

THE UNISON CALL

- Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

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Editor's Note — March 2016

This issue of the newsletter is longer than usual, packed with crane news, both good and bad. Thanks to all those who contributed articles, information, and suggestions (Gay Gomez). The dates for the next North American Crane Workshop are now set, and excitement will build toward Chattanooga as January 2017 nears. I received no submissions concerning the recent decision to discontinue the ultralight-led migration program, so here is my own commentary on that topic:

I was saddened and disappointed by the USFWS decision to end the program of ultralight-led migration of young Whooping Cranes from Wisconsin to Florida after 15 years of toil. This crane reintroduction project, audacious from the get-go, has been a resounding success – there exists now an Eastern Migratory Population of about 100 whoopers east of the Mississippi where none had been for perhaps two hundred years or more. This achievement is not only unprecedented in species conservation practice, it is also leading-edge avian science [e.g., Mueller et al. (2013) *Science* 341:999-1002].

The primary reason cited by USFWS for stopping the ultralight program is the low recruitment rate (so far) for the flock. Each spring on the Wisconsin landscape, paired birds are nesting and laying fertile eggs but only a few chicks are surviving to fledge and migrate with their parents. Enter the 'bad parenting' hypothesis: the poor reproductive performance of the EMP is being blamed on the nesters' lack of

good parenting skills, which in turn is suggested to be a consequence of the ultralight-led youngsters not having learned in their formative months some critical life lessons that can be gained only from adult cranes, or having had too much interaction with their costumed human handlers, abating some 'wildness' factor, I suppose. Or maybe the early socialization experienced by the young birds is detrimental? The speculation could go on and on.

But Whooping Cranes as a species are underperformers as breeders (obviously), and in Wisconsin they endure suboptimal breeding habitat, including sometimes heavy blackfly infestations and too-easy access by predators (at least in the Necedah region they do). The birds of the EMP will eventually figure out how to repopulate, and second-generation (i.e., wild-hatched) breeders, especially, will eventually make the EMP self-sustaining. In the mean time, the updated EMP recovery plan calls for fall releases in Wisconsin of juveniles raised by captive parents (i.e., "parent-reared", PR), with the hope that these young birds, now removed from their parents (orphans, in a sense), will follow adult crane strangers that already know the migration route.

What may be the fate of an unguided young crane? Well, here's one recent example. The PR juvenile #20-15 was released in Wisconsin last September (2015) and ended up a short time later in Dubuque, Iowa, frequenting a heavy-traffic area of the city. The locals named him "Kevin", and he was a bit of celebrity in town. After several weeks, ICF staff captured the bird, re-

Save the date! The 14th North American Crane Workshop will be January 11-15, 2017 in Chattanooga, TN.

See page 2

turned him to Wisconsin and released him again, only to have him end up in southern Louisiana, still alone. (See the reports on pages 16 and 17 for more on the wayward bird 20-15.)

I fear USFWS may have pulled the plug too early on the ultralight-led mission which ensures newly introduced young whoopers will learn where to migrate to and be relatively safe while doing so. Although the entire project is overseen by the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership composed of many dedicated cooperators, the linchpin of this reintroduction effort is Operation Migration. The expert knowledge of Joe Duff, Brooke Pennypacker and their colleagues at Operation Migration is unique and irreplaceable, and probably the team could not be easily reconstituted once dismantled. It is this highly inventive and resourceful organization that actually teaches the young cranes a safe migration route to fly.

Can anyone assure that the EMP has now reached a critical mass of mature, migration route-savvy cranes? As insurance, why not give the ultralight mission five more years? I'm sure there is strong public support. — Daryl Henderson

This commentary is my own opinion and does not necessarily reflect the views of NACWG or other board members. I have no connection to Operation Migration other than as a 'Milemaker' supporter for several years.

Announcements

14th North American Crane Workshop

Save the date! The 14th North American Crane Workshop will be January 11-15, 2017 in Chattanooga, TN! Highlights will include trips to Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge on January 14th (which coincides with the Hiwassee Crane Festival) and Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge on January 15th. Chattanooga is also a family-friendly destination, with attractions such as the Tennessee Aquarium, the Children's Discovery Museum, the Chattanooga Zoo, and the historic Chattanooga Choo-Choo. There is also a multitude of good restaurants and clubs, so a good time will be had by all! **Updates will be provided as planning progresses.**

13th Proceedings

You have **one last chance** to submit something to the Proceedings of the 13th North American Crane Workshop. We currently have 7 submissions, so any additional ones are welcome. They can be either full papers or short communications, and they need not have been presented at the workshop. See <http://www.nacwg.org/authors.html> for author instructions. Please send me (david-aborn@utc.edu) your manuscripts no later than March 25, 2016. I know that may be a tight deadline, but I am already running behind on receiving submissions, sending out reviews, and receiving reviews. Thank you! — David Aborn

Yampa Valley Crane Festival

Join the Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition in celebrating the fall gathering of Greater Sandhill Cranes in the high country of beautiful Northwest Colorado! The fifth annual **Yampa Valley Crane Festival** takes place **September 8-11, 2016** in scenic Steamboat Springs and Hayden, Colorado.

Highlights of this year's festival will include:

- Guided sunrise and sunset crane viewing with Paul Tebbel, wildlife biologist and former director of Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary in Nebraska
- Keynote address by Nyambayar Batbayar, crane expert and Director of Wildlife Science and Conservation Center of Mongolia
- Whooping Crane update given by Barry Hartup, ICF Director of Conservation Medicine
- Bird walks with Ted Floyd, field guide author and editor of *Birding* magazine

- Wine and cheese reception and gallery show featuring bird and crane art at Circle 7 Gallery
- “Owls of the World” booth and presentation by HawkQuest, featuring 5 different live owls
- Nature and bird walk, including gondola ride, on the Steamboat ski mountain
- Birding-by-boat at nearby Stagecoach Reservoir State Park
- Barbecue dinner and program at The Nature Conservancy’s historic Carpenter Ranch
- Children’s activities
- Photography, writing, and art workshops

And much more!

For full details visit our website- www.coloradocranes.org The complete schedule will be posted on our website by June 1, 2016. Registration begins on August 1st. Be sure to register early for events that have a limited number of participants. Many events do not require registration.

Our lodging partner Wyndham Vacation Rentals is offering special crane festival rates. Contact them at www.wvrsteamboat-cranes.com or call 844-910-2733.

Book Review

One Chosen: The Spirit of Living Creatures by James C. Lewis, 2015, paperback, 213 pages

(available from Amazon.com)

Reviewed by Robin Doughty

James Lewis has written an intriguing, innovative young readers’ book about efforts in the 1970s and ‘80s to establish a flock of whooping cranes in the Rocky Mountains centered between Idaho and New Mexico. Adopting the personal voice of a crane named One Chosen, the author tells the story of a pioneer journey, in the manner of current ultra-light flights between Wisconsin and Florida, which guides One Chosen and his fellow cranes to New Mexico.

Adopting a similar narrative style used in *The Last of the Curlews* that records the migration of what is probably the extinct Eskimo Curlew, Lewis introduces his readers to the dangers, natural and man made, faced by the whooping crane flock. We learn how golden eagles ambush cranes, how coyotes and bobcats pounce on unsuspecting birds, how some hit power lines, and how humans shoot others. The One Chosen chronicles the journey, talks to his own species and to sandhill crane cousins about weather, food, roost sites, and other necessities along the route to Bosque del Apache, the journey’s end biologists selected for wintering birds. We are introduced to the flight northward where human supporters await and greet One Chosen and his survivors.

It is an interesting, unusual way of teaching 4-6 grade students about crane biology, behavior and conservation. It also assumes a strong religious background among its youthful readers. The Biblical names given to the birds, Old Testament references, and prayer-making resulting in Divine guidance linked to Christian beliefs make this children’s book best suited for religious schools.

The Unison Call is a forum to share updates, news and opinions. It is published twice yearly (spring/summer and fall/winter) by the **North American Crane Working Group**, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization incorporated in Wisconsin. Both print and electronic (PDF) versions are produced; PDFs of past issues of the newsletter can be downloaded free of charge from our website: www.nacwg.org . **The views expressed in *The Unison Call* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the positions of NACWG.** Comments and contributions are always welcome.

Daryl Henderson, Editor
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Reducing Whooping Crane Shooting Incidents Through Public Awareness Campaigns

Lizzie Condon, 'Keeping Whooping Cranes Safe' Project Coordinator, International Crane Foundation

The recent shooting of two Whooping Cranes in Beaumont, Texas brings the total number of confirmed shooting cases since the 1967 Endangered Species listing of the Whooping Crane to 26. More than half of these cases have occurred in the last 5 years. There has been an alarming increase in the rate of Whooping Crane shootings (Fig. 1). Gunshot accounts for 19% of known mortality in the reintroduced Eastern Migratory Population (EMP). The International Crane Foundation is working to reduce illegal shootings by raising awareness of Whooping Cranes along the flyway, enlisting the help of hunters and other citizens in public education, and providing resources for reporting illegal activity.

