



THE UNISON CALL

A Newsletter of the North American
Crane Working Group

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President's Report

At the North American Crane Workshop in January several of the long-standing board members tendered their resignations, including our president for the past 8 years, Scott Hereford. New board members were elected to replace these departing members. From the new board, officers were elected, and I was honored to be selected as the new president. I thank the departing president and board for all the hard work they have done over the past decade.

Also, at the meeting in January, the attending membership voted on possible locations for our next workshop, to be held in late 2005 or early 2006. The top location was somewhere in northern Mexico, possibly Durango. More work will have to be done to secure a location. This should be an interesting meeting and a chance to visit an area frequented by wintering sandhill cranes that few of us have seen. We certainly had a number of excellent papers at the last meeting, and expect a similar turnout at the next meeting.

Other items to consider include the name of our organization. Have you ever had to explain to someone what the North American Crane Working Group is? As I understand it, the name dates from a time when some government employees were restricted from going to "meetings," but could attend "working group" sessions with no restrictions. Is this a true story? Perhaps some of our senior members could enlighten us. In any case, would a more descriptive name be more appropriate for the group at this time? I do not know if it is even feasible to easily change the name of the organization, but if it is, what name do we want to consider? Would something like North American Crane Biologists Association be more appropriate? Please give me some feedback on your thoughts on this.

Besides holding the conference and producing the proceedings every 3-4 years, are there other projects or programs in which our group should involve its membership? Your thoughts on this subject are also appreciated.

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REGIONAL REPORTS

FLORIDA NON-MIGRATORY WHOOPING CRANE REINTRODUCTION PROJECT

As of 9 June 2003 we routinely accounted for 72 birds (more could be alive but are not trackable). We identified 16 pairs. During the 2003 breeding season we saw more nests (8) than in any previous year (1999-2 nests, 2000-3 nests, 2001-2 nests, 2002-7 nests). Six of 8 nests hatched, showing a dramatic improvement over the previous nest success (only 2 of 14 nests hatched during those drought years). This spring 8 chicks were hatched from 6 nests; there were 2 sets of "twins". One pair raised 2 chicks to over a month of age before losing both chicks. The pair re-nested, hatched another chick, and it was still alive at the time of this writing. The pair of whoopers that raised the project's first chick to fledge last spring also raised another chick to fledging this spring. A third surviving chick from this spring will likely make its first flight within a week.

Our first fledged chick, "Lucky", became independent of his parents on 6 January 2003. By 15 January he had discovered the new release birds and some older birds in nearby Lake County.

During winter 2002-2003 we released 2 cohorts of 6 and a single bird. As of early June 2003 all but one bird that collided with a power line survived. Another bird collided with a power line, breaking its transmitter completely and cleanly off its leg. The bird had a slight limp for 2 days and then was back to normal. One bird suffered a broken lower leg. The bird remained strong and alert so rather than risking further damage to the leg we opted not to capture it and take it into captivity. The bird's leg healed and gradually the bird has regained use of that leg. It still walks with a limp, however.

On 11 April we captured a bird (926, a 1999 hatch-year male) that had been frequenting a golf course (not desirable habitat!) with sandhill cranes in Citrus County. We translocated the bird 37 km and released it in Lake County near other whooping cranes. To our surprise it did not fly back to Citrus County right away. In fact, not only did it take up residence, it immediately began "flirting" and courting several females. On 28 April a new female (646, a 1996 hatch-year female) showed up in the area. Within 2 days she and 926 were nest-building in a marsh! However, they did not follow through with egg-

laying (maybe next year). The trans-location of bird 926 turned out to be a surprisingly gratifying bird management choice.



Taking routine measurements prior to the trans-location of whooper male 926. Body parts left to right: Marty Folk's knuckles, Kristi Candelora's hands, 926's schnozz, Jeannette Parker's elbow. Photo by Steve Baynes

Recently we completed a video primarily portraying the life of Lucky from dancing parents to fledging (the first wild-born chick to fledge in the US since 1939). Additional footage gives a little history of the whooping crane, the re-introduction efforts for our non-migratory flock, and the Whooping Crane Conservation Association (WCCA).

