

# THE UNISON CALL

- A Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

*Spring/Summer 2008*  
*Vol. 19 No. 1*

## **The Eleventh North American Crane Workshop in 2008**

*Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin*  
*September 23-27, 2008*

### **Workshop Highlights:**

- Ice-breaker: Oktoberfest, Tuesday evening
- Technical sessions, Wednesday and Friday
- Thursday all-day field trip to Necedah NWR to see Operation Migration in action. Then on to ICF to visit Crane City, etc. Tour leader George Archibald guarantees good birding.
- Banquet on Friday evening

### **Hotel:**

Glacier Canyon Lodge at the Wilderness Hotel and Golf Resort:

<http://www.glaciercanyonlodge.com/index>.

Discounted room rate is \$90 per night for a double queen with a pull out sofa. Upgrade to 2-bedroom deluxe is \$124 per night. Discount rate is only available for reservations made before August 23. Mention you are with the NACWG group in the Glacier Canyon Lodge. Check in time is 4 p.m.

### **Registration:**

Registration is \$225 which includes workshops, opening reception, three breakfasts, three lunches, and banquet. Student registration is \$125 for undergraduates and graduates (may also attend Wed. and Friday for \$25, payable at the door).

### **Transportation:**

Air flights to Madison, WI, a 1-hour drive or to Milwaukee, WI, a 2-hour drive. There is no

shuttle to the Dells. Amtrack has a train station in the Wisconsin Dells.

### **Other events:**

- Necedah Whooping Crane Festival, Saturday, September 20; [www.whooping-crane-festival.com](http://www.whooping-crane-festival.com)
- International Crane Foundation Board meets Friday and Saturday (invited to attend workshop and banquet on Friday).
- Annual Members Meeting of the International Crane Foundation. Day-long activities at ICF on Saturday, with an evening banquet at the Glacier Canyon Lodge. Contact Ann Burke at 608-356-9462, ext. 147 or [aburke@savingcranes.org](mailto:aburke@savingcranes.org).

Please mark the dates on your calendar, make your hotel reservations, and register for the Workshop! It's a great opportunity to spend time with a whole flock of craniacs!

#### Note from the "Editor"

Cathy and I serve primarily as compilers, not editors, but in each issue, we alter or eliminate a few confusing or ungrammatical phrases. For previous issues of *The Unison Call*, we have sent even minor corrections/questions to the appropriate author. Major changes, of course, are sent to the author, but for minor changes, this time we didn't. All the problems were uncomplicated, so we just fixed them. If we added to the confusion (or introduced an error) in your submission, we apologize. If you (authors or readers) see places where something is wrong or confusing, please write and we will go back to the proven method of sending everything to you before printing. Again, the reason we are not sending minor changes to you this time is that (1) the changes were few and minor, and (2) nobody has protested our "tweaks" in the past.

—David H. Ellis

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## Regional Reports

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### Whooping Crane Numbers in North America

#### Wild Populations, July 14, 2008

	Adult	Yearling	Total	Adult Pairs
Aransas/Wood Buffalo	227	39	266 <sup>A</sup>	72
Rocky Mountains	0	0	0	0
Florida non-migratory	33 <sup>B</sup>	0	33 <sup>B</sup>	12
Wisconsin/Florida migratory	72	28 <sup>C</sup>	100 <sup>D</sup>	11
<b>Subtotals in the Wild</b>	332	67	399	95

<sup>A</sup> Estimated flock size in spring, 2008. In addition, 64 chicks hatched from a record 66 nests in 2008.

<sup>B</sup> This number reflects the birds regularly monitored in Florida. A few additional cranes could be present in unknown locations. No chicks fledged in the wild in 2008.

<sup>C</sup> The 5 whooping crane breeding facilities (Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, International Crane Foundation, Calgary Zoo, San Antonio Zoo, and Species Survival Center in New Orleans) either provided eggs or hatched and raised chicks in 2008. Four eggs came from abandoned wild nests in Wisconsin and successfully hatched at Patuxent. Approximately 28 chicks are being raised for the release programs in central Wisconsin (19 ultralight, 9 direct autumn release). These have not yet fledged.

<sup>D</sup> The flock total includes 2 adults that have not been sighted for some time and are considered "missing."

