

THE UNISON CALL

A Newsletter of the North American
Crane Working Group

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

CRANE WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS AVAILABLE

The Proceedings of the Seventh North American Crane Workshop, held 10-13 January 1996 on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, are being printed and will be available in late July or early August 1997 from International Crane Foundation, P.O. Box 447, E-11376 Shady Lane Road, Baraboo, WI 53913-0447. The 262-page illustrated book contains 34 of the presented papers and abstracts of 3 others. Cost is \$25 per copy postpaid. Wisconsin residents add 5.5% sales tax.

Richard Urbanek

REGIONAL REPORTS

FLORIDA

This year (1996/97) 28 whooping cranes were released in Florida. This brings the number of birds released since releases began in 1993 to 128. We have recorded 9 mortalities among this year 5 release group, though none since early April. Most of the mortalities were due to predation, but one bird was hit by a vehicle, perhaps after collision with a power line. Another bird was killed by an alligator, and two other disappeared with no sign, or radio signal, and we are assuming they are dead. One of the older birds (1995/96 release) was killed by a bobcat in January.

There are currently 65 whooping cranes in Florida. Among this group there are 4 or 5 pairs developing. They are territorial to both whoopers and sandhills. They are unison calling and some have been observed copulating. One pair this year, as they did in 1996, built multiple nests but did not lay eggs. The good news is that as these birds are aging they are doing all the right things.

The movements of 65 cranes are harder for our staff to keep up with than when we had 16 to check. Most are staying within 50 miles of their respective release sites. But, 4 birds came north in February and have remained since in the same area about 50 miles northwest of Gainesville, +200 mile from their release location. We expect they will eventually return to their release area, as all the other dispersing birds have.

We have a new biologist on the team. Kathy Sullivan began in January; prior to coming to Florida she had been at the Mississippi Sandhill Crane Refuge with Scott Hereford. We feel very lucky to have her and all her experience with us now. Thanks to Scott and all the folks at Mississippi Crane Refuge for giving her such a good background in crane biology. I hope we can return the favor someday.

Steve Nesbitt, Gainesville, FL

MISSISSIPPI

CHEERS for the Mississippi! A record nesting season is in the works. A record 18 nesting pairs have laid 34 eggs. Other 33 year highs include 20 total nests, 12 successful nests, 16 hatched chicks, and 4 nests with both eggs hatched. All but one of the pairs had at least one captive reared parent. There are 4 new territories and 8 new pairs. Two "old" territories were active for the first time in 14 and 29 years. For the first time, a (re)nest was found inside a release pen (Gautier). We'll keep our fingers crossed for fledging success. One viable egg was taken to the Audubon Species Survival Center to augment genetic representation in the captive flock. Thanks to our Savanna Striders: Patuxent contract tech Tracy Grazia and SCA Resource Assistant Ute Bradter for an outstanding effort.

The Jackson, MS, Ecological Office is providing funds again this year for important refuge savanna restoration. A record 1,500 acres of growing season prescribed burns have been completed so far. A contract to open up 200 total acres in 2 potential nest savannas with handclearing is being finalized.

Three captive-reared cranes were released at the Fontainebleau Pen in January. They have continued to stay within a mile of the pen since. Work to rehab 1-2 release pens is expected this summer.

We said goodbye to Kathy Sullivan (contract Biotech through Patuxent) after 2+ years at the refuge. She did an absolutely superior job monitoring the cranes, accumulating record numbers of crane observations and target crane captures. We'll miss her but wish her well at her new position in Florida with the Whoopers. Job well done, Kathy.

Our sincere thanks to long-time refuge technician Tom Harper who surprised us all with an early July retirement. Over 16 years, Tom has helped with crane releases, radio-telemetry, nest monitoring, law enforcement, farming, predator control, and other chores. He's also helped "train" many new employees, particularly us yankees. Tom and his

family will remain very active in nearby Vancleave. Good luck to you Tom in your retirement and new life. We thank you.

Scott Hereford, Gautier, MS

CANADA

Water levels on the whooping crane breeding grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park are the highest ever seen by Brian Johns, CWS. The CWS (Brian Johns) found a record-tying 49 nesting pairs. In addition there are 2 pairs of banded cranes that have bred in previous years that had changed territories last year and have yet to be rediscovered, so there are likely 51 nesting pairs this year, a new record. No egg collection took place in 1997, so the opportunity remained for all pairs with 2 eggs to hatch and raise 2 chicks. A total of 56 chicks have been seen by Johns this season and at least 16 pairs hatched 2 eggs. The CWS, with assistance from the USFWS (Tom Stehn and Jim Bredy) conducted summer range surveys and as of June 21, 8 pairs still had twins.

