

WHOOPING CRANE RECOVERY ACTIVITIES

MARCH - AUGUST 1999

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1998-99 WINTER - ARANSAS

Whooping Crane Coordinator Tom Stehn wrote up his winter findings in a report entitled "Whooping Cranes During the 1998-99 Winter". The following is from the report;

ABSTRACT - The number and distribution of whooping cranes on the wintering grounds were studied during the 1998-99 winter. The peak population equalled 165 white-plumaged birds and 18 juveniles totalling 183 cranes. The flock consisted of 102 adults, 63 subadults, and 18 juveniles. One subadult wintered with sandhills and apparently never made it to Aransas. The 183 cranes is probably the peak population this century and was an increase of one over the peak of 182 during the 1997-98 winter.

An estimated 181 whooping cranes were present at Aransas in the spring of 1998. With the addition of 18 young that arrived at Aransas, the flock could have reached a maximum of 199 whoopers. The peak population of 183 thus represents a loss of 16 cranes (8.8% of the spring, 1998 population of 181). High mortality is believed to have occurred in the fall, 1998 migration. Adult female o/w-BWsp (1986) had a broken leg and was last observed at Quivira NWR in Kansas on December 29. Another notable sighting in the fall migration was one bird photographed just north of Chicago following a strong wind storm.

No mortality was documented during the 1998-99 winter. Adult cranes and/or potential pairs occupied 51 territories and/or use areas, two more than last winter. Thirty-seven cranes were color marked (2 less than last winter), representing 20.2% of the population. Cranes generally were found on the refuge (67), Lamar (5), San Jose Island (38), Matagorda Island (51), Welder Flats (21), and one bird wintered north of the refuge near Brazos Bend, Texas. Territories and/or use areas were located on the Refuge (20), Lamar (2), San Jose (9), Matagorda (14), and Welder (6). Record highs for the 1998-99 winter were documented on San Jose (38) and Matagorda Island (57).

Food resources were considered excellent. Blue crabs were very abundant in the fall, and remained available in lesser quantities throughout the winter. Little use of clams in open bay habitat was observed. Wolfberries were not as abundant as last winter but were still available for the cranes in November through January. Acorns were available on prescribed burns which received only moderate use. Salinities were low throughout the winter so that crane use of freshwater sources was rarely observed.

After 35 years of government service, Aransas Refuge Manager Brent Giezentanner retired at the end of December and moved to Colorado. Mr Charles Holbrook from Crab Orchard NWR was hired as the new project leader at Aransas and will start in September,

1999. Refuge clerk Sue Forbis retired in March, so I am short on assistance until the position is filled.

TAMU graduate student Cinda Bonds continued her work using GIS techniques to analyze habitat in whooping crane territories.

National Public Radio aired a story on bird mortality at communication towers on the "Living on Earth" program in December. There are over 40,000 towers in the lower 48 states that could cause bird mortality. The number seems to be growing at about 10% annually which is a long-term threat for whooping cranes. Two new towers have been constructed just west of the refuge near the town of Holiday Beach.

SPRING MIGRATION - 1999

Whooping crane departures from Aransas were documented on weekly aerial census flights.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Estimated Present</u>
March 25	147 + 17 = 164
April 2	124 + 16 = 140
April 8	48 + 8 = 56
April 15	36 + 5 = 41
April 21	0

In general, the spring 1999 migration was about one week ahead of average. One whooping crane was an early arrival on the Platte River, present March 4 near Gibbon. This may have been the whooper that wintered in Texas north of Aransas. To add excitement to birding the Platte, a common crane was also present in early March. Two whooping cranes were reported in North Dakota on April 1. This may have been the Lobstick pair that departed Aransas around March 21. The peak of the migration in the U.S. appeared to be between April 2 and 15 (Jobman, Cooperative Whooping Crane Tracking Project, Spring, 1999).

The most notable aspect of the spring whooping crane migration was the presence of nine cranes in southwest Iowa April 9-12. They were apparently blown from the usual mid-Nebraska migration corridor by a strong low pressure system that moved east and caused devastating tornados in Ohio. Six cranes were monitored near DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge near the Iowa/Nebraska border. They feasted on frogs in a small drainage ditch. A family group was present near Essex, just northeast of Shenendoah, Iowa. The extended snow goose season was underway in Iowa at the time of the whooper sightings, but no snow geese were near the Desoto whoopers.

