

# THE UNISON CALL

- Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

Fall / Winter 2014-15

Vol. 25 No. 2

## Editor's Note — February 2015

**R**oswell, New Mexico is renowned for its alien visitors, and this winter was no exception, when a Eurasian Crane (Common Crane) was spotted in the area mingling with Sandhill Cranes, including at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge (see page 3). According to Bill Flynt of Friends of Bitter Lake NWR, the wayward bird was last seen 29 January in flight above the refuge. Bill was able to view and photograph the bird on only 3 occasions out of 20 attempts to locate it. Many other birders, who came from near and far to see the crane, were not so fortunate, having failed to find the bird at all.

A skookum crane-viewing event, which in terms of awe might just rival the annual spring gathering of Sandhill Cranes along Nebraska's Platte River, was recently announced by Parks Canada: 'The Wood Buffalo Whooping Crane Experience' (see pages 4-5). A series of limited guided tours will allow, for the first time, public viewing of wild Whooping Crane adults and chicks on their nesting grounds. It's too early to say whether these intrusions could adversely affect the cranes in some way — Parks Canada has made some dubious decisions of late in other areas — but what a boreal treat it promises to be, northern mosquitoes and black flies be damned!

For other unique crane experiences, why not join George Archibald on one of his upcoming adventures? Kari Stauffer at ICF extends the following invitation on behalf of George:

*Dr. George Archibald, Co-Founder and Senior Conservationist at the International Crane Foundation, invites you to join him in his world travels, engaging fellow scientists and citizens in the struggle to save cranes and their habitats.*

*In March of 2015, Dr. Archibald invites you to join him in Kearney, Nebraska for the great Sandhill Crane migration. In addition to crane viewing, trip participants will also visit leks of the Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie Chicken.*

*June brings the opportunity to view possibly 5 crane species in Mongolia. This 10-day expedition will involve camping in tents and traditional ger camps between treks across the expansive steppe in 4x4 vehicles. Views of the reintroduced Przewalski's horse are also expected.*

*Dr. Archibald's favorite destination in the month of November is the Cloud Kingdom of Bhutan, where he will lead a small tour from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> of the month. Along with the many excellent birding opportunities, a highlight of the journey will be the Black-necked Crane Festival in the Phobjikha valley.*

*Travels in 2016 will include these and other destinations that highlight ICF projects and crane conservation priority sites. If you would like more information on how you may join one of Dr. Archibald's tours, please contact Kari Stauffer at [kstauffer@savingcranes.org](mailto:kstauffer@savingcranes.org) or 608-356-9462, ext. 115.*

Daryl Henderson

## Kachemak Crane Watch to release new video

This spring, Kachemak Crane Watch will release its new 20-minute video, “A Fledge for Freedom: A Young Sandhill Crane’s Quest for Flight.” Each year, when Lesser Sandhill Cranes arrive in Homer, Alaska for the short breeding season, mated pairs return to their territories or claim a new nesting area, mate, and then go about the business of incubating their eggs and raising their young.

Raising a family of one or two colts is filled with challenges, from bad weather to plentiful predators. Following hatching, the adults nurture their young, feeding and protecting them until they are strong enough to fly the 2400 mile journey to their wintering grounds in California. Find out more about these challenges and enjoy a peek at a colt’s intensive flight training. The video will be shown in Homer in May 2015 and then will be available on YouTube.



“A Fledge for Freedom” was filmed and edited by Nina Faust, whose previous film, “Raising Kid Colt: A Story of a Young Sandhill Crane,” has been show at numerous Sandhill Crane Festivals. Find out more about Kachemak Crane Watch at: [www.cranewatch.org](http://www.cranewatch.org)

**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](http://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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## Common Crane at Bitter Lake NWR

A common crane (*Grus grus*) was observed near Roswell, New Mexico on 30 November 2014 and was still in the Roswell area as of 17 January 2015. This is the second record of a common crane near Roswell; the first was on 10 March 1961. The crane roosted with sandhill cranes at Bitter Lake NWR and foraged with sandhill cranes in agricultural fields near Roswell. Corn was grown for cattle feed (silage) on most of these fields. The corn stalks were harvested in September, the stubble was disked, and most of these former corn fields were planted in a green crop such as wheat or barley by the end of October.

Sandhill crane numbers in the Roswell area (Bitter Lake NWR and nearby off-refuge roosts) peaked at 24,720 on 19 November 2014 and declined to 7,415 by 14 January 2015.

Jim Montgomery, Roswell, NM



*Bill Flynt, the president of the Friends of Bitter Lake NWR, was kind enough to allow us to reproduce the above copyrighted image. Bill wrote:*

The picture was taken on the afternoon of 14 January on Baker Road just north of East Grand Plains Road in Chaves County southeast of Roswell. The flock has been spending most of its days feeding in cultivated fields in the East Grand Plains area. They usually spend the night on Unit Seven at Bitter Lake NWR.

