

Whooping Crane Migratory Reintroduction Project

Whooping Crane

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How are whooping cranes different from sandhill cranes?

Whooping cranes stand 5-1/2 feet tall, and are the tallest birds in North America. Sandhill crane adults are about 4 feet tall. Adult whooping crane plumage is white with black wing tips, whereas adult sandhills are grey or sometimes grey and tan. They both have a bald spot – a red, bare patch of skin on their forehead. Whooping cranes are aquatic birds, spending virtually all of the time in wetlands. Sandhill cranes will use wetlands, but also feed in upland habitats. Whereas sandhill cranes have adapted to human agriculture and feed extensively on grain, seeds and tubers, whooping cranes prefer marsh habitat and prefer to eat crabs, invertebrates, frogs and minnows. And of course, sandhill cranes are much more common than the endangered whooping crane. Sandhill cranes occur throughout much of North America and number in the tens of thousands. Whooping cranes are known from a limited area in North America and the total world population is about 400 individuals.

2. What is the current status of the whooping crane - is it in danger of extinction?

The whooping crane is a federally endangered species in the United States. It is one of the world's rarest birds. The species was thought to number "in the thousands" in North America before European settlement caused population declines. Archival evidence suggests that by 1865, its population was 700 to 1,400. Their numbers dropped rapidly and by 1890 the whooping crane had disappeared from the heart of its breeding range in the north central United States. By 1938, only two small flocks remained - one non-migratory flock in southwest Louisiana, and one migratory flock that nested in Canada and wintered in Texas. In 1941, there were only 21 whooping cranes in North America.

From near extinction 60 years ago, captive breeding efforts and the protection provided by the Endangered Species Act have enabled whooping crane populations to slowly increase. There are now over 400 whooping cranes in North America

While whooping cranes are not in immediate danger of extinction, extinction in the wild without reintroductions would be likely because of the small size of the single wild natural migratory flock. For this reason, multiple efforts are underway to reduce the danger of extinction by increasing populations in the wild, including a new migratory population in the East.

2. What caused the whooping crane's near extinction?

Several factors contributed to the historic decline of whooping cranes. Much of their wetland habitat was drained and converted to farmland. The migratory populations in the central U.S. and Canada lost large portions of their breeding and wintering habitat in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Then the non-migratory population lost much of its habitat in the coastal marshes and prairies of Louisiana and Texas as wetlands were converted for rice production. In addition to outright habitat loss, these activities increased the amount of human disturbance, which may have had adverse effects on crane behavior. At the same time, hunting, egg collecting, and specimen collecting were a substantial drain on the population, particularly from 1870 to 1920.

4. Are there currently threats to whooping cranes?

The wild flock winters in a small area in Texas where all the birds could be lost to a catastrophic event like a hurricane, red tide, or a contaminant spill which could destroy their habitat, eradicate their food or kill the birds directly as a result of ingestion of toxins. For example, a hurricane in 1940 contributed to the loss of half the population of nonmigratory whooping cranes residing in Louisiana at that time. The population never recovered from that loss and the last bird was captured and moved to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas in 1949. The principal threat continues to be a contaminant spill along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway that bisects the winter

range. It is one of the busiest waterways in the world and much of the commercial barge traffic is petrochemical products including crude petroleum, gasoline, benzene, and basic industrial chemicals. Each of these cargoes is chronically to acutely toxic.

5. Why doesn't the flock of whooping cranes in Florida migrate?

The non-migratory whooping crane population in Florida was reintroduced in 1993, a product of captive breeding and reintroduction efforts. Since migration is a behavior that must be learned by cranes, the Florida whooping cranes are expected to remain in areas near where they were released. In 2000 two whooping cranes wandered as far away as Michigan during the summer that year and biologists think that occurred as a result of a severe drought in Florida, which made their home marshes unsuitable for breeding. The dispersal observed in those two cranes is expected to be an infrequent and unpredictable event in the future.

6. What habitats do whooping cranes use?

Whooping cranes spend most of their time in shallow water wetlands where they feed and nest. Nests are built on small islands of bulrushes, cattails, and sedges that provide protection from predators. At night (when not incubating), whooping cranes stand (roost) in shallow water where they are safe from coyotes and bobcats.

During migration, the wild population uses a variety of feeding and roosting habitats, including croplands, marshes, and submerged sandbars in rivers. They winter in bays and coastal marshes in and near the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast. The experimental non-migratory population inhabits palmetto grasslands, savannahs, and shallow marshes in the Florida's Kissimmee Prairie region.

7. What do whooping cranes eat?

Whooping cranes feed in shallow water wetlands and eat insects, minnows, crabs, clams, crayfish, and frogs. During migration and on their wintering grounds they sometimes feed in upland areas, especially in areas that have been flooded or burned. There they forage for acorns, snails, insects, rodents, and other food items.

8. How long do whooping cranes live?

Whooping cranes may live up to 24 to 25 years in the wild. Captive birds have lived up to 40 years.

9. How many young does each whooping crane pair produce each year?

In Wood Buffalo Park, 50 pairs of cranes produce from 15 to 30 chicks each year. Whooping cranes do not start breeding until they are four or five years old even though they have their adult plumage by the time they are a little over one year old. When they do mate, they are monogamous and have the same mate for life. Although, if one of the pairs dies, the remaining bird will mate with another. Whooping cranes usually nest once each year, but sometimes they will lay a second clutch of eggs if their first is destroyed. Occasionally a pair will skip a nesting season if conditions are unsuitable or for no apparent reason.

Whooping crane pairs lay two eggs in late April to mid-May, with hatching one month later. The parents share incubation and rearing duties although the female takes the primary role in feeding and caring for the young. Most often, successful nesting pairs raise one young each year. As a rule, fierce competition between the two chicks usually results in the death of the smaller, weaker sibling. Occasionally, when food supplies are abundant and the chicks are perhaps more evenly matched in size and strength, whooping cranes have been known to successfully raise two chicks.

10. Are the remaining whooping cranes genetically diverse enough to survive into the future?

The population reached a low of 15 birds in 1945-46, which resulted in a decline in diversity and changes in gene frequencies. However, the population continues to expand and genetic diversity, though reduced, appears to be comparable to many other crane populations.

11. Who is the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership?

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership is a consortium of people representing a wide variety of private organizations and public agencies working to reintroduce a migratory flock of whooping cranes back into eastern North America. The ultimate goal of the project is to reintroduce enough birds to the flyway to establish a self-sustaining flock containing at least 25 adult breeding pairs.

Founding members of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership are the International Crane Foundation, International Whooping Crane Recovery Team, Operation Migration Inc., National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USGS/Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and Madison Wildlife Health Center, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Many other flyway States, provinces, private individuals and conservation groups have joined forces with and support WCEP by donating resources, funding and personnel.

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