

THE UNISON CALL

- Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

Vol. 33, No. 1
Spring 2026

President's Report

Hello everyone!

Spring is springing here in the Midwest, and I hope you all are doing well and are starting to get excited about our upcoming North American Crane Workshop! I'm looking forward to seeing you all in Rockport, Texas, 7-10 December 2026. It's bound to be a great time seeing Whooping Cranes at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge along the Gulf Coast, while we catch up with one another and share the latest on crane research and conservation here in North America.

The NACWG Board has been working with our partners on the local host committee to make plans for the workshop. We will hold our welcome social on 7 December 2026, followed by two days of presentations for the scientific program, and then a field trip on 10 December 2026. Abstract submission and registration will open on 1 June 2026, and abstracts will be due on 31 July 2026. You will be able to find the abstract submission portal linked on our website (nacwg.org). Thanks to everyone who is working to plan logistics for the conference and field trip, coordinate the awards committee, and develop the scientific program! If you'd like to get involved or have any questions in the meantime, please feel free to reach out. Otherwise, we will send announcements via email, so please keep an eye out for those in the coming months.

We would also like to extend our gratitude for the work done by the Whooping Crane Conservation Association (WCCA), and a hearty welcome to our new members who came to us by way of the WCCA. Whooping Cranes have benefited greatly from the remarkable dedication of the WCCA to their protection and conservation. Please find more details about the history and dissolution of the WCCA in the article in this edition of *The Unison Call*.

As always, the Board of Directors welcomes your input on the North American Crane Working Group. If there is something we can do to better connect or serve you, or if there is something you would like to see at our next workshop, please let us know.

Take care,

Hillary Thompson

President, North American Crane Working Group

International Crane Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin

hthompson@savingcranes.org

Announcements

Heads up!

Registration and abstract submission for the 17th North American Crane Workshop in will be open from 1 June to 31 July 2026. Additional details to come.

Nominations for career achievement awards will be open from 1 May to 31 July 2026. Details on award criteria and how to submit a nomination are provided on the following page.

Proceedings still available

The Proceedings of the 16th North American Crane Workshop are available [here!](#)
They are available as downloadable files from the North American Crane Working Group website (www.nacwg.org). Hardcopies of the complete proceedings can also be purchased if preferred.

Cranes in the News

Click the hyperlinks to learn more

[Shooting of LW6-24 in Evangeline Parish, LA](#)

[Shooting of LW4-22 in Evangeline Parish, LA](#)

[Whooping Cranes Winter in Oklahoma for the First Time](#)

[University of Waterloo students track Whooping Crane habitat at Wood Buffalo NP](#)

[Sandhill cranes—one of the last great migrations on earth](#)

[Whooping Crane visits a restored coastal marsh in Michigan](#)

North American Crane Working Group Awards Committee

The awards committee of the North American Crane Working Group will be accepting nominations for three separate career achievement awards. Winners will be selected by a voting committee and presented awards at the forthcoming 17th North American Crane Workshop to be held in December of 2026 in Rockport, Texas. Nominations will be taken for the following awards from 1 May to 31 July 2026.

L. H. Walkinshaw Crane Conservation Award

The proceedings of the First International Crane Workshop were dedicated to Dr. L.H. Walkinshaw as "The Father of International Studies of Gruiformes." He was a mentor to succeeding generations of crane researchers. This award recognizes the outstanding crane biologists following in his footsteps. Criteria for this award include long-term involvement with conservation of cranes through research, management, education, or application of biological principles to the preservation of cranes in North America. This is our top-tier achievement award.

Paul J. Currier Habitat Conservation Award

This new award honors the life and legacy of Dr. Paul J. Currier, who completed his doctoral dissertation on the floodplain vegetation of the Platte River and dedicated the rest of his life to adaptive management of that system for the benefit of cranes, other waterbirds, and wetland vegetation, until his untimely death from a heart condition in 2005. He served as the vegetation ecologist and then Executive Director of the Crane Trust for 23 years. He was a pioneer in using heavy machinery to mimic flood pulses to maintain crane habitat and was involved in early efforts to restore hydrologically functional wet meadows. This award is intended for habitat managers and land conservation practitioners working across crane species' ranges at multiple scales and in diverse roles, including those managing national wildlife refuges, state wildlife management areas, land trusts, private lands, and nonprofit conservation organizations.

