

THE UNISON CALL

- Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

Spring / Summer 2015

Vol. 26 No. 1

Editor's Note — September 2015

Fall migration is well underway, bringing golden opportunities to experience anew one of nature's greatest shows. I was fortunate to attend the Yampa Valley Crane Festival based in Steamboat Springs, Colorado in the second week of September. Only in its fourth year, the festival is receiving enthusiastic public support and raising awareness of the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) of Greater Sandhill Cranes. The Yampa Valley is both a nesting area for some RMP birds and a stopover location during migration for other RMP cranes that breed further north. The festival was started in 2012 as part of a marshalled response against a proposal to allow hunting of Sandhill Cranes in the region. That proposal was defeated thanks to the leadership and pushback of Nancy Merrill, co-founder and president of the Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition (CCCC), the organization behind the crane festival. With broad public support and an army of passionate volunteers, the annual festival now provides a backstop against further potential incursions into the lives of RMP cranes in northwestern Colorado.

The cranes in the Yampa Valley depend largely on the leavings in post-harvest grain fields (oats, wheat, barley) for their sustenance. However, the amount of acreage planted to grain crops has declined dramatically over the decades, from historical highs of

about 85,000 acres to fewer than 10,000 acres today. A new initiative being undertaken by the CCCC is called Crops for Cranes. The group is seeking to partner with farmers and ranchers to have them grow small-grain crops exclusively for crane consumption. This would ensure reliable sources of food for the RMP cranes at specific locations and keep the birds from dispersing, and it would have a secondary benefit of providing dedicated crane-viewing sites, possibly with blinds.

At this year's festival, long-time crane researchers Paul Tebbel and Van Graham each gave presentations on crane biology and behavior, and led morning and evening crane-viewing tours on private ranch lands. Ted Floyd, editor of *ABA's Birding* magazine, demonstrated his consummate birding skill and knowledge during several birding excursions that he led, and also gave a fascinating talk on bird identification basics. A live raptor presentation by master falconer Kin Quitugua of HawkQuest was another highlight.

The Yampa Valley Crane Festival is well worth a visit. The air may be thin (for a lowlander) and sometimes sulfurous (from hot springs), but the venue is beautiful, the fall colors spectacular, and the cranes captivating.

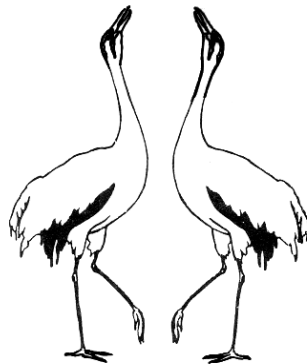
Daryl Henderson

Announcements

Jeb Barzen resigned as director of the Field Ecology Department at the International Crane Foundation (ICF) in June after more than 27 years in that position. Until June, 2016, Jeb will be a research associate with ICF where he will focus on getting as many crane publications completed and submitted as possible. This will likely affect many of you as reviewers! After that, the future is less clear but, with luck, cranes will still be in that future – at least in part. It has been a pleasure to work with such an excellent group of crane conservationists.

Officers of the **Whooping Crane Conservation Association** are looking for an individual to be editor of **Grus Americana**, the association's newsletter. The editor will be paid a moderate amount to be negotiated. He or she is responsible for assembling and typing news items about conservation of the whooping crane for publication in two issues annually (spring and fall). The layout may be single column per page and include photos or figures. Newsletters are prepared in multiples of 4 pages to make for efficient printing and the typical newsletters are 8, 12, or 16 pages. The print-ready material is sent to the Association's printer. After printing the printer mails the newsletters to the Association membership. The Association web site administrator places a copy on the WCCA website. Those interested in applying for the position should contact the Association President, George Gee, phone (207) 454-8422 or by e-mail to george.f.gee@gmail.com.

A reminder that the **14th North American Crane Workshop** is scheduled for January 2017 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. We hope to have preliminary information in the next issue of *The Unison Call*.