A set of tools to help reduce shootings lies in situational crime prevention (SCP). The principle behind SCP is that in order for a crime to occur, three factors must align. There must be a suitable target, a lack of guardianship of that target, and a willing criminal (Fig. 2). Situational crime prevention has been used to address a variety of crimes, from terrorism to shop lifting, to poaching of wildlife.

During an SCP workshop at ICF, we brainstormed activities that would fall under SCP strategies. One activity that emerged as a way to address several strategies was an awareness campaign for Whooping Cranes in communities where Whooping Cranes are likely to be seen. This type of campaign can create a human population that is both aware and proud of having Whooping Cranes on the landscape, which increases guardianship. Feeling pride in having Whooping Cranes in the community also reduces the attractiveness of the target and the motivations of the offender.

The International Crane Foundation has completed the first season of an awareness campaign in northern Alabama, an important wintering area for the EMP. We have partnered with an Auburn University professor to evaluate attitudes towards Whooping Cranes in northern Alabama. Auburn used mail surveys and focus groups to establish a baseline for attitudes towards Whooping Cranes. Questions covered general attitudes towards wildlife, where participants get information, as well as the specifics of Whooping Crane conservation and how to report

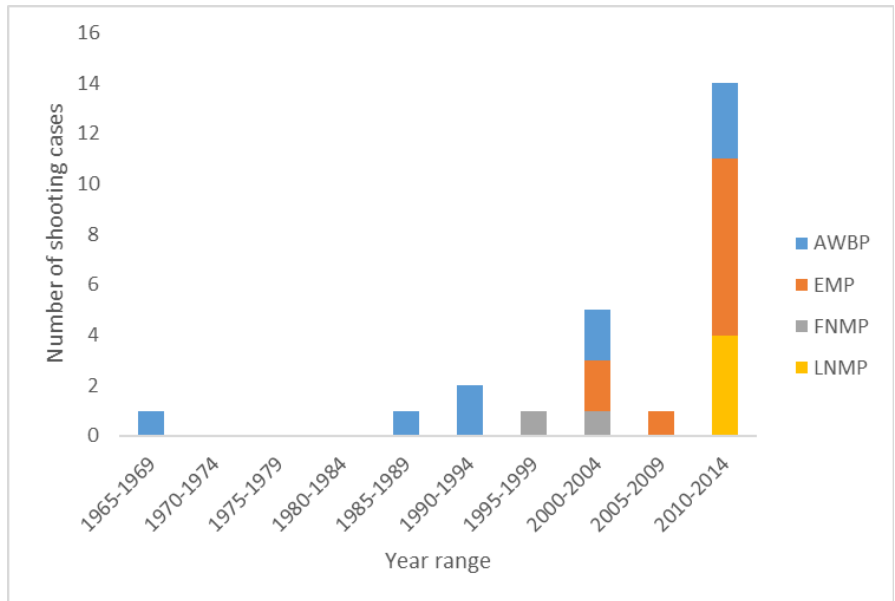


Fig. 1. Number of confirmed shooting cases between 1967 and 2014. AWBP=Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population, EMP=Eastern Migratory Population, FNMP=Florida Non-Migratory Population, LNMP=Louisiana Non-Migratory Population



Fig. 2. The triangle of situational crime prevention. In order for a crime to occur, these three factors must align.

a perpetrator(s) of a Whooping Crane shooting. The results of the survey showed that very few people know that Whooping Cranes are present in Alabama. Surveys went out to 1000 people, and about 200 people responded.

- 83% of respondents had never seen or received information about Whooping Cranes before receiving the survey.
- 75% of respondents felt that people in Alabama are generally unaware that Whooping Cranes spend part of the year there.
- 85% of respondents said that they are likely to report a Whooping Crane shooting to federal, state or city law enforcement.
- 66% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are personally responsible for stopping the poaching of Whooping Cranes.

Focus groups were used to delve more deeply into effective messaging, where local people get their information, and who local people trust to deliver information.

In November of 2015, ICF launched an awareness campaign centered on Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. We have started a pledge campaign (Fig. 3), created a Whooping Crane mascot that attends outreach events (Fig. 4), posted billboards (Fig. 5), produced a 30-second radio and television public service announcement with a local spokesperson, conducted radio, television and newspaper interviews, worked with partners to increase K-12 and public outreach programs, tabled at gun shows and other local events, conducted workshops on Whooping Crane outreach for environmental educators and teachers, provided materials for hunter education classrooms, added ten new Whooping Crane education trunks to schools, museums and other outreach facilities and helped grow the Festival of the Cranes at Wheeler NWR to over 3,000 participants. We even have a beer made by a local brewery with messaging about



Fig. 3. The “I give a whoop!” logo.



Fig. 4. “Hope”, a Whooping Crane mascot made by the Jim Henson Company, greeting visitors at the Festival of the Cranes in Decatur, Alabama.

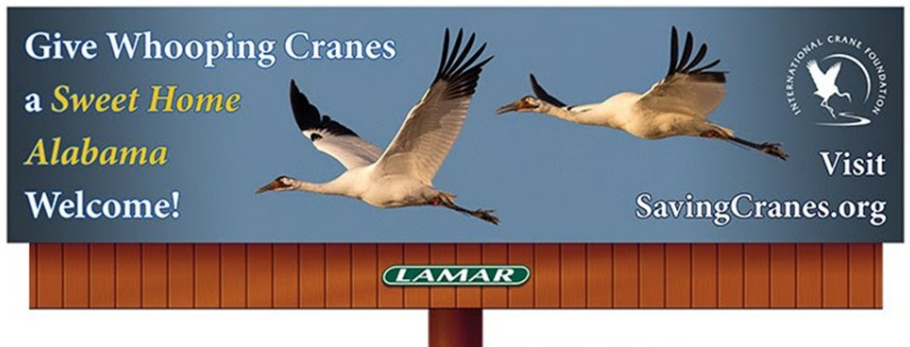


Fig. 5. Billboards produced in Alabama through Lamar Advertising’s non-profit program.

Whooping Cranes in the local community on the can (Fig. 6).

We are looking forward to a set of post-campaign mail surveys, which we will work with Auburn University to carry out in late spring 2016. We plan to replicate successful components of this model in more states where Whooping Cranes occur and where Whooping Cranes are at risk of shootings, including Wisconsin, Indiana and Texas.

Fig. 6. Beer produced by Old Black Bear Brewery, designed to highlight the presence of Whooping Cranes in Alabama. Half the profits from the sale of this beer go to the International Crane Foundation's Whooping Crane outreach programs.



Congratulations to Robert Love on his retirement this month (March 10) after 35 years with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Among his many accomplishments, Bob paved the way for the Whooping Crane reintroduction into Louisiana. Whoopers there are already incubating eggs on the landscape (see Eva Szyszkoski's report on page 18), and Bob is "hoping for a first hatch as a bucket-list item shortly after retirement!"

Bob submitted to the newsletter a draft of a chapter he wrote for a forthcoming monograph on the Whooping Crane, saying "Perhaps pick and choose what you wish from this submission?" The following is an abridged (one third of the full draft) and lightly edited version of Bob's chapter. The multi-author book to which it belongs is titled *The Biology and Conservation of the Whooping Crane (Grus americana)*, which is being put together by John French as part of a new series, 'Biodiversity of the World: Conservation from Genes to Landscapes' (Elsevier – Academic Press). — Ed.

Whooping Crane Outreach: Louisiana Efforts

Robert Love, LDWF

Louisiana truly has a long and storied heritage with Whooping cranes. Early distribution accounts (Allen, R.P., 1952) indicate Louisiana had both a resident population which inhabited the fresh marshes above White Lake in southwest Louisiana, as well as a significant migratory population which wintered in the tall grass prairies of southwestern Louisiana. The cranes also utilized the Chenier ridges along the gulf. Louisiana is indeed native range.

Repopulation of a species within native range with intact suitable habitat also requires some level of protection, which, after many decades of absence, requires much education and public outreach. In Louisiana, to secure that required level of protection, the expensive repopulation efforts required public support. Whoopers being totally absent since 1950, also meant very few citizens knew of the species. Restoring this iconic and charismatic species to its native range, is certainly a substantial challenge, but also a potentially huge conservation accomplishment with much serendipitous benefits to all large white birds, and wildlife conservation in general.

In 1976, the recovery team approached Louisiana Wildlife Commission about a Whooping Crane repopulation. At that time, the state rejected the proposal because of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and potential consequences of the law, such as critical habitat designations, and its effects on lifestyles of the citizenry. There was no 10j rule to the ESA at that time. The ESA has since been altered, the 10j rule added, allowing for the Non-essential, Experimental Population (NEP). This was instrumental to Louisiana becoming a partner in restoring cranes starting in 2011. However valuable this provision of law, it is misunderstood by people and requires a clear explanation to many. Furthermore, because

Whooping Cranes had been absent from the state for over 70 years, essentially none of the state's citizenry knew about these birds or their pending reintroduction. However, some large landowners and their land managers knew about the prior interest of repopulating the state since 1976, recalling the fear of ESA ramifications. This was a misunderstanding and certainly an obstacle to be overcome. Explaining the new rules was one of the first outreach objectives of Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) staff.