George Archibald Special Achievement Award

This award is intended to recognize professionals who have dedicated a significant portion of their life to crane conservation through research, adaptive management, policy, education and outreach, and habitat conservation. This award recognizes those that have made a significant contribution over a period of 15 years or more.

Nomination Process

Nominations should be submitted to the Awards Committee via email at nacwg.board@gmail.com and include an attached 1-page nomination letter that clearly outlines the nominee's achievements and contributions to crane conservation. This letter should describe the individual's impacts regarding crane conservation including applied research, policy, population conservation, habitat management, community outreach, and/or education.

The letter should be tailored to the specific objectives of the award to which the candidate is nominated by a third party – no self-nominations are permitted. Additional context is encouraged, including the nominee’s professional background, major challenges overcome, experience mentoring others, and demonstration of their ability to collaborate across organizations and stakeholders. Submissions must also include the nominee’s contact information and may include supporting materials such as publications or reports as attachments. Letters of support from multiple peers and colleagues are also encouraged as attachments. Nominations will be accepted from 1 May to 31 July 2026. Please feel free to reach out to the awards committee with any questions.

Regional Reports

Update on the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes

Nicki Gordon, Whooping Crane Biologist, International Crane Foundation

Current Population Size and Status

As of 2 April 2026, the estimated population size of the Eastern Migratory Population is 64 (36 females, 25 males, 3 unknown). Fifteen of these individuals are wild-hatched and the rest are captive-reared.

Fall Parent-reared and Captive-reared Releases

Eight captive-reared juvenile cranes were released in Wisconsin into the Eastern Migratory Population during 2025. One of these was parent-reared (36-25), and 7 were costume-reared (30-25, 31-25, 32-25, 34-25, 35-25, 37-25, 38-25) at the International Crane Foundation.

Parent-reared male 36-25 was released in October 2025 on private property in Green Lake County, Wisconsin, near a pair of adult Whooping Cranes. After release, he briefly associated with a different pair of Whooping Cranes. In December, he migrated to Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge in Meigs County, Tennessee, where he remained for the winter alongside two nearby Whooping Cranes. As of April 2026, he is still in Tennessee.

The costume-reared cranes were released in October 2025 at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). One of the costume-reared birds moved to the release site, 33-25, died before release, due to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), and 37-25, died in November at Horicon NWR from a non-HPAI respiratory disease. After release, the costume-reared birds typically remained in a large group with adults 79-19 and 28-24.

Regional Reports *continued*

Male 30-25 and female 38-25 wintered at Wheeler NWR in Limestone County, Alabama, with a large group Whooping Cranes. They are currently still together in Juneau County, Wisconsin. Female 34-25 wintered at Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge in Meigs County, Tennessee, where she was occasionally seen with 24-24. She is currently in Jasper County, Indiana. Female 31-25 wintered in Lake County, Florida, and currently remains there. Female 35-25 and male 32-25 wintered together in Baker County, Georgia. Now, 32-25 is in Marshall County, Kentucky, and 35-25 is in Outagamie County, Wisconsin. We hope to see all of them back in Wisconsin soon!



Release of parent-reared juvenile 36-25 in Green Lake County, Wisconsin, October 2025. Photo by Doug Pellerin.