The Unison Call is a forum to share updates, news and opinions. It is published twice yearly (spring/summer and fall/winter) by the **North American Crane Working Group**, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization incorporated in Wisconsin. Both print and electronic (PDF) versions are produced; PDFs of past issues of the newsletter can be downloaded free of charge from our website (www.nacwg.org). **The views expressed in *The Unison Call* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the positions of NACWG.** Comments and contributions are always welcome.

Daryl Henderson, Editor

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Re Parks Canada's proposed Whooping Crane tours in Wood Buffalo National Park (see *The Unison Call*, vol. 25, no. 2)

Dear Unison Call:

I thought the enclosed news item from the *Metro* (Edmonton) would be of interest to you. I had my doubts about that move on the part of Parks Canada, and it appears the birds don't like it either! I'm a long time supporter of the crane project and I hope it continues to have success.

Allen Ronaghan, Edmonton, Alberta

Crane Tours May Never Take Flight

Aboriginal band planning to ask feds for injunction

EDMONTON, AB (27 May 2015) — Parks Canada's plans for fly-in tours to the nesting grounds of the world's last natural flock of whooping cranes may be as endangered as the birds themselves.

Excursions planned for May and June have been cancelled, because the birds have declined to nest near observation blinds built by officials at Wood Buffalo National Park on the Alberta-Northwest Territories boundary.

And while tours are still planned for August, an aboriginal band is preparing to ask the Federal Court for an injunction to ban the trips altogether.

"We haven't been consulted on these tours," said Chief Frieda Martselos of the Salt Lake First Nation in Fort Smith, NWT. The band has the right to practice traditional activities in the park. "We don't want the tours to go ahead."

Whooping cranes, the tallest bird in North America and with a two-meter wingspan, were once hunted to extinction. Intensive conservation efforts from their wintering grounds in Texas to their nesting sites in northern Alberta have brought back a few hundred.

While there are captive breeding programs, the Wood Buffalo flock is the last natural one left, said Jeff Wells, chief scientist of the Boreal Songbird Initiative. "They're the only population that survived from the original birds."

This spring, Parks Canada announced plans to bring bird enthusiasts to the remote park to watch the whoopers.

Also, from CBC News (www.cbc.ca/news) on the same story (27 May 2015):

...Ken Hudson, the president of Fort Smith's Métis Council, says Parks Canada never came to them, either. Hudson says they have concerns about the altitude of the flights over the park. He says Parks Canada was proposing flight ceilings of about 300 meters for planes and 360 meters for helicopters. He says he would have liked the opportunity to consult with the Canadian Wildlife Service or the people who monitor the whooping cranes about how the proximity of aircraft could affect wildlife. "If we consult with them and they advise us that no, that's way too low, we'd get back to Parks and get them to change it before we give it support," says Hudson. "But we weren't given that opportunity."...

The Journey of a Sandhill Crane from Pennsylvania

By Matt Hayes, International Crane Foundation

The population of Sandhill Cranes living east of the Mississippi River experienced a population bottleneck in the early 1900s. During this nadir, Sandhill Cranes survived in a few refugia in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Since the 1970s, this population has been steadily growing and re-colonizing former breeding areas in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, and Ontario. More recently, the birds have been expanding into Pennsylvania, New York, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont. In summer 2011, researchers from the International Crane Foundation near Baraboo, Wisconsin and the University of Wisconsin-Madison visited New York and Pennsylvania to collect genetic samples and apply colored plastic leg bands to Sandhill Crane chicks. We expected that some of the birds we banded would be observed on subsequent breeding and wintering areas and along migratory flyways to better understand how this growing population interacts with other birds in the Great Lakes on and off of the breeding grounds.