Brian Johns, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

TEXAS

The 1996-97 winter was a good one for the whooping cranes with adequate food resources. A red tide outbreak that started in September killed many fish but was over by the end of October. Blue crabs were abundant in the fall but became harder to find in mid-winter. However, blue crabs continued to be taken and were the mainstay of the cranes diet throughout the winter. Wolfberries were fed on heavily in the fall. Some acorns were available on prescribed burns which received moderate use. Only limited foraging on clams in open bay habitat was observed.

Shrimp (probably mud shrimp) were detected in DNA analysis of fecal material. Salinities were very high throughout most of the winter so that the cranes made daily flights to freshwater sources to drink until heavy rains in March dramatically lowered salinities.

Adult cranes and potential pairs occupied 52 territories and/or use areas at Aransas. Forty-two cranes were color-marked (3 less than last winter), representing 26.3% of the population. Interesting observations included a refuge pair that after a year of trial separation were back together, a single female with a chick that re-paired within 6 days after arrival at Aransas, and two single adults that showed no evidence of pair bonding throughout the winter.

Some whooping cranes normally start the spring migration by the end of March. This spring, all the cranes were apparently still at Aransas on April 3. One family group departed April 6. Then on April 9-10, an estimated 103 whoopers headed north, a very large number all to have left within a short period of time. Many cranes were sighted in Kansas and Nebraska April 15-17, right on schedule roughly one week after leaving

Aransas. One adult pair left Aransas April 10 leaving their juvenile behind on their winter territory. This youngster was last observed at Aransas on April 24. A census flight on May 6 indicated that all the cranes had headed north.

It is believed that one subadult and one juvenile whooper confirmed present in different locations on Nebraska's Platte River in mid-March did NOT winter at Aransas and were added to the total flock size of 144 adults + 16 young = 160 in spring, 1997. The subadult may have wintered in West Texas south of Lubbock, whereas the juvenile wintered in an unknown location. The 160 cranes is probably the peak population this century and was an increase of 2 over the peak of 158 during the 1995-96 winter.

An estimated 157 whooping cranes were present at Aransas in the spring of 1996. With the addition of 16 young that survived the winter, the flock could have reached a maximum of 173 whoopers. The peak population of 160 thus represents a loss of 13 cranes (8.3% of the spring, 1996 population). Both members of one long-standing pair failed to arrive in the fall on their Matagorda territory. Two adults each arrived without their mates. This above average mortality held the whoopers to a net gain of only 2 birds in 1996.

Tom Stehn, Aransas, TX

GREAT LAKES

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public input on a proposal to establish a new national wildlife refuge along the Kankakee River in northwestern Indiana and northeastern Illinois. The proposed Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge would be about 30,000 acres of restored tracts associated with the historic Grand Kankakee Marsh, which covered up to a million acres before the turn of the century and was a breeding and migration stopover area for sandhill cranes and probably whooping cranes. Jasper-Pulaski State Fish and Wildlife Area (Indiana), in the vicinity, is the major migration stopover area for the current Great Lakes Population of greater sandhill cranes.

Richard P. Urbanek, Seney, MI

CAPTIVE FLOCKS

Captive whooping crane flocks are located at the Calgary Zoo, in Alberta, the International Crane Foundation (ICF) in Baraboo, Wisconsin, and the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. The Calgary Zoo is the newest facility to breed whooping cranes. There were a total of 12 eggs laid at Calgary, 8 were infertile, 3 were broken by a new pair laying eggs for the first time, and 1 fertile egg hatched but the chick died 2 days later. ICF had a total of 8 whooping crane eggs hatch, 6 chicks are being isolation reared and 2 are being parent reared. In addition, 3 eggs were sent to Patuxent to support an ultralight aircraft migration study being conducted by Kent Clegg in Idaho. Of the 3 eggs, 1 was a late dead embryo, and 2 hatched. One is now out in Idaho training with 6 whooping crane chicks from Patuxent. All the chicks for this project were raised

by Kent Clegg at Patuxent, with the help of the Patuxent staff, until the chicks were 2 weeks old to assure healthy birds for the project. Then they were flown to Kent's ranch in Idaho.

At Patuxent, 8 producing whooping crane pairs laid a total of 55 eggs and 29 chicks hatched. In addition to the 6 whooping cranes from Patuxent in Idaho, there are 18 birds at Patuxent, 13 being costume reared and 5 being parent reared. There have been 5 deaths, 2 from omphalitis, 2 from bacterial enteritis, and 1 from complications following a femur fracture. Also, 1 of the ICF birds that hatched at Patuxent died from enteritis.

