

# THE UNISON CALL

- A Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

*Fall/Winter 2007*  
*Vol. 18 No. 2*

## President's Report

We at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center were planning a five-year science review in mid July. As part of this project I have been reviewing where we have gone and where we are going in the next five years in the crane world.

In the last five years we have seen introduced whooping cranes breeding in Florida and Wisconsin. The wild Aransas/Wood Buffalo flock has over 80 chicks on the aerial surveys in June. Sandhill crane numbers are increasing in most areas. There is even a report of a pair nesting in Maine. As we saw on the field trip during our North American Crane Workshop in Zacatecas, Mexico, sandhill cranes are wintering in increasing numbers in Mexico. We have heard good news about the Cuban sandhill cranes from colleagues at the Mexico meeting. All these projects have benefited from the work of numerous biologists and colleagues in the NACWG. I look forward to working with you all and reporting on all of our accomplishments in the next five years.

Research, natural history studies, and historical studies all continue at an increasingly rapid rate. We are looking forward to the next workshop in Wisconsin in September 2008, where we will hear more exciting news about cranes in North America. We will even get to see the ultralight migration training flights at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. If you arrive in Wisconsin a few days earlier, you can witness an increasingly popular event in small towns in crane country

across North America, a genuine crane festival in Necedah, Wisconsin, sponsored by the local Lions Club, and complete to even their own specialty beer, Whooper Brew. Plan to come early and participate in this festival.

If you have colleagues working with cranes, encourage them to join our organization and tell them about the meeting next year in Wisconsin.

*Glenn Olsen, President NACWG*

### **Proceedings of the Tenth North American Crane Workshop**

Steve Nesbitt and I are still working on the 10<sup>th</sup> Workshop Proceedings. All papers are finalized and we are getting some figures revised from authors so the figures will be more legible when in print. We have priced some printing options and hope to get proofs prepared in the near future. Thanks for your patience while waiting for the 10<sup>th</sup> Proceedings.

*Marty Folk, Florida Fish and Wildlife*

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## Regional Reports

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### Wild Whooping Crane Population

The tallest bird in North America has something special to “whoop” about. In December, census flights at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and surrounding areas documented a record flock size of 266. The flock consists of an estimated 142 adults, 85 subadults, and 39 juveniles. These are the highest numbers of endangered whooping cranes wintering in Texas in approximately the last 100 years. The current population exceeds by 29 the previous high of 237 whooping cranes present in the fall of 2006.

The estimated flock size of 266 is a result of excellent production (from a record of 65 nests) of 40 juveniles sighted on the nesting grounds in August just prior to fledging. Thirty-nine juveniles arrived safely in Texas this winter, and survival of the juveniles since August is excellent. One carcass of a juvenile was found in the fall in Saskatchewan with the cause of death unknown. Adult survival since last spring has also been very good. Mortality of white-plumaged cranes between spring and fall 2007 was at most 9 birds, or 3.8% of the flock present at Aransas in spring 2007. This is calculated by taking the spring flock size (236), adding the number of juveniles that made it to Texas (39), and subtracting the current estimated flock size (266). In the previous two years, mortality between spring and fall has been above average and totaled over 20 birds each year. One indication of adult mortality in 2007 subsequent to nesting was the arrival of one adult with one chick seen in Saskatchewan in the fall and at Aransas during the winter.

One of the surviving 39 juveniles was sighted with sandhill cranes at Muleshoe NWR in west Texas in November and is wintering at an unknown location. One whooping crane apparently resumed its migration from North Dakota on December 22nd. This is the furthest north a whooping crane has ever been located just before Christmas. All the water bodies were frozen so the crane was roosting in a shelterbelt and feeding in agricultural fields. Especially notable at Aransas is one whooping crane pair with two chicks. Although whooping cranes normally hatch two chicks every year, usually only one of the youngsters is able to survive. The pair with two chicks has a territory on the south tip of Aransas and are the first cranes the tour boats usually see once they reach the refuge, providing the public a great opportunity to see the family of four. They are the 13th two-chick family to reach Aransas since 1997 when the egg pickup was halted.

The population in Texas reached a low of only 15 birds in 1941 before efforts were taken to protect the species and its habitat. The population has been growing at about four percent annually and reached 100 birds in 1987 and 200 birds in 2004. However, the whooping crane population continues to face many threats, including collisions with power lines in migration, development of wind power in the migration corridor, limited genetic variability in the flock, loss of crane migration habitat, and winter habitat threatened with housing developments, chemical spills, sea level rise, and reduced fresh water inflows.

