



# THE UNISON CALL

- Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

Fall/Winter 2010

Vol. 21 No. 2

12<sup>th</sup> North American Crane Workshop  
March 13-16, 2011  
Grand Island, Nebraska

along the Platte River and adjacent wetlands and fields. The spring staging of Sandhill Cranes is recognized as a unique ecological phenomenon..."

Don't forget to register for the 12th North American Crane Workshop in Nebraska! This workshop will be even more exciting because we will be meeting jointly with *The Waterbird Society*, so it should be a very interesting and productive conference. There will be a variety of symposia, fun social events, and of course field trips to see the spectacular crane, waterfowl, and shorebird migration along the Platte River. Further details and registration information can be found on the NACWG website, <http://www.nacwg.org/workshop12.html>. We will see you in March!

**David Aborn, Scientific Program Chair**

The theme of the conference is:

### *Migration and Migratory Landscapes*

"...Grand Island is located in south-central Nebraska, in the middle of the continent and in an important migratory corridor for millions of birds along the Central Flyway...some 6-10 million waterfowl and half a million Sandhill Cranes are staging in a relatively narrow corridor. Cranes, geese, ducks, and shorebirds are easily visible in and

### ***Planned symposia and special paper sessions include:***

- ◆ Playa Wetland Ecology
- ◆ Mountain Plover Management and Conservation
- ◆ Ecology of Waterbird Migration
- ◆ Local Movements and Roosting Habits of Waterbirds
- ◆ Black Tern: Science and Management
- ◆ Species Reintroductions
- ◆ Climate Change, Freshwater Resources and Waterbirds
- ◆ Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: Lessons Learned
- ◆ Why, How, and Wherefore of Monitoring Programs

Don't miss this unique conjunction of nature's grandeur and conservation science. Both workshop registration and hotel reservations can be easily done online through links at [www.nacwg.org](http://www.nacwg.org).

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# Regional Reports

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## **Aransas–Wood Buffalo Whooping Crane Population**

Two census flights conducted in early December, 2010 accounted for 270 Whooping Cranes in the Aransas–Wood Buffalo flock. This ties the previous record high reached in the fall of 2008. Forty-five of the 46 juveniles found in mid-August on the Canadian nesting grounds arrived safely at Aransas. The 45 chicks at Aransas included five sets of “twin” chicks (adult pairs that have brought two chicks each). This is the second highest total ever of “twin” families at Aransas, exceeded only by seven sets of “twins” present at Aransas in the 2006 winter. Habitat conditions at Aransas were excellent for the cranes during the fall, with blue crabs and wolfberries abundant and marsh salinities low. By mid-December, salinities had climbed and the cranes were observed flying to freshwater to drink, foraging over a much wider variety of habitats as their primary food sources became less abundant.

I expect to find more cranes when I conduct additional census flights since a few Whooping Cranes sometimes don’t reach Aransas until right before Christmas. As an example, a single Whooping Crane was sighted in north Texas near Wichita Falls on 30 December.

A hail storm on 9 January 2011 over a short portion of the crane range on San Jose Island killed over 1000 birds of multiple species, including Sandhill Cranes, waterfowl, and White Pelicans. However, no evidence of dead Whooping Cranes was found. The Whooping Cranes may have dodged nature’s bullet, though we’ll probably never know for sure if a few Whooping Cranes perished. Tornadoes with wind gusts >60 mph associated with the storm had also damaged buildings in various locations in the Coastal Bend.

*Tom Stehn, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge*

## **Update on Eastern Migratory Whooping Crane Reintroduction**

*Summer and Autumn 2010* —As of 20 July 2010, maximum size of the eastern migratory population was 97 birds consisting of 52 males, 43 females, and 2 chicks. Distribution included 88 in Wisconsin, 1 in Michigan, 1 in Indiana, 2 last recorded in North Dakota, 2 not located since spring migration, and 3 missing since December 2009. One of the chicks was naturally produced on Necedah NWR, and the other originated from a captive-produced egg substituted for infertile eggs in a nest in a private cranberry reservoir. Both chicks fledged. An additional 11 juveniles were added to the population by the DAR (direct autumn release) method on 25 October. One was killed by a predator 5 days after release; the remaining 10 migrated appropriately with older Whooping Cranes to locations in Tennessee and Alabama.

