



# THE UNISON CALL

A Newsletter of the North American  
Crane Working Group

Vol. 12, No. 2, 2000

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## NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

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### MAN CHARGED IN CRANE SHOOTINGS

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has charged an 18-year-old St. Augustine man with the Nov. 19 shooting of two whooping cranes.

William Lonnie Bush Jr., of 203 Cornell Rd., must appear in court Dec. 19 to face charges of two counts of taking a species of special concern and two counts of taking wildlife from the right of way of a public road. Both charges are misdemeanors, punishable by a maximum \$500 fine and 60 days in jail for each of the four counts.

FWC law enforcement officer Doug Tyus investigated the case with assistance from five other officers. Tyus tracked down a tip that Bush owned a two-tone blue pickup which matched the description of a vehicle seen at the site of the shootings. Bush had attempted to have his pickup painted a new color before investigators contacted him.

The individual who provided the tip to investigators may qualify for up to \$14,500 in rewards offered by the FWC, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Audubon of Florida, St. Johns Chapter Audubon Society, Safari Club International, St. Johns County Commission and Dr. William J. Broussard of Forever Florida.

In addition to filing the criminal charges, the arresting officer seized a .22-caliber rifle, which Bush had borrowed from a relative. Investigators believe it is the same rifle Bush used to shoot the birds.

The two male cranes were part of a reintroduction project - a joint effort of the FWC, USFWS, U.S. Geological Survey, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Canadian Wildlife Service and International Crane Foundation - to restore the species to its former range in the southeastern United States. Before the reintroduction project began in 1993, no whooping cranes had been in Florida since the late 1920s.

Today, there are about 400 whooping cranes in the world, including about 73 in Florida.

*Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission* December 5, 2000  
CONTACT: Henry Cabbage (850) 488-8843

*The two whooping cranes that were shot were isolation-reared at ICF in Spring 1999 and released in Florida in December 1999. --ed.*

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## **Whooping Crane Conservation Association Plans Meeting In Fort Smith**

The Whooping Crane Conservation Association is planning to meet in Fort Smith and plans to fly out over the whooping crane rearing areas. The dates are August 15 thru August 18, 2001. Participants will meet in Edmonton on August 14 and fly as a group from Edmonton to Fort Smith on the 15th.

Participants will leave Fort Smith on August 18 arriving back in Edmonton in mid-afternoon. Due to plane seating and accommodations in Fort Smith the participants will be limited to 45 plus those traveling there by motor home. Once this package is priced, the first 45 paid participants will get the slots with a deadline of May 1, 2001. This early deadline is necessary in order to ensure airline reservations during a busy time of the year for travel in and out of Fort Smith. WCCA is working with a Fort Smith travel agent who is putting together a package price that will include round trip airfare from Edmonton to Fort Smith, ground transportation, one night motel in Edmonton on the way in, and the charter flight out over the crane area.

Fort Smith WCCA members Archie and Angie Bevington are serving as local hosts. Lots of birdwatching and sightseeing in both Fort Smith and Wood Buffalo Park is planned as well as a speaking program featuring the crane research work going on in the park. Local accommodations, meals, and conference registration will be due on arrival in Fort Smith. WCCA President Walt Sturgeon is pulling together a mailing list of those interested in order to keep them updated as the details develop over the next few months. Walt's email address is [candwsturgeon@worldnet.att.net](mailto:candwsturgeon@worldnet.att.net), telephone number is 252-478-5610, and mailing address is P.O. Box 1251, Spring Hope, NC 27882.

*Walt Sturgeon*

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## **Ninth Workshop Site Search**

Participants at the Eighth NACWG Workshop in Albuquerque in Jan 2000 voted Central California as their number one choice for the next workshop, followed by the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo WI. The Board is considering holding the Ninth NACWG Workshop in Sacramento CA either January 21 through 25 or January 28 through Feb. 1, 2003.

The delta area south of Sacramento is fascinating and a highly recommend location for the next workshop. There are thousands of cranes on agricultural lands which are managed for wildlife habitat. The acres and acres of farms in the delta are surrounded by man-made canals. The water level is higher than the farmland which is protected by levees. After crops are harvested, fields are flooded in rotation to provide habitat for cranes, ducks, geese, and other waterfowl. In addition to conservation on private lands there are several state wildlife reserves and a collaborative reserve with the lead party being the Nature Conservancy. Thus, it will be possible to have an interesting field trip by bus visiting both public and private lands. The Greater Sandhill Crane is listed as threatened in California. By the end of 2001 a recovery plan with delisting criteria will be established. The recovery plan, delisting criteria and planning process make a very interesting story and it will be possible to have the key players make a presentations at the Workshop. There are many threats to cranes in the delta with, as elsewhere, loss of habitat being the most critical. The growing California population has encouraged farmers to sell their agricultural lands to developers. Another threat is the conversion of row crop agricultural lands to vineyards. This has progressed with astonishing speed and there are miles and miles of grapes. In summary, it is a very interesting area with an intriguing story to be told.