First-Step Outreach:

Obtaining approval to conduct this new "expensive" wildlife repopulation from a newly elected Governor, intent on downsizing Louisiana State government, was one of the first approvals required. It was achieved by outreach and salesmanship, largely by emphasizing the proposed funding model, utilizing 1/3 state, 1/3 federal, 1/3 private dollars.

Developing an **informed consent** of user groups was also a very high priority. This outreach effort was initiated immediately by visiting with all the large coastal marsh land owners of southwest Louisiana. Informed consent was not automatic. In some instances, it was not so much gaining support from key players as it was having them cease to object to our program. Over time, it seems that as the broad public support base has increased, even those who expressed so much initial concern have themselves become more supportive.

The process of petitioning the Department of the Interior to create the entire boundary of Louisiana as a NEP for this species began immediately with regular conference calls with our federal partners (e.g., US Fish and Wildlife Service, USGS). Completion of this legal process was critical to developing trust in our agency from the power brokers of the Louisiana coastal landowner society.

Second-Step Outreach:

This step required finding private and corporate sponsors and utilizing our Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Foundation (LWFF) to channel donated funds to the repopulation efforts. We also developed the program design for the broad base public outreach in order to sell this idea and the repopulation project to the Louisiana citizenry. Its goal was to *elevate the respect for wildlife resources within this state* among arguably a very utilitarian, rural-agricultural populace. We were utilizing this iconic and charismatic species as the "poster child species", and believed that serendipitous benefits could aid other species, perhaps other big white birds, which also utilize the region and its "working wetlands" of the Cajun prairie. We realized we shared a social responsibility with the large oil companies operating in south Louisiana, so we sought them as corporate sponsors. LWFF was integral in this process.

Our largest corporate sponsor was Chevron, Gulf of Mexico business unit, which helped develop the slogan "**Awareness leads to Appreciation, which leads to Protection.**" Thus, the media awareness campaign grew, and to date ~36 vinyl billboards have been placed along major interstate corridors since 2012, which have literally resulted in millions of motorist viewings. Also, our multiple television commercials have run in excess of 20,000 times. Additionally, over 25,000 30-second radio commercials having been run throughout the state. They create a public sentiment of pride in this new species, and commensurate disdain for anyone contemplating harm to these magnificent birds.

The LDWF environmental education section created a formal Whooping Crane education module with the help of professional educators. The module contained life science lesson plans centered on topics like adaptation, habitat and migration, and endangered species, with the Whooping Crane as the subject matter. Also, the "*Give a Whoop*" education workshop was developed with the aid of professional teachers, and is designed to teach teachers about the Whooping Crane reintroduction program, with topics on historical crane populations, reasons for their near extinction, the various recovery efforts in North America. The program has already reached >200 teachers across the state.

Subsequently, the first crane shooting eventually did occur in Louisiana, generating a public outcry and further propelling a greater desire for *elevated respect for this wildlife resource*. This reaction stimulated even more outreach.

Third-Step Outreach:

Largely in response to the first shooting, more extensive outreach was needed. LDWF increased the number of presentations at festivals and speaking appearances, more signage on store-fronts of country groceries and gas stations were placed. More presentations occurred at National Hunting and Fishing day and Earth Day events.

Billboards, radio and TV airings have also now reached the entire state. A more thorough saturation is still desired, many communities particularly in crane “hot spot” parishes should receive additional efforts. It is believed the repopulation effort will last perhaps 15-20 more years. It is further believed to adequately educate a population of more than four and a half million citizens, who essentially knew nothing about Whooping Cranes when we began, that an aggressive media, public awareness and education campaign should take at a minimum 10-12 years to perform.

We now realize that restoring the cranes is a subject people are willing to support. We have found that people like winners and heroes. The Whooping Crane is a very charismatic and iconic wildlife species. They are highly visible and exhibit fascinating behaviors, so they are potentially attractive as wildlife “heroes.” So we recommend they be treated as such.

Fourth-Step Outreach:

Enhanced outreach to specific groups began with incorporation of identification and protection messages within our annual LDWF hunting regulations pamphlets. Additionally, we incorporated the Whooping Crane as an endangered species topic into our Youth Hunter Safety coursework as “hunters beware.”

Understanding that the vast majority of wildlife in Louisiana resides on private lands is also important as it also dictates education and outreach efforts going forward. Ultimately, the private or corporate landowner is the actual steward of these birds and the habitat for them throughout the year. Thus, our outreach campaign also morphed into targeting farmers and landowners with cranes utilizing their property, including presentations annually at Parish-level rice farmer meetings, where we discuss nesting, molting, and we have created stewardship awards for farmers. Specific focus is with crawfish farmers, most of whom are also rice farmers. We are also incorporating our protection message in their farm news briefs bulletin and at their annual association meetings.

There are about 1000 rice farmers in Louisiana and on any given year most or at least half will also have some fields in crawfish production. The tremendous habitat base of shallow water on the prairie which provides an abundant food source is a key reason to expect a successful repopulation of this species in Louisiana.

Whenever we make outreach presentations, folks ask “where can we go to see these cranes,” and the answer is “we can’t tell you.” We as a state agency will protect the private landowners’ right to privacy and not disclose these birds’ locations, so as not to create trespass or road destruction by tourists straying across their property. However, we believe some entrepreneurial farmers will eventually take advantage of this eco-tourism opportunity. It seems plausible to create a web page and invite birdwatchers to make a tour reservation, thus reserving a viewing session from a stationary blind on such farms. The whooper sightings will be somewhat guaranteed if cranes are sitting a nest or fledging a chick. In addition to cranes there are many species of birds in these working wetlands. It normally is a bird watcher’s treasure chest of viewable species. This idea is untested as yet, but Louisiana is an NEP state, so we ask why not? The farmer, the viewing public and the agency partners all get what we want, which is success, and greater respect for wildlife resources. Remember, the best form of conservation occurs when humans find inherent values in the species.

Outreach to landowners in Texas is another matter, with some Louisiana-released cranes spending some summers in that state. We now have had a shooting incident of Louisiana NEP cranes in Texas, in January of 2016. This incident, however, will be treated as an infraction on fully endangered cranes, being they were across the state line. This situation clearly calls for some additional outreach to begin in Texas as well, and may also involve some of the volunteer partners of the Texas Whooper Watch network.

Louisiana’s Whooping Crane repopulation is still a relatively young conservation effort in comparison to efforts in other states. It may well become an answer to restoring this wonderful species by achieving some of the recovery plan goals. However, having suitable habitat in native range is an already acknowledged fact. Providing protection for them requires public support and informed public consent, and Louisiana is well on its way to achieving its vision of “awareness leads to appreciation, which leads to protection” challenge.

Whooping Crane ‘Stopover’ habitat project on US military bases

Chester McConnell, *Friends of the Wild Whoopers*

Friends of the Wild Whoopers (FOTWW) has initiated a ‘stopover’ habitat project to help Whooping Cranes during their two annual migrations between Canada and the Texas coast. Stopover habitats are essential so Whooping Cranes can rest and feed during their long migrations. FOTWW contends that it is imperative that we provide more help to the only wild Whooping Cranes population remaining on earth.

These wild cranes have faced numerous threats over the years and hazards are continuing. We know that wild Whooping Cranes can take care of themselves if they have good habitat. FOTWW is working to assure that crucial stopover habitats are identified, maintained and developed.

During migration Whooping Cranes often stopover on private lands, wildlife areas and possibly some military bases. Regrettably many private lands have lost stopover habitats due to more intensive uses or development.

FOTWW contemplated whether our nation’s military lands within the migration corridor could provide some additional relief? Could some of these lands be developed and/or managed to provide stopover habitats for Whooping Cranes? Importantly, habitats for the cranes also benefit many other species of wildlife and fish. And our military installations are obligated by federal laws to manage their lands to benefit wildlife and other natural resources.

FOTWW prepared a proposal to evaluate wetland habitats on military installations and met with the Department of Defense Partners in Flight (DODPIF) to discuss the issue. DODPIF sanctioned our proposal and assisted us in making contacts with appropriate officials on military installations within the migration corridor. We are currently working with military natural resource managers to identify existing good quality whooper habitats, to improve poor habitats and develop new habitats where needed. Until we initiated this project, officials on military bases were largely unaware of Whooping Crane needs or that the bases could play an important part in managing them.

The most expensive part of establishing or improving habitat is land cost. If ‘stopover’ habitat projects can be provided on military lands, the cost would be relatively minimal. No habitat projects would be allowed that would be incompatible with military missions.