On 26 June 2011, we captured two chicks in Crawford County, in northwestern PA (just north of Cambridge Springs) after receiving information from Pennsylvania Game Commission employees and private landowners that a family of Sandhill Cranes was breeding there. We determined that the chicks were 7 ½ to 8 weeks old based on body size, eye color, and emergence of the primary flight feathers from the feather shafts. We applied different sized and colored plastic leg bands to each bird's legs in a unique combination so that they can be identified at a distance. These chicks each received a 3" white band with red engraved letters and numbers (B|1 and B|2; see image below). We collected a blood sample for genetic analysis. Upon release, the



B|2 spreads his wings defensively shortly after being captured, color-banded, and released.

Photo by Hoa Nguyen-Phuc, taken at the time of banding on 26 June 2011.

chicks quickly returned to their parents which led the chicks toward cover. Using the blood samples, I determined that B|1 was female and B|2 was male.

Three important sightings of B|2 have been received since he was banded. On 13 April 2013, a pair of Sandhill Cranes, one of which was B|2, was observed near the Seneca Division of the Erie National Wildlife Refuge in Erie County, PA. As a two-year-old bird, this male was likely not breeding yet, but had found a mate and the pair was looking for a location to establish a breeding territory. Only a few months later, on 9 January 2014, B|2 was observed in a flock of 42 Sandhill Cranes near St. Cloud, Florida. This was the first confirmation of a wintering area for a Sandhill Crane from the Northeastern U.S.



Photo of B|2 with chick, taken by Larry Slomski near Erie National Wildlife Refuge in August 2015.

On 23 August 2015, a photographer observed a family of cranes (B|2 with an unbanded mate and chick) in the same area of the Erie NWR in PA. Whether this is the same mate he was paired with in 2013 is unknown. The breeding territory for B|2 is 5 miles from where we captured him four years before. We hope that we will continue to receive more sightings of B|2 as he continues to summer in Pennsylvania, winter in Florida, and migrate part of the year flying in between.

Acknowledgments: **Lisa Williams** and **Jeb Barzen** provided useful comments on this story.

Our thanks to **Larry Slomski** of Saegertown, PA for kindly sharing the recent photo of ‘Proud Papa’ B|2 and his offspring. — Ed.

Regional Reports

Update on the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes



Nest cam image (cropped) of two wild-hatched chicks of parents 7_11 (F) and 3_11 (M). The photo was taken the morning of 26 May 2015 at an off-refuge nest near Necedah NWR.

Winter 2014/2015 and Spring 2015 – Final wintering locations of adult birds was determined to be: Florida (7), Georgia (2), Alabama (35), Tennessee (10), Kentucky (6), and Indiana (23). In addition, the one wild-fledged chick, W3_14, wintered in Alabama. The seven Ultralight juveniles wintered at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, and the three parent-reared chicks wintered in Georgia, Alabama, and Kentucky.

Mortalities – Mortalities on wintering grounds included 8_13 (January, found with a badly broken leg and euthanized), 7_13 and 2_13 (cause unknown, likely occurring on the same day as 8_13's injury), 2_14 (January, predation), all on or adjacent to St. Marks NWR in Florida. W3_14 died in April after returning to Necedah NWR and 14_09's remains were found in April on her wintering territory in Indiana, where her mate, 12_09, remained all summer.

Summer mortalities included 26_07 (May, remains collected from her nest site), 57_13 (May, trauma), 20_11 (June, cause unknown), 6_09 (June, unknown cause, molting), 7_12 (July, unknown cause, mate of 6_09), 5_05 (September, unknown cause), and 22_13 (September, unknown cause, found near site of 6_09, also molting).

Reproduction – In total 37 nests were built in the EMP by 27 pairs this spring: 32 at Necedah NWR and 5 off-refuge. There were 10 renests, including 8 from the forced renesting experiment (all forced renests successfully hatched chicks). From these nests 24 chicks hatched, 3 of which survived to fledging age and are still on the landscape with their parents. So far only W3_15 has been banded.