This tape is available from the WCCA at their web page <http://whoopingcrane.com/>.

Marty Folk, Kissimmee, FL and Steve Nesbitt, Gainesville, FL

EASTERN MIGRATORY WHOOPING CRANE REINTRODUCTION

Winter 2002/03--The five HY2001 whooping cranes over-wintered in Florida: a male/female pair on a cattle ranch in Pasco County; two in separate places at Hixtown Swamp, Madison County; and a male at Chassahowitzka NWR with the HY2002 juveniles that had been led to the refuge by Operation Migration ultralight aircraft. All 16 juveniles also over-wintered successfully at Chassahowitzka.

Spring Migration 2003--The two HY2001 whooping cranes at Hixtown Swamp left in February and migrated north with sandhills; the male returned to Necedah NWR, and the female eventually returned to and remained at Horicon NWR, where she had spent the previous summer. The pair in Pasco County left on 25 March, arrived at Necedah NWR on 31 March, and subsequently disassociated. The remaining HY2001 male and the 16 juveniles departed from Chassahowitzka on 1 April. Two females dropped out on the first day of migration. The remaining flock of 15 birds migrated to southern Indiana in three days before confronting bad weather that stopped further migration for a week. They arrived in Wisconsin on 13 April in three different groups. Two groups returned to the Necedah NWR area on that date. A third group consisting of three birds returned to the Necedah NWR area on 28 April after spending the interim in eastern/northeastern Wisconsin. Of the two females that dropped out on the first day of migration, one migrated to and remained in a wetland along the Illinois River in northern Illinois. The other got off track in the mountains of northern Georgia and migrated well east of the migration route used by the other birds. On 4 May she was retrieved in southeastern Ohio and released with three other whooping cranes near Necedah NWR.

Spring Wandering Period 2003--As of early June, like the previous year, most of the whooping cranes continue to move about central and southern Wisconsin before settling on their summer home ranges. Post-release survival of the 21 birds in the migratory whooping crane flock has been 100% from late winter 2002 through spring return 2003.

Richard P. Urbanek, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and International Crane Foundation, and Lara E. A. Fondow and Colleen D. Satyshur, International Crane Foundation, on behalf of Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership.



Juvenile whooping cranes exercising at Necedah NWR. Photo by Sheryl Leffer.

MISSISSIPPI

The two cohorts soft-released late in 2002 remain alive. A HY02 White-Oak captive-reared male was abrupt-released at the wastewater area, never joined other cranes even though a strong flyer, and was found dead just west of the wastewater wet cells. A greater sandhill crane carcass was also recovered. Results from Madison are pending, but suggest metal toxicosis. However, those were the only AHY cranes mortalities reported for 2003 to date.

More water on the ground by early March than many could remember, along with few predators in the area due mainly to successful control efforts, seemed to promise an optimistic view on the upcoming nesting season. What a strange season ensued. After a good start with seven nests in March, nesting seemed to halt entirely until resuming in late April, possibly to a prolonged cool snap. Budget games resulted in us not getting a budget until early June and a halt to predator control right during the middle of the nesting season. A five inch torrential rain in part of a day in early June wiped out most of the last of the nests. Most interesting of all was that three of the four families of 2002 remained together throughout most if not all of this nesting season. The results: 17 pairs laid 20 eggs. Two (maybe three) chicks still survive.

Some good did come out of reduced nesting: habitat management. Growing season burns lead to better habitat restoration results. Burns can only occur when nesting will not be disturbed. Some burns were postponed; however, close coordination between refuge fire management and biological staffs helped facilitate the most spring growing season

prescribed burning ever on the refuge. Fourteen burns totaling over 4808 acres were completed in May.