In addition to the whooping cranes being raised at ICF, there are 3 hand-reared and 1 cross fostered hooded cranes (cross fostered with Eurasian crane parents). ICF also has 3 black-necked cranes being cross fostered by red crowned cranes, and they are hoping for some brolga chicks. At Patuxent there are 25 greater sandhill cranes being reared for ultralight migration work with Bill Lishman and Joe Duff of *Fly Away Home* fame. These birds will eventually be transported to Ontario where they will follow ultralight aircraft in a migration flight to Virginia this fall. Other cranes being raised at Patuxent include 16 Florida sandhill cranes for an eastern equine encephalitis study in conjunction with the U.S. Army at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland, and 21 Florida sandhill cranes for a coccidia vaccination study.

In other news, the Audubon Institute in New Orleans, Louisiana, has hatched 17 Mississippi sandhill cranes and is currently raising 15 chicks, 2 having died from yolk sac infections. One fertile egg was brought in from the wild and 2 were transferred from the White Oak Conservation Center in Florida. These birds will eventually be released on the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge. I wish to thank Dr. Susan Mikota, Allan Shoults, Jane Nicolich, and Dr. Julie Langenberg for the information used in preparing this report.

Glenn Olsen, Laurel, MD

CHANGES IN SANDHILL CRANE NUMBERS AT GRAYS LAKE, IDAHO

Rod C. Drewien, Hornocker Wildlife Institute, University of Idaho, P.O. Box 3246, Moscow, ID 83843

During the 1970's-80's, Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge and adjacent private lands supported the highest known sandhill crane nesting density in North America. During this period, September counts also revealed that Grays Lake was the second most important fall staging area in the Rocky Mountains. From 1975 to 1989, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) at Grays Lake NWR implemented specific crane management activities because of the whooping crane foster-parent experiment. Cornerstones of the crane management program were: 1) strategically planned grazing, haying and lure crops, 2) minimal human disturbance, and 3) a predator control program for canids. Cranes responded positively to these actions and during the 1980's the number of nesting pairs exceeded 300 and the September population averaged nearly 3,000 (Fig. 1).

During the 1990's, with termination of the whooping crane experiment, refuge activities shifted away from crane management and the cornerstone programs were either modified or terminated. The local crane population has responded adversely to these changes. Compared to the 1980's, the 1995-96 September population levels have declined 75%, and over 50% of the breeding pairs have abandoned their territories and left the valley. Hopefully, FWS will reinstate some of the successful management programs of former years so Grays Lake will again attain its status as one of the premier crane habitats of North America.

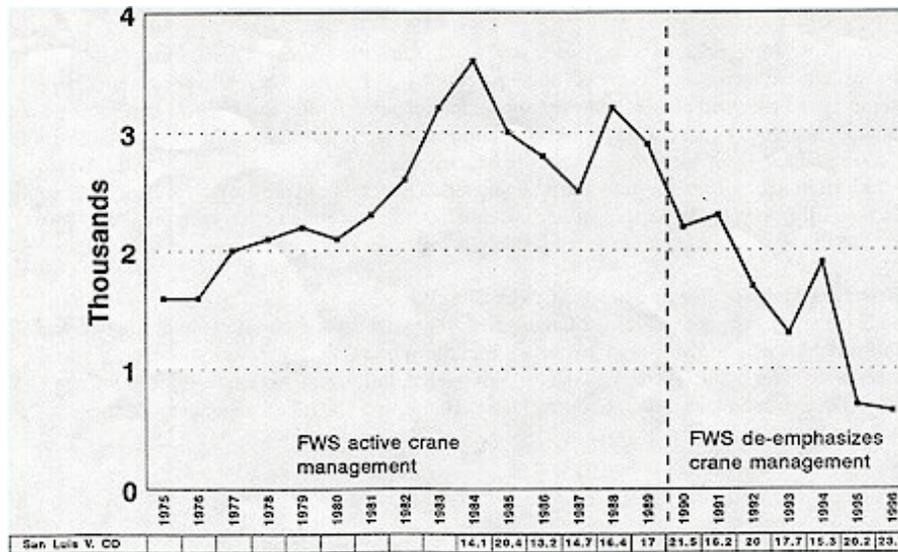


Figure 1. Fall crane populations, Grays Lake, Idaho, 1975-96.

CRANE FOOD SUPPLIES DIMINISHING IN SAN LUIS VALLEY

Wendy Brown

I would like members to be aware of an important issue regarding diminishing food supplies for the Rocky Mountain population of greater sandhill cranes. The San Luis Valley (SLY) in southern Colorado is a critical spring migration stop for over 95% of the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) of greater sandhill cranes, and they require food resources to continue migration and to build nutrient reserves for the breeding season.

Cranes in the SLY depend upon grain left in the fields after the fall harvest of crops, primarily barley, cultivated on private farmlands and supplemented by crops planted on the Alamosa and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges. In recent years, many private farmers have been converting to fall cultivation, resulting in less waste grain available for migrating sandhill cranes and waterfowl, especially in spring. Accordingly, more cranes and geese are concentrating on the Monte Vista Refuge. Additional feed has been secured through the Partners for Wildlife Winter Program, which paid landowners to leave stubble standing until spring. However this program is being phased out because its primary purpose of providing winter habitat for waterfowl is no longer needed.