This was a record year for hatched chicks, possibly due to the cool spring and comparatively low levels of blackflies. More research is needed to understand why even with such large numbers of hatching chicks only a few survived to fledging.

Male 16_11 mated with a sandhill crane at Horicon NWR this summer. The resulting chick was captured and removed from the wild by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff on 22 July. The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership felt that a hybrid chick did nothing to supplement the EMP and although the chick is likely infertile it could result in the effective removal of another whooping crane in the future if he/she were to pair with one. Since capture the hybrid chick has been housed at the Milwaukee County Zoo.

Current Population Estimate – As of 16 September, 2015, the Eastern Migratory Population consisted of approximately 91 birds (49 males, 40 females, 2 unknown). This does not include the Ultralight cohort about to begin migration or the DAR cohort which has moved to Horicon NWR but has not yet been released.

Karis Ritenour
Whooping Crane Field Technician
International Crane Foundation

Update from Karis – Sadly, chick W3_15 is now deceased. Its remains were discovered by aerial survey on 21 September 2015. The cause of death has not yet been determined. – Ed.

Whooping Crane Class of 2015 Gets Ready for Next Adventure: Migration

PRINCETON, Wis. (10 Sept 2015) — For the first time in their young lives they'll learn to fly to their wintering grounds in the central and southeastern United States, another crucial step in efforts to re-establish a migratory population in the eastern half of North America. Hatched and raised in a variety of settings to increase cranes' overall chance for survival, the whoopers also will reach their destinations in a variety of ways.

- Six young cranes hatched earlier this year at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md. are already on site at the White River Marsh State Wildlife Area in Green Lake and Marquette County where they are training to fly behind an Operation Migration ultralight aircraft. That flight will start in late September and is expected to take six to 16 weeks depending upon weather conditions.
- Eight young cranes hatched in captivity earlier this year at the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo and raised by costumed handlers will be released at Horicon Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in October to mingle with, and hopefully make the migration south, with adult whooping cranes.
- Three birds that were hatched in captivity at Patuxent and raised by captive crane parents there will be released at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in September and will hopefully follow migrating adults in October.
- Three whoopers hatched in the wild at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge have fledged and will likely follow their parents along the route.

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Class of 2015 in training. Photo credit: Operation Migration

Joe Duff, Operation Migration co-founder and chief executive officer, says the young whoopers now training with ultralights “make up one of the best, most attentive cohorts we’ve ever had the honor of working with.”

“All six are very attentive to the aircraft and currently can fly for up to 30 minutes at a time,” he says. “We anticipate beginning the southward migration to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge south of Tallahassee on Sept. 20, provided the weather cooperates.”

Milestones achieved but chick survival remains a challenge

“We’ve achieved a lot of milestones with the class of 2015 and are hopeful these young birds can make it safely to their wintering grounds and help us build the flock,” says **Davin Lopez**, a conservation biologist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, one of the partners in the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership that is working to establish a flock in the eastern United States.

Lopez says 2015 saw a record number of nests in the wild, a record number of chicks hatched, a record number of fledglings, and none of the nest abandonment problems of past years.

“We’re seeing a lot of positives and we’re learning a lot about reintroductions that will not only help the Eastern Partnership project but will also help the efforts in Louisiana to establish a non-migratory population of whooping cranes there,” Lopez says.

Studies are ongoing to try to better understand what predators may be posing a problem for chick survival, and the partners are convening a group of experts from across the nation to explore possible causes and solutions.

Black flies, which had contributed to nest abandonment at Necedah in past years, weren’t a problem this year. The flies didn’t emerge in large numbers this summer and there were good hatching rates, although chick survival was not what the partners had hoped for.

“The partnership continues to overcome hurdles and make progress toward establishing a self-sustaining eastern migratory flock,” Lopez says.

Contacts: Heather Ray (heather@operationmigration.org); Davin Lopez (davinlopez@bringbackthecranes.org)

News release (edited) of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership. Thanks to James Lewis for contributing the article.

