

Whooping Cranes:

*The Road
to Survival*

The mission of the Southwest Region Ecological Services Program is “to conserve, enhance, and protect the fish and wildlife and ecosystems that support them, within the context of a rapidly changing world, and to provide leadership to achieve a regional net gain for fish and wildlife.

Introduction

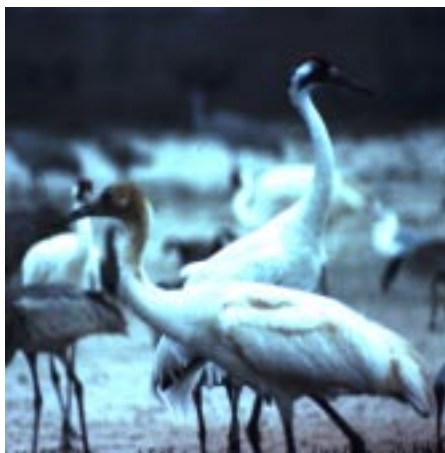


Adult Whooping Crane

FWS Photograph

Whooping cranes are one of the best known of all endangered species and symbolize the struggle to maintain the vanishing creatures of this world. One scientist estimated that only 1400 whoopers survived by 1860. Their population continued to decline due to drainage of wetlands, conversion of grasslands to agriculture, and hunting until only 15

or 16 cranes survived the winter of 1941-42. The present world population is about 335 wild and captive whooping cranes (1997). Only one self-sustaining population survives in the wild; these birds spend the winter at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf of Mexico coast and nest in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada,



Juvenile Whooping Crane with Adult
FWS Photograph

migrating 2,500 miles twice annually. There are 158 birds in this flock. Over the last 50 years this population has increased an average of 4.6 percent annually. If this rate continues, the population wintering along the Texas coast will total 500 birds by the year 2020.



Whooping Crane
FWS Photograph

The United States and Canada work cooperatively to recover this species to portions of its original range. Three main captive flocks have been developed to produce cranes for reintroduction to the wild. These flocks are located at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Maryland; at the International Crane Foundation near Baraboo, Wisconsin; and the Calgary Zoo, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Starting in 1993, cranes have been released into the wild at Kisimmee Prairie, Florida, in an experimental effort to reestablish a nonmigratory flock in that area. As of summer 1997, there are 64 birds in the flock with additional birds to be released in subsequent years.

Identification

Whooping cranes are magnificent birds, unique to North America. They are the tallest bird in North America, standing nearly 5 feet tall, with a long, sinuous neck and long legs. They have red-and-black heads with long, pointed beaks. Their snow-white body feathers are accented by jet-black wing tips (visible only when the wings are extended). Their wingspan measures 7 feet across. During the fall, juveniles have rusty brown plumage with some white adult feathers just beginning to appear. Whoopers fly with a slow wingbeat, straight neck, and legs trailing out beyond their tail.



Sandhill Cranes
FWS Photograph

Two legally hunted wildlife species, sandhill cranes and snow geese, are similar in appearance to whooping cranes. They and other birds which are sometimes misidentified as whoopers are illustrated in this leaflet. The sandhill crane is gray and smaller with a wingspan of 5 feet, but sometimes appear whitish in bright light. Sandhill cranes occur in flocks of 2 to hundreds. Snow geese and white pelicans are white with black wingtips (geese) or wing edges (pelicans) but both have short legs that do not extend beyond the tail when in flight. Snow geese generally occur in large flocks, are much smaller than whooping cranes, and fly with a rapid wingbeat. White pelicans fly with their neck folded and can be distinguished by their large yellow bill. Herons and egrets also fly with their long necks folded.



Snow Goose
FWS Photograph

Natural History

Our fascination with whoopers partially results from their loud vocalizations and elaborate courtship rituals which help strengthen pair bonds. Courtship behavior consists of

calling, wing flapping, head bowing, and tremendous leaps into the air by both birds. These dances begin in late winter as a prelude to mating, but may occur at other times as



Dancing Cranes
FWS Photograph

whoopers defend their territories or play.

Whooping cranes mate for life but will re-mate following the death of a mate. Whoopers may survive up to 25 years in the wild and 35 to 40 years in captivity. They generally begin to produce eggs when 4 or 5 years old and lay two eggs but

seldom are successful in rearing more than one chick. The nests are built on small islands of bulrushes, cattails and sedges. Wetlands are the main source of food for whoopers where they find crabs, crayfish, frogs, and large insects but rarely fish. In the uplands they feed on small grains, acorns and berries. At night they stand (roost) in shallow water where they are safe from coyotes and bobcats.



*Sandhill Crane
in flight*
FWS Photograph

Fall migration begins in September. The cranes normally migrate as a single pair, family group, or in small flocks, sometimes accompanying sandhill cranes. Flocks of up to 10 subadults have been observed feeding at stopover areas. They migrate during the day and make regular stops to feed and rest. They prefer to stop at isolated areas away from human disturbance. By sometime in November they are on their wintering grounds. Spring migration begins in early March and they reach the breeding grounds in May.