Furthermore, fewer landowners are willing to participate in the program by leaving their fields uncultivated until spring.

It appears that the spring feed situation in the SLV will worsen and adversely affect RMP cranes unless immediate action is taken. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should be encouraged to continue to secure funding through the Partners for Wildlife program to provide necessary feed for migratory cranes in the short term. In addition, the Service should determine what the actual needs and availability of grain are for cranes and other spring migratory birds in the SLY, and design and implement a program to meet these needs in the long term.

The Service also plans to disband its annual spring survey of RMP cranes in the SLY in favor of fall staging area surveys in the northern Rocky Mountain states. It is unfortunate that this survey, which provides not only a population size and composition estimate, but also information about distribution of RMP cranes in the SLY, is being discontinued at a time when it appears that such information could be extremely valuable in assessing the extent of and possible solutions to food shortages for this population.

The NACWG Board of Directors sent a letter to Ralph Morgenweck, Director of Region 6 of the FWS, last March expressing our concern about this issue. Interested members can help by sending their own letters to:

Mr. Ralph Morgenweck, Regional Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 25486
Denver Federal Building
Denver, Colorado 80225

with cc to: Skip Ladd, Assistant Director for Refuges and Wildlife
John Cornely, Regional Migratory Bird Coordinator

CRANE RESEARCH

WESTERN ULTRALIGHT PROJECT

Six of the 1996 sandhill cranes and 3 of the 1995 ultralight birds initiated spring migration from New Mexico in February. They staged in Colorado and in March moved into summering sites in southeastern Idaho and western Wyoming. The status of the other two 1996 cranes is unknown. Personnel at Bosque del Apache NWR and the Alamosa/Monte Vista NWR monitored the birds during winter and spring migration, respectively. Crane 107 had a leg hanging in flight and was hauled in a truck most of the distance in the fall migration. It migrated as far north as Gunnison, Colorado, where it was sighted alone. In June it worked its way southward and was seen near Taos, New Mexico, and later near Albuquerque. We presume it was unable to keep up with the other migrants and was left behind. It seems to be retracing its path to the Bosque del Apache NWR wintering site.

In May 1997, eight viable whooping crane eggs were made available to the project. One was malpositioned and failed to hatch. With the excellent assistance from the staff at Patuxent, the birds were reared the first few weeks in the former masked bobwhite building. Another chick being isolation-reared was added to the group prior to shipment to the Clegg Ranch in Idaho. The Kohlers provided their aircraft for the shipment. The chick that was initially isolation-reared died about 36 hours after shipment. Two chicks died the same day at Patuxent, all three of a similar bacterial infection. The remaining seven whoopers are now following the taxiing aircraft. Eleven sandhill crane chicks, from eggs collected at Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge, are being reared separately from the whoopers. In the fall, the two species will be migrated together. We hope that the association with the sandhills will increase the likelihood of association between the young whoopers and wild sandhills and thereby accelerate the whoopers' adjustment to the wild on the wintering site.

Jim Lewis

OPERATION MIGRATION 1997-98 SANDHILL CRANE PROJECT

Members of the Crane Crew at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center are working hard to prepare sandhill cranes for shipment to Canada. Above and beyond their normal work load they still seem to have the energy to give a little extra when it comes to our ultralight birds. Daily exercise with the aircraft sounds like fun but takes much more time than you expect and soon becomes tedious, particularly when you are costumed.

Back in Canada negotiations are underway to recruit the assistance of the Canadian Armed Forces Air Command to transport birds. If possible, the short trip would be scheduled as a training mission. Ten sandhill chicks in shipping boxes in the back of a C130 Hercules hardly qualifies as a heavy lift, but maybe we can change the protocol and get them to fly their migration inside the aircraft.

Leading a flock of birds across Lake Ontario and over the mountains of Pennsylvania in an aircraft that weighs the same as the pilot is proving easier than convincing the *powers that be* that it should be done. Most agencies, however, agree with the research in principle and have been cooperative. Still outstanding is the approval of the Atlantic Flyway Council but they have promised to discuss it at their meeting in July.

I am certain everyone is looking forward to the day the birds are shipped north. The gang at Patuxent will finally be rid of the pesky Canadians and we get a chance to again fly with the birds.

Joe Duff, Operation Migration, Blackstock, Ontario

Doug Bergeson from Wood Buffalo National Park began a feeding ecology study of the nesting cranes as a part of the requirements for a Ph.D. from the University of Alberta.

Ann Burke is continuing her research into habitat use and breeding biology of sandhill cranes in the Yorkton region of Saskatchewan as part of the requirements for a M.S. from the University of Wisconsin.

Brian Johns