Louisiana Whooping Crane Update – September 2015

Reproduction – Four pairs (1 at the White Lake WCA and 3 on private land in Avoyelles and Allen Parishes) produced five nests with eggs during the second year of nesting by the Louisiana flock.

Pair L7-11 and L8-11 sat past full term on both their first nest and renesting attempts. This pair now has two years of nesting experience (four nests total) but all eggs they have produced have been infertile. (See photo on next page.)

Pair L1-11 and L6-11 produced two eggs, however due to heavy rains at the White Lake WCA in a short period of time, this nest flooded. One intact egg was collected from the flooded nest and determined to be fertile but dead. All that was found of the second egg was a piece of eggshell.

Pair L2-11 and L13-11 nested in a private marsh in Allen Parish. Due to poor readings from satellite transmitters, the date of initiation of this nest is not known, however we do know that they incubated between 27-37 days, so it is likely they sat at least full term. Only a small piece of eggshell was found at this nest and there was no evidence of a hatch.

Pair L3-11 and L1-13 also nested in Allen Parish. They laid two eggs and incubated for a maximum of 28 days before leaving the nest for an unknown reason. One intact egg was collected, however due to degradation of the contents, fertility could not be determined. Male L1-13 was only two years old at the time.



L7-11 & L8-11's nest in a crawfish field in Avoyelles Parish. Photo by LDWF/Phillip Vasseur.

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Mortalities – One crane (female L11-14) was found severely injured and had to be euthanized on 26 August. Female L2-14 and male L4-14, who are both long-term missing, were also removed from the population totals.

Movements to Texas – Similar to the 2012 cohort, a number of hatch year (HY) 2014 cranes made the trip to Texas in 2015 and remained for an extended period of time. Two males, L3-14 and L4-14, moved to Liberty Co, Texas on 14 May. L3-14 returned to Louisiana by 24 August. His GSM transmitter had not transmitted any data since 24 June when he was still in Texas, so his whereabouts during those two months remain unknown.



L1-14, L13-14 & L14-14 in Jefferson County, Texas. Photo by LDWF/Eva Szyszkoski.

HY2014 L1, 12, 13 & 14 arrived in Jefferson County, Texas on 22 April and remained at this location through at least 15 September.

Three-year-old females L5-12 and L6-12 returned to previously used locations in Texas, spending a majority of their time in Denton and Ellis Counties, respectively.

Current Population Size – As of 15 September 2015, the Louisiana non-migratory population consisted of a maximum of 37 cranes (16 males and 21 females).

Eva Szyszkoski

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Note that Eva has migrated from Wisconsin to Louisiana. I asked her about the peregrination of the 2014-cohort cranes to Texas. She responded: “They did not follow the older birds. Apparently the LA birds just like to visit Texas”. I should have checked a county map of Texas first, because the 2014 birds were spotted in counties in southeast Texas, whereas the 2012 birds go further north, to the Dallas–Fort Worth area. And the 2015 cohort? Those birds are expected in December, after the hurricane season has ended. — Ed.

Mississippi Sandhill Crane Update

The population at the beginning of the nesting season in February consisted of 126 cranes, 106 banded and 20 unbanded, 60 males, 51 females and 15 unknown sex, 80 in Gautier (east) area, 31 in Ocean Springs (west) area and 15 in Fontainebleau (south) area. There were 33 pairs, 60 unpaired cranes, with the oldest known marked crane of 26 years.

To date in 2015, the refuge conducted 30 prescribed burns for a total of 5778 acres, 3958 acres (68%) during the growing season.

During the nesting season, at least 23 pairs produced at least 34 total nests (11 renests). Five chicks fledged – from West Doubletree (2), G-18, Sullivan, and West Cottonmouth.