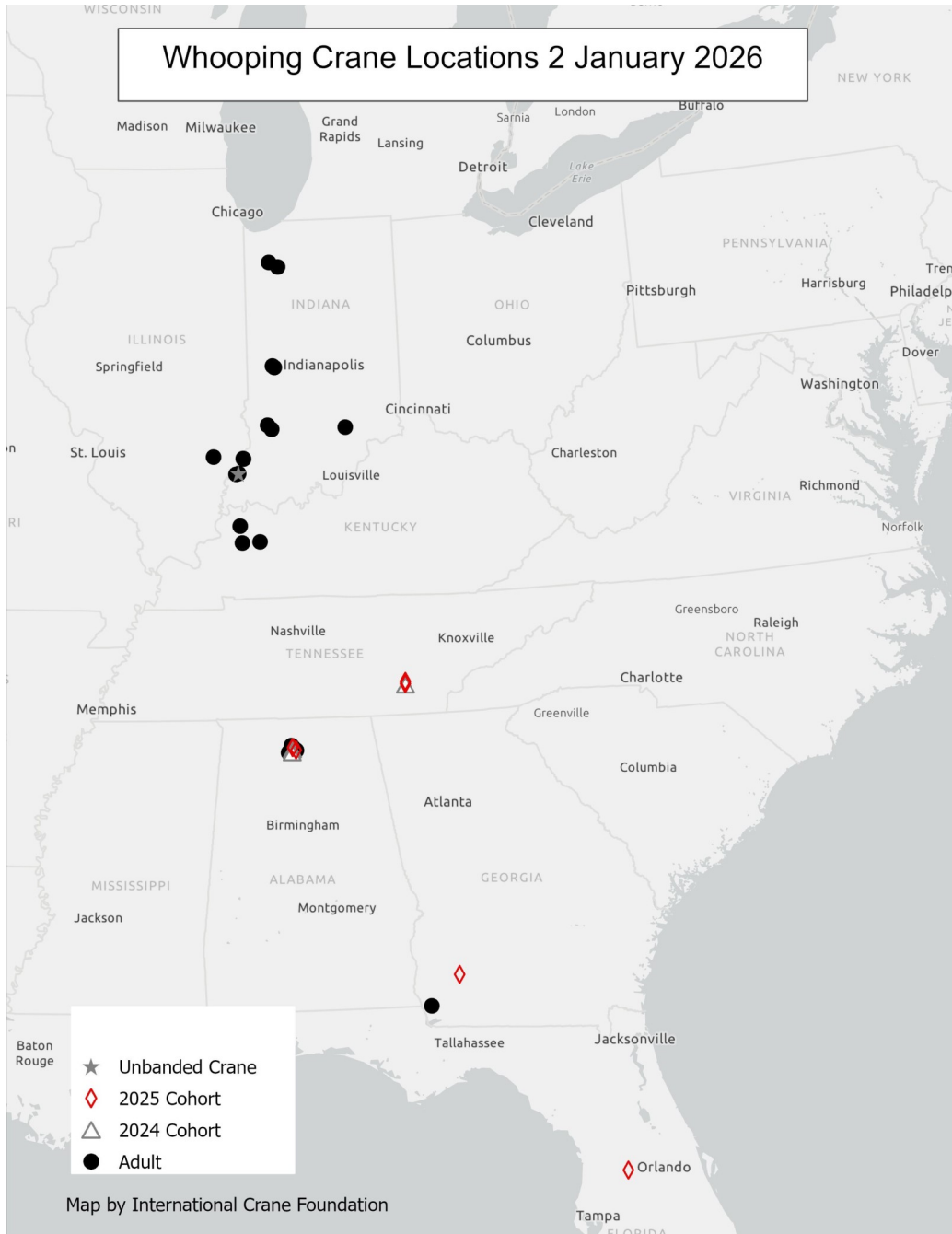
2025 Wild-hatched Cohort

W1-25 hatched in April 2025 in Portage County, Wisconsin, to parents 1-17 and W1-19. W1-25 and parents wintered at Wheeler NWR in Limestone County, Alabama. W1-25 was last seen there in early March. Parents W1-19 and 1-17 migrated north, stopping in Green County, Indiana, before continuing on to their usual territory in Portage County, Wisconsin.

Regional Reports *continued*

Winter Distribution 2025-2026

To the best of our knowledge, 20 Whooping Cranes spent the winter in Alabama, 17 in Indiana, 2 in Illinois, 5 in Kentucky, 3 in Tennessee, 1 in Florida, and 3 in Georgia. Their winter locations are shown on the map below. The highest concentrations of cranes this winter were at Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area in Indiana, on private lands in southwestern Indiana, and Wheeler NWR in Alabama.