SUMMER 1999 - ARANSAS

In issues related to the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contract for placement of mats for erosion control will be completed this summer. It has taken several years, but all whooping crane habitat will soon be fully protected by these structures. My congratulations go to the Corps for their efforts to get this done. Oil spill booms are also being purchased and stored at the refuge for placement by first responders. The Section 216 project is scheduled to be completed next summer with the placement of structures in Sundown Bay to improve the quality of habitat.

Edison Electric Institute's Avian Powerline Interaction Committee (APLIC) received national awards in the spring from the Department of the Interior. APLIC was formed in 1988 after collisions resulted in the deaths of several whooping cranes, sandhill cranes and other birds in the San Luis Valley, Colorado. To solve the problem, the group funded a 3-year study and tested color markers designed to make lines more visible to birds. The markers reduced collision rates by 40%.

Victoria Electric Coop was contacted and asked to mark a powerline that dissects whooping crane territories at Welder Flats. My thanks go to Wendy Brown for her expert advice concerning project design. In August, the old line was taken down and replaced with a new, more visible line.

I met with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department on June 23 to discuss their proposed changes for hunting sandhill cranes. Much consideration was given to protection of the whooping crane. It was decided not to open the sandhill season two weeks earlier since this is when whooping cranes are migrating through Texas. Participants agreed to ask the Flyway Council to open the coastal counties to hunting sandhills, except for an area surrounding the winter range of the whoopers.

Application was made for a CITES whooping crane programmatic import permit for live birds and salvaged materials. Although an annual application will still be required, simpler public notice procedures can be followed so that future import permits can be issued within 30 days instead of the current 90 days.

At Aransas, Conoco has agreed to provide PenzEnergy data from their previous 3D seismic shoot, so hopefully the seismic work will not have to be done a second time. Conoco drilled one new well from an existing pad in the 1999 summer, but came up dry. They have plans to drill three additional wells in 2000, with all wells located on upland sites.

Ten refuge prescribed burns totalling nearly 11,000 acres were conducted in July and August. Five units were whooping crane use areas where the brush had become too thick and needed an intense "summer" burn to carry through the thicketized live oak shrubs and restore coastal savannah habitat. A helicopter was used to ignite the units, and a crew of 30 fire fighters and seven engines were assembled to control the fires. We received much publicity for the whooping crane and refuge burn program.

WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

Canadian Whooping Crane Coordinator Brian Johns located 45 nests in May. Eight were later abandoned. Five pairs failed to nest. Habitat was initially on the dry side, but June rains helped conditions. Cold weather hit the week the eggs were hatching and was believed to contribute to mortality. The USFWS-Region 2 aircraft piloted by Jim Bredy and I assisted Brian with production surveys June 10-14. We documented three more nests. Nest 48 was located 14 miles north of the other nesting pairs in the Nyarling, and is actually outside the Park. Chicks totalled 48 with 10 sets of twins. By June 14th, only 35 chicks remained, including one set of twins. Subsequent surveys indicated that no twin families had survived.

One chick radioed by Park Ranger Doug Bergeson was abandoned by its parents and picked up June 4 by Brian and Doug due to chilling rain wetting the chick. The chick was shipped to Calgary, where it later died after not eating well. Doug also observed one other chick from a twin family being abandoned by the parents and a raven quickly moved in and took the chick. Parental behavior apparently must be exemplary if twin chicks are to survive. Surveys conducted August 19-21 by Brian Johns indicated that only 16 chicks had survived. Habitat conditions were poor, and water levels low. We will have to have above average survival of adults/subadults in order to maintain the flock size at 183.

Check out a new Canadian whooping crane home page on the internet:

http://www.mb.ec.gc.ca/ENGLISH/LIFE/ENDSPECIES/Whooping/index_e.html.

It features information on crane surveys in Wood Buffalo NP, migration updates, and general whooping crane information. It was put together by the Resource Conservation Division, Environment Canada - Prairie and Northern Region.

SPECIMENS

Five specimens were shipped by the International Crane Foundation to the University of Kansas on April 12. In August, contacts were made with eight more universities/museums and arrangements made to distribute additional whooping crane specimens.