To make matters more challenging, Whooping Cranes require ‘stopover’ habitats with some rather specific features. Generally, they prefer roosting sites located in small wetlands, ponds and streams with some shallow water and shorelines with sparse vegetation. Such site-specific wetland-pond habitats, once abundant, are now becoming scarce. Whoopers need secure stopover habitats throughout their 200-mile-wide migration corridor about every 50 miles in every direction to help assure safe migration.

FOTWW invited Gulf Cost Bird Observatory (GCBO) to be our partner in the project because of their experience with Whooping Cranes. Our FOTWW–GCBO team recently visited six military bases to determine where marginal habitat areas can be improved by proper management or new habitats developed. We have discussed needs with base officials and provided written recommendations that will protect and improve existing habitats or develop new stopover habitats



Camp Maxey, Texas Army National Guard pond serves as stopover habitat. FOTWW–GCBO made minor management recommendations for improvements.



‘Stopover’ wetland pond on Texas Army National Guard Camp Bowie. FOTWW–GCBO classified this pond to be in excellent condition.

for Whooping Cranes. Natural resource personnel stationed on the military installations guided us around the bases.

We have already identified numerous potential stopover habitats. Management recommendations have been made for each specific site that can be rather easily and inexpensively converted into excellent stopover habitats. Base personnel have agreed to carry out our recommendations as soon as practical. Hopefully they will be implemented in the near future.

Our FOTWW–GCBO team has made some important initial strides but we still have more installations to visit. This project will result in improving and developing many more suitable wetland stopover habitats for the wild Whooping Cranes as they migrate 2,500 miles from their Wood Buffalo nesting grounds in Canada to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas coast.

In addition to the need for stopover habitats, more secure wintering habitats are needed along the Texas coast near the Aransas Refuge. Currently about half of the population winters off the Aransas Refuge where they are not as safe. Development along the flyway corridor and along the coast continues to take a serious toll on habitats.

We invite you to be a partner with us in this important stopover habitat project. For more information visit <http://friendsofthewildwhoopers.org/support-fotww/>

Influence of Landscape Change on Habitat Conditions and Survival of Wintering Greater Sandhill Cranes

Matthew A. Boggie (New Mexico State University), Scott A. Carleton (USGS)
and Daniel P. Collins (USFWS)

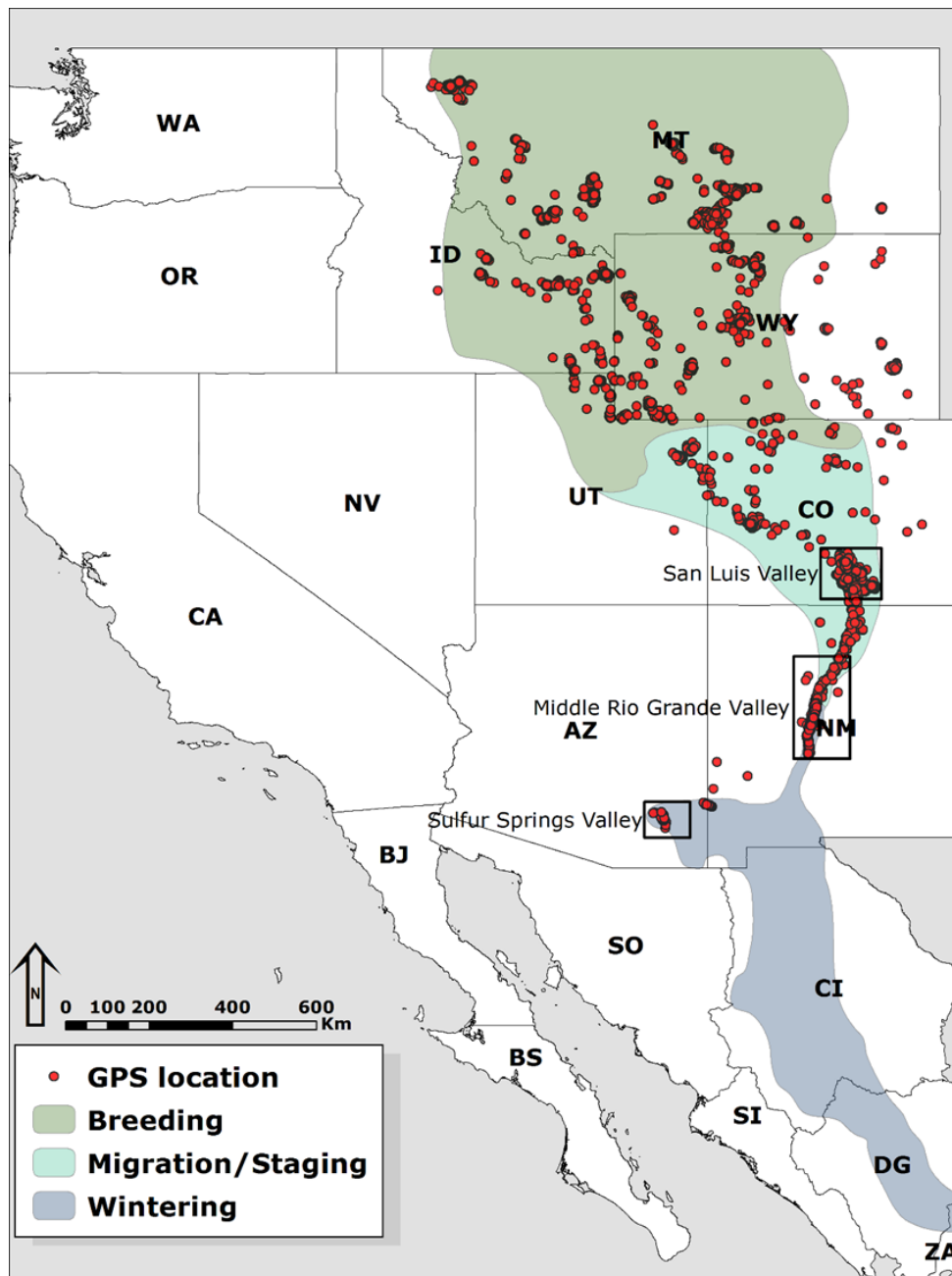
Water scarcity and land conversion in the West have negatively impacted seasonal habitats that migratory birds have come to rely upon to carry out their life histories. Regionally, in the Middle Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico, persistent drought, human disturbances and changes in land use have raised concerns that availability of overwinter habitat may be limiting the Rocky Mountain Population (RMP) of greater sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis tabida*; hereafter cranes). Over 80% of the 24,000 cranes belonging to the RMP winter in the Middle Rio Grande Valley and their seasonal range spans throughout parts of the Intermountain West, Southwest, and historically several states of Mexico.

The Pacific and Central Flyways and USFWS Webless Migratory Bird Program have formulated priority information needs for the RMP which include (1) refinement and updating of survival estimates to better guide decision making for harvest management, and (2) impacts of changes in land use on the RMP. The USGS Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at New Mexico State University (M.A. Boggie and S.A. Carleton) along with the USFWS Region 2 Division of Migratory Birds (D.P. Collins) are spearheading the initiative to fill these information gaps.

To achieve our objectives we are employing the use of Platform Transmitter Terminals (PTTs). The PTTs provide fine scale, highly accurate GPS fixes of PTT-tagged cranes throughout the annual cycle for three to five years. Currently the PTTs have logged over two continuous years of locational data for ~30 cranes. With these data we are estimating and identifying associated factors that may influence survival rates of adults. Moreover, we are developing regional scale datasets to delineate the extent of important habitat-related features (e.g., classification of agricultural lands, geomorphic characteristics of riverine environments used for roosting, etc.) on the wintering grounds to relate the distribution of and temporal variation in resources to movement patterns of cranes. Furthermore, we are collecting behavioral data to construct time-energy budgets of cranes to estimate daily energetic expenditures and sampling primary food resources to determine their availability and true metabolic energy. We are using daily energy expenditures together with the metabolic energy of primary food resources to establish energetic carrying capacity of the Middle Rio

Grande Valley and determine if habitat conditions may be limiting the population.

Ultimately the desired outcome of research is to identify the population-level consequences of current disturbances and evaluate if the Middle Rio Grande Valley can support the RMP at their current abundance. Expanding beyond these regional objectives, we have forged an alliance with federal and state partners operating on the staging and breeding areas of the RMP. Collectively our efforts are focused on examining the relationship between demographic performance and the quality of the suite of habitats the RMP uses throughout its entire range to facilitate the formation and prioritization of range-wide strategies for conservation.



Historic distribution of breeding, staging, and wintering areas of the Rocky Mountain Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes with overlaid GPS locations from cranes tagged with PTTs from 2014-present. Important known wintering areas in the United States include the Middle Rio Grande Valley, NM, the principal winter grounds, and Sulfur Springs Valley, AZ. The San Luis Valley, CO is the principal staging area for fall and spring migration.

Crops for Cranes

Nancy Merrill, Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition

Colorado Crane Conservation Coalition, Inc. (CCCC) works to ensure the protection of Greater Sandhill Cranes and their habitat in Northwest Colorado. As part of that effort CCCC sponsors the annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival. The fifth Yampa Valley Crane Festival takes place September 8-11, 2016 in beautiful Steamboat Springs and Hayden, Colorado (see page 2).