Refuge Biotech Jereme Phillips moved east 100 miles to a new assignment and promotion as Wildlife Biologist at the Bon Secour NWR on the Alabama Coast, where he will switch to sea turtles and beach mice. Jereme was a valuable member of the refuge biological staff for 4 2 years and he attended the last two NACWs. We=ll greatly miss him but wish him well. Stop in and see the cranes sometime, Jereme. Wildlife photographer Mike Forsberg visited the refuge twice for his book on sandhill cranes.

The refuge Biological Review, scheduled for June, was postponed until autumn.

Scott Hereford, Gautier, MS



Sandhill cranes foraging in central Wisconsin, August, 2002. Photo by Sheryl Leffer.

WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK WHOOPING CRANE UPDATE

The winter of 2002/03 was good to whooping cranes. The high count during the winter for the Wood Buffalo/Aransas population was 185 cranes. Over winter mortality was limited to one juvenile, leaving 184 cranes to migrate north in the spring of 2003. The birds began arriving on their breeding grounds in late April and early May. After a few days of re-establishing their territories the cranes settled in to nesting.

The Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) conducted breeding pair surveys over the whooping crane nesting area May 14-26, 2003. In spite of a mid-May snow storm that dumped 20 cm of snow on Fort Smith and the eastern edge of the nesting area, the CWS discovered a new record number of nests. A total of 61 nesting pairs have been located in and adjacent to Wood Buffalo National Park. Another 9 pairs of non-nesting cranes were also observed on the breeding grounds, plus a number of single birds. Of the 61 nesting

pairs 8 are new and nesting for the first time. The 9 non-nesting pairs are made up of 3 pairs that bred in 2002, plus 6 new pairs.

Hatching success surveys were carried out from June 11 to 16 by the CWS with aerial support from the USFWS. During these surveys 45 chicks were documented, including 3 sets of twin young (a pair that hatches both their chicks is referred to as having twins). There were 6 additional nests that had not hatched by the time the surveys were completed. Typically the late nests are not as successful as early nests; however there is a chance of additions to the chick total for the year.

Habitat conditions throughout the nesting area appear near normal. The water levels in the ponds and creeks during the 2000-2002 period were above normal, however production of crane young was lower than average, reflecting the low productivity period that is typically experienced around the turn of each new decade. Productivity of crane chicks and survival of adults is usually greater during the middle of each decade and since we are moving into that portion of the 10 year cycle it is anticipated that chick survival will be average or higher than average over the next 3-5 years.

The Canadian Wildlife Service would like to thank the following for support for their research: Josie Weninger, Mark Bradley, Sharon Irwin, Steve Malcolm, Christina Kaeser and Rita Bourque of Wood Buffalo National Park; T.J. Lovell, Dustin Lunde, Dick Funk, Doug Williamson and Linda Ellsworth of Big River Air; and Tom Stehn and Jim Bredy of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Brian Johns and Lea Craig-Moore, Canadian Wildlife Service, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



Young whooping cranes in flight at Necedah NWR. Photo by Sheryl Leffer

CAPTIVE PROPAGATION UPDATE

The captive propagation centers have been busy with their breeding efforts this spring. ACRES, which houses 30 adult Mississippi sandhill cranes, has been raising 26 chicks

this year, a record number. Of the total, 24 are being costumed reared and 2 are parent reared. The plans are to socialize the chicks into 3 groups for fall release on the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge. ACRES also houses 8 whooping cranes, with one additional pair at the Audubon Zoo. One pair laid 4 eggs this year, the first whooping crane eggs laid at the facility since receiving whooping cranes for the breeding program. One egg was broken by the pair and the other eggs failed to hatch, but this was an excellent start for a relatively new program.

The Calgary Zoo describes their whooping crane breeding season as very quiet. A total of 21 eggs were laid by 4 females. All 4 females had laid eggs in previous years. Three eggs hatched but, unfortunately, one chick had to be euthanized at 20 days of age due to leg problems. One chick is being costumed reared and will become an educational display bird. The other remaining chick is being parent reared by Hope and Chinook, the Calgary Zoo's naturally fertile pair. This chick will eventually be sent to Patuxent for inclusion with a cohort going to the Florida non-migratory release project.