It has been interesting having the crane here. I have met a lot of nice birders from all across the country who have come to see it. I know all of them haven't found it during their stay here and feel so sorry for them. There have been people here that I got to visit with from other parts of New Mexico, California, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, South Carolina, New Jersey, Illinois and several additional states.

*Thanks to Jim Montgomery and Bill Flynt of Roswell, NM for this interesting report (communicated January 2015).*

## THE WOOD BUFFALO WHOOPING CRANE EXPERIENCE

Parks Canada is now offering guided tours of the Whooping Crane nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park. The tours will originate from Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, and visitors must arrange their own travel to Fort Smith (e.g., via air from Edmonton, Alberta). The prices indicated below are in Canadian dollars (1 CAD is currently approx. 0.80 USD).

The following information is from the Parks Canada website and a brochure, *The Wood Buffalo Whooping Crane Experience* (available at the website).

[http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/nt/woodbuffalo/ne/WC\\_Exp.aspx](http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/nt/woodbuffalo/ne/WC_Exp.aspx)

**The endangered whooping crane continues to make a remarkable recovery “back from the brink”. Visit their amazing summer nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park and experience first-hand this important conservation achievement.**

**For the first time ever,** visitors will be guided to the secluded summer nesting grounds of the iconic whooping crane. Parks Canada is offering a package tour for those who would like to:

- Learn more about the wild WBNP whooping crane flock and the conservation efforts that have kept their population on the rise
- Fly over the nesting grounds in a fixed wing airplane or helicopter for a look at the whooping cranes in their unique nesting and rearing habitat with a Parks Canada guide
- Land via helicopter in the nesting grounds to see the unique whooping crane habitat up close OR hike to a blind to hopefully view whooping cranes on their nest or see parents and fledglings forage for food
- Go flightseeing over the Salt Plains, an ancient inland sea bed, and perhaps see non-nesting whooping cranes
- Heli-hike to the Salt Plains largest salt mound for a taste
- Play a role in the conservation of Whooping Cranes

All Whooping Crane Experience tours depart from Fort Smith, NT (these dates are approximate).

### **Airplane Flyover Trip**

- June 1 - 4
- August 17 - 20
- August 24 - 27

### **Heli-Flight Trips – land in the nesting ground OR Heli-Hike Trips – hike to a whooping crane blind**

- May 25-May 28

Wood Buffalo National Park is ready to present to you a never-before offered experience of a lifetime. Celebrate the conservation success story of North America's most iconic bird. Discover the ancient nesting grounds of the whooping crane, the only place in the world where they still nest in the wild. There are three different packages that you can choose from, offered in May, June and August and all are guided by Parks Canada guides.

1. **The Fixed Wing Flyover Tour** will take you over the remote and extremely rare whooping crane nesting area at 1000ft in a single-engine airplane. You will see nesting whooping cranes in May (June? — Ed.) or parents and fledglings in August. The plane tour will also include flying over the park's awe-inspiring Salt Plains and the mighty Slave River rapids, a National Historic Site of Canada. (\$1400)
2. For a closer look, join the **Heli-Flight Tour** to view the nesting area from above, land to see the unique habitat up close and hike to a huge salt mound on the Salt Plains. (\$2900)
3. Go on a **Heli-Hike Tour** and land and quietly hike your way through the wetlands to a blind that will be camouflaged into the landscape. From the blind, you may catch a glimpse of a nesting whooping crane or view a family out foraging for food. (\$3900)

## THE HIKE TO THE BLIND

A Parks Canada guided hike to the blind to view whooping cranes is our top of the line experience. This "behind the scenes" opportunity is worthy of any wildlife photographer's bucket list. We have chosen the best, most accessible route to the blind but be prepared to quietly step your way through the boreal wetlands. Don't worry, we will make sure you have all of the right gear for your adventure!

For further information, contact Parks Canada staff at 1-867-872-7960; email [WBNP.info@pc.gc.ca](mailto:WBNP.info@pc.gc.ca)

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The *Edmonton Journal* newspaper published an article about the proposed Wood Buffalo crane tours (appearing online 13 February). The article stated that tours would be limited to 75 persons combined and included the following quote: "I think a lot of our members and others are going to be very interested and excited about the opportunity," said **Barry Hartup**, director of veterinary services for the Wisconsin-based International Crane Foundation.

The few readers' comments posted on the newspaper's web site expressed that the cranes would be better off left alone or criticized the high cost of the tours.