Every year since the inaugural festival in 2012, attendance at festival events has increased significantly. In 2015 attendance topped 3,900 with attendees coming from 26 states. These attendees provide an economic boon to the entire Yampa Valley. In addition to learning more about Colorado cranes, festival attendees are interested in the ranching and agricultural lifestyle that helps to support the cranes and other wildlife of the area.

In recent years agricultural trends have undergone a significant change in the Yampa Valley largely due to economic factors. Specifically, the production of local grain crops (wheat and oats) has decreased from approximately 85,000 acres in the 1940's to only 10,000 acres currently. This decrease in grain crop production has potential to adversely impact the cranes. The Greater Sandhill Cranes that stage in the Yampa Valley, especially the young of the year, rely on waste grain crops to provide adequate nutrition for successful migration to their wintering grounds in New Mexico and Arizona. CCCC is concerned that if grain production continues to decrease, cranes may spend less time in the Yampa Valley and may eventually leave the area altogether. This would be a huge loss for the valley's biodiversity and for the ecotourism that the cranes generate. In response to this problem, CCCC has launched a new project called Crops for Cranes. CCCC is working with state wildlife officials, conservation organizations and private landowners in the Yampa Valley to provide grain crops for cranes during a crucial time in their yearly cycle – just prior to migration and coinciding with the annual Yampa Valley Crane Festival.

In addition to diminishing grain crops, another challenge CCCC faces as sponsor of the annual crane festival is finding reliable, safe locations for attendees to view the cranes. A key part of the festival involves bringing people to harvested grain fields and allowing them to have a first-hand experience of the cranes as they eat, dance, and socialize. These experiences play a critical role in educating attendees about the cranes, the environment, conservation, and the important role that agriculture plays with wildlife in the Yampa Valley. By launching the Crops for Cranes program, CCCC hopes to establish some areas of grain crops that will not only benefit the cranes but will also allow for safe public viewing of the cranes during the festival. In 2016 CCCC's goal is to establish 100 acres devoted to Crops for Cranes in the Yampa Valley. As of February 2016, approximately 40 acres have been secured for this effort. These crops will be cut and harvested or left in the field at the time of the crane festival.

In summary, CCCC's Crops for Cranes project is a habitat enhancement program intended to benefit both cranes and crane festival attendees. Grant money and donations will be used to purchase crops from farmers and will also be used to partially cover the costs of establishing new areas of grain crops for the cranes. Many of these food plots will be situated in areas that will allow easy and safe access for festival attendees to view the cranes.

If you are interested in learning more about the Crops for Cranes project or the Yampa Valley Crane Festival, contact Nancy Merrill at coloradocranes@gmail.com or visit CCCC's website: www.coloradocranes.org

Occupation of Malheur Refuge in Oregon Threatens Sandhill Cranes

Gary Ivey, International Crane Foundation Research Associate based in Oregon and leader of the West Coast Crane Working Group

In 1908, President Teddy Roosevelt established the Malheur Lake Reservation to protect waterfowl and waterbird breeding grounds in eastern Oregon. Prior to the establishment of the reserve, local bird populations were decimated by market hunters, who shot large numbers of waterfowl for their meat and destroyed entire waterbird colonies in pursuit of feathers for fashion. Fortunately, over the past 100 years, waterbird populations have recovered in the reserve, and the now 187,000-acre **Malheur National Wildlife Refuge supports the largest population of Greater Sandhill Cranes (about 250 pairs) of all national wildlife refuges.** Malheur is also critically important to over a million migrant waterfowl and tens of thousands of breeding waterfowl and other waterbirds.

Malheur has taken the spotlight in the news recently – unfortunately not for its critical role in protecting wildlife, but because it has been illegally taken hostage by a group of armed extremists whose primary mission is to remove land (including Malheur) from federal ownership, preventing refuge staff from doing their good work for wildlife. I work with the International Crane Foundation as a Research Associate, focusing on conservation issues of Pacific Flyway Sandhill Cranes. I also have intimate knowledge of Malheur’s issues and challenges, as I served as the Refuge Biologist for 15 years. I also serve, voluntarily, as President of the Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, a non-profit group established to assist Malheur in meeting its mission to serve both wildlife and the public.



The illegal occupation of Malheur threatens the ability of refuge staff to provide approximately 50,000 acres of managed wetland habitat for birds (each spring the wetlands are flooded for Sandhill Cranes and other waterbirds), as well as the public’s rights to enjoy such special places. This habitat shortfall will prevent many crane pairs from nesting and greatly reduce the capacity of Malheur to support bird populations, resulting in a failure of the refuge mission. Frankly, my life has been a living hell this past month. I have been leading the Friends to provide accurate information to the public and a forum for them to express their frustrations and anxieties about the occupation of Malheur. I am also working diligently with other conservation groups to develop grassroots opposition to the refuge takeover and the anti-government/anti-public land doctrine of this movement.

It is only by working together that we can protect special places, such as Malheur, for cranes and for future generations. To get involved today: visit www.malheurfriends.org to learn more about the Friends of Malheur or follow us on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Friends-of-Malheur-National-Wildlife-Refuge-498825580197534/>

I came across Gary’s article posted on ICF’s web site, dated February 4, 2016. The illegal occupation ended February 11, but I thought it was important to record here the impact the occupation was having on Malheur wildlife, an important concern which received little, if any, attention in the national media. Gary, thanks for speaking out! — Ed.

Regional Reports

Update on the Aransas—Wood Buffalo Population of Whooping Cranes

Summary of Aransas—Wood Buffalo Population Breeding Surveys for 2013-15

	2013	2014	2015
No. of nests detected (May)	74	82†	68
No. of fledged chicks detected (Aug)	28	32	23
Average no. of chicks per nest (20-year average = 0.49)	0.38*	0.39**	0.34*
Additional territorial pairs (non-nesters)	21-25	43	20-24
No. of birds at Aransas NWR (<i>no. of juveniles</i>) [does not include off-refuge birds]	304 (39)	308 (39)	?

†Most nests ever recorded. *All family groups had a single offspring, i.e., no twins; **two families with twins. WBNP 2013 data are from Harrell and Bidwell (Oct. 2014), *Report on Whooping Crane Recovery Activities*; WBNP 2014 data are from *Northern Journal* (norj.ca), Sept. 1, 2014, quoting Mark Bidwell; 2015 data are from Bidwell and Conkin (see below), with thanks to Lea Craig-Moore. Aransas NWR counts are from 'Whooping Crane Updates' on the Aransas NWR website, with thanks to Wade Harrell. The 2015 Aransas count was not available at deadline. — Ed.

Recovery and Ecology of Whooping Cranes: Monitoring of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population during the Breeding Season 2015 Report

Mark Bidwell and John Conkin, Species at Risk Recovery Unit,
Canadian Wildlife Service Prairie and Northern Region, Environment Canada

Summary: Annual monitoring of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population (AWBP) of whooping cranes (*Grus americana*, hereafter cranes), which numbers approximately 300 individuals, is a key element of Canada's efforts to recover the species under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). In 2015, the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) and Parks Canada conducted surveys for whooping cranes in breeding areas in southern Northwest Territories (NT) and northern Alberta, in and adjacent to Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP). Breeding pair surveys in May detected 68 nests, 13 of which were outside the area designated as critical habitat and six of which were outside WBNP; 20-24 pairs without nests were also observed. Surveys in August detected 23 juveniles; 23 pairs had one juvenile each and no pairs had two juveniles. Annual productivity was 0.34 juveniles per nest, lower than the 20-year average of 0.49 but within the long-term natural range of variation. Of 16 cranes banded with satellite transmitters that were confirmed to nest, nine were re-sighted with

juveniles and five without juveniles. Of 18 banded cranes that did not appear to nest, 11 spent the summer in or adjacent to WBNP. Results from monitoring of the AWBP in 2015 highlight the continued increase in the breeding population, although it is still well below Canadian and international recovery goals, and the ongoing expansion of the breeding range into areas not currently designated as critical habitat.

Habitat Conditions in Breeding Areas: During the 2015 breeding season, habitat conditions in the whooping crane nesting area were exceptionally dry. Annual precipitation (May 2014 to April 2015) at Fort Smith, NT preceding the breeding season was 104% of the 60-year average, however precipitation in the seven-month period from October 2014 to April 2015 was 79% of the 60-year average (Environment Canada 2015). In May 2015, observers noted that water levels in the nesting area were low relative to recent years. Dry conditions persisted throughout the breeding season; precipitation in the five-month period from May to September was 62% of the 60-year average (Environment Canada 2015). During juvenile surveys in August 2015, observers noted that many breeding-area ponds were dry. Warm and dry conditions contributed to an active wildfire season in breeding areas and the surrounding region. Fires burned 15,839 ha or 3.88% of the area designated as critical habitat, greatly exceeding the 25-year average of 0.90%. Outside the area designated as critical habitat, 13 nests were detected and two of these occurred within 5 km of fires. Additionally, wildfire affected 372,450 ha or 8.16% of WBNP (vs. the 25-year average of 1.26%) and 280,880 ha of the South Slave Region of the NT (Government of the Northwest Territories 2015).