*Mortality*—Six mortalities were confirmed during July-December 2010. These included the newly released DAR male noted above, a yearling DAR female that was found with an injured leg and later euthanized, and a yearling UL (ultralight-led) female that died in late November, apparently from chronic aspergillosis. Three DAR juveniles were found dead in southern Georgia on 30 December. Those mortalities are under investiga-

tion. In addition to these confirmed mortalities, the 3 missing cranes noted above are now considered dead and were removed from current population totals below.

*Autumn Migration of Ultralight-led Juveniles*—The 2010 migration led by Operation Migration to Florida departed from Necedah NWR on 10 October. Five juveniles completed migration to St. Marks NWR on 15 December 2010. As of 8 January, 5 others were in a holding pen in Gilchrist County, Florida, en route to Chassahowitzka NWR.

*Winter 2010/2011*—As of 8 January 2011, maximum size of the eastern migratory population was 99 birds (53 males and 46 females). Distribution was 38 birds in Florida, 6 in Georgia, 4 in South Carolina, 18 in Alabama, 11 in Tennessee, 3 in Indiana, 13 last recorded in migration and currently at undetermined locations, and 6 which have not been accounted for more than 6 months. These totals do not include 2 males and 3 females released on St. Marks NWR on 25 December or an additional 2 UL males and 3 females soon to be released on Chassahowitzka NWR.

***Richard P. Urbanek, Necedah, Wisconsin***

### **Florida Resident Whooping Crane Flock Update**

As of 22 December 2010 we monitored 21 Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*) (9 males, 12 females), including 8 pairs. In a pilot study last breeding season we deployed artificial data-logging eggs into nests of Whooping and Sandhill Cranes to document incubation temperature. The most important finding was the incubation temperature in 4 Whooping Crane nests suggests the eggs were not incubated for long periods (3 hours, 7 minutes to 15 hours, 18 minutes) at night during which the eggs dropped up to 41 degrees F below mean incubation temperature. Unusually long lapses in incubation likely affect hatchability of eggs. This coming breeding season, cameras capable of night-vision will be deployed near nests to determine the cause of lapses of incubation. We also will use video equipment to record behaviors of nesting Whooping and Sandhill Cranes with the goal of determining if behavior is associated with nest success and to compare incubation between the species. Our work with data-logging eggs is the first not only with Whooping and Sandhill Cranes but with any crane species in the wild. Hence, knowledge gained from the research will not only allow insight into potential problems with nesting, but also provide important information regarding the efficacy of the technique for research on other crane species.

***Marty Folk, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission***

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## News and Announcements

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### Switch to Underground Cable in North Dakota Will Benefit Whooping Cranes

**BISMARCK, N.D. (Sept. 22, 2010)** — Last winter, several winter storms knocked down thousands of power poles, taking out miles of line and jeopardizing the safety of thousands of North Dakotans, who were left without power in frigid weather. As efforts were made to restore power and rebuild the electrical infrastructure as well as mitigate against future damage, there was an unexpected beneficiary — the Whooping Crane.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) revised criteria for replacement of storm-damaged power lines encourages rural electric cooperatives to bury overhead wires where possible. While the goal of underground lines is to prevent future damage, save money and human life, burying power lines also protects the long-legged birds.

In 2010, FEMA provided funding to bury 22 miles of line across the state following damage caused by storms in January and April. The buried segments range from as little as one mile to as long as 7 miles.

“Whenever there is a opportunity to bury a damaged transmission line instead of returning it to an overhead location, we prefer to bury it,” said FEMA mitigation specialist Dave Lucas. “Because, from a mitigation standpoint, once the line is buried the risk of future damage is greatly reduced if not eliminated. Any benefit above and beyond that is icing on the cake.”

While FEMA's primary goal is to support the recovery of storm-damaged communities, the Whooping Cranes' migratory path is now an environmental consideration for FEMA. FEMA consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and received concurrence that burying lines is a measure that benefits the species.

Main source: <http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=52768>; additional information from B. Dokken, Grand Forks Herald, Sept. 23, 2010 (<http://www.grandforksherald.com>)

### Tennessee Wildlife Resources Commission Votes to Put Off Decision on Proposed Sandhill Crane Hunt Near Hiwassee

**NASHVILLE, Tenn. (Jan. 21, 2011)** — The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Commission (TWRC) voted on Friday 21 January 2011 to delay a decision for at least two years on whether to set in motion the regulatory process that would see the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service establish a hunting season for Sandhill Cranes in the state.