#### Captive Populations, July 14, 2008

	Adult	Young <sup>E</sup>	Total	Breeding Pairs
Patuxent WRC, Maryland	63	2	65	13
International Crane Foundation, WI	35	0	35	11
Devonian Wildl. Cons.Cent./Calgary	22	0	22	6
Species Survival Center, Louisiana	11	0	11	1
Calgary Zoo, Alberta	2	0	2	0
New Orleans Zoo, Louisiana	2	0	2	0
San Antonio Zoo, Texas	7	0	7	1
Homosassa Springs Wildl State Park	2	0	2	0
Lowry Park Zoo, Tampa, Florida	1	0	1	0
Jacksonville Zoo, Florida	2	0	2	0
Milwaukee County Zoo, Wisconsin	1	0	1	0
<b>Subtotal in Captivity</b>	148	2	150	32

<sup>E</sup> These young are genetic holdbacks and will remain in captivity as future breeding stock. The table does not reflect captive young that have entered reintroduction programs in 2008.

**TOTALS (Wild + Captive) 399 + 150= 549**

*Thomas V. Stehn, Whooping Crane Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

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## **Patuxent Wildlife Research Center**

The crane team at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center continued our role in rearing whooping cranes both for captivity and for release in the WCEP ultralight migration project. This year, one focus was to produce birds of under-represented family lines to improve genetic diversity. Through artificial insemination, we were able to produce chicks of four new genetic combinations. Two Patuxent whooping crane females produced chicks for the first time in 2008. One was a 17 year old female which originally came to us as an egg from Wood Buffalo National Park. She is ranked as one of the most genetically valuable females in captivity and we have been working with her for several years to have her lay fertile eggs. Finally our efforts paid off this year with one fertile egg produced. The resulting chick hatched successfully, is nearly fledged and is being held at Patuxent to become a future breeder. The second female to produce offspring for the first time is much younger – 7 years old. She and her mate produced 2 chicks. One is being kept in captivity and the second was sent for release. Production from our own birds was supplemented with that from whoopers at other breeding centers to produce birds for release. This season we reared, trained, and sent 19 whooping crane chicks to Necedah National Wildlife Refuge for release.

Patuxent scientists are also involved in several research projects focused on various aspects of whooping crane recovery. Clint Moore is leading development of a quantitative population model and decision-support tool for use by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in deciding whether to recommend additional releases to the Florida Non-Migratory Population. Sarah Converse is leading an effort to study demographic patterns in the Eastern Migratory Population. In addition, Sarah Converse and Michael Runge recently completed the first phase of a project to develop a decision-analytic framework for management of impounded wetlands used by whooping cranes at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin.

*Jane Chandler and Sarah Converse, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD*

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

Refuge staff moved into the new Headquarters facility in February. The Visitor's Center opened to the public in May. Park Ranger Doug Hunt transferred over from the Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex so our complex went from zero to two rangers in a matter of months. The Visitor's Center is now open Saturdays for the first time in 20 years. In early February, a crane recovery meeting became appropriately the very first meeting convened in the new facility.

As part of the continuing restocking effort, two cohorts of captive-reared cranes totaling eight individuals were released from the refuge over the winter from two of the new 2-ac acclimation pens. Two from the Ben Williams pen were killed by a predator soon after release; the remaining six survive.

Colleagues Anne Lacy and James Burnham from ICF visited the refuge to exchange information on crane trapping techniques. They demonstrated their backpack radio attachment technique, and we showed them the noose capture method. Since January, three AHY cranes were caught, banded, and radio-tagged.

Twenty four pairs laid eggs in at least 31 nests. There were five new territories used including three off-refuge. Three young survived including one fledgling. One refuge egg was transferred to Audubon for rearing.

Five management compartments totaling 1970 acres were burned on the refuge during the growing season to enhance pine savanna habitat.

University of New Orleans graduate student Rose Butler began her first season using remote camera surveillance to assess nest failure. Nests cameras were deployed at 22 nests. Some of the thousands of images included evidence of the first known alligator predation. Fellow UNO graduate student Jessica Henkel received funding for her project looking at the genetics of the subspecies. Dr. Ken Jones will advise.

Crane #532, a HY05 captive-reared female died as a result of a vehicle collision. The remains of an unknown crane were discovered near Beasley Pond. Crane #628, the West Coke male, a likely founder and oldest known crane in the wild population disappeared. He is at least 27-28 years old. Crane #136, the “Black Widow”, reappeared after not being observed since July 2007.

