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HISTORICAL NOTES ON WHOOPING CRANES AT WHITE LAKE, LOUISIANA: THE JOHN J. LYNCH INTERVIEWS, 1947-1948

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Migratory and non-migratory populations of whooping cranes (Grus americana) formerly occurred in southwest Louisiana and are well documented (Nelson 1929, Simmons 1937, McIlhenny 1938, 1943, Oberholser 1938, Allen 1952, McNulty 1966, Lynch 1984, Doughty 1989, Gomez 1992, 2001). Migratory and non-migratory populations of whooping cranes (Grus americana) formerly occurred in southwest Louisiana. Lynch found 13 cranes, including 2 pre-fledged young, confirming breeding. Lynch’s survey occurred, in part, because fur trappers and alligator hunters working in the White Lake marshes had informed the biologist of the cranes’ presence and habits. Lynch continued his contacts with these knowledgeable marsh users, and in 1947 and 1948 interviewed at least 7 individuals. In 2001, M. L. Courville, along with her sister Nora Z. Lynch, discovered the interview notes among their father’s papers. The notes contain information on the Louisiana non-migratory population’s range, abundance, habitat use, feeding behavior, nesting, and young, including survival of twins; they also include a small amount of information on sandhill cranes (Grus canadensis) and migratory whooping cranes. Both Lynch and Robert P. Allen relied heavily on this “traditional ecological knowledge” in their accounts of non-migratory whooping cranes in southwest Louisiana. Because of their biological and historical significance, the interview notes are reproduced in this paper. Many marsh users remain in the White Lake area, and their knowledge could aid future research and crane reintroduction efforts in the region.

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**Key words:** Grus americana, Grus canadensis, John J. Lynch, Louisiana, non-migratory population, traditional ecological knowledge, White Lake, whooping crane
The notes focus primarily on the non-migratory population, but they also include information on sandhill cranes and migratory whooping cranes. Because of their biological and historical significance, we have reproduced the interview notes in this paper. We have made minor format changes from the original notes, including (1) altered length of sentence lines, (2) omitted page numbers, (3) moved periods and commas inside quotation marks, (4) left-justified all paragraphs, and (5) inserted words in brackets, when necessary for clarification. Spelling (e.g., altho, thru, rice-farming) remains intact except for 8 typographical errors which we corrected. Allen’s map (1952: 33) depicts most locations recorded in the interviews; when other place names appear, we have added a note describing these locations. The interview notes follow in chronological order.

1. 8 January 1947—Interview with O’Neil Nunez

Notes on History of Whooping Cranes in Louisiana

(Information supplied by O’Neil Nunez, Gueydan, Louisiana)

The area referred to in these notes includes the lower limits of the Pleistocene prairies in western Vermilion and Eastern Cameron Parishes between Florence, (North of White Lake), and the Mermentau River at its entrance into Grand Lake below Lake Arthur. A series of “islands” or prairie outcrops surrounded formerly by marsh, extends east to west thru this region as follows:

- Eagle-nest Island
- Shoemaker [Island]
- Cherry-tree [Island]
- Live-oak Hill
- Lost Island
- Mullet Island

“Isle nid-d’aigle”
Isle Cordonnier
Isle Cerisier
Coteau du Chene
Isle Perdue
Isle Mulet (called “Mallard Island” on charts)

Three generations of the Nunez family have lived in this region. Cattle ranged the prairies and adjacent shallow marshes since the country was first settled, but agriculture was confined to small farms and garden patches until intensive development of rice-culture began shortly after 1900. The entire region is now given over to rice, with the exception of the deepest marshes.

O’Neil Nunez was born in 1882, and started trapping and hunting gators at the age of eight. He is still very active, running his traps daily and tending cattle. A very good observer, with a keen memory. Following is a summary of his observations.

Recent history of the Whooper

Nunez remembers his father speaking of great “droves” of sandhill cranes, and large numbers of whoopers in this region in the decades following the Civil War. Both birds were still plentiful within his own memory. As a boy (he started trapping at the age of 8 which dates this observation about 1890-95), he saw as many as 10 or 12 nests of whoopers each spring, and that bird was still quite common in the general region. He saw his last whooper nest about 1900. After 1900, both the whooper and the sandhill declined steadily in numbers, and by 1920, only a few pairs of whoopers could be seen, and those only in winter. His last record of whoopers was a single pair seen in flight in the winter of 1935. Eight sandhills were seen 2 years ago.

Migration and movements

Prior to 1900, when whoopers were still plentiful, Nunez is emphatic in declaring that all birds were resident. (I asked him a dozen leading questions in poor English and worse French, and could get no evidence that there was any increase in winter, or decrease in summer. This went for sandhills also.)