A draft hunt plan by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) for a 2011/12 season had been presented to the TWRC at the commission's June 2010 meeting. The TWRC had directed the agency to develop the plan following a request made by the Tennessee Wildlife Federation (TWF), a nonprofit organization which advocates for conservation and hunting. The plan was approved by the Mississippi and Atlantic Flyway Councils in July 2010.

At the January meeting the commission heard scientific presentations from Tim White, TWRA Migratory Game Bird Coordinator and Jim Kelley of the USFWS, as well as from both proponents and opponents of the plan. A period for accepting public comments began last fall and continued until prior to the TWRC meeting. (Adapted and modified from <http://news.tennesseeanytime.org/node/6618>)

## **Q&A:**

### **Why the proposal to allow hunting of Sandhill Cranes in Tennessee?**

The eastern population (EP) of the Greater Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis tabida*) has increased significantly in size and geographic range in recent decades, re-establishing itself over much of its historic former range. This expansion has been felt acutely at the 6000-acre Hiwassee State Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Tennessee, as it has become an important stopover and wintering area for EP Sandhill Cranes. The numbers of migrating and wintering Sandhill Cranes at Hiwassee have increased significantly, with peaks of around 14,000 birds in recent years; a record 48,505 Sandhills were recorded in Tennessee in the 2010 mid-winter count (source for both numbers: Van Horn et al., *Management Plan*).

One negative effect of EP growth at Hiwassee has been crop depredation by cranes in agricultural fields near the refuge. According to Simmons (*Sirloins in the sky*), in the last 3 years the USFWS issued 9 depredation permits to Tennessee farmers whose crops were damaged by Sandhill Cranes. Nonetheless, as noted in the *Management Plan*, a proposed fall/winter hunting season “would not provide direct assistance to areas impacted primarily by spring crop damage...” Acknowledging this fact, Kirk Miles, TWRA Wildlife Diversity Coordinator, stated that the proposed crane hunt is “...not just to address crop depredation...It’s also pretty clear that the local crane population has reached a point where it can sustain limited hunting pressure. We believe we can manage the resource for hunting and still have plenty of cranes for viewing” (quotation from Simmons).

### **How would the hunt be managed?**

According to the Simmons article, TWRA would issue 733 permits through a special drawing. Hunters would be allowed 3 cranes each for a total harvest of 2199.

Crane hunting would not be allowed on the Hiwassee refuge itself, but would occur mostly on private land.

Opening the EP to hunting in Tennessee could trigger other states/provinces to establish hunts of their own (at present, EP Sandhills are not hunted in any jurisdiction). Should this happen, then permits would be allocated to each state so as not to exceed 10% of the peak number of Sandhill Cranes observed in that state in the previous 5 years. The total requests for all states could not exceed the maximum number of permits allowed for the entire EP. If requests did exceed that number, then permits would be allocated to states on a proportional basis according to estimated sizes of crane populations in each jurisdiction (details in Appendix 1, Van Horn et al.). The *Management Plan* aims to maintain the EP at 30,000-60,000 cranes, as measured by the USFWS fall survey.

### **Who opposes the hunt?**

Opposition to the hunt comes from birders and birding groups such as the Tennessee Ornithological Society (TOS). The Sandhills now attract thousands of visitors to Hiwassee each year for public viewing, and there is an annual Hiwassee Refuge Crane Days event (incidentally, co-sponsored in January 2011 by the TOS and TWF). “We believe there is higher value to the cranes than having a hunting season,” said Melinda Welton of

the TOS (quotation from *Sirloins in the Sky*). A further concern raised by opponents of the hunt is the potential for accidental shooting of Whooping Cranes of the Eastern Migratory Population, mistaken by hunters as Sandhills.

References cited:

M. Simmons (2010) 'Sirloins in the sky': TWRA says birds eating crops; viewing sponsor stresses value. (<http://www.knoxnews.com/news/2010/oct/16/sirloins-in-the-sky/>)

K. Van Horn et al. Ad Hoc Eastern Population Sandhill Crane Committee (2010) Management Plan for the Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes.

Thanks go to Tom Stehn for suggesting this story and providing background information.

*Daryl Henderson, Editor*

## **Reward Fund Now at \$20,800: Georgia DNR Board Passes Resolution in Support of Investigating Whooping Crane Killings**

**SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga. (Jan. 27, 2011)** – The Georgia Department of Natural Resources Board passed a resolution today supporting the investigation of the recent killing of three Whooping Cranes in Calhoun County, Ga. Members of the Georgia DNR Board and the Georgia DNR Foundation also are contributing an additional \$4,800 to the reward fund. This addition brings the total reward fund amount to \$20,800.