<http://www.edmontonjournal.com/Wood+Buffalo+National+Park+offer+first+whooping+crane+tours/10812764/story.html>

# The Value of Long Term Crane Research

By Jeb Barzen, International Crane Foundation

The International Crane Foundation (ICF) has been studying a marked population of breeding greater sandhill cranes near Briggsville Wisconsin since 1990. We chose to study a breeding population in an area where the breeding density was high and, after the study began, likely reached carrying capacity. The population dynamics for dense breeding populations are generally not well understood for most species and for a long-lived species like sandhill cranes population dynamics are even more poorly understood. Our objectives in this study are to 1) over the lifetime of long-lived cranes, learn about the behavioral and ecological needs of breeding cranes, as well as density-dependent constraints on a population; 2) maintain a functional expertise in field crane biology among ICF staff; and 3) provide training for people wishing to study cranes in the wild. My purpose in this note is to exemplify the value in knowledge gained by maintaining such long-term studies.

In 1990 we captured and color-banded our first family group of cranes in the study area. It wasn't until 1993, however, that we had built up enough marked family groups within our study area to provide a meaningful sample size of 13 marked territories. Since 2003 the number of marked territories that we have consistently followed has been well above 50 (Figure 1). We considered a marked territory as having at least one territorial adult being marked, though most of our territories are occupied by two marked adults. The emphasis on marked territories is important as this metric produces the most accurate breeding estimates possible. When territories are occupied by unmarked birds, it is easy to underestimate the number of territories in an area because adjacent territories may appear to be occupied by one pair when they are actually populated by 2 or more pairs who use the space that we monitor asynchronously. On staging and winter areas the percentage of young seen in a flock is often used to estimate