It takes about seven hours of flying to cover about 56,000 acres of marsh to find all the cranes. These flights determine flock size, locate crane territories, and spot mortalities that occur during winter. Finding every whooping crane is a challenge with thousands of other white birds in the marsh, including pelicans and egrets, that makes spotting of cranes more difficult. Also, the cranes can move

during a census flight and either not be counted or else be counted twice. Census flights are contracted with Air Logistic Solutions of San Antonio, Texas in a Cessna 210 high-wing aircraft with Pilot Gary Ritchey.

The current total North American population of wild (382) and captive (147) whooping cranes is 529. Although the whooping crane population remains endangered, the comeback of the species sets a standard for conservation efforts in North America.

*Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 2*

## **Whooping Cranes in Wood Buffalo National Park**

The final surveys of the 2007 breeding season in Wood Buffalo National Park were completed on August 19. Forty young were observed in 35 family groups. Four other pairs that had young in June were not found. Based on winter arrivals, at least two of these four pairs had to have had one young each for an estimated total of 42 young fledged from 65 nesting attempts.

The loss of two birds (one adult and one juvenile) was documented during fall migration. From September 27 to October 4, a single adult was observed with a juvenile in central Saskatchewan, indicating the loss of one of the adults and, on October 8, the remains of a juvenile were discovered in southern Saskatchewan.

After a public consultation period, the Recovery Strategy for the Whooping Crane in Canada was posted on the Species At Risk Public Registry in November 2007 ([http://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/plans/showDocument\\_e.cfm?id=966](http://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/plans/showDocument_e.cfm?id=966)). The Action Plan is scheduled to be completed sometime in 2008 but may be delayed until additional critical habitat for breeding and staging can be identified.

For more information on Wood Buffalo Whooping Cranes see:  
<http://www.pnr-rpn.ec.gc.ca/nature/endspecies/whooping/index.en.html>.

*Brian Johns, Canadian Wildlife Service*

## **Whooping Crane Numbers in North America, January 1, 2008**

### **Wild Populations**

	Adult	Young	Total	Adult Pairs
Aransas/Wood Buffalo	227	39	266 <sup>A</sup>	69
Rocky Mountains	0	0	0	0
Florida non-migratory	40 <sup>B</sup>	1	41 <sup>B</sup>	17
Wisconsin/Florida migratory	51	24 <sup>C</sup>	75	4
<b>Subtotal in the Wild</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>90</b>

<sup>A</sup> A record 84 chicks hatched from 65 nests in 2007. Forty chicks fledged. So far this fall, 266 cranes are accounted for in Texas or still in migration, including 39 juveniles. The peak flock size of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population is estimated at 266.

<sup>B</sup> This number reflects the birds regularly monitored in Florida. A few additional cranes could be present in unknown locations. One chick fledged in the wild in 2007.

<sup>C</sup> The five whooping crane breeding facilities (Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, International Crane Foundation, Calgary Zoo, San Antonio Zoo, and Species Survival Center in New Orleans) all either provided eggs or hatched and raised chicks in 2007. Two eggs came from a wild nest in Florida and 2 eggs came from wild nests in Wisconsin. Twenty-eight chicks were raised in captivity and shipped to the Necedah NWR in central Wisconsin for later reintroduction. Seventeen are being led by ultralight to Florida, and 10 were released with other wild cranes in central Wisconsin. Three of the 10 have died.

## Captive Populations

	Adult	Young*	Total	Breeding Pairs
Patuxent WRC, Maryland	60	3	63	13
International Crane Foundation, WI	35	0	35	11
Devonian Wildl. Cons.Cent./Calgary	20	2	22	6
Species Survival Center, Louisiana	8	0	8	1
Calgary Zoo, Alberta	2	0	2	0
New Orleans Zoo, Louisiana	2	0	2	0
San Antonio Zoo, Texas	8	0	8	1
Homosassa Springs Wildl State Park	2	0	2	0
Lowry Park Zoo, Tampa, Florida	2	0	2	0
Jacksonville Zoo, Florida	2	0	2	0
Milwaukee County Zoo, Wisconsin	1	0	1	0
<b>Subtotal in Captivity</b>	142	5	147	32

\* Numbers are of young remaining at the captive centers after eggs and/or birds were shipped out for reintroduction programs. In most cases, these young are genetically valuable and will become future captive breeding stock.