Regional Reports *continued*

Louisiana Whooping Crane Update

Sara Zimorski, Biologist, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Current Population Size - As of 2 April 2026, the Louisiana non-migratory population consisted of a maximum of 77 individuals (37 males, 35 females, 5 unknown). Seventy-two of these individuals were located in Louisiana; the remaining 5, all of whom have nonfunctional transmitters, have not recently been confirmed and their current status is unknown. This total does not include up to 11 newly hatched chicks.

Long term use of Texas – In October, male, L1-18 and female, L10-22 returned to Louisiana, after having spent ~4.5 months at the Kosse Mine in Limestone and Robertson counties, Texas. L1-18 had a history of spending time at this location during the spring, summer, and fall in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 and then returned there in May 2025 with his new mate. The pair has consistently used the same area in Cameron Parish since returning to Louisiana, and though both are old enough, they have not yet shown any signs of reproductive activity.

Captive Release – On 4 November 2025, 7 costume reared juvenile cranes (2 males, 5 females) were transported from the Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center in New Orleans to the White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area (WLWCA) in Vermilion Parish. They were banded and placed in the top-netted section of the release pen until their release on 12 November 2025. After being released, male, L2-25 was observed flying with his right leg hanging down significantly, and female, L5-25 was observed flying with both her legs hanging down significantly. While being reared in captivity, both individuals were documented to have what was believed to be a minor injury/incident that resolved quickly and left no visible indication of a problem while standing and walking on the ground. It was only after being released and able to fly freely that the dangly legs were able to be observed, similar to 4 other individuals that have been received for release in Louisiana over the course of the reintroduction.

Following their release, the cohort mainly used the marsh habitat in the unit where the release pen is located, but for several weeks did also regularly use the agricultural fields on the north side of the WLWCA property. However, transmitter data indicated that L5-25 did not typically make those flights of longer distances that were routinely observed and made by the other members of the cohort, including L2-25.

Regional Reports *continued*

Unfortunately, the minimal remains of L2-25 were found in mid-December 2025, and the minimal remains of L5-25 were found in February 2026, with transmitter data later indicating death had occurred in mid-January 2026. The remains of both cranes were located on a treed levee to the west of the release pen. A heavily-used feral hog trail also runs along the levee edge and the marsh where the juveniles spent a lot of time after release. The 5 remaining yearlings have not yet left the WLWCA property but have begun using different parts of the marsh and most recently were observed associating with an unbanded, wild-hatched bird.

Translocated Florida Cranes – Of the 6 adult cranes moved from the Florida non-migratory population to Louisiana, 2 remain alive. LFW12-15 was moved to Louisiana in February 2019. She has nested with her mate each year since 2021, but has not yet had much reproductive success, hatching only 1 chick in 2024. Twenty-six year old male, LF1-00, was moved to Louisiana in March 2025. His mate/associate, LW1-24 died in December. Following her death, he was observed several times with an unbanded, wild-hatched bird, but was most recently observed alone; so, although there is still time, it seems less likely that he'll have a mate and attempt to nest this spring.

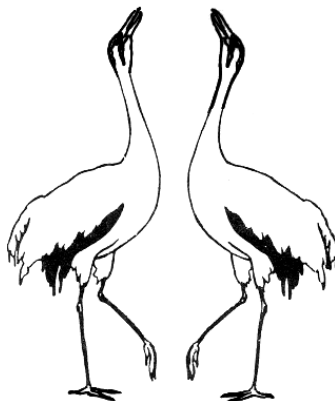
Mortalities – Five mortalities occurred during the period of October 2025 through March 2026. Four were younger (4 years of age or younger), unpaired birds, and included 2 wild-hatched males, both of whom were confirmed to have been shot. The fifth individual was a young, wild-hatched female who was associated/recently paired with the 25-year-old male translocated from Florida. Additionally, two birds were removed from the population total, a yearling female, missing since May 2025, and 27-year-old female, LF1-98, reported missing and presumed dead in the last update.

Reproduction – The 2026 nesting season, once again set a new earlier than ever start record with pair, L6-16/L16-17 initiating their first nest of the season on 9 January 2026. As of 2 April 2026, 18 pairs have initiated 23 nests, 18 first nests and 5 renests, with 9 chicks visually confirmed hatching to 6 pairs and 2 additional chicks believed to have hatched to another pair, based on evidence observed at the nest. Nine pairs are currently incubating and with the Louisiana nesting season typically lasting into June, there is still plenty of time for additional nests.