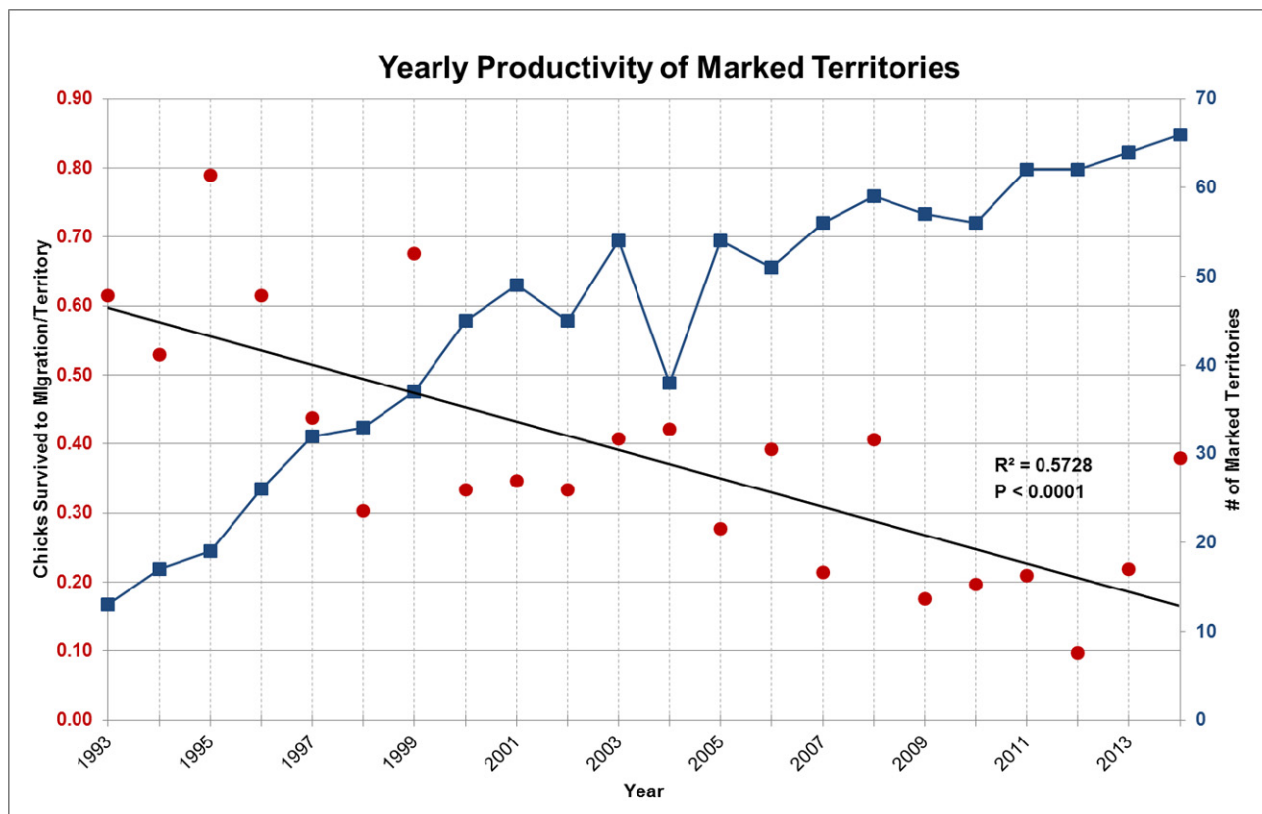


Figure 1. The number of chicks fledged to fall migration in November for territories where at least one adult crane is color-marked from 1993 to 2014. The number of chicks fledged to fall migration is on the left Y-axis and denoted by red dots whereas the number of marked territories is represented by blue squares and measured on the right Y-axis. The black line is the regression of annual productivity for marked territories against calendar year.

population productivity but this estimate is biased by having an unknown number of non-breeding birds in the population that you are estimating age ratios in. Counts of unison calling birds on breeding areas likewise under-estimate the number of breeding birds because not all birds unison call in synchrony. With marked territories we can better understand the reproductive success of pairs over the length of time that they occupy a territory and, with a saturation of marked birds in particular wetlands areas, we can estimate reproductive success in relation to ecological factors as well. In our Briggsville study we have found that, from 1993 to 2014, reproductive success has generally declined from an estimated high of 0.60 chicks fledged to migration in the fall per territory in 1993 (estimated from regression) to an estimated high of 0.20 chicks fledged to migration per territory in 2014 (Figure 1), one third the productivity found in 1993.

Though we have compared predator densities, habitat change and climate variables with sandhill crane productivity rates, the only variable that significantly explained the declining productivity over 22 years was calendar year. One of the few variables that we have left to examine in relation to productivity is density of breeding and non-breeding birds in the

study area and these changes may parallel the changes that have occurred over calendar year. Breeding density is hard to measure so our first effort will be to examine how non-breeding and breeding cranes interact and at what densities. Our next step might be to examine measures of stress at different population densities.

What is already clear is that the productivity of our breeding population of cranes has changed dramatically over the decades and that this change has not been random. Models that were based on any productivity estimates arising from just a few years of observation would poorly represent the population dynamics over a broader timeframe. Long-term datasets are needed to better understand environmental periodicities that may occur on decadal scales rather than on annual scales. Once they become established on a territory, sandhill cranes from our Briggsville population often spend well over a decade on that territory. Estimates that truly represent a population will thus require measurement among time periods that are longer than the tenure of territories by individuals and we have not yet attained that goal after more than two decades of research.

## **Pressures on Sandhill Crane Habitat in California's Delta Region and the Bay Delta Conservation Plan**

Gary Ivey, Research Associate, International Crane Foundation

**S**andhill cranes winter in a few discrete agricultural regions within California's Central Valley. All of those regions are under threat of habitat losses, both to urbanization and other development (such as water projects and solar farms) and to conversions to incompatible crops such as orchards and vineyards. However, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region, which supports about half of California's wintering sandhill cranes, is suffering the greatest habitat loss. For example, the acreage of vineyards in San Joaquin County has more than doubled in the last 25 years. Additionally, the state's Department of Water Resources has proposed a large water diversion project that cuts through the heart of the crane's Delta wintering region.

Because the greater sandhill crane is listed as threatened in California, habitat and population impacts must be fully mitigated. The state is preparing the *Bay Delta Conservation Plan*, a conservation strategy aimed at protecting dozens of species of fish and wildlife, while permitting the construction of the water diversion project. For the past 3 years, I have been consulting with the agencies on mitigation and the conservation strategy for cranes in the Delta to minimize risks to crane populations. If the diversion project goes forward, I think cranes will be better off in the long term. The conservation plan prescribes protection of



**Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1994; construction of the adjacent housing tracts began in 1999.**

48,625 acres of cultivated lands; keeping them in wildlife-friendly crops. While not all of this acreage is within the core wintering area for cranes, it includes protection of 7,300 acres of high-value habitat (primarily corn or rice) for sandhill cranes. These conserved areas will be protected from future habitat loss due to development and incompatible crop conversions. Additionally, the plan prescribes creation of at least 595 acres of new crane roost sites. Some of these conservation sites will become part of **Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge**. The mitigation for construction disturbance and displacement of cranes includes providing unharvested food plots to supplement foraging habitat near the impact areas to attract cranes to a better food source. I also developed a strategy for no net loss of cranes from powerline strikes using a sophisticated model that allows estimation of annual mortality and mitigation by marking areas of existing lines to save at least as many cranes that new (temporary) lines may kill. The existing marked lines will continue to save cranes years after the temporary lines are removed. While crane habitat loss will continue in this region, the Bay Delta Plan will at least ensure that some key wintering areas are protected into the future.

