



Local birdwatchers experience the take-off *Corky Lockburn* *Newst View 17th Dec 1981* of 30,000 geese

Try to visualize 30,000 geese. That's two acres packed solid with birds. Or visualize 20,000 sandhill cranes. Since they don't stand that close together, I can't tell you how many acres of cranes that is.

Last month five local bird-watchers went to New Mexico to marvel at the snow geese, ducks and cranes at Bitter Lake Refuge on the Pecos River. Migrating water birds come in astronomical numbers, counted each day by the refuge staff. The birds do not feel threatened by watchers inside vehicles, so we had a very close view of the birds. The refuge has three or four sloughs where the migrating birds rest and feed before heading farther south. During the day most of the cranes and geese fly to nearby fields to feed. At dusk they return to the safety of the slough.

It is the evening flight that awes the bird-watchers.

The sandhill cranes fly in long lines, side by side, some lines over a mile wide, one bird deep. As they reach the refuge they wheel and drop to the water, long legs stretching down in awkward grace. Against the colorful evening sky, it isn't hard to imagine covens of witches riding their

brooms to do strange things. Often, at Bitter Lake, six or more lines of cranes could be seen, wave on wave coming in from the fields, the air throbbing with their loud rattling calls.

The snow geese congregate in late afternoon in fields close to their sleeping pond. Seen from a distance, one would think snow had covered the ground. Through

binoculars individual geese could be studied. It became too dark to see, but still the geese stayed in the field. Mosquitoes bit, a few killedeer called, the bird-watchers waited. With no apparent warning or signal the 30,000 geese took off in unison. There was a roar not unlike the blast-off of a spaceship as every bird rose for the quarter-mile flight to the pond, flying over the heads of the bird-watchers. In 30 seconds it was all over, the watchers stunned by the magnitude of birds and noise, and the geese settled for a noisy night on the slough.

The ducks were thick and varied: mallards, pintails, canvasbacks, redheads, gadwalls, buffleheads — they were all there in numbers estimated at 12,000.