The Rocky Mountain Population

The Previous Experiment

There are 3 birds in a flock that winters in New Mexico and spends the summers in Idaho and Wyoming. These birds are the survivors of an experiment to start a new migratory wild population. Whooping crane eggs were placed in sandhill crane nests in Idaho. The foster parents



Sandhill Cranes and one Whooper
FWS Photograph

reared the whooping cranes and taught them how to survive in the wild, when to migrate and where to spend the winter. The population peaked at 33 in 1985, but these birds never paired and produced young. The absence of breeding is thought to be caused by improper sexual imprinting. We now know that some species of birds identify their parents or foster parents as a model for their future mate. Therefore, the foster-reared whoopers want to mate with sandhill cranes but sandhill cranes are not interested in pairing with the whoopers.

The New Experiment



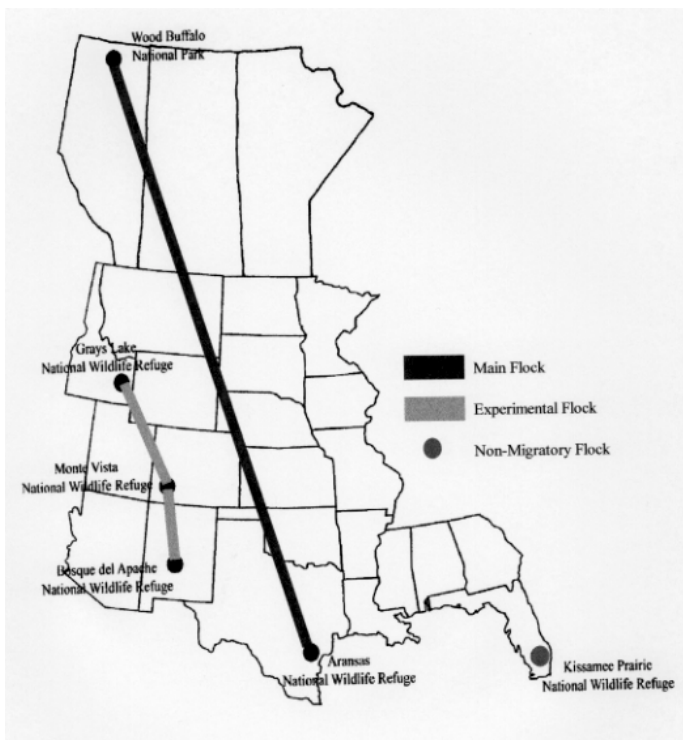
Whooping Crane
FWS Photograph

The Fish and Wildlife Service is now experimenting with techniques of introducing captive-reared whooping cranes (imprinted on their own species) into the wild where they will learn an appropriate migration route. In cranes, migration behavior must be learned. Seven whoopers have been captive-reared in Idaho and trained to follow an ultra-light aircraft. They will follow the plane (mimicking migration following their parents) to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in the fall of 1997. The whoopers will winter at the refuge and then should migrate back to Idaho in the spring on their own.

If this experiment is successful, the technique may be used to introduce a new migratory flock to the eastern United States and Canada. No more whoopers will be introduced into the Rocky Mountain population.

Viewing, Protection, and Reporting Sightings

There are three places in the United States where whoopers can reliably be viewed. Whooping cranes are a major tourist attraction on the Texas coast in winter and annual festivals are held in association with their presence in Colorado and New Mexico. Tour boats offer trips from Rockport, Texas to view cranes



along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. A fall festival of the cranes is held in Socorro, New Mexico and at nearby Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge where the main attraction is the opportunity to see whooping cranes and sandhill cranes. The Monte Vista Crane Festival is held in March in Monte Vista, Colorado when the cranes stop in the San Luis Valley en route north to summering areas in Idaho and Wyoming.

Sandhill crane and snow geese hunters in Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico should be on the look out at all times during the various hunts for whooping cranes. See map for summering/wintering locations and for migration routes.

Whooping cranes are protected by the Endangered Species Act of the United States. The Act authorizes payment of up to \$2500 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any person harassing, shooting, or attempting to take a whooping crane. Contact your local State Game and Fish Office, or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for further information, or to report possible violations. If you see whooping cranes during the migration periods of March-May or September-November, please report the observation to your State Game and Fish Office or to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Grand Island, Nebraska phone (308) 382-6468.

Credits

*Juvenile Whooping Crane with
Adult* photo by Gary Montoya
Whooping Crane
photo by Steve Van Riper
Snow Goose photo by Ed Loth
Sandhill Crane in flight
photo by K. Granillo
All other photos by FWS staff.



Snowy Egret
FWS Photograph

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