An offshoot of the Bay Delta Plan is the recent partnership of agency and conservation organization's staff to form the Delta Sandhill Crane Technical Advisory Committee. This committee is seeking funding to develop a Delta-wide Conservation Strategy for Sandhill Cranes to further crane habitat conservation in this region.

# Parent Rearing, Annual Report, 2014 for Research and Science Team

Prepared by Glenn H. Olsen, USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

The recovery plan for the whooping crane requires the establishment of two new wild flocks of 25 or more breeding pairs, which would be in addition to the existing native flock that migrates between Aransas, Texas and Wood Buffalo National Park, Alberta. In 2001 a reintroduction of a migratory whooping crane flock between Wisconsin and Florida began, using birds imprinted on costumed people and ultralight aircraft to lead the birds on their first fall migration. This program has been successful in establishing migrating whooping cranes in the east. In 2006 a direct autumn release program was initiated where whooping crane colts are costume reared and released as a group in Wisconsin in the fall to find their own way south, usually with adult whooping cranes. A third method was developed in 2013, where the whooping crane chicks were reared in captivity not by costumed people, but by parent whooping cranes. The goal is to produce wild whooping cranes for release in the fall and to maximize parent-chick learning. The chicks are moved from Patuxent each September to sites in Wisconsin, where they are released singly in the territory of adult whooping crane pairs. The goal is for each chick to form a bond with these allo-parents and migrate south with them.

Both 2013 parent-reared (PR) whooping cranes survived the winter and remained with their allo-parents all winter. When the adults that whooping crane #22-13 spent the winter with at Hiwassee in Tennessee left to fly north, 22-13 accompanied them as far north as the first stop-over point in southern Indiana. When the adults continued north, 22-13 remained behind, but later flew north to Necedah. After spending several days at Necedah it flew about 100 miles north, spent a week there, and then flew back south to Necedah. Later this bird flew to Rice Lake County Minnesota, possibly with other whooping cranes, as the 200 mile flight was done in one trip and other whooping cranes have flown over there in past years. However, no visual verification of whooping cranes in Rice Lake County was available. After several weeks there, 22-13 flew south to Necedah again. In late July, during an unusual cold spell with strong northerly winds, 22-13 left on migration south, flying to central Indiana. Later this crane returned north as far as Champaign County, Illinois, where he remained with some sandhill cranes until November 14, 2014, when it again flew south to a roost location in DeKalb County, Tennessee, where the crane remained for November 15 and 16. On November 17 or 18 he arrived on his previous wintering territory at Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge, Meigs County, Tennessee. 22-13 is still in Meigs County as of the end of December, 2014.

The story of 24-13 is much less adventurous. This crane was left behind by its allo-parents in central Kentucky when they migrated north. After several weeks alone in Kentucky, 24-13 migrated north on its own, following the path it had taken south, even stopping for a few nights at the same rest area. Once back at Necedah, 24-13 settled in some wetlands in southwestern Juneau County, Wisconsin, along with several other unpaired whooping cranes. In November, 24-13 migrated south to Knox County, Indiana, with 3-11, 7-12 and 38-09. Three other whooping cranes have also joined this group in Indiana.

Six eggs were assigned to the 2014 PR project and all eggs hatched successfully. One chick was lost at 10 days of age due to a bacterial infection, and another chick was lost to predation by a large black rat snake. The snake killed the chick, but the chick was so large the snake was unable to ingest it. The snake was found in the pen and removed. All 4 remaining chicks were given 12 days of pond exposure before being shipped by private aircraft to Necedah National Wildlife Refuge on September 19, 2014. Three temporary pens that had been created on Necedah NWR, and the former ultralight pen at site 4 built by Operation Migration were used to introduce the young cranes to their new environment. Cranes were held overnight together at site 4, and then on the morning of September 20, with help from the International Crane Foundation, all 4 cranes received satellite transmitter legbands (commonly called PTTs), conventional VHF transmitter legbands and small metal numbered Bird Banding Laboratory legbands. After this each crane

was assigned to a temporary pen and monitored several times daily. After establishing that adult pairs were visiting all the pen sites, the 4 cranes were released on September 22 and 23. For the next two weeks the cranes were monitored closely and continued to be with adults, in some cases the intended allo-parents we had selected, in other cases, moving to other pairs of adults.

One young bird, 21-14, flew northeast off the refuge in early October. The signal was lost for awhile and then the bird was found dead in a water-filled ditch in this general location. The body was taken to the USGS National Wildlife Health Center (a WCEP partner organization) for necropsy. The diagnosis was blunt force trauma, possibly hit by a motor vehicle, though the body was found about a half mile from the nearest roadway.