Scott Hereford, Gautier, MS

Fall Productivity Survey for Eastern Population Sandhill Cranes

By David L. Fronczak and Elizabeth Rigby

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Migratory Bird Management, Bloomington, MN

Productivity rates (% of juveniles) of a population are an important component for monitoring population demography and status, and tracking management actions and the impact from harvest. Eastern Population (EP) Sandhill Cranes have increased in number and expanded their breeding range. There have been few published productivity surveys throughout the range of EP Sandhill Cranes. Many of these surveys were short-term, characterized a limited geographic representation of the EP Sandhill Crane population, and were conducted during a period when the USFWS Cooperative Fall Survey population estimate of EP cranes was relatively low. Specific objectives for the study are to update productivity estimates, recommend an optimal starting time period for productivity surveys, and create a standard operating procedure for future surveys.

We conducted random-route road surveys for 5 time-periods from mid-October through mid-December for 2013 and 2014 in an area surrounding the Indiana Department of Natural Resource, Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area (JP FWA) and 3 counties in south-central Michigan (Barry, Calhoun, and Eaton; SCMI). Four observers determined the age of 33,458 cranes at JP FWA only in 2013 and 6 observers counted 35,924 cranes during the same time-periods at JP FWA and SCMI in 2014. The productivity ratio (juvenile/total birds) for both areas varied among all time periods. The average productivity for 2013 at JP FWA was 8.17% and the average productivity for 2014 at both JP FWA and SCMI was 9.92%. We also determined that productivity in 2014 differed among the survey locations (peak production estimates: JP FWA 10% vs. SCMI 16%). In addition, we analyzed survey data using logistic regression to test assumptions about overall juvenile dispersion among survey periods. We found for both years, time had a positive effect, with more juveniles observed later in the season and flock size had a negative effect, with a higher proportion of juveniles seen in small flocks.

We will continue the project for one more season in 2015 and will survey productivity for both JP FWA and SCMI within 3 time-periods (October 31 through November 23). We are very interested to see if the productivity in SCMI is different than JP FWA in a consecutive year. We would like to thank the Indiana

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Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources for their in-kind support in providing personnel and vehicles. We also thank the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Webless funding and USFWS Region 3 Migratory Bird Management for their financial support for this project. We anticipate a final report in 2016.

Cranes in the News

Feds move to speed upper Great Plains wind projects

BILLINGS, Mont. (23 April 2015) — Federal officials are moving to speed up their review of wind power projects across the Upper Great Plains in anticipation that the industry will continue growing, a situation that's alarmed wildlife advocates who say many bird and bat species are being put at risk as wind turbines proliferate.

The proposal would cover future wind farms in Montana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Companies to date have installed roughly 8,000 turbines generating more than 12,000 megawatts of wind energy in the six states.

With 8,600 to 30,000 additional turbines anticipated by 2030, officials hope to reduce the duration of environmental reviews that are needed for permitting from two years to one, said Jennifer Neville, a spokeswoman for the Western Area Power Administration, a branch of the U.S. Department of Energy.

To speed the process, wind farm developers would receive site-specific information about potential impacts on wildlife, including bald and golden eagles and endangered **whooping cranes**. That would ensure developers construct their turbines and transmission lines away from wetlands and rivers where **whooping cranes** and other birds gather, or shut down turbines when the birds are seen nearby, according to the proposal.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service collaborated with the Western Area Power Administration on a 1,160-page environmental study that details steps companies may need to take to avoid killing birds.

A final decision will come after a 30-day review process that begins once the study is published in the Federal Register.

Better planning for wind energy has been embraced by wildlife groups, including the American Bird Conservancy, which has said that current lax oversight allows turbines to be constructed in areas frequented by birds.

Michael Hutchins, the head of the conservancy's Bird-Smart wind energy program, cited a study that appeared in the Wildlife Society Bulletin estimating that 573,000 birds and 888,000 bats were killed by wind turbines in 2012. While it's hard to gauge the accuracy of such findings, Hutchins said it's clear that more turbines erected in bird migration corridors will result in more birds being killed.