Calgary Zoo sent Dwight Knapik to Patuxent in the spring for artificial insemination training, and then attempts were made to AI one pair of whooping cranes (Cal and Nelson). Another breeding pair (Ish and Christie) were given a wooden egg to incubate, and later received a sandhill crane chick to raise. The Zoo is looking forward to hosting the 2004 Whooping Crane Recovery Team Meeting and Captive Management Meeting this January.

USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center had a noisy spring. A total of 27 whooping cranes were hatched from 51 eggs laid. Additionally, two eggs from the San Antonio Zoo and one egg from the International Crane Foundation were received to add to the total chicks for the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) project. Nineteen of the chicks were being trained for the WCEP migration project, so the noise of the ultralight running in the fields behind the Propagation Building was almost constant some mornings. Of the 19 chicks, one was lost at 10 days of age due to an *Acanthocephalan* infestation, and another developed scoliosis and was not shipped. But all the others are now in Wisconsin, receiving their flight training in preparation for the migration next fall.

Of the remaining whooping crane chicks, 4 are being parent reared and 6 costume reared for the Florida non-migratory release project. We are also parent rearing two greater sandhill crane chicks as practice for parenting, and have 34 Florida sandhill crane chicks, 19 of these are being hand-reared for a West Nile virus vaccination study to be done in cooperation with the USGS National Wildlife Health Center, in Madison, Wisconsin.

The International Crane Foundation had 8 producing female whooping cranes this year, with 36 eggs laid. Seventeen of the eggs were fertile and 14 chicks were hatched, including one fertile egg sent to Patuxent for inclusion in the WCEP ultralight migration project. Two chicks died and of the remaining 11 chicks at ICF, 8 are destined for the Florida non-migratory release program, 1 is to be kept in captivity, and 2 are yet to be determined.

I wish to thank Dwight Knapik from the Calgary Zoo, Mike Putnam from the International Crane Foundation, and Megan Lauber from ACRES for contributing to this article.

Glenn H. Olsen, Laurel, MD

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Population and nesting ecology of sandhill cranes at Grays Lake, Idaho, 1997–2000

U.S. Geological Survey scientists Joe Ball (Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit), Jane Austin (Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center), and Adonia Henry have completed the report on their four-year study of sandhill cranes at Grays Lake during 1997–2000. The study was funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service–Region 1 to address concerns about the status and breeding success of cranes relative to management activities on Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

The average local population of cranes in late April–early May, 1998–2000, was 735 cranes, 34% higher than that reported for May 1970–1971 ($n = 549$; Drewien 1973) and 63% of the peak estimated population reported for mid-June 1979–1982 ($n = 1,175$; GLNWR Narrative Reports, 1979–1982), during a whooping crane cross-fostering study. Current estimate of nests in the basin core (excluding renests) was 228 ± 30, 16% higher than the 1971 estimate (Drewien 1973). Fall crane numbers peaked during 11–16 September 1998 ($n = 1,210$), 16–20 September 1999 ($n = 1,530$), and 5–8 September 2000 ($n = 1,663$). Estimated local recruitment from mid-August counts averaged 4.7% in 1998, 4.2% in 1999, and 2.3% in 2000. Estimated regional recruitment from September counts averaged 5.4% in 1998, 5.9% in 1999, and 1.4% in 2000. High recruitment during the 1980s, high adult survival, and breeding philopatry likely have helped maintain the local population through a period of low recruitment in the 1990s. Trends in fall populations at Grays Lake appear to be influenced by drought and changes in local and regional agricultural practices. Recruitment likely has been affected by drought and changes in predator communities.