The other 3 released PR birds have done well to date. 19-14 began migration with adult pair 7-07 and 39-07 on November 12 to Winnebago County, Illinois for 4 days, to Grayson County, Kentucky on November 18, Logan County, Kentucky on November 20 and arriving on the previous wintering grounds of the adults in Lowndes County, Georgia, by November 22. 20-14 migrated south with 9-05 and 13-03 to Greene County, Indiana, where they have been joined by another pair of whooping crane adults. 27-14 migrated to Hopkins County, Kentucky with 2-04 and 25-09. This is the wintering territory of 2-04, and where this male led 24-13 last year. The female, 25-09, is new, as 2-04's previous mate died in the spring of 2014. These 3 birds have since been joined by 2 other pairs of whooping cranes.

The PR project is a large endeavor, starting with eggs contributed by several institutions, then with chicks reared at USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center with the help of lead biological technicians Rachel Roberts and Robert Doyle, but with help from all the crane crew and Carlyn Caldwell, veterinary technician. Extensive behavioral observations were made of all chicks this year, including number of times per hour that the adult parents fed the chicks. These observations were conducted by Cameron Stanek, Anne Harshbarger and Rachel Roberts. Windway Corporation flew the chicks from Maryland to Wisconsin. In Wisconsin, help constructing temporary pens and monitoring birds was freely given by refuge manager Doug Stahler, refuge biologist Brad Strobel, his intern Scott Collins, and the staff of the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. From the International Crane Foundation, Marianne Wellington and her interns Rachel Koebert, Tiffanay Hudson, and Aubrey Klink came out to help with temporary pen construction, banding and observations of cranes after release. Eva Szyszkowski from ICF helped with banding and tracking cranes on migration. The migration history and wintering locations of the PR cranes and their allo-parents are from her monthly update 6 November-4 December 2014.

### **A Note About Membership Dues**

Attendees of the Louisiana workshop are "captured" as NACWG members until the next workshop, which is scheduled for Chattanooga, Tennessee in January 2017. **NACWG members who did not attend the workshop should send their annual dues to our new treasurer, Dr. Barry Hartup, International Crane Foundation, PO Box 447, Baraboo, WI 53913.** Checks should be made payable to 'NACWG'; NACWG and ICF remain as separate organizations.

## **Fifth Circuit declines to rehear whooping crane case; Gulf Coast group vows appeal to Supreme Court**

*Edited excerpts from the Austin American-Statesman blog (16 December 2014)*

In 2013, a federal judge [U.S. District Judge Janis Graham Jack] held that the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality failed to manage the waters of the Guadalupe River to ensure the cranes' survival. That ruling threatened to up-end water permitting in the Guadalupe and other basins, as river authorities balanced the sale of water to cities, industrial facilities and farmers with the water needs of fish and other wildlife.

But in June three judges at the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans found that [the] lower court had failed to adequately determine whether the TCEQ could have foreseen that its action would have led to the crane deaths.

The Aransas Project [the plaintiff]...asked for a hearing on the issue before the full Fifth Circuit.

Eleven judges declined the request. But a dissent authored by Judge Edward Prado, joined by two other judges [James Dennis and James Graves], argued that the three-judge panel incorrectly decided to reconsider the facts of the case and instead should have deferred to the fact-finding by the district court judge.

Jim Blackburn, a Houston environmental attorney for the Aransas Project, said he would file an appeal to the Supreme Court within the 90 days allowed.

### **Whooping Crane winter grounds will go underwater, shorebirds will face higher risk**

*Excerpts from BirdWatchingDaily.com (16 December 2014)*

Two new studies suggest that climate change will pose a severe challenge to both North America's shorebirds and the last wild population of Whooping Cranes.

The first, prepared by a team organized by the International Crane Foundation and Gulf Coast Bird Observatory and released last summer by the Gulf Coast Prairie Landscape Conservation Cooperative, focused on the crane's future winter habitat needs. If targets set by the recovery plan are met, the birds will require at least 125,000 acres along the central Texas coast, enough for 250 breeding pairs. Yet only 27 percent of that potential habitat is protected.

Worse, estimates of sea-level rise produced by combining the rate of land subsidence with *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* models show that much of the potential habitat will disappear by 2100. From 23 percent to 54 percent will be inundated. Efforts to protect habitat, write the researchers, should focus to the northeast and inland, within grasslands, freshwater wetlands, and agricultural rice fields.

The second study, from researchers at the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, Dalton State College, and Tufts University, argues that the conservation status of 52 taxa of shorebirds that breed in North America should be revised.