If you have any suggestion or questions regarding the Ninth Workshop, please e-mail Tom Hoffmann at [thoffmann@hoffmanns.com](mailto:thoffmann@hoffmanns.com).

*Tom Hoffmann*

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## **REGIONAL REPORTS**

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### **MISSISSIPPI**

The thirteen cranes released on to the refuge in late 1999-early 2000 are still alive, a record for survival for a release year since the augmentation began in 1981. The total number of nesting pairs (21) and total known active nests (26) in 2000 are both 34 year record highs. Approaching 70 days old and nearing fledging, the Firetower chick was killed by a bobcat. The Ben Williams 6C nest may be the latest ever recorded with probable oviposition about June 24-25.

Twenty-seven people participated in the Annual Autumn Crane Count on a windy, drizzly early morning in mid-November. Analysis of the Count and year-round 2000 monitoring is not finalized but it appears there are about 103 in the population. After two years of drought, the rains finally began again in November. Ponds and drains began filling up. By that time, the area was 20+ inches below normal. We hope it's back to our usual 5" a month.

The organism that causes Avian TB was isolated from one of 16 crane chicks scheduled for release on the refuge in late 2000 as part of routine pre-release screening. The positive bird shows no symptoms of the disease. However, Avian TB has never been reported in this subspecies. Since they had earlier been in the same pen at Audubon and shared water with the positive bird, the three cranes in the Fontainebleau acclimation Pen pending release were returned to Audubon. Audubon will have all 16 HY birds undergo screening protocol for at least the next two months and results have 8-week turnaround. A decision tree is being developed for different test outcomes.

Two new roost ponds were created: a 0.33 acre area inside the Fontainebleau Pen and a 3-acre pond along Duck Pond Road that will hold the next release cohort.

Among the couple dozen greater sandhill cranes that have begun showing up in November to winter was one we banded last February, observed at the same site where it was captured. Friends in the Great Lakes states: please be on the lookout.

Biologist Scott Hereford traveled to the Russian Far East and Japan. (Thanks George and others!!) In Russia, he served as leader/lecturer at a Wild Bird Society of Japan sponsored crane breeding habitat management training course for North East Asian Crane Network participants from Russia, Japan, and China. In Japan, he visited eastern Hokkaido to see crane sites, visited with biologists, and gave a presentation at the Akan International Crane Center.

The refuge website has changed again to <http://mississippisandhillcrane.gov>

*Scott Hereford, Gautier, MS (scott\_hereford@fws.gov)*

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## **FLORIDA**

The Florida flock of whoopers numbers around 70, which includes 13 pairs. Because of severe drought, we are not releasing as many birds this winter as are available. We plan to release 21 birds and hold back 14-16. At a time when marsh water levels should be at peak this fall, they were extremely low. This will likely be the driest winter since we began releases in 1993. As of early December most marshes were dry and we've built several soft release pens on the edge of a small private lake in Polk County.

The pair of whooping cranes that summered in Michigan began their journey homeward on a snowy 21st of November. Staff from the International Crane Foundation (ICF), assisted by plane/pilots provided by the Kohlers, tracked the pair. The male disappeared the first night and the female continued on her own. Her flight path was quite direct except for a stretch near the Appalachian Mountains. She arrived back in her former home range of Citrus County, Florida, on 30 November. The next day she traveled another 90 miles to the Kissimmee Prairie and roosted near other Florida whooping cranes. After traveling across the Eastern US she had almost immediately gotten together with the single largest concentration of whooping cranes in the state of Florida. This unusually long dispersal was probably drought induced. Technically, when/if she goes back to MI, it may be termed a migration. By definition, migration is a round-trip conducted on a *periodic* or *regular* basis.

Prior to this year, whooping cranes soft-released in FL had not left the state. There have been a total of 354.34 whooping crane years in Florida since 1993. So, in that number of total crane years we only had 2 bird years (0.57%) outside of the state of FL.

This summer Tom Miller resigned and Steve Baynes took his place. Steve was most recently employed at Disney's Animal Kingdom but prior to that worked with the captive Mississippi sandhill cranes at the Audubon Institute.

*Marty Folk, Kissimmee, FL*

New on the Florida team, Steve Baynes holds Black/Black, "the hen that laid the golden eggs", after capture for attachment of a new radio transmitter this fall (*photo not available*).