INTRODUCED FLOCKS

FLORIDA

For the first time, egg production was documented from the Florida whooping cranes. A national news release was sent out. On April 9, a nest with two eggs was located. Incubation, turning of the eggs, and unison calling was observed. Both adults had been raised at Patuxent in 1995. On April 18, the nest was abandoned with egg fragments found on the nest. Predation was suspected, possibly by feral hogs. The nest had become

vulnerable due to dropping water levels in the worsening drought. The marsh was large and had deep water, but the nest had been built towards the edge of this marsh complex. On April 23, a second whooping crane nest with birds incubating one egg was found. The adults were raised in 1994 and 1995, both at Patuxent. On April 29, the nest was found abandoned following a 2-3 inch rain. The nest may have been flooded. One egg was picked up and taken to Sea World for incubation, but did not hatch. The egg shell, plus the shell fragments from the first nest, will be deposited at the Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

June rains ended the drought and helped water levels. Several birds were lost from alligators and bobcats, with 70 whoopers surviving in Florida at the end of July. The sex ratio is skewed, with more females (38) than males (32). There was evidence of 14 birds going flightless during molt of remiges, but no mortality occurred. Extensive dispersals were documented; 38 birds traveled a mean of 77 km each and one bird traveled 292 km (S. Nesbitt, 3rd Quarter Progress Report, 1999).

ROCKY MOUNTAINS

The Rocky Mountain whooping crane project has been unable to win support to continue reintroductions from key players, including western state wildlife departments and flyway councils. In late February, proponents met with the USFWS Regional Director in Albuquerque, but she would not endorse continuing the project. Frustrated with lack of support from the USFWS for the western whooping crane project and the direction of the Recovery Team, Mr. Bill Huey resigned from the Team in July. Our thanks go to Mr. Huey for the excellent contributions he made to the Team dating back to 1991.

In the spring, Kent Clegg proposed to capture the two ultralight whooping cranes to replace their non-functional radios and then transport the birds to Bechler Meadows in Yellowstone National Park. Due to Wyoming not wanting whoopers transported to Yellowstone, preferring their movements be studied without interference, no capture attempt was made. Data on movements came solely from observer reports.

The two ultralight whoopers started the spring migration together, departing Bosque del Apache NWR on March 12. They were next sighted on April 11 near Heber City, Utah. This was on the route they were flown behind the ultralight in fall, 1997. Whooper UL 56 was next sighted in Arbon Valley, Idaho on May 16, and just west of Grays Lake NWR on June 2 where it spent the summer. The second ultralight whooping crane has not been seen since its April 11 location.

OPERATION MIGRATION (OM)

Eleven sandhill cranes trucked south from Ontario in the fall of 1998 wintered successfully at the Tom Yawkey Center in South Carolina. In March, the release pen and supplemental feeders were removed, and the birds were completely on their own. When the cranes were approached by talking caretakers NOT in costume, they flew off. This was an encouraging display of human avoidance.

The birds roamed extensively, but avoided human contact. In mid-June, the birds were moving between Tom Yawkey and Cedar Island NWR in North Carolina, 225 miles away, and about 50-75 miles east of where the birds had been flown the final leg of their journey after being trucked from Canada. To learn more about the effect of trucking, seven birds were captured and taken to New York northeast of Buffalo in August to see if they will migrate back to Tom Yawkey in the fall. The birds quickly moved south 90 miles closer to the Pennsylvania border, and in mid-August were in the Never Sink River District 80 miles NW of New York City. They are continuing to avoid humans. Five birds were left in North Carolina. All these trucked sandhills are avoiding humans, the primary goal of this experiment.

In support of OM, Officer Alistair Wilson of the British Military organized an ultralight flight from Florida to Alaska in a joint planning project with the U.S. and Canadian Military. He plotted the route on GPS, videoed landing spots, and made contacts. In August, OM set up an information booth at the Oshkosh, WI air show in an effort to raise funds and make contacts for the eastern reintroduction project.

WISCONSIN

On March 5, a planning meeting of partners for the proposed eastern whooping crane reintroduction was held in Madison, Wisconsin. Participants agreed that three release sites would be evaluated (Crex Meadows, Necedah, and Horicon). Public meetings were held May 18-20 at these three sites. Dr. John Cannon made presentations at the meetings and received input. Issues raised included impacts of a whooper reintroduction on hunting programs, "take" of a whooper designated as experimental/nonessential, and crop depredation by cranes. Dr. Cannon continued his assessment of these sites throughout the summer and will present results to the Recovery Team in September. Dr. Richard Urbanek organized field sampling at the three sites to assess crane food resources and other habitat measures. An outline 10-year plan for an eastern migratory reintroduction was completed in August. A letter was sent to eastern Flyway States updating them on the proposed reintroduction.

