

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

WHOOPING CRANE

The whooping crane has been experiencing a difficult but successful rebound from the brink of extinction. Impressive efforts by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and conservation groups in recent decades have led to significant recovery for the whooping crane, the tallest bird species in North America.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

In 1870, between 500 and 1,400 whooping cranes inhabited North America; by 1941, the migratory population had dropped to 16 individuals. Whooping crane numbers fell due to several factors, including hunting and specimen collection, human disturbance, and conversion of nesting habitat for agriculture. Collisions with power lines and fences are known hazards to wild whooping cranes. Others have died of avian tuberculosis, avian cholera, and lead poisoning. Whooping cranes also are vulnerable to natural disasters such as hail storms or drought due to their long migration route.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Active intervention by the U.S. and Canadian governments, as well as conservation groups, have helped this flock recover from less than 20 birds in the 1940s to nearly 400 birds today. In 1967, when the crane was listed as endangered, the FWS began a captive breeding and intensive recovery program. Captive

management has been challenging, for the bird is very sensitive to human contact. Through this program, three facilities are now captive rearing whooping cranes for reintroduction into the wild, and flocks have been reintroduced into the wild at two

sites. There are currently seven captive flocks in the U.S. and Canada.

Excess eggs have been removed from the wild and raised in captivity while artificial insemination has also proven successful. Today, there are nearly 400 whooping cranes in the wild and in captivity.

CONSERVATION TODAY

The FWS's whooping crane recovery program, conducted by a partnership of non-profit organizations and government agencies, has been so successful that other countries have adopted similar methods to protect other threatened crane species.



Sixteen cranes, recently hatched at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Texas, are being trained to fly and migrate by following an aircraft. Twenty cranes released during the last two years migrated back to Wisconsin from Florida during the 2003 spring.

ECOLOGICAL & ECONOMIC VALUE

Whooping cranes are among the most dynamic and charismatic bird species and are a favorite of birders. The whooping crane's elaborate dance is well known and attracts birding fanatics and casual observers alike. A 1991 FWS survey estimated that \$14.4 billion is spent annually on bird watching by more than 24 million Americans.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Recent whooping crane reintroduction efforts offer hope. The whooping crane partnership, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, has shown that establishing a wild population migrating between Wisconsin and Florida may indeed prove successful.

Still, however, increased human impacts on crane habitat pose serious threats for the birds. The last wild flock of migrating whooping cranes (numbering only 187 birds) migrates between Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas and Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. This flock's food source could be contaminated by leaks from chemical barges on the Gulf Coast. Oil and gas wells and connecting pipelines could also cause a disaster.

Habitat loss throughout the Central Flyway is a serious threat. Whooping cranes depend on wetlands and rivers to rest and refuel as they migrate between summer and winter ranges. Increased irrigation and municipal water use are drying up key migration stopover points, such as the Platte River in Nebraska. Rollbacks to the Clean Water Act also threaten the long term survival of these remarkable birds.