The scientists collected information on >500 nests. Nesting phenology, clutch size, and nest site characteristics are described. Crane nests were most abundant in semi-wet meadow, Baltic rush, and cattail/bulrush habitats. We estimated occurrence of renesting at 5% (1997), 2% (1998), 10% (1999), and 8% (2000). Nest success seems to be influenced by factors related to concealment (vegetation type and height) and predator access (isolation by water) and foraging opportunities (alternative prey), but not to land-use practices. Nest survival examined in 12 experimental units differed among years but did not differ among 4 management practices (idle, fall burning, fall grazing, and a rotation of summer grazing and idle), but differed among years. Apparent nest success of sandhill cranes during 1997–2000 ranged from 72% in 1998 to 51% in 2000, with an overall mean of 60% (41% Mayfield nest success; $n = 519$ nests). These rates are lower than that reported for 1949–1951 (90%; Steel 1952) and 1970–1971 (78%; Drewien

1973). We suspect that substantial changes in the predator community have contributed to declining nest success rates over the past 30 years.

The report also discusses historic changes in the Grays Lake crane population relative to climate, regional and local crop production, and the Rocky Mountain Population. We also discuss factors influencing patterns of nest success within the Grays Lake Valley. Methods developed during this study will be used by refuge staff to continue monitoring spring and fall populations and annual recruitment. For more information about this study and Grays Lake, contact Jane Austin at jane_austin@usgs.gov or visit Northern Prairie's web site: www.npwrc.usgs.gov/grayslk/index.htm.

Citation of the final report: *Ball, I. J., J. E. Austin, and A. R. Henry. 2003. Population and nesting ecology of sandhill cranes at Grays Lake, Idaho, 1997–2000. U.S. Geological Survey, Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, Missoula, MT and Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Jamestown, ND. Final report to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, February 2003.*

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The 2001 report, "*A comprehensive review of observational and site evaluation data for migrant whooping cranes in the United States, 1943-99*" by Jane Austin and Amy Richert is now available on the internet at <http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/2003/wcdata/wcdata.htm>.

The report can be viewed in full online, or downloaded as a PDF file for printing.

The West Coast Crane Working Group has a new web site: <http://www.wccwg.nacwg.org>

Coming Soon! Look for the *new* NACWG web site at <http://www.nacwg.org>

This issue of *The Unison Call* reflects a change in editors. Jane Nicolich served as our newsletter editor for the past seven years, and now I have accepted the charge of following in her footsteps. I want to thank Jane for her kind assistance with the transition. I also wish to thank Tom Hoffmann for his advice, support, and well-organized Excel files. I greatly appreciate the submissions for this issue, and I encourage all NACWG members to email comments, suggestions, and contributions for future issues to sheryl@sigmaxi.org. This is YOUR newsletter and YOU make it happen .

**THANK YOU, JANE, FOR ALL YOUR EFFORTS
IN PUBLISHING A GREAT NEWSLETTER!**



Tom Stehn and Jim Lewis at an Aransas NWR field trip in February, during the combined Whooping Crane Conservation Association annual meeting and Celebration of Whooping Cranes Festival. Photo by Marty Folk

Editor’s Note: The Unison Call is a forum to share updates and opinions. The articles in the “Notes from the Field” section are scientific updates and are not peer reviewed. Reviews and opinions included in any section of the newsletter are those of the author and do not represent the views of the NACWG.

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, photos, and cartoons are very welcome! Please send newsletter items to:

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Deadlines are June 10 and December 10. Please send information as an emailed Microsoft Word attachment whenever possible.

Mission of the North American Crane Working Group:

NACWG is an organization of professional biologists, aviculturists, land managers, and other interested individuals dedicated to the conservation of cranes and their habitats in North America.

NACWG:

- Sponsors a North American Crane Workshop every 3-4 years
- Promulgates technical information including a published Proceedings of a North American Workshop and a semi-annual newsletter
- Addresses conservation issues affecting cranes and their habitats
- Promotes appropriate research on crane conservation and management
- Promotes a better understanding and appreciation of cranes and their habitats among the general public

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