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WINTER HABITAT SELECTION BY A REINTRODUCED POPULATION OF MIGRATORY WHOOPING CRANES: EMERGING PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract: In an effort to model the reintroduced eastern migratory population of whooping cranes (*Grus americana*) after the remaining wild whooping crane population, biologists selected the salt marshes of Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Florida as the winter release site for ultra-light led juvenile cranes due to its similarities to Aransas NWR, Texas. Releases began in the fall of 2001, and the 3 subsequent winter seasons have afforded the opportunity to observe whether habitat selection by these whooping cranes would be influenced by the pre-selection of salt marsh. Intensive monitoring efforts each winter have revealed a dominant early-winter pattern. Young whooping cranes that return to Chassahowitzka NWR eventually abandon (1-10 days in birds observed to date) the salt marsh in favor of inland areas. A preponderance of birds utilizes private lands, with several birds wintering exclusively on cattle ranches. Forming and maintaining positive relationships with private landowners will remain an important objective for winter monitoring staff. Another, perhaps more pressing concern is the shifting land-use pattern in central Florida. The building boom threatens many of the ranches that the whooping cranes select. This is particularly problematic in light of the high level of site fidelity exhibited by older cranes.

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Key words: Chassahowitzka, Florida, *Grus americana*, habitat selection, reintroduction, whooping crane, winter.
