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MARILYN G. SPALDING

University of Florida

LILLIAN M. STARK

Florida Department of Health, Bureau of Laboratories-Tampa

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EASTERN EQUINE ENCEPHALITIS IN FLORIDA WHOOPING CRANES

MARILYN G. SPALDING, Department of Infectious Diseases and Pathology, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Florida, Box 110880, Gainesville, FL 32610, USA

LILLIAN M. STARK, Florida Department of Health, Bureau of Laboratories-Tampa, 3602 Spectrum Boulevard, Tampa, FL 33612, USA

Abstract: Two whooping cranes (*Grus americana*) that were part of separate projects to reintroduce whooping cranes in eastern North America died suddenly in Florida following a few days of abnormal behavior. The first case was a semi-captive bird on ultralight-led migration from Wisconsin to Florida in December 2004. The second case was a molting 10-year-old male and successful wild breeder that died in May, 2005. Clinical signs were lethargy, abnormal posture, isolation followed by attack by other birds, collapse, heart murmur, and death. Eastern equine encephalitis virus (alphavirus) was isolated from the liver of both birds. The most severe lesions were in the intestinal tract and liver. Evidence of exposure in sandhill cranes (*G. canadensis*) and other released whooping cranes indicate that summertime exposure is relatively frequent, may cause of summertime illness, but only occasionally causes death. These 2 deaths followed months of elevated seroconversion rates in Florida sentinels. Other factors, such as prior exposure, immune status, vaccination, molt or other pre-existing diseases may put individual birds at greater risk.

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Key words: disease, eastern equine encephalitis, Florida, *Grus americana*, reintroduction, whooping crane.