“Those Midwestern states are right smack in the middle of the **whooping crane** migratory corridor,” Hutchins said. “The loss of even a few (birds) to wind turbines or power lines and towers would have a population-level impact.”

Excerpts from an AP article by Matthew Brown, in the Flathead Beacon <http://flatheadbeacon.com/2015/04/23/feds-move-to-speed-upper-great-plains-wind-projects/>

The following are excerpts from the article **Wind, Birds and Bats: Recent Legal Migrations** by lawyers M.H. Ahrens & M. Gabriel published 15 September 2015 in *North American Wind Power* (www.nawindpower.com).

Incidental Take Permits

In March, the Merricourt Wind Farm in North Dakota applied for an Endangered Species Act (ESA) Incidental Take Permit (ITP) for **Piping Plovers** and one **Whooping Crane**. If approved, it will be the first ITP ever issued to a wind project for take of a **Whooping Crane**.

Multi-state Habitat Conservation Plans

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is preparing multi-state and multi-species habitat conservation plans (HCPs) to address certain incidental takes by wind projects. HCPs currently undergoing National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reviews include...The Great Plains Wind Energy HCP to cover take of the **Whooping Crane, Interior Least Tern, Piping Plover** and **Lesser Prairie Chicken** across the Great Plains.

Supreme Court denies bid to reopen case of dead Whooping Cranes

Excerpts from a story by David Sikes in the Corpus Christi Caller Times (22 June 2015)

The U.S. Supreme Court announced Monday it has denied a petition to reopen a case involving the deaths of 23 endangered whooping cranes, according to Houston environmental attorney Jim Blackburn, who filed the petition as lead counsel in a lawsuit against the state over the deaths.

“We knew this petition was a bit of a long shot,” [Blackburn] said. “But we did a lot of good in the long run. Now everyone in Texas is on notice that there is an overriding federal interest in freshwater inflows under the Endangered Species Act. This fight over freshwater inflows, blue crabs, whooping cranes and the ecological health of our bays and estuaries has only just begun.”

Blackburn said the lawsuit and specifically [U.S. District Judge Janis] Jack’s ruling [in 2013] will indeed influence how Texas water is allocated, particularly during drought. Even overturned, this is powerful, he said.

Thanks to Tom Stehn for contributing this story.

UNESCO Weighs in on Threats to Wood Buffalo National Park

Wood Buffalo National Park, located in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1983 as one of the world's largest freshwater deltas and for its biodiversity, which includes the **Whooping Crane**. Two important rivers flowing into WBNP are the Peace River, with headwaters in northeastern British Columbia, and the Athabasca River, with headwaters at Columbia Glacier in Jasper National Park to the south. Alberta's oil sands industry is situated in the Athabasca River Basin, and much of the water that is used to process the mined bitumen is taken from the Athabasca River as it flows northward to WBNP. Leakage of toxic hydrocarbons and metals into the Athabasca River may also be occurring as a result of oil sands activity.

On 1 July 2015 (Canada's birthday), in response to a 2014 filing by Fort Chipewyan's Mikisew Cree First Nation, UNESCO requested that Canadian authorities undertake a rigorous environmental assessment of the effects of oil sands extraction and a proposed open-pit mine in northern Alberta, and construction of a controversial third hydroelectric dam ('Site C') on the Peace River in British Columbia, on WBNP. Furthermore, UNESCO also requested that it be allowed to send its own team of investigators to the park.

The following text (abridged) is from the UNESCO website (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/3318>). I added the text in square brackets. – D. H.