**Totals (Wild + Captive)    382 + 147= 529**

*Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 2*

## Eastern Migratory Whooping Crane Reintroduction

*Summer and Autumn 2007.*—As of 1 July, estimated size of the population was 57 individuals (33 males and 24 females): 54 in Wisconsin, 2 in Lower Michigan, and 1 in New York. Three of the individuals included in the Wisconsin total were missing and had still not reappeared by the end of the year. The female in New York was retrieved on 3 October and quickly paired with a male after release on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). An additional 10 juveniles were added to the population in late October by direct autumn release (DAR) on Necedah NWR. Seven of these juveniles later separated from other cranes and were retrieved in Arkansas (1) and Southern Illinois (6) and re-released on Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge, Tennessee.

*Mortality.*—Nine mortalities occurred during July-December. These included a 4-year-old female on Necedah NWR, a 4-year-old male on Meadow Valley State Wildlife Area (SWA), a pair consisting of a 3-year-old male and a 2-year-old female on Meadow Valley SWA, a 2-year-old female on Necedah NWR, and a 2-year-old DAR male adjacent to Necedah NWR. Causes of mortality were predation for 4 individuals and undetermined for 2 others. Mortality of 3 DAR juveniles occurred shortly after release; causes were predation on Necedah NWR, collision with aircraft in Dane County, Wisconsin, and collision with a powerline in Grayson County, Kentucky. There have been 33 mortalities of free-flying, released birds since the reintroduction began in 2001 and a significantly increased mortality rate in the population since spring 2006.

*Winter 2007/08.*—As of 5 January 2008, the estimated maximum size of the population was 59 individuals (31 males and 28 females). Autumn migration was not yet completed, and early winter distribution was Indiana (3), Tennessee (18), Alabama (2), South Carolina (4), Florida (24), and undetermined (8).

*Richard P. Urbanek, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, on behalf of Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership*

## **Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge**

After the last newsletter, there was one more re-nest, so the final nest tally for 2007 was 23 pairs producing 30 nests. A new record for the Refuge was of cranes incubating a nest in August, the fourth nest of the season for the North Turcotte pair. That may be a first for the species. The West Cottonmouth chick was the only one to fledge and needed help. It was hatched and reared inside the new 2.5-acre Ocean Springs pen where the parents chose to build a nest and lay eggs. Somehow, this chick grew to fledging size using only a portion of this pen. One or both parents were likely flying in and out of the pen to bring food to the chick. This again brings up the potential limited use of fencing to protect nests and chicks. We hope to test some smaller variations in the next few years. A chick hatched and reared west of the Gautier Unit on private land disappeared after being observed at 75 days of age.

The South Valentine male, no. 255, has a new unbanded mate, probably the light-colored East Valentine female that “paints” herself each breeding season. Her mate, no. 716, injured his leg and eventually disappeared. Crane no. W-29 was observed without longtime mate, no. 404. Crane 252 was observed in September for the first time since February 2005. Crane no. 055 was observed in October for first time in 12 months. The Vickers female, no. W-9, has a new mate—no. 436.

The remains of crane no. 427 were found on the edge of the NW Wet Cell in the wastewater habitats October 3. Death was likely due to bobcat predation. Crane no. 427 was a HY94 Patuxent-reared female and released at the Ocean Springs pen. Sorry for the bad news, Kathy Sullivan. Tracking her was one of Kathy’s first assignments during her time here. Crane no. 427 did nest with no. 116 in the West Wet Cell and West Doubletree areas from 2002-2005 and in Jordan’s Pond in 2007 with new mate no. 057. Crane no. 427 was likely the last of the HY94 releases.

New refuge wildlife biologist, Lauren Billodeaux, has been doing a great job coming up to speed on the crane work. Wildlife interns, Ingrid Kobler and Lisa Dlugolecki, provided important technical

field support for the program. We are also pleased to announce our first ever full-time public outreach staff person. Park Ranger Emily Neidigh transferred over in October from a refuge in Oklahoma. The timing could hardly be more fortuitous with the upcoming new Visitor Center opening.

Twenty-four people participated in the Annual Autumn Crane Count. Cranes were observed at 25 different locations, including 16 on the refuge. A minimum of 79 different cranes were counted. Especially exciting were sightings of no. 718, no. 920, and no. W-23 (not seen since Jan 07), and the probable sightings of the Firetower pair (no. 136 and no. W-31), which had not been seen since Oct 2006, and no. W-2 (not seen since Dec 2006) who was not with long-time mate no. W-9. Thanks to our new friends' support group, the Southeastern Wildlife Conservation Group, for sponsoring the post-Count luncheon.

Construction of the new refuge headquarters/visitor center continued and neared completion on the HQ side. Staff is scheduled to move in early 2008. The Visitors Center will open to the public in the spring. The four crane acclimation pens were completed. All are about 2.5 acres and were built in the area of the original pens in Gautier, Ocean Springs, Ben Williams, and Fontainebleau. Survey work began on the new bunkhouse site.

