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Whooping Cranes

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WHOOPING CRANES



South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, & Parks
and
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South Dakota State University

WHOOPING CRANES

A year with the whooping crane

The whooping crane's year begins at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the coast of Texas, a hazardous 2,600 miles away from the Canadian nesting grounds.

It is near the end of March and time to go. Newspapers announce their departure date and television crews, birdwatchers, and professional biologists will watch over their northward migration.

Counting captive, zoo, and experimental birds, there are barely over a hundred whooping cranes alive; the Aransas birds are the largest group, and they pass through the central plains states into the prairies of Canada.

But first the birds must survive the unsettled spring weather of the South—tornadoes, violent squalls, fog, and rain. Then in the northern plains and Canada they fly into the last days of winter, and are tossed through frigid air laced with sleet and snow.

Wings and wit take them north—far north. Small groups once nested farther south. Their nesting grounds were drained in some areas, and one flock was decimated by a coastal storm in Louisiana.

The flock leaves Aransas over a 2- to 6-week period. Most whoopers travel in small groups, seldom in the company of other birds. Occasionally a single whooper, or possibly two or three, will join larger flocks of sandhill cranes also in their northward migration.

The birds come to the breeding grounds at Wood Buffalo National Park in late April. Pairs claim territorial sites in the vicinity of the Sass, Klewi, and Nyarling rivers where new nests are constructed each year. Nests are usually three quarters of a mile or more apart.

A single year high of 17 nesting pairs has been located by Canadian biologists in recent years, with prospects of several new pairs coming of breeding age in 1979. Whooping cranes are believed to mature for breeding at about 5 years of age.

Eggs are laid shortly after arrival; incubation is shared, alternately, by both parents and starts in early May. Usually two eggs are laid; the downy young hatch in 30 to 35 days.

Both eggs are commonly hatched, but normally only one chick survives. Competition for food between the chicks is believed to result in the loss of the less dominant chick.

The survivor grows rapidly during the long days of the short, northern Canadian summer under the watchful eyes of diligent and protective parents.

The fall migration from Canada may start as early as August. First sightings in the United States are in September. This trip appears to be a more leisurely movement than in the spring.

The trip to the wintering grounds has some old and some new hazards for the whoopers, especially for those groups traveling with chicks. The chicks are not yet strong flyers like the adults. Stops are more frequent and "ground time" for resting and feeding is longer.

This means more exposure to ground obstructions during feeding flights and to foul weather, which is common at this time of year. Some of the last migrants always seem to make their departure from northern states with the entry of early winter snow storms. It is suspected some chicks and parents may succumb to these storms.

Early arrivals at Aransas occur in the first or second week of October. Most of the whoopers reach the wintering grounds by mid-November.

Occasional stragglers show up at the Refuge after mid-December.

History

Whooping cranes did not always have such a difficult struggle to survive and hold their tenuous thread to existence. Although it is doubtful that whooping cranes ever occurred in large numbers, populations of the mid-1800's have been estimated at about 1,300 individuals.

Numbers declined rapidly in the late 19th century. By 1937, two small breeding populations were all that remained. The migratory Canadian flock of 18 birds and a sedentary flock of 11 whoopers in southwestern Louisiana were the sole survivors of early civilization.

The Louisiana population was destroyed by a storm in 1940, and the last member of this flock was taken into captivity in 1948. The establishment in 1937 of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge saved the Canadian flock from a similar fate. In 1952, 21 whooping cranes were known to exist in the wild.

The spring 1979 population totaled 109: 74 in the Wood Buffalo Park flock; 9 in the Rocky Mountain experimental population; 22 in captivity at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland; 2 at the International Crane Foundation, Wisconsin; and 2 at the San Antonio Zoo, Texas.

Protection by law

The U.S. Congress enacted the Endangered Species Act on December 28, 1973. The Act gives special protection to all listed species. Federal agencies are required to protect and enhance the listed species and habitat essential to their existence. Citizens are prohibited from taking, harassing, and possessing species except under specific regulations and provisions of

law. South Dakota law similarly protects endangered species. The whooping crane is classified as endangered by both federal and South Dakota law.

Distribution in South Dakota

South Dakota is regularly host to visiting whooping cranes in spring and fall. They will use cropland and pastures, wet meadows, shallow marshes, shallow portions of rivers, reservoirs and stockponds, fresh water, and alkaline basins for both feeding and loafing. However, overnight roosting appears to require shallow water in which they stand and rest. The birds seldom occur on elevated terrain and usually occupy lower areas where they are more secure.

Observations of whoopers have been reported in the north and south from the prairie edges of the Black Hills to near the eastern boundary of South Dakota. However, most sightings are within a north-south corridor 100 miles east and 150 miles west of Pierre. Sighting reports have been highest during fall migrations.

Identification

Distinguishing characteristics of the whooping crane easily separate it from other birds.

Only two of the world's 15 crane species live in North

America—the sandhill crane and the whooping crane. The adult sandhill crane is gray in color, while the chicks are uniform brown. A sandhill adult will stand 3 to 3½ feet tall and has a voice that is a moderately low-pitched, but loud, musical rattle.

The adult whooping crane is pure white in color, with the primary feathers and the primary coverts of the wings black (as are the alulae, or feathers of the wing thumb). Its chicks are white with blotches of fawn colored brown on the body with the head and the neck a more uniform brown. Wingtips of immatures are black like the adults. An adult whooper will stand 4 to 4½ feet tall and has a voice that is a vibrant trumpet-like note.

The bird most commonly misidentified as a whooper is the white pelican.

The legs of pelicans are short, compared to the long legs of the whooping crane that protrude visibly like sticks behind the tail. The pelican neck is bent in an "S" as it flies or sits on the water. The crane neck is stretched straight and full-length while flying or standing.

The behavior of whooping cranes on the ground can also assist identification. They will occasionally extend their huge wings and jump a few feet into the air and drop back to the ground.

Reporting observations

If you see a whooping crane, your report could be valuable to the continued survival and long-term recovery of the population.

The value of an observation is increased by prompt and detailed reporting to the nearest wildlife conservation officer. Studies of marked whooping cranes (large colored bands have been placed on the legs of 24 whoopers for individual identification) are assisted by these reports.

Knowledge of movements and location also helps wildlife biologists to protect whooping cranes from the hazards of avian disease outbreaks, pollutant spills, and other dangers along the migration route.

A chance for survival

The whooping crane is North America's tallest bird. It once flourished in the marshlands of this continent, but it almost disappeared as frontiers were civilized. The trend toward recovery has started. The opportunity for restoration is with us.

Consulting editor was Maurice Anderson, Endangered Species Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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