By 1920, the few remaining pairs of whoopers showed up only in winter. Interesting conjecture: does this support the theory of the birds being driven off the prairies into the deeper marshes, first for nesting, and then altogether? Rice-farming was becoming extensively developed by this time.

As a rule, these whoopers must have been fairly tame, and would not fly great distances unless heavily gunned. Nunez reports only short local movements between feeding and nesting areas each day.

Courtship

Birds were most noisy on still mornings in winter and early spring, altho they would “crow” any time when frightened by a shot or other loud noise. Nunez saw one pair dancing in December, 1913, near White Lake. “Birds stood about 8 feet apart. One would jump about 6 feet in the air, wings spread and beating slowly, while the other remained quietly on the ground. Then the other would jump in a like manner while the first stood still. The whole performance lasted from 5 to 10 minutes.”

Nesting

(Nunez saw his last whooper nest nearly 50 years ago, but as a boy, he reports seeing 10 or 12 whooper nests per year, and large numbers of sandhill nests).

“Whoopers always nested in a “platin,” which is a marshy swale in the prairie.” (I checked this carefully, and Nunez is certain that all nests were built in standing water. He never saw one on dry prairie.) The “Paille-fine” (Panicum hemitomon) marsh of these prairie swales was the preferred nesting site. (These Panicum swales are the deepest and most permanent of the prairie swale marshes, with an average of 5 to 8 inches of standing water and some admixture of peat in the soils. The marshes of the Stanolind Tract above White Lake, last haven of

sandhill cranes, and large numbers of whoopers in this region...
the whooper, are quite similar to this marsh type, altho in this case the peat deposit is much deeper than would ordinarily be the case in the prairie marsh.

“The nest was built of Panicum stalks and foliage, and was 3 to 5 feet in diameter at base, and about 2 feet in height. The sides were much steeper than a muskrat house. The nesting cavity was about 2 feet across, and 6 inches deep. Eggs were always 2 in number.” Nunez couldn’t tell whether both birds helped with incubation, but said that one bird wandered about feeding while the other was on the nest. Both would stay by the nest when an intruder approached, but would take wing before he got too close unless young were already hatched, in which case the female would stay and often threaten the intruder.

Most nests were found in May or early June, altho Mrs. Nunez tells of two young, just hatched, that her father picked up early in April.

Young

Couldn’t find out much about the period of incubation, but Nunez thought it was about four or five weeks. Chicks took about 12 hours to dry, and left the nest the day after hatching. After leaving the nest, “the male chick always remained with the old male, and the young female with the mother.” (Here again the idea that each clutch of 2 eggs produced a male and a female. Nunez couldn’t say how he knew this, but did have an answer to the splitting up of the brood. He claims that when crane eggs were brought home and hatched under a setting hen or turkey, the young picked each other to death unless separated immediately. See report of Johnny Gaspard’s Grandmother).

The young fed with the adults during the day in shallow swales (“les platinis”), and roosted at night on dry prairie knolls, preferable [preferably?] small ridges surrounded by marsh. The adults “mashed down” the tall prairie grasses on those knolls, and squatted to cover the chicks. Each adult covered one of the young (male with poppa, female with momma, goes the report). The brood usually remained for many weeks in the same swale in which it was hatched.

The young were well-developed by August, and “exercising their wings.” They were on the wing by September, but remained with the parent birds all the first winter.

The red coloration persisted during the first winter, disappearing first from the wings, gradually from the body, with a few spots on the back (scapulars) the last to remain. By spring, all birds were quite white. Nunez had no idea as to whether year-old birds nested, altho he thought it significant that all cranes, young and old, were paired in the spring months. Probably this merely represented the breaking away of the adults from the brood for their next nesting.

A set of 2 whooper eggs was brought in by Nunez’ father when Nunez was a boy. Eggs hatched, and young grew almost to maturity, but had to be killed because they were too rough on the young poultry around the farm, picking and eating any chick that came too close. Two young whoopers, taken from a nest, were raised by Mrs. Nunez’ father, and stayed around the farm for 3 or 4 years. This pair made more and more frequent trips to the marsh, and finally stayed away for good. (Apparently none of these trips prior to the last were of long enough duration to permit of [allow] nesting.) The young whoopers were fed grits, and later corn.

Food Habits

Nunez thinks that crawfish (Cambarus, spp), were the main food of the whoopers. He remembers seeing tracks and bill-marks around and in crawfish “Chimneys” and holes. “The droppings of cranes were always red after eating crawfish.” (This is the case also with egrets, ducks, and raccoon).

He thinks also that small fish and water-insects were eaten, after noting the birds walking in shallow marsh, picking here and there in the water. (Many aquatic Odonata, Coleoptera, Hemiptera, and Diptera would be available in the prairie marsh.)