Regional Reports *continued*



Female, L11-11 with 4 day old LW1-26, Jefferson Davis Parish, 21 March 2026. Photo by Sara Zimorski.



Unusual Behavior by One Pair in the Louisiana Non-Migratory Population

Female L5-14 and male L12-16 have nested every year since 2018, when they successfully fledged a chick. From 2019 through 2025, however, they have not repeated that success, only hatching 3 chicks from 30 attempts, and none making it to fledge. They have also had an extraordinarily high number of nests fail with eggs ending up in the water.

This spring, they initiated their first nest on 11 March 2026. When I observed the nest on 12 March, it did not look well formed. On 16 March, I found the pair working on the nest, but the female was exhibiting some odd behavior: she was pulling up vegetation and moving it toward the nest, then turning around and pulling large chunks back off. She alternated this behavior several times until the male stepped up on the nest for his turn at incubation. Two days later, the nest was in terrible condition. On my first pass that day, I was certain I was about to watch the eggs roll into the water as the female got off and on and then off again and began piling vegetation on the edges. About 2.5 hours later, I went by again, and the eggs were in the water.

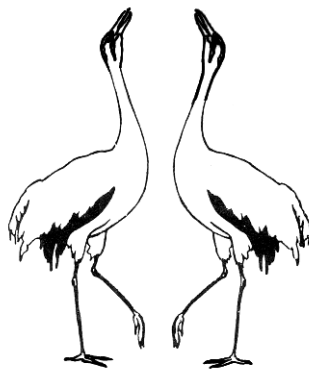
Just a week later, a cluster of transmitter points in a crawfish field suggested the pair might be trying again, but the male stopped using the location after only a couple of days. Knowing this pair's history, I walked out to check the location the following week, and found a small but fairly sturdy platform - and a single egg in the water at the edge of the nest. In perhaps what might be the strangest twist yet, the female laid the second egg of the clutch on a field levee to the north, where I observed the male incubating while the female foraged to the west. I was fairly certain I would find an egg out there, but still walked far enough into the field to confirm it with my own eyes, and sure enough, they were nesting on the levee. On the bright side (if there is one) there is no vegetation for the female to pull apart, so perhaps, in her own unconventional way, she has finally found the perfect nest site, as long as they are able to keep land predators away. This pair continues to be one of the most puzzling in the population.

Eva Szyszkoski, Biologist

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries



Pair L5-14 and L12-16 with their nest on a levee in Jefferson Davis Parish. Photo by Eva Szyszkoski, LDWF.



The Relationship Between Cranes and Geese During the Breeding Season

A passage from George Archibald

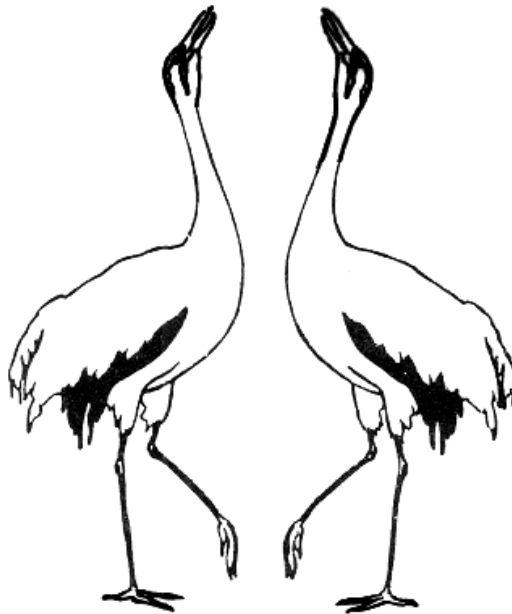
Dr. Bernhard Wessling observed a pair of Eurasian Cranes that were raising two colts in a meadow near Hamburg Germany, evict a flock of Graylag Geese after one of their colts was predated by a fox. Prior to their loss, the crane ignored the geese although a fox had been taking goslings.

A researcher at Necedah National Refuge told me a pair of Whooping Cranes destroyed a clutch of eggs of a pair of Canadian Geese.