*Scott Hereford, Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR, Gautier, Mississippi*

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## **Eastern Migratory Whooping Crane Reintroductions**

*Winter 2007/08 and Spring Migration 2008.*—Winter distribution, not including ultralight-led juveniles, was Florida (26), Tennessee (18), South Carolina (4), Alabama (2), Indiana (1), and state undetermined (5). The birds in Tennessee included 10 of the 12 surviving cranes reintroduced by the direct autumn release (DAR) method in Wisconsin. The flock of 17 juvenile ultralight-led whooping cranes arrived at the holding site on Halpata Tastanaki Preserve, Marion County, Florida, on 27 January. Sixteen of these juveniles were led to the pensite on Chassahowitzka NWR, Citrus County, on 28 January, and 1 bird with a temporary wing injury was transported there on 2 February. There were no recorded mortalities of project whooping cranes during the winter. Two mortalities were recorded during spring migration. These consisted of 1 ultralight-led and 1 DAR juvenile and were due to predation and a powerline strike. One ultralight-led juvenile was removed from the project after failure to recover flight capability after an earlier handling injury.

*Reproduction.*—Eleven pairs (9 on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, 1 on Meadow Valley State Wildlife Area, and 1 on Wood County Forest) nested in early or mid April 2008 in the core reintroduction area in central Wisconsin. All nests were unsuccessful. Most pairs deserted their nests synchronous with occurrence of warm weather, the same pattern that had been demonstrated during the previous year. Because of the relatively cold, wet spring in 2008, many nests were incubated almost full-term, and there was no renesting.

*Current Population Size.*—As of 30 June 2008, the eastern migratory population consisted of an estimated 70 birds (39 males and 31 females) including 59 in Wisconsin, 4 in Michigan, and 7 either not recorded returning to Wisconsin or departed during spring wandering with no confirmation of return. The single wild-hatched (2006) crane in the population paired with a 5-year-old male this spring, and that pair held a territory on Necedah NWR.

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

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## Florida Resident Whooping Cranes

There are 26 birds (8 pairs) in the population. This summer we saw mortality and movements of birds that were likely associated with drought and the lack of water in marshes. During the 2008 breeding season there were 5 nests (2 were re-nests) by 3 pairs, with 3 nests hatching 5 chicks; none lived past 25 days. Four of 5 nests were in lakes because marsh water levels were too low for nesting. A team (consisting of project representatives) will meet in Gainesville on 25-26 August to consider the future of releases into the flock under various release scenarios, taking into consideration expected performance of the flock, costs, public relations, and other aspects. The resulting recommendations will be brought to the Recovery Team in late September. The future of the flock really hinges on how well the *wild-hatched* birds will survive and reproduce. The wild-hatched birds will have to do much better than the *release-birds* for the goal of a self-sustaining population ever to be realized.

Steve Nesbitt and I continue to work on the Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Workshop and hope to have galleys to authors before long.

*Marty Folk, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*

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## Conboy Lake NWR, Klickitat County, Washington, 2007 Breeding Season

The 2007 season marks the thirteenth year of censusing the refuge's nesting sandhill crane population with additional data collected for off-refuge crane nesting. This work is believed to encompass all of the current nesting by greater sandhill cranes in Washington. Since 1995, this project has documented crane nesting sites, habitat use, reproduction, nesting phenology, migration, site fidelity, and juvenile survival.

Loss of crane eggs and colts is suspected to be due primarily to depredation by birds of prey and coyotes. Human influences, including land and water management conflicts, contribute to depredation. Cranes nest in water to protect eggs, adults, and young from ground predators. Nests must remain in shallow water while parents brood the small chicks. To maintain crane habitat, water levels must be carefully controlled, but because the nests are not visited, the effects of water levels can only be guessed. It is likely, however, that some nests become dry and others are flooded. A more thorough examination of hydrological changes would benefit management.

Hay harvest also disturbs breeding cranes. This mid-July through September activity can drive cranes off territory and remove valuable portions of cover, endangering unfledged colts. Glenwood Valley ranchers have been willing to communicate crane sightings and occasionally alter haying schedules to accommodate nesting pairs and unfledged colts.

The breeding population of cranes within the study area has nearly tripled since regular monitoring was initiated in 1995. As the population continues to increase, cranes will likely spread to other breeding areas. According to the Recovery Plan, downlisting to State Threatened Status requires that 15 (of 65) breeding pairs be located outside Glenwood Valley. Subadult cranes flock together and explore surrounding areas for potential breeding habitat. Tracking the movements of these birds could locate colonization sites.