Among the plant foods, Nunez is absolutely certain that whoopers pulled up and ate the white roots of “marsh onion” (Crinum americanum), locally called “Glaieul,” from the French for “gladiole.”

The small “prairie lily” (Nothoscordum bivalve) also was pulled up in spring, and its “onion” (enlarged basal portion), eaten. (Nothoscordum is abundant on low prairie that is frequently flooded, and is known to be a good Canada goose food in this region.)

Whoopers did not seem to bother crops to the extent the sandhills did. Sandhills were bad on sprouting grains and sweet potato, especially on isolated garden patches. (On original prairie, the farm house occupied the highest knoll, and adjacent knolls that were dry enough were farmed.) Whoopers were partial to sprouted corn.

Sandhills were attracted to new “burns” in the prairie vegetation, and also fed in heavily-grazed cattle-pastures. Whoopers, on the other hand, used such places but little, and preferred the swale marshes, including those that were opened up by cattle.

2. 12 January 1947—Interview with John Gaspard and His Grandmother

Authors’ note: The “Stanolind Tract” includes the approximately 26,000-ha freshwater marsh north of White Lake. AMOCO and British Petroleum subsequently owned the property; the latter transferred ownership to the State of Louisiana in 2002.

Crane info from John Gaspard, Caretaker at Stanolind Tract, White Lake, January 12; talk with John’s grandmother, age 74, who lived on Pine Island next to White Lake marsh as a girl.

Remembers her father bringing in a female whooper and two chicks. Story goes that her father winged the female, which
had been defending her nest, and brought the whole works home. The adult died within a few days, probably from wounds, and the two young “picked each other to death.” She remarked on the reddish-pink color of the young, and the shiny black legs.

She saw a few nests, but from hearing the men-folk talk, she got the impression that the whoopers nested in abundance. Nests were built in the “Paille-fine” (*Panicum hemitomon*), and also in “Fouets” (lit. “whips” or bulrush, *Scirpus californicus*). The latter must have been used extensively, since she spoke of the birds breaking down and piling the whips in the middle of a stand, leaving the periphery of the stand as a shield for the nest. She claims all the nests were capable of floating, and would do so with every south wind that drove the waters of White Lake over the marsh west of Pine Island.

### Reports from John Gaspard

In December, 1935, John ran across a crippled whooper while on his trapline at Stanolind Tract, White Lake. The bird made a couple of passes at John, but John succeeded in pinning the bird down with his trapping stick, and brought it in to Ovid Abshire, then the caretaker, who in turn took the bird to George Welsh at the Florence Club. (This is the bird that George says died in a day or so, due to “overeating.”)

In April, 1936, while walking the White Lake marsh with Ovid Abshire, John reports a whooper, not crippled, but jumping on the marsh “like a turkey with a brood.” Says the bird fluttered and jumped just ahead of them, finally disappearing behind some dense sawgrass. They were unable to keep up with the bird, but Ovid, who was out ahead when the bird was first seen, “saw two very small young running under the grass.” John did not see them. John reports about that same time seeing numbers of small snakes killed and left along the sides of a pirogue trail. He was told by Ovid that this was typical crane work.

Latest report, 2 whoopers seen by Wallace Salzman flying north towards Gueydan on Friday morning, January 10, 1947. One seen flying south that same evening. Observation point is above Intracoastal [Waterway], about two miles due east of Florence Club.

### 3. 12 January 1947—Interview with Ralph Sagrera

Info from Ralph Sagrera, 1-12-47

Ralph trapped at Mulberry Island (about 10 miles west of Cheniere au Tigre) from 1931 to 35. Reports seeing three whoopers every winter up until 1934, only 2 in 1935, and none thereafter. Birds fed in fresh burns in three-cornered grass (*Scirpus olneyi*) and coco (*Scirpus robustus*) marsh. They were always very wary, and would take wing when he had approached to within 200 yards.

### 4. 27 January 1947—Interview with Duncan Crain

Authors’ note.- The Mermentau River broadens north of Grand Lake to become Lake Arthur. The community of Lakeside was located on the lake’s southern end, near the boundary between prairie and freshwater marsh. Grand Chenier and Johnson Bayou are communities on chenier ridges south and west-southwest of Grand Lake, respectively.

Whooping crane notes from Duncan Crain, Grand Chenier, 1-27-47.

Says whoopers nested below Lake Arthur (Lakeside) up to 1900. Nests in “Paille rouge” (*Andropogon* sp.) & gazon, in March. Fed in marshy places in prairie.

The whoopers of the coastal cheniers (Grand Chenier & Johnson Bayou region) seem to have been migrants, showing up only in winter. No nesting on the coast. Cranes on wintering marshes were seen to pull Three-cornered grass (*Scirpus olneyi*), “popping cane” (*Spartina alterniflora*), and also went for sweet potatoes on local farms.