*Scott Hereford, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR*

## **Florida Nonmigratory Flock**

We currently (1/8/08) track 37 birds (13 pairs) in the Florida resident flock. Despite on-going drought, one chick fledged in 2007, the ninth for the project. To date, two of the wild-fledged birds have died and one is missing (likely dead). Rainfall rates were below normal during all of 2006 and 2007, and this was the driest 2-year period on record since the 1930's. Hence, the outlook for the 2008 breeding season is grim.

Preliminary analyses show a high correlation of breeding activity and rainfall/wetland water levels prior to the breeding season. Since our first breeding efforts in 1999, lack of suitable rainfall and low wetland water levels has limited productivity of whooping cranes in at least two out of every three years. Mortality of older males is also an issue for this flock.

Clint Moore and Sarah Converse of the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center are modeling the Florida population to determine the odds of success based on various release strategies. Early runs of the model were not encouraging for any release strategy. After some tweaking, we will revisit the model and at a meeting on 1 February will make some decisions regarding the future direction of the Florida flock.

Project biologist Jeannette Parker resigned in November to have another baby and move away to Virginia where her husband took a new position. We are hiring a new biologist and hope to have someone on-board within a month or so.

*Marty Folk, Florida Fish and Wildlife*

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## News and Announcements

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We invite you to the **11<sup>th</sup> NORTH AMERICAN CRANE WORKSHOP**, which will be held **September 23-27, 2008**, at the beautiful Glacier Canyon Lodge Convention Center in the Wisconsin Dells. We will kick off on Tuesday, the 23rd, with a welcoming evening social in Wisconsin Oktoberfest style. There will be technical sessions, with over 40 papers, on Wednesday the 24th and Friday the 26th. Thursday, the 25th, is set aside for an all-day field trip to Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, where we can see Operation Migration in action, and then to the International Crane Foundation, with visits to the Whooping Crane Exhibit, Crane City, Education Center, and isolation chick-rearing site. Our tour leader, George Archibald, guarantees good birding, including whooping and sandhill cranes, loons, trumpeter swans, woodpeckers, and much more. There will be our traditional closing banquet on the evening of the 26th.

You and your family also may want to take in the Necedah Whooping Crane Festival on the preceding Saturday, September 20 ([www.whooping-crane-festival.com](http://www.whooping-crane-festival.com)), and the annual Members Meeting of the International Crane Foundation. Plan to bring raingear for the field trip and your bathing suit to take advantage of the Lodge's water features.

The Call for Papers and registration information will be available in Spring 2008. Papers and posters presented at the workshop will be published in the peer-reviewed Proceedings. For your travel and budget planning: The preliminary estimate for registration is \$200 per person. Room rates will be \$75 for weekdays and \$90 for Friday or Saturday, plus 11% tax. Air flights should be to Madison, WI, a 1-hour drive, or to Milwaukee, WI, a 2-hour drive. Alternatively, Amtrak's *Empire Builder* train (Seattle/Portland to Chicago) stops at the station at the Wisconsin Dells.

Questions? Contact Jane Austin at [jane\\_austin@usgs.gov](mailto:jane_austin@usgs.gov) or 701-253-5510. As more information becomes available, it will be posted on <http://www.nacwg.org/>.

Several other meetings will be held in association with the Crane Workshop that week:

\* The West Coast Crane Working Group: Monday and Tuesday, September 22-23.

\* International Crane Foundation Board: Friday and Saturday, September 26-27. Board members are invited to attend to workshop and the Friday evening banquet.

\* Annual Members Meeting of the International Crane Foundation: daylong activities at the center on Saturday, September 27, with an evening banquet at the Glacier Canyon Lodge. For more information, contact Ann Burke at 608-356-9462 ext. 147, or [aburke@savingcranes.org](mailto:aburke@savingcranes.org).

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**Editor's Note:** *The Unison Call* is a forum to share updates and opinions. Articles are not peer reviewed. Reviews and opinions included in any section of the newsletter are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NACWG. *The Unison Call* is published twice yearly, winter/spring and summer/fall. Membership is based on a calendar year. Contributions, suggestions, opinions, drawings, cartoons, and photographs are welcome. Deadlines are normally July 10 and January 10. Please send information as a Microsoft Word attachment (e-mail) whenever possible. Items can be sent to:

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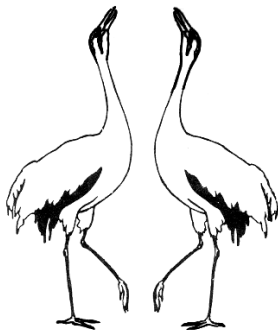
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