**TABLE 1. Sandhill Crane: Breeding Pairs and Production in Washington, 1995-2007**

	1995 <sup>‡</sup>	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
WA Population Estimate <sup>A</sup>	22	26	34	39	40	47	50	50	49	53	60	60	64
#Breeding Pairs On-Refuge ( ) <sup>B</sup>	7 (2)	8 (2)	12	14	13 (1)	13 (3)	14 (2)	11 (5)	15 (2)	18 (1)	15 (5)	18 (3)	20 (2)
#Breeding Pairs Off-Refuge ( ) <sup>B</sup>	1 (1)	2 (1)	3	(3)	3 (1)	2 (1)	2 (2)	2 (2)	3 (1)	1#	3 (2)	1 (2)	3
#Subadult (non-breeders) On-Refuge	0	0	4	5	4	9	10	10	7	15	10	12	12
#Young Produced*	1	3	5	5	5	6	0	2	6	5	5	7	5

<sup>A</sup> – data includes confirmed pairs, unconfirmed pairs, and sub-adults but does not include young fledged that year

<sup>B</sup> – data in parentheses represent territorial pairs without confirmed nesting data

“On-refuge” refers to cranes nesting within the Glenwood Valley

“Off-refuge” refers to cranes nesting outside the Glenwood Valley

<sup>‡</sup> - for prior years’ data, see previous reports (2006 and preceding)

\* - this number reflects young known or suspected of joining the fall migration

# - unable to confirm 2 traditional pairs at Deer Creek and Panakanic Valley based on limited surveys

*Jessica Stocking, jessica.stocking@gmail.com.*

## Michigan Sandhill Crane 2007 Fall Survey

During late October and early November 2007, volunteers in Michigan joined with counters in five other states to survey the Eastern Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel have coordinated this survey since 1979 to document long-term trends in the number of migrant sandhills. It was conducted when cranes are mostly concentrated at pre-migration staging areas. Earlier in the year cranes are dispersed on breeding territories making counting them very labor intensive. Counts made later when they have arrived at wintering areas are complicated because the greater subspecies mingles with the non-migratory Florida subspecies in some areas.

More than 52 areas in 22 Michigan counties were surveyed last fall. An all-time high 16,707 Sandhill Cranes were found at 43 areas in 18 counties of Michigan (see table). The 2007 count eclipsed the 12,758 cranes counted in 2006 and the previous high count of 15,191 in 2005. Ninety percent of the cranes were found in four south central counties: Barry, Calhoun, Jackson and Livingston. Michigan Audubon’s Bernard Baker Sanctuary in Calhoun County harbored 8,528 cranes while 2,219 sandhills and one Whooping Crane were counted at the Phyllis Haehnle Sanctuary, Jackson County.

Sean Kelly (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) reports that Michigan’s 16,700 cranes comprised nearly half of the 35,945 eastern population tallied in 2007. About 37,000 were counted in the previous two years. The Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Game Area in north Indiana attracted 11,900 cranes, the most for any single area east of the Mississippi River. Surprisingly, only 5,964 Sandhill Cranes were counted in Wisconsin, down from an average 9 to 10 thousand found in previous years. Fewer than one thousand Greater Sandhill Cranes were found in Tennessee, Georgia, and Florida.

The 16,700 cranes counted last year is considered a good minimum estimate of the actual number of cranes present in Michigan. However, I suspect several hundred went uncounted in Kalamazoo, St. Joseph Counties and other unknown areas so there is need for better coverage to further improve accuracy in those counties.

Results of Michigan Fall Survey of Sandhill Cranes, 2007

County	Number Cranes
Allegan	137
Barry	1,635
Branch	111
Calhoun	8,762
Cass	0
Clinton	33
Genesee	200
Gratiot	13
Hillsdale	40
Jackson	3,604
Kalamazoo	254
Lapeer	65
Livingston	1,170
Missaukee	0
Montcalm	125
Oceana	0
Oakland	65
Saginaw	72
Sanilac	30
Schoolcraft	0
Shiawassee	177
Washtenaw	214
Michigan Total	16,707
<b>Eastern Population</b>	<b>35,945</b>

Ronald Hoffman, [hoffmanrj@dmci.net](mailto:hoffmanrj@dmci.net).

**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. Items can be sent to:

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 E-mail: [dcellis@theriver.com](mailto:dcellis@theriver.com)

Deadlines are normally July 10 and December 10.  
 Please send information as a Microsoft Word attachment (e-mail) whenever possible.

**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.

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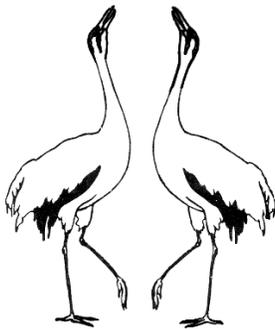
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