Management Considerations: We confirmed nesting by 68 pairs in late spring, producing an average of 0.34 juveniles per nest by mid-summer. While the number of confirmed nests has increased steadily since surveys began in 1966, it also varies annually, possibly in response to environmental conditions during the breeding season. The ratio of juveniles to nests, which is an estimate of breeding success for the population, also varies annually but in a periodic manner that tracks the 10-year boreal hare-lynx cycle (Boyce et al. 2005, *Biological Conservation* 126:395-401), likely because of periodicity in abundance of potential predators (e.g., wolves, lynx, red fox). In 2015 there were fewer nests than in the previous two years, possibly because weather was unusually hot and dry, and juvenile success was relatively low. In 2014, however, more nests were confirmed than in any previous year, highlighting the gradual but steady increase in the breeding population over the last 60 years. Even so, the AWBP is many years away from achieving the Canadian down-listing goal of 125 pairs (i.e., 250 mature individuals; COSEWIC 2010) or the international goal of 250 productive pairs (CWS and USFWS 2007). Recovery of the species depends mainly on growth of the AWBP, so monitoring should continue until recovery goals are reached (CWS and USFWS 2007). Thirteen breeding pairs with nests were detected outside the area designated as critical habitat (CH; Environment Canada 2007) under SARA, and six of these were also outside WBNP, highlighting the ongoing expansion of the AWBP's breeding range. The first nest outside WBNP was detected in 1982 on reserve lands of the Salt River First Nation, east of WBNP, and in 1998 cranes were detected nesting north of WBNP, in the Northwest Territories. Currently, up to 20% of nests occur outside CH annually and, although cranes and their nests are protected under SARA and the Migratory Birds Convention Act wherever they occur, breeding habitat is not protected unless it is identified as CH (i.e., habitat required for the survival or recovery of the species). In particular, SARA prohibits destruction of CH in federal protected areas (e.g., WBNP) and includes measures that could protect CH in other areas. Moreover, up to 11% of nests occur outside WBNP annually, and these nests and associated habitat are not protected under the Canada National Parks Act or related regulations. Because the breeding range of whooping cranes has expanded outside the CH, including into areas which could be impacted by human development, Environment Canada is undertaking work to update the CH to ensure it more closely corresponds to current and probable future breeding ranges of the species.

The above are excerpts (with minor editing) from Bidwell and Conkin, not the entire report. Thanks to Lea Craig-Moore (Species at Risk Recovery Unit, CWS Prairie and Northern Region, Environment Canada) for providing the document. — Ed.

Regional Reports *continued*

Update on the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes

Karis Ritenour, Whooping Crane Field Technician, International Crane Foundation

Parent-reared release and migration – Three whooping crane colts reared by adult whooping cranes at Patuxent National Wildlife Research Center were banded at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge on 17 September 2015, moved to temporary pens near established pairs of adult whooping cranes, and released between 20-22 September.

14_15 (F) integrated with a large group of sandhill cranes, leaving Necedah on 3 October and staying with them on the Wisconsin River in Sauk Co, WI. Eventually she migrated with sandhills to Wheeler NWR in Alabama.

16_15 (M) was found dead on 6 October, the official cause of death was predation.

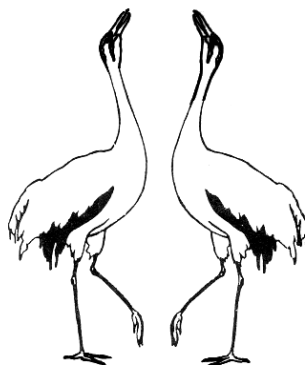
20_15 (M) left Necedah NWR in early October and was reported in Dubuque, IA habitually using an area near several businesses, busy parking lots, and close to a highway. International Crane Foundation staff captured him on 13 October and re-released him near 14_15 in Sauk Co, WI. Almost immediately he flew south alone again and has been in Louisiana (currently St. Martin Parish) since then.

Direct Autumn release and migration – Eight birds reared by costume at ICF (6 F, 2 M) were banded as of 22 October and officially released on 3 November 2015 at Horicon NWR. Most remained near Horicon until mid-December. By January, 4 birds (61, 62, 63, and 67_15) had migrated to the border of Randolph Co, IL and Sainte Genevieve Co, MO with no other cranes in the area. 65_15 wintered at Goose Pond, IN with sandhills and several adult whooping cranes, 68_15 near Jasper-Pulaski Wildlife Area in IN along with sandhills and at least one adult whooping crane, and 66_15 migrated with sandhills to Lake Co, FL. One DAR juvenile (64_15) was last seen leaving Horicon NWR in November with a large group of sandhill cranes, current whereabouts are unknown.

Ultralight release – This year's ultralight cohort reached St. Marks NWR on 6 February 2016 and the group of six juveniles (5 F, 1 M) were banded on 9 February.

Mortalities – W3_15 died on 21 September 2015 due to pneumonia caused by *Aspergillus fumigatus*. 16_15 (M) was found dead on 6 October due to predation.

Wintering locations – The maximum population size as of 31 December 2015 is 100 birds (52 males, 46 females, 2 unknown). As of late January the distribution of the population was as follows (not including the 6 ultralight-led birds): Alabama 14, Indiana 38, Illinois 16, Florida 12, Georgia 2, Kentucky 5, Tennessee 2, Louisiana 1, Unknown 10.



Second Field Season Completed for Research on Winter Habitat Use of Whooping Cranes in the EMP

Hillary Thompson, MS Student, Clemson University

February 2016 marks the end of the second field season of data collection for my Masters research with Dr. Patrick Jodice at Clemson University Department of Forestry and Environmental Conservation and the USGS South Carolina Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit. This study focuses on local scale habitat characteristics of areas used by Whooping Cranes during the winter. This information will be paired with a landscape scale analysis using satellite telemetry data to understand what drives habitat selection at multiple scales.

In each year, we used radio telemetry to track each crane or group of cranes for one full day and recorded location, behavior, and habitat characteristics every 30 minutes. In 2015, we collected habitat use and movement data on 20 groups of Whooping Cranes in six states (FL, GA, AL, TN, KY, IN, See Fig. 1). Similarly, this winter we collected data on 23 groups of cranes in 7 states (LA, FL, GA, AL, KY, IL, IN, See Fig. 1).

Some highlights from this year's field season include tracking juveniles in Louisiana and Illinois, and two families with wild-hatched chicks in Alabama and Kentucky (Fig. 2). Early in the season we tracked parent-reared juvenile 20-15 in Louisiana. This individual migrated to Iowa earlier in the season, was captured, and was brought back to Wisconsin. He then migrated on his own to Saint Martin Parish, Louisiana. We ended up finding him in a very secluded crawfish pond. We also tracked the group of four DAR juveniles in Randolph County, Illinois. These cranes made use of oxbow ponds in agricultural fields within the Mississippi River floodplain.

The distribution of birds was slightly different this year than last (Fig. 1). Last year we accounted for 37 Whooping Cranes in the state of Alabama, while this year we only found 20 cranes. We were also only able to find one Whooping Crane at Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge in Tennessee this year (although there were possibly three present), which has been a major wintering area in the past. This year, however, we did find Whooping Cranes in a few new places, including St Martin Parish Louisiana, Highlands County Florida, and Randolph County Illinois. Overall, we identified 66 Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds this year, and tracked 37 cranes that had working transmitters. The data we collected during these two winters will contribute to a better understanding of the local-scale habitat characteristics of areas used by Whooping Cranes throughout the eastern flyway.

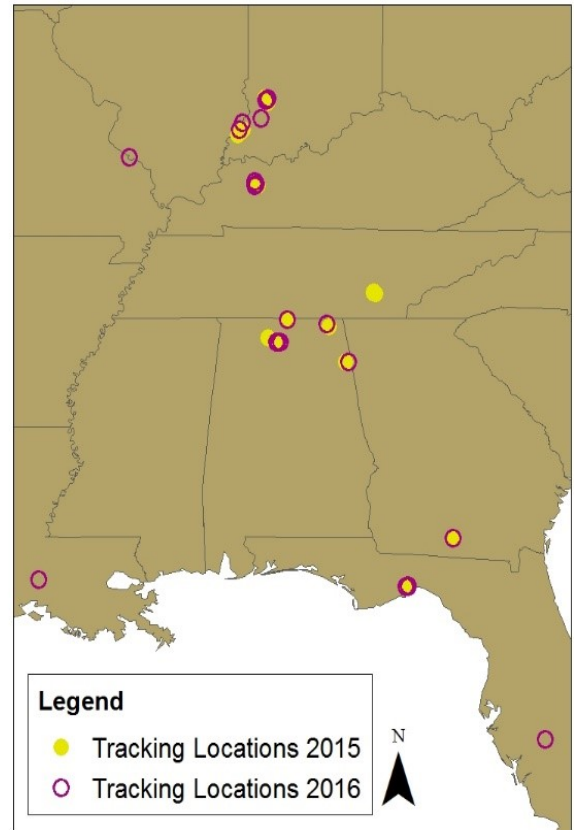


Fig. 1. Map of tracking locations in 2015 and 2016.



