

OUTDOORS

## How a goose became part of a sandhill crane family

A remarkably rare adoption on a Minnesota lake inspired a children's book about belonging, family and acceptance.

**By Val Cunningham**

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A Canada goose named Fam, left, walks with a pair of sandhill cranes on a road near Green Lake in Chisago County. The unusual bird family inspired the children's book 'Fam: The Remarkable Story of a Canada Goose Adopted by Sandhill Cranes.' (Gary Noren)

Martha Harding and Gary Noren were looking out a window in their lakeside home several years ago when two adult sandhill cranes stalked into view, followed by two

youngsters. Something seemed odd about one of them – as Harding says, “I wondered if it was sick.”

As it turned out, the young bird wasn’t sick – it just wasn’t a crane.

Instead, it was a young Canada goose with three sandhills. The four birds spent the summer together on the lakeshore, delighting Harding and Noren and their neighbors. They named the goose Fam. This mingling of species is so rare there are just a few other documented cases of sandhills raising a gosling.

That first summer, and in the years that followed, the crane/goose family inspired Noren, a photographer, and Harding, a writer, to collaborate on a children’s book. [“Fam: The Remarkable Story of a Canada Goose Adopted by Sandhill Cranes”](#) was published last year by Beaver’s Pond Press.

Harding and Noren recently sat down for an interview to discuss the story, which begins in the summer of 2022 on the shores of Green Lake in Chisago County.

**Q: How do you think this unlikely family come about?**

**A:** We think that a female goose prepared a nest on the lakeshore and laid one egg, but then was chased off by a pair of sandhills who wanted that site. The female crane laid her own egg in the goose’s nest and both cranes took turns incubating the two eggs. When two youngsters broke out of their eggshells, the parent cranes accepted both as their hatchlings.



Fam, center left, flies with his sandhill crane family. The Canada goose learned to fly alongside the cranes that raised him. (Gary Noren)

**Q: You both obviously kept a very firm eye on the gosling and his crane sibling as the story unfolded.**

**A:** We started observing them closely right away, but our watching grew over that first summer into an obsession. We didn't know yet that this kind of thing was extremely rare, and our admiration of the four birds as a family grew as the summer progressed. They captured our hearts and many of our neighbors were drawn into the story, too, alerting us to their own sightings of the cranes and goose.

**Q: What kinds of things drew your attention to these birds?**

**A:** The adult cranes completely accepted Fam as their offspring, there never was any question about that. They fed him, taught him to fly, even tried to teach him the crane courtship dance. The family was always together, the only time they were briefly separated was when Fam's short legs couldn't keep up with the cranes as they walked to a nearby farm to feed on grain. When he got tired of being left behind, he figured out that he could fly back home instead of walking.

**Q: What are some other things Fam learned from his crane parents?**

**A:** Cranes and geese learn by observing, like most creatures. We saw the youngsters watching their parents and doing just what they did. Sometimes, though, Fam wasn't equipped to follow their lead. The cranes used their long beaks to dig for grubs, and Fam, with his short beak, couldn't do that. They did their crane dance and Fam watched them but didn't dance the same way they did. The biggest thing he had to learn was how to fly, and he and his sibling, who we called Sam, had many flight demonstrations from their patient parents before they eventually caught on.

**Q: Many people might ask is how could you be sure that the adult cranes and adult goose who returned to your lakeshore in subsequent years were the same birds?**

**A:** It's known that sandhill cranes tend to return to their nest site year after year, and Canada geese return to the same area where they hatched, too. That second year, the cranes' nest wasn't successful, and they let Fam rejoin them. As winter approached they all migrated, but we don't know if they traveled together. The third year, Fam appeared with a mate, and both pairs nested in the same area. Fam was ferocious about defending our bay against all comers, except for his Sandhill parents (and a pair of swans he must have known from previous years). And in the fourth years, just as our book was going to press, Gary photographed the goose pair and the sandhill pair in close proximity. This made it likely that this was the same family. And they've returned again this spring, across the bay this time.

**Q: How did you decide to write a book about this experience?**

**A:** Everyone who heard about this blended family told us, "You've got to write a book about it." We agreed, and Martha especially resonated to this tale of tolerance and diversity. She was an adopted child herself and feels Fam's story reminds us that family isn't defined by biology, but by love, commitment and caring for each other. We've made many presentations since the book's publication and kids love the story, as do their parents and grandparents.