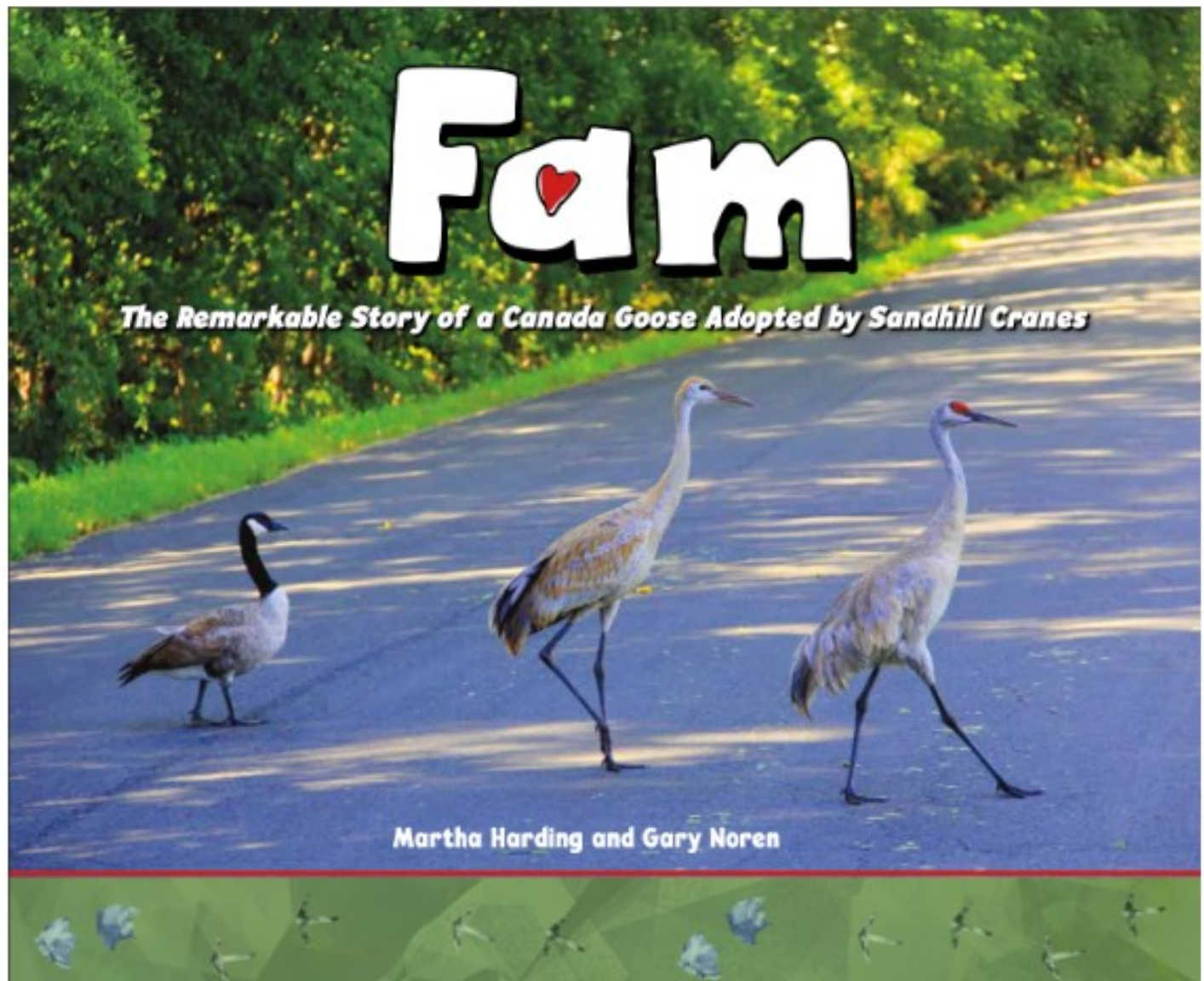
The more Harding and Noren shared photos and stories about what they were seeing, the more people told them to share the story in a book. They approached a number of publishers who were interested but wanted to illustrate it rather than use Noren's photos. Harding and Noren felt their rare photos of this interspecies alloparenting were too important not to use. Beaver's Pond Press in St. Paul agreed with the couple. They worked closely with them to design a children's book that creatively blends Noren's photos with speech bubbles and other graphic elements.

As the writer of the book, Harding felt she had several ways to express the story. One, the stereotypical "here's a gosling that doesn't look like the rest of his family. He tries to find his flock." The alternate, one of acceptance and belonging, was the path she took instead.

Harding herself was "happily adopted" as an infant. "I grew up with a resilient feeling, like, I was chosen by my family. It was an empowering way to feel about being adopted," she says.

While the book mainly focuses on the first two seasons that the birds were at Green Lake, there's an epilogue highlighting the third season, when Fam returns with a mate and introduces her to his sandhill parents.

## A book on the brink of fledging



The sandhill crane family has returned to Green Lake every year for the past three years, and Harding and Noren are still sharing photos and stories about the birds on social media. In preparation for the book launch later this summer, they're posting daily on the Facebook page, [Fam and more](#), revisiting the chronological timeline from when they first encountered the sandhill cranes. A website, [FamFamily.com](#), contains information about the book and the authors.

Everywhere they've visited with the book this summer, Harding and Noren say people marvel at the unusual story they've captured in photos and in words. When the book releases, they hope it speaks to many different audiences, from

children to adults, foster and adoption families, and naturalists and environmental educators.

“Looking back at the beginning of this, we didn’t know what we had,” says Harding. “We didn’t know how this would transform our life.”

## **Book Details**

*Fam: The Remarkable Story of a Canada Goose Adopted by Sandhill Cranes*

By Martha Harding and Gary Noren

Anticipated Release Date: September 1, 2025

Pre-order on [ItascaBooks.com](https://www.ItascaBooks.com)

Pre-order on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)

### **Launch party open to the public**

Sunday, September 28, 2025

2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Uncommon Loon Brewing Company

Chisago City, MN

Reprinted with permission from [St. Croix 360](#), a weekly e-mail newsletter full of news, nature, events, and much more about the St. Croix River watershed in Minnesota and Wisconsin. [Subscribe here.](#)