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## **GREAT LAKES**

1999 Fall Sandhill Crane Census--Results were compiled by Len Schumann. Of 32,404 individuals tallied during 27 October-6 November, 12,761 were counted at specific sites in Wisconsin, 5,715 in Michigan, 13,348 at Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in Indiana, 464 at other sites in Indiana, 56 in Tennessee, and 60 in Florida. Peak count at J-P was an estimated 14,000 on 4 and 11 November.

2000 Fall Sandhill Crane Census--The count at J-P on the coordinated count date, 27 October, was 11,531, and peak count was 16,267 on 30 November.

*Richard P. Urbanek, Necedah, Wisconsin*

## **CANADA**

Fifty-one pairs of Whooping Cranes nested in and around Wood Buffalo National Park during the 2000 breeding season. Habitat conditions deteriorated soon after hatch with

many of the wetlands drying in June. With the large number of nests, it was anticipated that a near record number of chicks would be produced, however, only about 30 young were accounted for at hatching time. There were only 2 family groups that were observed with 2 young. Twelve of those young survived to fledging age.

Dr. Bernhard Wessling has developed an acoustical marking technique using the Unison Call of crane pairs. He has discovered that each pair has its own unique voice print. In August unison call recordings were made of several pairs in an attempt to match the calls with pairs recorded at Aransas during the winter of 1999/2000. Because of the success of this technique, the summer and winter territories of several unbanded pairs have been matched and additional recordings are planned for the winter of 2000/2001 and the following summer.

*Brian Johns, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*

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## **ARANSAS**

This could be a very rough year for the Aransas/Wood Buffalo population of whooping cranes. As of December 17th, only 177 whoopers had been accounted for at Aransas. This is down 11 from the record high of 188 present in the 1999-2000 winter. No additional whooping cranes have been confirmed present in the flyway. One adult and one juvenile have died since making it to Aransas with no clues as to causation, leaving the population estimate at 175 (167 adults plus 8 young). Due to the drought in Texas, the whoopers are finding few blue crabs or acorns to feed on. With the poor nesting season and high over-summer mortality, the population count has dropped this winter as predicted by the 10-year population cycle that anticipated a dip in numbers in the 2001-2002 winter. Apparently the expected decline has come one year early.

*Tom Stehn, Aransas, Texas*

## **ROCKY MOUNTAINS**

### **September Population Survey of the Rocky Mountain Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes**

Greater sandhill cranes of the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) were counted from the air or ground at 65 sites in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah and Wyoming during 7-12 September 2000. Migrants that had arrived at the autumn staging area in the San Luis Valley, Colorado were also counted. The annual survey is a cooperative effort of the Pacific Flyway states and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. More than 36 individuals from various state and federal agencies and the Jackson Hole Bird Club assisted in the count.

A total of 19,990 cranes were recorded with 46.7% in Idaho, 19.5% in Wyoming, 18.0% in Montana, 12.1% in Utah, and 3.8% in Colorado. Over 76% of all cranes were recorded at 15 areas. The 5 most important areas were: 1) Teton Basin, ID (1,831), 2) Bear River Valley in the tri-state area of ID, UT and WY (1,719), 3) Grays Lake, ID (1,529), 4) Ashton-St. Anthony area along the Henry's Fork of the Snake River, ID (1,405), and Farson, WY (1,367). The September 2000 survey tallied the highest number of RMP cranes recorded in 8 counts conducted since 1987.

*Rod Drewien, Wayan, ID; Phil Thorpe, Lakewood, CO; and Paul Keywood, Laurel, MD*

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## **Longevity Records from Band Recoveries of Rocky Mountain Greater Sandhill Cranes**

We recently summarized data from 180 band recoveries obtained during 1969-99 from Rocky Mountain greater sandhill cranes banded on summer areas in 5 states during 1969-94. The 5 oldest recoveries of cranes banded as juveniles follow:

<u>Banding Loc.</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Recovery loc.</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Age (yr.mo.)</u>	<u>Mortality factor</u>
1. Grays Lake, ID	7/24/70	Soda Spr., ID	9/09/99	29:3	Shot
2. Grays Lake, ID	8/11/73	Chihuahua, Mex.	1/04/98	24:7	Shot
3. Grays Lake, ID	7/29/69	San Antonio, NM	12/13/93	24:6	Shot
4. Grays Lake, ID	7/24/73	Grays Lake, ID	9/01/96	23:3	Barbed-wire fence
5. Daniel, WY	7/20/72	San Antonio, NM	12/03/93	21:6	Shot

The 29-year-old recovery is currently (Sept 00) the oldest sandhill crane recovery in the files of the Bird Banding Laboratory, Laurel, MD.