WHOOPING CRANE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

At the WCCA meetings in Wilcox, AZ in mid-January, Mr. Bill Huey received a certificate of appreciation for his significant contributions to the conservation and management of natural resources around the world. It was in recognition for years of service as representative to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The certificate from Office of International Affairs, USFWS, was presented by Geoffrey Hasket, Deputy Regional Director, USFWS, Region 2.

Dr. Jim Lewis was elected to a 5-year term on the Board of Trustees starting in the year 2000. Dale Hjertaas of Regina, Saskatchewan has been appointed to the Board of Trustees.

CAPTIVE FLOCKS

The captive whooping crane program had good production in 1999, and raised 33 birds for expected release in Florida in the winter of 1999-2000. Reports from the breeding centers will be presented at the September Captive Management Team meetings.

CALGARY

The Calgary whooping cranes laid 12 eggs from two pairs. Two eggs were lost just before hatching, and others experienced weight loss. Two chicks were raised to fledging.

INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION (ICF)

ICF whoopers laid 20 eggs from 4 pairs, one which produced eggs for the first time. Seven chicks are being reared for release in Florida. On March 15, adult 10-year-old female "Mousse" was killed by her mate. The pair had been together two years with no signs of aggression. This female, foster reared at Patuxent, had never produced young.

In a ceremony to honor service employees and volunteers March 4, 1999 in Washington, DC, the Department of the Interior presented a Conservation Service Award to Terry and Mary Kohler of Windway Corporation for the use of their private aircraft to transport eggs from Wood Buffalo National Park, juveniles from the captive breeding centers to Florida, and trumpeter swans across the continent. The Kohlers are dear friends of the cranes and have provided funding for numerous projects.

SAN ANTONIO

Two chicks were raised, one each from the two breeding pairs. This is the first production of whooping cranes at San Antonio in 20 years (many years breeding pairs were not present) and caused much excitement at the zoo. The two juveniles will be transported to Patuxent in the fall where they will be socialized into a cohort with other juveniles for release this winter in Florida. Plans were drawn to improve the whooping crane exhibit, including enlarging the pens.

PATUXENT

Patuxent whoopers laid 52 eggs from 8 pairs, 29 hatched, and 26 fledged. Plans are underway for forming cohorts and also having up to five birds for 1 x 1 releases. One subadult died.

In collaboration with graduate student Ken Jones, Patuxent continued research on artificial insemination in sandhills to determine the best time for AI.

A review of the crane program at Patuxent was held March 17-19. Recovery Team member Dr. George Archibald was on the 7-member review team. Whooping crane coordinators Brian Johns and Tom Stehn attended. A draft report was reviewed in mid-

June, and a final report hopefully will be completed in September. The review focused on strengthening Patuxent's crane research program.

WHOOPING CRANE MEETINGS

Meetings of the Whooping Crane Captive Management Team (September 19-20) and Whooping Crane Recovery Team (Sept. 21-23) will be held in Baraboo, WI. Anyone interested in attending the meetings should contact Tom Stehn.

WHOOPING CRANE NUMBERS, August 25, 1999.

Wild Populations	Adult	Young	Total	
Aransas/Wood Buffalo NP*	183	16	199	
Rocky Mountains	4	0	4	
Florida	70	0	70	
Subtotal in the Wild	257	16	273	

Captive Populations	Adults	Young	Breeding Pairs	Total
Patuxent WRC, Maryland	44	26	10	70
International Crane Foundation, Wis.	29	7	6	36
Calgary Zoo	21	2	2	23
San Antonio Zoological Gardens	4	2	2	6
White Oak Conservation Center, Fla.	1	0	0	1
Lowery Park Zoo, Tampa, Fla.	1	0	0	1
Audubon Institute, New Orleans	2	0	0	2
Subtotal in Captivity	102	37	20	139

TOTALS (Wild + Captive) = 412

* NOTE - Numbers in the Aransas/Wood Buffalo flock and total numbers are inflated since they do not account for adult mortality during the spring and summer, 1999, or ongoing loss of chicks in Wood Buffalo National Park. The flock is expected to number approximately 183 in the 1999-2000 winter.