### 5. 27 January 1947—Interview with Alcie Daigle

Authors’ note.- The Creole Ferry formerly crossed the Intracoastal Waterway west of Grand Lake, near the boundary between prairie and freshwater marsh. Holmwood and Sweet Lake are rice farming communities on the prairie uplands northwest of Grand Lake.

from Alcie Daigle, Holly Beach, Louisiana, 1/27/47

Says whoopers did not nest in the prairie section north of Creole Ferry and Holmwood. Winter residents only. Tells of killing 12 whoopers in 1918 north of Sweet Lake in rice field. Cranes were eating rice that had fallen from separator door of thresher. Sandhills also common in this region as winter residents, but gradually disappeared a short time after whoopers were wiped out.

### 6. 15 June 1948—Interview with Ulysse Marceaux

Whooping Crane notes (talk with Ulysse Marceaux), 6-15-48

Ulysse Marceaux, (age 75), has been in the cattle business all his life, and knows the country between Kaplan and Lake Arthur. Used to winter his stock at Cheniere au Tigre.

He knows the cranes well, both the white and the “blue” (sandhill). He recalls that whoopers were commonly seen in pairs at all seasons of the year, while the sandhills were mostly in flocks, and showed up in winter. From his description, I got the impression that the region just below Kaplan and west to Gueydan had very few migrant whoopers. Winter migrants seemed to head “for the coast,” and these were the birds that showed up at Chenier au Tigre and Mulberry during the winter months. Marceaux is certain that there were just as many
whoopers in summer as in winter on the “paille rouge” prairies (red-grass, Andropogon) below Kaplan.

The whoopers nested “in the edge of the marsh.” Marceaux didn’t recall seeing nests, but spoke of running down and catching young on several occasions. “They were red, red.” He never tried bringing any home, because of the antics of the parents, and because “it was bad luck to harm the white crane.” Old folks in the Abbeville-Kaplan region have mentioned this superstition, and apparently left the white cranes alone while taking it out on the blue cranes. Damn shame this particular foible didn’t achieve more widespread popularity.

Says the whooper fed on crawfish a good deal, and “pulled roots in the marsh.” They were plentiful up until 1900, but the following decade saw a rapid decline (rice culture getting under way then, and the general region was being settled).

DISCUSSION

Allen (1952) praised Lynch’s efforts to record the traditional ecological knowledge of the White Lake marsh users, and both men clearly respected and gave credence to the information the trappers and other residents shared with them. According to Allen (1952: 30), “The keen recollections of men and women of that generation, through Lynch’s patient and intelligent research, have given us an incomparable picture of the status and habits of the whooping crane in this and other parts of Louisiana in the early days.”

The interview notes include marsh users’ observations of whooping cranes nesting in the freshwater marshes north of White Lake and Grand Lake, a region that stretched from Pine Island in the east to the Lakeside area in the west, a span of approximately 30 km. The area that retained resident whooping cranes until 1950, however, was the relatively isolated Panicum marsh north of White Lake and south of the town of Gueydan (Allen 1952, Lynch 1984). Ownership of this former crane marsh passed from Stanolind (Oil Company) to AMOCO Production Company to British Petroleum (BP); in 2002, BP donated the 26,000-ha marsh, along with the adjacent 6,000 ha of rice land, to the State of Louisiana (Gomez 1992, 2001, Chaillot 2002).

By terms of the donation agreement, White Lake Preservation, Inc., managed the property for the state in the manner of its predecessors, AMOCO and BP. Land uses, all of which are carefully regulated, include oil and gas production, limited waterfowl hunting in a small section of the marsh, fur trapping and alligator hunting, alligator egg collection, and rice farming and cattle grazing on the prairie uplands. Future plans include expanding access to birders and other ecotourists, as well as to qualified scientific and scholarly researchers (W. Sweeney, White Lake Preservation, Inc., personal communication).

In 2004, the Louisiana State Legislature created the White Lake Property Advisory Board. Under jurisdiction of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, this board assumed advisory responsibility for the White Lake property in 2005.

Dr. Felipe Chavez-Ramirez has proposed a study to determine whether suitable habitat for whooping cranes still exists in the White Lake marshes (F. Chavez-Ramirez, Platte River Whooping Crane Trust, personal communication), and it is hoped that the department and advisory board will approve and provide funding for the study.

In addition to scientific research, traditional ecological knowledge can be a valuable tool for environmental historians and wildlife and habitat restoration scientists (Allen 1952, Gomez 1998, 2002, Bonta 2003). Local people have long been and remain an integral part of the southwest Louisiana wetlands, and any future crane re-introduction effort should both learn from and respect their traditional ecological knowledge and wetland use practices.

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