Fig. 2. W10-15 trailing behind parents (2-04 and 25-09) in Kentucky.

Regional Reports *continued*

Special thanks to the International Crane Foundation, Nemours Wildlife Foundation, Clemson University Department of Forestry and Environmental Conservation, St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge, Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Fish and Wildlife, as well as local landowners and volunteers.

Louisiana Whooping Crane Update

Eva Szyszkoski, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Autumn 2015 - As of 15 September 2015, the Louisiana non-migratory population consisted of a maximum of 37 cranes (16 males, 21 females) including 26 whooping cranes in Louisiana, 6 in Texas, and 5 not recently reported.

2015 Cohort – On 3 December, 11 juveniles (3 male, 8 female) arrived from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. They were placed in the top-netted portion of the release pen upon arrival and received their permanent bands and transmitters on 7 December. They were released from the top-netted pen on 29 December. Food was provided in the open pen until 10 February and then allowed to run out. Once food was discontinued, the juveniles began exploring the surrounding area but mainly remained on White Lake property. At least 19 different adults or sub-adults were documented visiting the pen site during December through February.

On 22 February, female L1-15 was found weakened, unable to fly, and having difficulty breathing. She had arrived in Louisiana with a pre-existing respiratory condition which had seemed to improve prior to shipment. After her arrival, her condition deteriorated and she lost her voice in mid-January. The decision was made to euthanize her and necropsy results indicated the presence of aspergillosis in her respiratory system.

As of 29 February, the remaining 10 juveniles had split into three separate groups. Female L4-15 broke off from the rest and was observed alone on the far western edge of the White Lake property. Male L7-15 and females L8-15, L10-15 and L11-15 formed one group, while males L2-15, L3-15 and females L5-15, L6-15 and L9-15 formed another. These two groups have been spending most of their time in the east marsh, across from the White Lake refuge and ENE of the pen.

Return from Texas – Females L5-12 and L6-12 returned to Louisiana from Denton and Ellis Counties, Texas on 19 September and 16 October, respectively.

HY2014 cranes L1, 12, 13 and 14 remained in Jefferson County, Texas until L12-14 split from the group and returned to Louisiana on 29 December. Female L1-14 and male L14-14 were shot and killed in Jefferson County on 11 January. Male L13-14 left the area shortly after, returning to Louisiana by 17 January.

Captures – Twelve free-flying cranes were captured for banding and transmitter replacement on 18 days of attempts between 2 October 2015 and 17 February 2016. Six of those were captured at the White Lake pensite.

Reproduction – Similar to last year, nesting began early in 2016. Pair L3-11 and L1-13 were observed on a nest in a private crawfish field in Allen Parish on 12 February. Pair L7-11 and L8-11 also began nesting in February with initiation on the 28th.

At least two other pairs have built nesting platforms but have not yet laid eggs. Based on current associations, there is a potential for up to 10 breeding pairs this spring.

Mortalities – Mortalities from mid-September-February included two females and one male in Louisiana and one male and one female in Texas. One long-term missing female was also removed from the population totals in early February. The deaths in Texas were due to gunshot.

Current Population Size – As of 29 February 2016, the Louisiana non-migratory population consisted of a maximum of 42 cranes (17 males, 25 females).

L7-11 & L8-11's nest in a crawfish field in Avoyelles Parish. Photo by LDWF/Eva Szyszkoski



Mississippi Sandhill Crane Update

Scott Hereford, Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR, Gautier MS

2015 Nesting. A 6th fledgling of the year for the population appeared in October with its parents 1006 and unbanded – their first fledgling.

Releases. In the 36th year of supplementation, two cohorts of 6 captive-reared juveniles were transferred to the Refuge (all on the Ocean Springs Unit) in November, acclimated for a month and released in early December. Ten of 12 were parent-reared. Six juveniles were transferred from Audubon Species Survival Center, brailed on left wing, weighed, measured, banded, radio-tagged, given MSC IDs 1501-1506, and placed in the Ocean Springs pen for acclimation. Six juveniles were transferred from White Oak, weighed, measured, banded, radio-tagged, given MSC IDs 1507-1512, and placed in the East Flat pen for acclimation. This was the first ever use of a top-netted pen here and the first release from East Flat. Since the pen was top-netted, the cranes were never brailed but left full-winged.



Top-netted release acclimation pen at East Flat area.

For the new pen at East Flat, we adopted the cool design by Dr. Glenn Olsen, Brad Strobel and others used at Necedah NWR to introduce juvenile whooping cranes to potential adoptive parents. We increased the size to 100' by 150' feet with a single piece of 114'x164' netting to form top and sides. The height of the netting varied 8' feet on sides to 10' in the middle.

Regional Reports *continued*

During acclimation, we tested the response of the Ocean Springs cohort to a neutral observer and a tethered dog. This group had received initial predator defense behavior conditioning at Audubon devised by Dr. Jerome Howard, University of New Orleans, along with Audubon staff. The cohort responded by being alert and maintaining at least 50 meter distance.

After debrailing, the juveniles in the Ocean Springs took from zero to 12 days to make their first flight out of the pen, with an average of 5 days. For the East Flat cohort, we opened one side of pen; they walked out of pen and flew immediately – all released.

There was a dramatic difference in the home range between the two cohorts in the first weeks after release. The Ocean Springs cohort was located within 8 acres in and next to the Ocean Springs Pen. The East Flat cohort expanded their home range to over 3000 acres on and near the Ocean Springs Unit. This much larger range may have been affected by their group cohesion and lack of wing brailing. On one of the cranes in the east Flat cohort, we attached a 35 gram backpack mounted solar-powered GPS cellular transmitter that can collect, store and download multiple locations daily.

Jan 2016 Population. There were 133 cranes including 111 banded and 22 unbanded. There were 60 males, 58 females, and 15 unknown sex. Sixty-four cranes were found in the Gautier area, 53 in Ocean Springs, and 16 in Fontainebleau. There were 65 from Audubon SSC, 25 from White Oak, 3 from Patuxent, and 39 wild-hatched. There were 37 pairs (including behavioral only), 24 pairs with an experienced female (38% of population), and 43 cranes (32%) are 3 years old or less.

The 2015 Crane Conservation Report (30 pages) is available through scott_hereford@fws.gov

Cranes in the News

Alleged Shooter of Endangered Whooping Cranes to be Prosecuted Under Endangered Species Act: International Crane Foundation Commends Federal Prosecutors

Texas (22 January 2016) — The case against the alleged shooter of two endangered Whooping Cranes in Texas this month (11 January) has been re-filed under the Endangered Species Act, which increases the likelihood of larger penalties for the crime. It was previously thought that the case against Mr. Trey Frederick would be tried solely as a Class B Misdemeanor under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which was widely considered an insufficient course of action.

“If we hope to deter future shootings, perpetrators must be prosecuted vigorously. In all cases of Whooping Crane shootings, we demand justice for the birds that were killed, restitution for the enormous effort needed to bring them back, and personal penalties that match the seriousness of the crime,” said Rich Beilfuss, President & CEO of the International Crane Foundation.

The two cranes deliberately shot in Texas were members of the recently reintroduced Louisiana flock which numbers just about 30. Over the past five years, more than 20 Whooping Cranes have been shot and killed in the United States.

“Whooping Cranes are an iconic species, central to our shared natural heritage. We are grateful to the thousands of citizens who have demanded justice in this case and thank federal authorities for continuing to pursue a just outcome. It’s our hope that by working together, we can prevent future tragedies like these shootings,” Beilfuss added.

ICF news release (edited), Anne Sayers

A recent communication from Anne Sayers, Direction of Marketing and Communications, ICF, with the following letter from Liz Smith attached: **“As the pre-trial hearing date approaches (Monday, March 21 at 2:00 pm in Beaumont, Texas) for the accused poacher of two Endangered Whooping Cranes, we are continuing to make the case that in order to deter future shootings, the shooter must be prosecuted vigorously. “**

March 16, 2016

Magistrate Judge Zack Hawthorn
The Jack Brooks Federal Building & United States Courthouse
300 Willow Street, Suite 234
Beaumont, TX 77701

RE: United States vs. Trey Joseph Frederick

Dear Judge Hawthorn,

The illegal shooting of two Endangered Whooping Cranes in Jefferson County in January 2016 represents an enormous loss on multiple fronts. These birds were part of the reintroduced non-migratory flock of Whooping Cranes in Louisiana that previously numbered just 46. The shooter did not just kill two birds. The shooter stole the deep monetary investment of governments and nonprofit organizations in Canada and the United States. The shooter endangered the very existence of this struggling species. The shooter stripped hope from the thousands upon thousands of individuals who have poured time, money, and energy into the recovery of these magnificent birds who are an intrinsic piece of our shared natural heritage.