Conservation Issues Presented to the World Heritage Committee in 2015

In December 2014, Mikisew Cree First Nation, an indigenous community of the property [i.e. WBNP], sent a petition to the World Heritage Centre (available online <http://cpawsnwt.org/news/mikisew-first-nations-petitions-unesco-to-list-wood-buffalo-np-as-world-her>), requesting to inscribe the property on the **List of World Heritage in Danger** for the following reasons:

- Hydroelectric dams on the Peace River outside of the property are affecting its hydrology and biodiversity, and a third dam on the river, Site C Hydroelectric Dam, has now been approved at regional and federal levels;
- Large industrial development of Alberta's oil sands region, located upstream of the Park, is releasing contaminants, extracting significant volumes of water from the Athabasca River system, and disrupting migratory bird movements;
- A proposal has been submitted for an open-pit mine, which falls partially within a watershed sub-basin that flows directly within the property into Lake Claire, the largest lake within the Peace-Athabasca Delta (PAD);
- Threats from climate change are not being adequately taken into account in the management of the property;
- Indigenous communities are not taking part in the federal government's monitoring programme, and the environmental management tools that are critical to address upstream threats have been omitted from the monitoring programme.

Analysis and Conclusion by World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies in 2015

It is noted that Site C Hydroelectric Dam on the Peace River, which will be located outside the property, was approved by the government of British Columbia in December 2014, and that the construction work is expected to start in summer 2015. [The dam is to be situated approx. 7 km SW of Fort St. John, British Columbia.] However, the Mikisew have

reported that First Nations have expressed significant concern about its impacts on their hunting, fishing and agricultural areas. The IUCN World Heritage Outlook 2014 identified the existing dams to have significantly altered the hydrological regime of PAD and hence, any further activities should be evaluated prior to commencement of constructions, including an assessment of potential (cumulative) impacts on Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).

A Joint Alberta-Canada Implementation Plan for Oil Sands Monitoring (JOSM) was created to support decision-making by governments and stakeholders; however the Mikisew have reported that all indigenous groups in the region have withdrawn from JOSM, due to concerns about the engagement process, limited incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge, and lack of transparency.

It is recommended that the Committee urge the State Party [i.e., governments of Canada, Alberta and BC] to review the cumulative impacts of all of the hydroelectric dam projects, oil sands development and open pit mining on the property's OUV, taking the effect of climate change into full consideration, and to complete a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), in line with IUCN's World Heritage Advice Note on Environmental Assessment. Furthermore....it is recommended that the Committee request the State Party not to take any decision related to any of the development projects that would be difficult to reverse, and to submit the SEA to the World Heritage Centre for review by IUCN.

It is finally recommended that the Committee request the State Party to invite a joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN Reactive Monitoring mission to the property to review the impact of the developments on the property, evaluate its state of conservation and exchange in more depth with the State Party, petitioning First Nation, and other stakeholders as appropriate.

In August, 30 Great Blue Herons were found dead in a "run-off pond" at Syncrude's Mildred Lake Facility, about 40 km (25 miles) north of Fort McMurray, Alberta, the center of oil sands mining. The pond was not a tailings pond, but the water in it was contaminated with bitumen.

Said Chris Fisher, wildlife biologist and author of Birds of Alberta, "Thirty Great Blue Herons represent a pretty significant portion of the birds we have in the province – such a beautiful majestic bird as well." (Information and quote from CBC News; cbc.ca/news)

Two recent crane articles published in the Open Access journal *Avian Research*:

M. Zheng, L. Zhou, N. Zhao, W. Xu — **Effects of variation in food resources on foraging habitat use by wintering Hooded Cranes (*Grus monacha*)**. *Avian Research* 2015, 6:11 doi:10.1186/s40657-015-0020-3

L. Yang, L. Zhou, Y. Song — **The effects of food abundance and disturbance on foraging flock patterns of the wintering Hooded Crane (*Grus monacha*)**. *Avian Research* 2015, 6:15 doi:10.1186/s40657-015-0024-z

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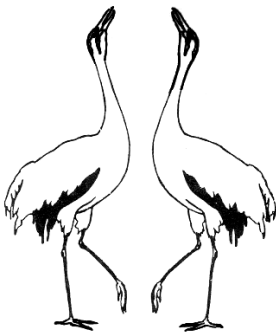
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