“This generous contribution comes at a time when there are no real leads in the investigation,” said Philip Watt, DNR Board Chairman of the Wildlife Resources Committee. “We hope the additional funds will entice someone to come forth with new information that will help solve the case. We are proud to be able to show our support in this way.”

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special agents are leading a joint investigation with Georgia DNR conservation rangers. The cranes were shot sometime before 30 December 2010, and were discovered and reported by hunters. An examination by scientists at the National Fish and Wildlife Forensic Laboratory determined that the birds had injuries consistent with gunshot wounds.

Other recent contributions to the reward fund include \$2,500 from The Environmental Resources Network (T.E.R.N.) and \$1,000 from the Atlanta Audubon Society. The reward will be provided to the person or people who provide information leading to an arrest and successful prosecution of the perpetrator(s). T.E.R.N. is the friends group of DNR’s Nongame Conservation Section.

The cranes were part of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership effort to reintroduce Whooping Cranes into the eastern United States. They were banded and equipped with transmitters and were not part of the ultralight

aircraft-led migration effort. Their identities were confirmed by recovery of their bands. The three cranes, 20-10, 24-10, and 28-10, were part of a group of five 2010 Direct Autumn Release cranes. According to Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership trackers, they had last been tracked in Hamilton County, Tenn., where they roosted on Dec. 10, 2010, with cranes 6-05, 6-09, and 38-09.

Any information concerning the deaths of these cranes should be provided to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agent Terry Hasting at 404-763-7959 and/or Georgia Department of Natural Resources 24hr. TIP Hotline at 1-800-241-4113.

### **11<sup>th</sup> NACW Proceedings update, from Barry Hartup, editor:**

Thank you again to all authors who submitted materials for publication in the 11<sup>th</sup> Proceedings of the North American Crane Workshop. All copyedited materials will be delivered to our printer immediately after New Year's. Galley proofs will be distributed to corresponding authors shortly after so that we can meet our planned printing and distribution deadline ahead of the meeting in Grand Island. Please be on the lookout for email correspondence regarding proof corrections and applicable page charges to help avoid any last-minute delays. Your assistance (and patience) has been greatly appreciated.

**Membership dues for 2011.** Please renew your membership immediately (see overleaf for details). At a July 2009 board meeting it was decided to have membership dues included automatically as part of the registration fees for the workshop, thus signing up workshop participants for 3 years. The 3-year membership opportunity begins with this year's workshop in Grand Island, Nebraska. Those not attending the workshop will still join on a yearly basis. Membership is based on a calendar year.

### **Editor's Note**

*The Unison Call* is a forum to share updates and opinions. Articles are not peer reviewed. Reviews and opinions in any section of the newsletter are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NACWG. The *Unison Call* is published twice yearly, spring/summer and fall/winter. Deadlines will usually be mid-July and mid-January. Contributions—including news stories, meeting reports, research summaries, book reviews, cartoons—are welcome.

Come across any articles which may be of interest to your NACWG colleagues? Here, for example, is a review published in the new open access journal *Investigative Genetics*:

A. Linacre and S.S. Tobe (2011) An overview to the investigative approach to species testing in wildlife forensic science. (<http://www.investigativegenetics.com/content/2/1/2>).

The article is an accessible review of the use of mitochondrial DNA analysis in species identification in the context of wildlife crime. The paper focuses on the cytochrome b and cytochrome oxidase I genes. The latter gene has been adopted by the Barcode of Life initiative ([www.barcodeoflife.org](http://www.barcodeoflife.org)) for genetic identification of many animal species, including birds.

*Daryl Henderson, Stony Brook, NY*

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*You are invited to join the North American Crane Working Group*

Membership is based on a calendar year. A membership directory is periodically mailed to members. Provide the contact information below **that you want printed** in the directory.

**Members: Please check the date code on the mailing label. This represents the year through which your membership is current. If you have questions, please contact Glenn Olsen (address below).**

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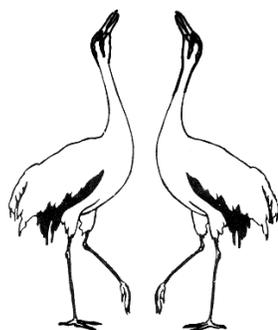
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Mail completed form and check (US\$ payable to **NACWG**) to:

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Daryl S. Henderson, *Editor*

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