In Russia I observed a nesting pair of Demoiselle Cranes chasing Swan Geese for the vicinity of their nest. In like manner, I observed a breeding pair of Whooping Cranes chase Canadian Geese from their breeding area near Baraboo, Wisconsin.

If readers of *The Unison Call* have observations of the relationship of cranes to geese during the breeding season, please share such for the next issue of *The Unison Call*. I wonder if increases in a goose population might negatively affect the breeding success of cranes from predation.

- Dr. George Archibald



The Whooping Crane Conservation Association Ends Its Long Run



WCCA members and other craniacs — participants of the Sixth North American Crane Workshop held in Regina, Saskatchewan — in front of ‘Walter’ the Whooping Crane at Govan, Sask., October 1991. The local Optimist club commissioned and erected Walter in 1987 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Last Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary west of the town. The statue was created by Merv Prychak of Wynyard, Sask. Walter continues to fly proudly at the intersection of Hwy-20 and Elgin Street, welcoming visitors to Govan. You can also see Walter on Google Earth’s Street View. Photo by Lorne Scott.

After more than 6 decades of engagement to safeguard Whooping Cranes and their habitats, the Whooping Crane Conservation Association has ceased operations.

We, the WCCA Board, took the necessary legal steps to dissolve the WCCA and divest the WCCA’s holdings (see Table of Disbursements below), a process that was finalized by the State of New Mexico on 20 November 2025. We were guided in this task by attorney Peter N. Ives of Santa Fe, NM, himself a long-time conservation advocate. A special thanks to our friend and colleague Jim Lewis, WCCA Trustee Emeritus, for his support of this action.

We are extremely grateful to all our supporters, who over many years gave generously to the WCCA, including to our habitat acquisition initiative to provide tangible benefits for Whooping Cranes. Accordingly, we, after careful evaluation and much discussion, chose to donate the majority of WCCA funds to support two specific habitat purchases: Whooping Crane winter habitat in coastal Texas and stopover habitat along the Platte River in Nebraska. The remaining funds have been disbursed to crane-related organizations whose conservation goals align with our own, including the North American Crane Working Group. Here, we would like to extend our sincere appreciation to President Hillary Thompson and the NACWG Board for adopting WCCA life members who opted to join the NACWG.

Founded in 1961 (incorporated in 1966), the all-volunteer WCCA was the creation of a small group of leading American and Canadian wildlife biologists and ornithologists, members of the 'Whooper Club' dedicated to saving the Whooping Crane from looming extinction.

In 1961 there were only three-dozen Whooping Cranes in the Aransas–Wood Buffalo flock, the last remaining wild population. At that time, the WCCA was the only organization devoted exclusively to the conservation of the endangered Whooping Crane. It advocated for the cranes and provided vital information for both WCCA members and the public.

Today, there is a robust Canada–USA Whooping Crane recovery program as well as several vibrant crane-conservation organizations that are carrying on those roles.

Most importantly, the Aransas–Wood Buffalo flock has grown steadily since the 1960s. The population now includes (at least) 115 nesting pairs in northern Canada, a record count this past summer! Meaning there are (at least) 230 reproductively active Whooping Cranes on the boreal plains. And last year's (2024–2025 season) USFWS Whooping Crane survey of the wintering grounds at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge produced a record estimate of 557 individuals (range 479 to 645).

Furthermore, partnerships involving state and federal agencies, private conservation groups, and leading zoos are continuing their efforts to establish two additional self-sustaining Whooping Crane flocks in the United States: the Eastern Migratory Population and the Louisiana Non-migratory Population.

Though challenges are ever-present and new ones will emerge, there is good reason for optimism that the Whooping Crane will continue to thrive in the wild. For our part, we craniacs must continue to enlist broad public support for this magnificent species, redouble our efforts to protect vital crane habitat, and maintain rigorous monitoring of flock health and numbers.