*Rod Drewien, Wayan, ID, and Wendy Brown, Albuquerque, NM*

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## **WEST COAST**

The West Coast Crane Working Group has established a web site at <http://www.geocities.com/wccwg>

*Tom Hoffmann, Seattle, WA*

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**TIME TO RENEW!** If you haven't renewed your NACWG membership for 2001, it's time. Please fill out the renewal form on the last page of this newsletter and send in with your dues. Thank you!

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## RESEARCH

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### **Effect of Delayed Training on Following Ultralight Aircraft by Costume Isolation-reared Sandhill Cranes**

Current plans to reintroduce an eastern migratory population of whooping cranes call for use of ultralight aircraft to lead cranes on their first autumn migration. One school of thought requires training of crane chicks to follow the aircraft to begin immediately after hatching and avoiding the standard practice of costumed humans leading the chicks. If, however, crane chicks could be reared by standard techniques without early use of aircraft, and the aircraft training could occur later, greater flexibility in who does the rearing, where it is done, and how many birds are available for release could result.

Eight sandhill cranes were reared from hatching (3-7 May) with standard costume isolation-rearing techniques by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and International Crane Foundation staff at the rearing facility on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. These chicks were first exposed to the aircraft when they were 37-41 days old.

Exposure to aircraft occurred during three periods:

13-18 June: Five chicks followed the wingless Operation Migration (OM)-piloted aircraft along the perimeter of a circular pen.

23 June-6 July: After the first day a costumed parent with whom the birds were familiar operated the aircraft. Training was moved from the circular pen to an open field on 26 June. By 27 June no birds were afraid of the wingless aircraft and all 8 birds followed as a group.

14 July-4 August: On 14 July a costumed parent walked with the chicks under the wing of the OM-piloted craft to familiarize the chicks with the overhead wing. The next session, to consist of leading the birds without assistance of the costumed parent, was cancelled on 16 July when a crash-landing rendered the aircraft inoperable. The landing strip was deemed unuseable. Other logistical problems complicated attempted training at another site 1.6 km away beginning 26 July and resulted in chicks flying back to the rearing facility.

Results indicate that:

--Crane chicks reared according to the standard protocol in which they routinely follow costumed parents can be trained to follow aircraft on the ground.



--Chicks without exposure to aircraft for the first month or more after hatching can be taught to follow the aircraft later.

--Identity of the pilot is important. Training chicks to follow is more effective if a costumed parent is operating the aircraft.

--Training chicks to follow in flight behind a winged craft was not adequately tested because of an accident and resulting logistical problems.

*Richard P. Urbanek, Necedah, Wisconsin*

## **A Test of the One-by-One Method of Releasing Sandhill Cranes in Central Wisconsin**

Eight sandhill cranes were costume isolation-reared from hatching (3-7 May) by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and International Crane Foundation staff at the rearing facility on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Releases occurred each day from 15 to 23 October at four major sandhill crane staging areas (Gallagher Marshes--Sandhill State Wildlife Area, Sprague-Mather and Rynearson Pools--Necedah NWR, and Quincy Bluff Preserve--Nature Conservancy) in Central Wisconsin. All birds were released one at a time at roost sites near dusk except for one released at a feeding site in mid-afternoon. The one-by-one method was similar to that developed in Arizona by D. H. Ellis, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.

All birds integrated completely into wild flocks within a few days. Five males did so immediately and remained in the wild flocks into which they were released. Another male, released at a feeding site, returned to the rearing area that evening when the wild flock flew over the area en route to roost. That bird was subsequently released at another site and remained with the wild flock. One female separated from the wild flock at the roost the morning after release. She flew alone about 18 km away and then sought cover in the edge of a woods. She was recaptured and re-released but returned to the rearing area 3 days later. She was then released again and remained with the wild flock. A second released female spent her first day after release with a solitary wild pair but thereafter joined the wild flock.

The release method was successful and all birds survived to apparently migrate from Central Wisconsin with wild flocks approximately 13-18 November. They are being monitored during migration and wintering.

*Richard P. Urbanek, Necedah, Wisconsin*

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*Editor's Note: To find out more about the migration experiment leading cranes with an ultralight, you can visit the following websites:*

<http://fathergoose.durham.net/>  
<http://bringbackthecranes.fws.gov>

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*The Unison Call* is published twice a year, winter/spring and summer/fall. Membership is based on a calendar year. All contributions, suggestions, opinions, drawings, cartoons are very welcome! Send newsletter items to:

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Deadlines are June 10 and December 10. Please send information on a disc (either size) in WordPerfect or as a WordPerfect attachment (e-mail) whenever possible.