The tumultuous history of the Whooping Crane illustrates the magnitude of this loss. A fixture in North American skies and wetlands for millions of years, unregulated hunting and habitat loss sent Whooping Cranes to the edge of extinction in the 1940s, with less than 20 left in existence. With significant investments of time and resources, Whooping Crane recovery efforts have slowly increased their numbers. Today, the Whooping Crane remains one of the rarest birds in North America, currently numbering about 450 in the wild.

Shootings contributed to the historic decline of Whooping Cranes, and remain one of the most significant threats to Whooping Cranes today. Since 1967, when the Whooping Crane was listed as a federally endangered species, there have been 26 confirmed shooting cases of Whooping Cranes in the United States and Canada:

- Illegal shootings represent 19% of the known mortalities from the eastern migratory population of Whooping Cranes, which is the population that was reintroduced into the eastern United States.
- The Aransas-Wood Buffalo population, the last remaining wild flock that winters on the Gulf Coast of Texas, also often experiences losses through illegal shootings.
- The non-migratory, reintroduced population of Whooping Cranes that lives in Louisiana has had the highest shooting rate of any of the populations, with 8 Whooping Cranes being poached since the reintroduction began in 2011. That number includes the two Whooping Cranes illegally shot on January 10 of this year. At the end of 2015, there were just 46 birds in the Louisiana flock, with 3 considered “long term missing,” but not yet declared dead. In any case, the recent shooting of the 2 Whooping Cranes represents a loss of more than 4% of the entire flock.

In recent years, shooting incidents have increased at an alarming rate. Whooping Cranes typically live 20- 30 years in the wild and do not begin reproducing until 4 or 5 years of age. Therefore, the loss of every individual has a devastating impact on the future of this species. We simply cannot guarantee the recovery of this species if poaching continues at the current rate. **In order to deter future perpetrators of this crime it is imperative that the shooter is prosecuted vigorously.**

The figure of \$85,000 was arrived at when a judge consulted with the International Crane Foundation, asking us for the cost of raising a Whooping Crane chick in captivity and releasing it into the wild. The fine in this case went towards

Whooping Crane conservation, allowing us in some small way to make up for the loss of a Whooping Crane from the wild population. It also served as a significant deterrent, in combination with the other punishments the man had to serve in this case. In most cases a perpetrator is never identified, which contributes to the unfortunate message that this is not a serious crime. The swift identification of a perpetrator in this case gives us the opportunity to send a much needed message, that shooting a Whooping Crane, similar to shooting a Bald Eagle, is not only a loss to the local community, it is a crime that has significant personal consequences. For your reference, I have attached a document that highlights the costs of Whooping Crane recovery, including costs of the Louisiana Program.

The American public is watching the outcome of this case closely because for them, like us, this case represents how our nation values our natural heritage. My colleagues and I do this work each day because we are fighting for future generations. We want them to be able to experience the joy of seeing a five foot tall, snow white bird – an ancient symbol of hope – foraging in a wetland or soaring overhead. It's their right. The shooter who put that future, and their rights, in jeopardy must be prosecuted vigorously.

Thank you for your serious consideration of this grave matter.

Sincerely,

Dr. Elizabeth H. Smith

Texas Program Director

Agreement Gives Hope to Whoopers and Their Fans

Corpus Christi, TEXAS (24 February 2016) — The endangered whooping crane now has a seat at the negotiating table alongside authorities who manage the flow of freshwater into their winter home.

After years of legal battles over water allocation for cranes and other wildlife in the San Antonio Bay estuary, the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and The Aransas Project announced Wednesday an agreement that could change how Texas balances the needs of man and nature, said Jim Blackburn, lead attorney for The Aransas Project, a Rockport-based nonprofit group of environmentalists, business owners, anglers and conservationists.

"We've agreed to talk about virtually all the issues in a good-faith effort to come up with solutions after all these years of fighting," Blackburn said. "This is about changing the way we've been doing things historically with respect to water rights and how water is allocated."

The two groups became adversaries in 2010 when the Aransas coalition filed a lawsuit accusing the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the river authority of withholding freshwater meant to nourish the San Antonio Bay estuary that, in turn, nourishes the only wild flock of endangered whooping cranes during their winter stay in Texas. An estimated 23 birds died during the winter of 2008-09 when drought conditions and lagging freshwater inflows brought high salinity to the marshes, which dramatically reduced the numbers of blue crabs and wolf berries. These are mainstays of the cranes' diet.

Initially, in 2013, Senior U.S. District Judge Janis Graham Jack upheld the group's claim, suggesting the state was, at least, partially to blame for the deaths in violation of the Endangered Species Act. That decision was overturned by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals based in New Orleans. An attempt to have the case heard by the U.S. Supreme Court failed in June.

This week's nonbinding agreement focuses generally on identifying creative ways to tap into or create nontraditional water sources to meet the growing needs of businesses and communities, while allowing for healthy bays and estuaries. The title of the six-page agreement indicates the span of its intended reach: "Water, Habitat, Economy — A Shared Vision of the Future for the Guadalupe River System and San Antonio Bay."

The agreement represents hope for whooping cranes and the people who protect them, said Chester McConnell, president of Friends of the Wild Whoopers, a nonprofit based in Alabama.

"Nobody knows the issues surrounding whooping cranes and water better than Jim Blackburn," McConnell said. "So if he's behind this agreement, then we put our full faith behind it and hope for a good outcome."

The document suggests the two parties share a belief and vision that solutions will come from the agreement. Blackburn said reaching common goals could become challenging at times, but suggested the gap separating the two parties is much narrower now.

"We're very serious about this," said Todd H. Votteler, executive manager of science, intergovernmental relations and policy for the river authority. "The litigation is done, so now we're going to focus on the things that we agree on." Votteler said he expects some unhappiness from people on both sides regarding parts of the agreement. And some might be leery of the process or the outcome. But he suggested that's to be expected with such a controversial and emotional issue.

Much of the agreement is written in broad language, with many references to research and analysis to be conducted to find innovative solutions. These might include returning prairies within the watershed to native conditions to provide greater retention of groundwater.

In turn, Blackburn said this natural storage system could replenish seeps and springs, which could translate to improved freshwater flows for the estuary. This would require engaging private landowners and offering incentives to restore native prairies.

The agreement touches on climate change and ways to offset the consequences of drought and sea-level rise. There is a section on moving or channeling water within the Guadalupe River Delta, possibly to expand or create new habitat for the growing flock of whooping cranes.

This effort might include looking at alternative habitats for cranes in other river basins and estuaries along the coast to offset habitat loss from a rising sea. This might include identifying willing buyers and sellers of land for this use. To achieve this shared vision of stewardship, the agreement mentions a need to seek funding through federal, state and private sources.

Either party can withdraw from the agreement at any time. And the document may be altered or revised to reflect changing views or circumstances.

"This is an opportunity that may never come around again for us to really change things in Texas," Blackburn said. "We're all guilty sometimes of not being creative enough in our search for solutions. This is an opening to change that. It's the beginning of a dialogue rather than an endpoint, and a huge step forward from where we were. It's remarkable in that way."

From an article (edited) in the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, by David Sikes. Contributed by Tom Stehn

In Memory of Robert Kruidenier

In February 2015, Robert Kruidenier Jr. passed away at the age of 68. Robert was a special person in the world of cranes in North America. He was not a trained biologist or a professional researcher. His passions were raptors, photography and cranes. I met Robert in the late 1990's at Bosque del Apache NWR where he was a resident volunteer naturalist. He was immensely curious about the migration and behavior of Sandhill Cranes and made it one of his missions in life to show as many people as possible the beauty and wonder of cranes. Eventually, he and I teamed up and started presenting Crane Behavior Workshops at the Festival of the Cranes at the Bosque – a highly popular 6-hour workshop now on its 17th year. My favorite memory of Robert is of him reading aloud from *Crane Music*, Paul Johnsgard's classic book about Sandhill Cranes and the Platte, as our bus full of excited 'craniacs-to-be' headed out to watch cranes in the November pre-dawn darkness. Robert's slow and careful Alabama drawl made the words come alive. His other crane passion was finding leg and neck bands, and many a researcher found themselves contacted by Robert as he worked to find the age and nesting area of each marked crane. I'd like you all to know that Robert contributed thousands of hours of his time to helping people better understand cranes. He did all of this while battling Parkinson's disease. He never complained or used his condition as an excuse. He was a unique and special man – and the general public's understanding of cranes is better because of him.

Paul Tebbel, February 2016

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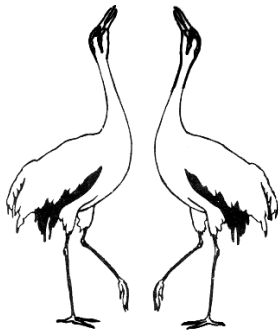
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