Daryl Henderson, President (nysquirrel1@gmail.com)

Tom Leiden, Secretary (tmleiden16@gmail.com)

Jane Chandler, Treasurer

Brian Johns, Trustee

Lorne Scott, Trustee (lorne.scott@sasktel.net)

Tom Stehn, Trustee

Walter Sturgeon, Trustee (sturgeon2@embarQmail.com)

Recipient	Donation	Purpose
Crane Trust	\$90,000	Habitat acquisition — Backbar Farm parcels, Platte River, Nebraska
Friends of Aransas NWR	\$5,000	Repair of two freshwater wells on the refuge
International Crane Foundation	\$150,000	Habitat acquisition — Lane Road Tract property (Wolfberry Whooping Crane Sanctuary), near Aransas NWR, Texas
International Crane Foundation	\$7,070	Habitat management — Wolfberry Whooping Crane Sanctuary
Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Foundation	\$14,000	GPS transmitters for Whooping Cranes
Nature Saskatchewan	~\$22,000	Whooping Crane-related research projects in Canada
North American Crane Working Group	\$20,000	Core activities (workshops, publications)
Smithsonian National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute	\$2,000	Six camera sets for monitoring crane breeding behavior and chick rearing
University of Waterloo, Ontario	~\$2,200	Support of graduate student research on the Whooping Crane breeding grounds

Table of Disbursements, WCCA, provided by Daryl Henderson

Upcoming Events

[50th Annual Midwest Crane Count](#)

Where: Spans 150+ counties in the upper Midwest, in Wisconsin and parts of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio

When: Saturday April 18th 2026 from 5:30AM—7:30AM CT

[ICF Crane Discovery Center Opening Day](#)

Where: Baraboo, Wisconsin

When: Friday May 1st 2026

[An Evening with the Cranes](#)

Where: ICF Global Headquarters in Baraboo, WI

When: Saturday June 20th 2026 from 4:00PM—7:00PM CT

[29th Annual Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival](#)

Where: Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Alaska

When: August 16th—23rd 2026

[Yampa Valley Crane Festival](#)

Where: Steamboat Springs/Hayden/Craig, Colorado

When: September 3rd—6th 2026

[9th Annual Greater Yellowstone Crane Festival](#)

Where: Teton Valley, Idaho

When: September 23rd—26th 2026

[Great Midwest Crane Fest](#)

Where: Baraboo, WI

When: Saturday November 14th & Sunday the 15th from 8:30AM—4:30PM CT

You are invited to join the North American Crane Working Group

Membership is based on a calendar year.

Dues: _____ Student \$10; _____ Active \$20; _____ Sustaining \$30; _____ Other >\$30

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____ Zip/Postal Code: _____

Country: _____

Email: _____ (required to receive the newsletter)

Phone: (_____) _____

Become a member online at www.nacwg.org or mail completed form and check (US\$ payable to **NACWG**) to:

Stephanie Schmidt, International Crane Foundation, E11376 Shady Lane Rd, Baraboo, WI 53913, USA

Board of Directors

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Vice President: Andy Caven

Treasurer: Stephanie Schmidt

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Antonio Cantu

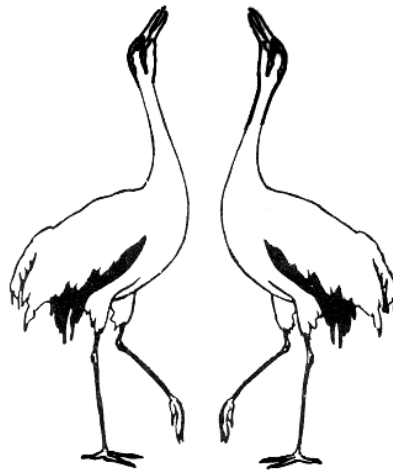
Eva Szyszkoski

Glenn Olsen

Megan Brown

Jeannie van Vianen

Webmaster: Richard Urbanek



***The Unison Call* is published semi-annually by the NACWG; Eva Szyszkoski & Sara Gomez-Maier, Editors**

The Unison Call is a forum to share news, updates, and opinions. It is published twice annually by the **North American Crane Working Group**, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization incorporated in Wisconsin. Electronic (PDF) versions 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 the NACWG.** Comments and contributions are always welcome; please send to Eva Szyszkoski (eszyszkoski@wlf.la.gov) and/or Sara Gomez-Maier (sgomezmaier@savingcranes.org).