Many, including Red Knot and Semipalmated Sandpiper, are already in widespread decline. But when the risks posed by climate change — chiefly, the loss of breeding, stopover, and wintering habitat — are added to their vulnerabilities, the risk of extinction increases for 45 of the 52 taxa.

E.H. Smith, F. Chavez-Ramirez, L. Lumb, and J. Gibeaut (2014) Employing the conservation design approach on sea-level rise impacts on coastal avian habitats along the central Texas coast. Gulf Coast Prairies Landscape Conservation Cooperative.

H. Galbraith, D.W. DesRochers, S. Brown, and J.M. Reed (2014) Predicting vulnerabilities of North American shorebirds to climate change. PLoS ONE 9(9): e108899.

**Thanks to Tom Stehn for keeping us apprised of crane news from the Texas Gulf Coast.**

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# Regional Reports

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## Update on the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes



**USFWS biologist Brad Strobel releasing crane no. 1-10 after banding. Photo by Eva Szyszkoski/ICF.**

**Autumn 2014** – As of 30 September 2014, the eastern migratory population consisted of an estimated 99 birds (55 males, 44 females) including 95 whooping cranes in Wisconsin, 1 in Indiana, 1 in Illinois, 1 not recently reported and 1 long-term missing.

**Captures** – Sixteen free-flying cranes, including one fledged wild-hatched juvenile, were captured for banding and transmitter replacement on 15 days of attempts between 8 September and 7 November.

**Parent-reared Release** – This year was the second year of releases via the parent-reared method where chicks are raised by captive adults. Four juveniles were part of this release in 2014. They were transferred to the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin and received their permanent transmitter and colored leg bands on 20 September. They were released from their temporary pens on 22 & 23 September. One juvenile died approximately eight days after release; however, the other three joined adult pairs and remained with them through migration. All three remain with adults and as of 29 January, they are located in Hopkins County, Kentucky, Jackson County, Alabama, and Lowndes County, Georgia. (Also see Glenn Olsen's report on pages 9 & 10.— Ed.)

**Direct Autumn Release** – Due to low chick numbers, the direct autumn release project did not go forward this year. The juveniles initially slated for this project were transferred to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland where they were incorporated into the cohort shipped to and released at the White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area, Louisiana.

**Mortalities** – Mortalities from August-December included one juvenile female, one adult male and one adult female in Wisconsin and one sub-adult male in Florida. The adult female is the mother of no. W3-14, the only fledged wild-hatched juvenile from the 2014 breeding season.

**Autumn Migration of Ultralight-led Juveniles** – The 2014 migration led by Operation Migration departed from the White River Marsh State Wildlife Area, Green Lake County, on 10 October with seven juveniles. On 14 November the birds were boxed in Dane County, Wisconsin, and driven to Carroll County, Tennessee, where migration was resumed. They arrived at the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Wakulla County, Florida, on 11 December where they were temporarily released 10 days later. They received their permanent transmitters and colored leg bands on 5 January and were re-released on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

**Winter 2014/2015** – As of 29 January 2015 the maximum size of the eastern migratory population was 100 birds (53 males, 47 females). Estimated distribution included 30 whooping cranes in Indiana, 7 in Kentucky, 10 in Tennessee, 33 in Alabama, 3 in Georgia, 13 in Florida, 2 at unknown locations, and 2 long-term missing. The total for Florida includes the 7 newly released juveniles.

*Eva Szyszkoski, WCEP Tracking Field Manager  
International Crane Foundation, Baraboo, WI*

## **Louisiana Whooping Cranes – January 2015**

### **2011 Cohort**

Ten members of this cohort remain alive three years after their release and we are optimistic and excited to monitor their behavior in the upcoming months. Last spring, a pair (L7 & 8-11), made up of two members of this cohort, nested and laid eggs – the first from the reintroduced birds and the first in Louisiana since 1939. Later in the summer, when the farm fields in which they had nested, were drained the pair moved south and joined up with another pair of birds for the fall. Last month the two pairs returned to White Lake together but several days later left separately. The nesting pair returned to the farm where they nested last spring while the other pair returned to their normal home area. Other members of this cohort consist of a lone female and a group of five birds that have been associated since they were juveniles. Within the group of five there is one clear pair, with data from their transmitters and reports from the landowner indicating they are recently staying separate from the other three birds. We hope and expect that soon another pair will form out of this trio.

### **2012 Cohort**

Nine members of this cohort remain alive two years after their release. The four birds that spent part of the spring, summer, and fall near Dallas, TX all returned and repeated the same pattern as last year in regard to the areas they visited and the habitat they have ultimately settled back into. With these birds reaching breeding age this spring we will be watching them closely but the potential for nesting is limited due to their still young age and the fact that only two of them are males. There are currently two trios each consisting of a male and two females, though a male and female from one of the trios has twice been observed trying to copulate. Two of the remaining females are each alone and the third has recently joined both an older and younger female in the marsh at White Lake.

### **2013 Cohort**

Seven members of this cohort remain alive one year after their release. It was last reported that one bird had died and a second, L5-13, was missing. Since then L5-13 has remained missing and is no longer included in the population total and sadly L4-13 was shot. She was reported to us to be injured and was captured and found to have a badly broken left leg. She was taken to the LSU vet school the following day where she was

## Regional Reports *continued*

euthanized after radiographs revealed damage that was beyond repair. Radiographs also revealed the presence of metal particles in and around the wound suggesting the injury was caused by gunshot which was later confirmed by necropsy. This is now the sixth bird and the fourth shooting incident in Louisiana. A \$10,000 reward has been raised for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of the person(s) responsible and the investigation is currently ongoing.

The remaining birds consist of a trio of males, a newly formed trio consisting of two males and a female, and a female who remains at White Lake and is currently associating with a female from 2011 and L8-14, the juvenile who split from the rest of her cohort.

### 2014 Cohort

On 4 December 14 juvenile whooping cranes (6 males, 8 females) arrived from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, MD. The birds were placed in the top-netted portion of the release pen, banded several days later, and released to the open pen and surrounding marsh on 29 December. While the juveniles were in the top-netted pen a number of older birds returned to the marsh in and around the release pen and stayed for varying amounts of time before leaving. However, by the time the juveniles were set to be released several birds had come back and over the next few weeks additional birds also returned to the area. At one point 26 birds were visible in and around the release pen with six others also known through transmitter signals or data to be in the vicinity. Several pairs of older birds became territorial of the food and the pen and were aggressive to the juveniles so the food was removed and only provided to the juveniles when a costumed caretaker was present. The juveniles, though seemingly intimidated, stuck around and simply got an earlier start on exploring the surrounding marsh.

The presence of all those birds allowed us to observe some interesting behaviors from the various pairs and groups of adults. Several groupings of adults split up and went their separate ways when they left the marsh and some new associations formed including one juvenile who joined several older birds and remained in the marsh but does not spend time at the pen or associate with the other juveniles. Eventually, all adult birds left the pen area which allowed us to leave the feeders out and gave the juveniles the opportunity to actually use the pen.

This year we are testing a new type of transmitter on several of our birds – a GSM or cellular transmitter produced by Microwave Telemetry Inc. All previously released birds have received a GPS PTT with roughly half also receiving a VHF transmitter. GSM/cell transmitters are available from several companies and are gaining popularity because the data costs are significantly less than typical satellite transmitters. They have proven to work well in some areas but had not yet been tested in southwest Louisiana.



Four juveniles received these new transmitters along with a VHF unit and we hope to deploy two other units on older birds as they are caught for transmitter replacements.

As of 31 January, there are 40 whooping cranes (17 males, 23 females) in Louisiana.

Sara Zimorski, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries



**T**houghtful readers' letters published in Louisville's *Courier Journal* newspaper in response to an 11 December 2014 article about Kentucky state-biologists floating an idea to double the length of the state's Sandhill Crane hunt to 60 days.

**"Thanks for the article Thursday explaining the difference between a Whooping Crane and the more populous Sandhill Crane. Beautiful picture too. Just one question: why would anyone want to kill either of them? "**

*Reed Gabhart, Jeffersonville, Ind.*

<http://www.courier-journal.com/story/opinion/readers/2014/12/13/letter-sandhill-cranes/20314733/>

**"Many areas of the country actually enjoy the arrival of the Sandhill Cranes. In New Mexico, an annual Sandhill Crane Festival celebrates the yearly arrival of this beautiful bird.**

**When we moved to our Kentucky home eight years ago, we would sit on our porch every evening and enjoy the haunting soulful cry of the cranes that came from the surrounding woods and ponds.**

**This past summer we did not hear any cranes.**

**In response to the letter-writer's query as to why anyone would shoot them, I would guess because of their slow moving bulky size and non-threatening nature they are an easy target. "**

*Tom Lewis, New Haven, Ky.*

<http://www.courier-journal.com/story/opinion/readers/2014/12/16/letter-sandhill-cranes/20478183/>

*You are invited to join the North American Crane Working Group*

Membership is based on a calendar year.

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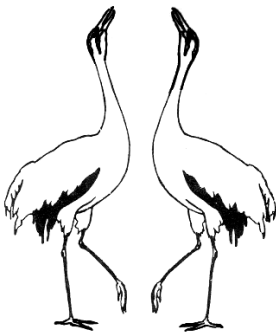
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***The Unison Call*** is published semiannually by NACWG

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