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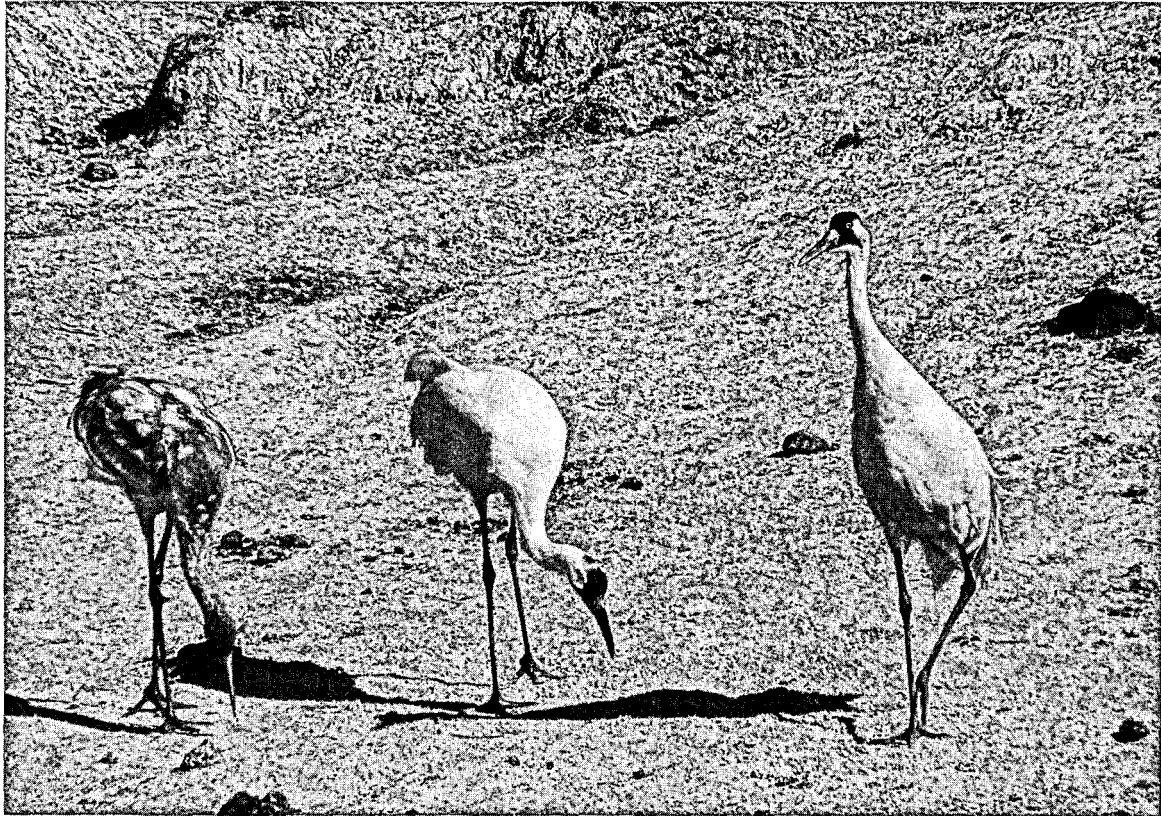
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THE WHOOPING CRANES

of

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge



All of the world's wild whooping cranes winter on or near the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast. Whoopers are about five feet tall, with red-crowned heads and black-tipped wings. *Grus americana*, as he is called by the scientist, weighs close to 20 pounds, and during migration flies high, sometimes out of sight, on wings with a seven-foot spread, signaling his passage with a trumpet-like call. In flight, the cranes have a slow downbeat and a fast upbeat of the wings. They fly with their long necks and legs extended.

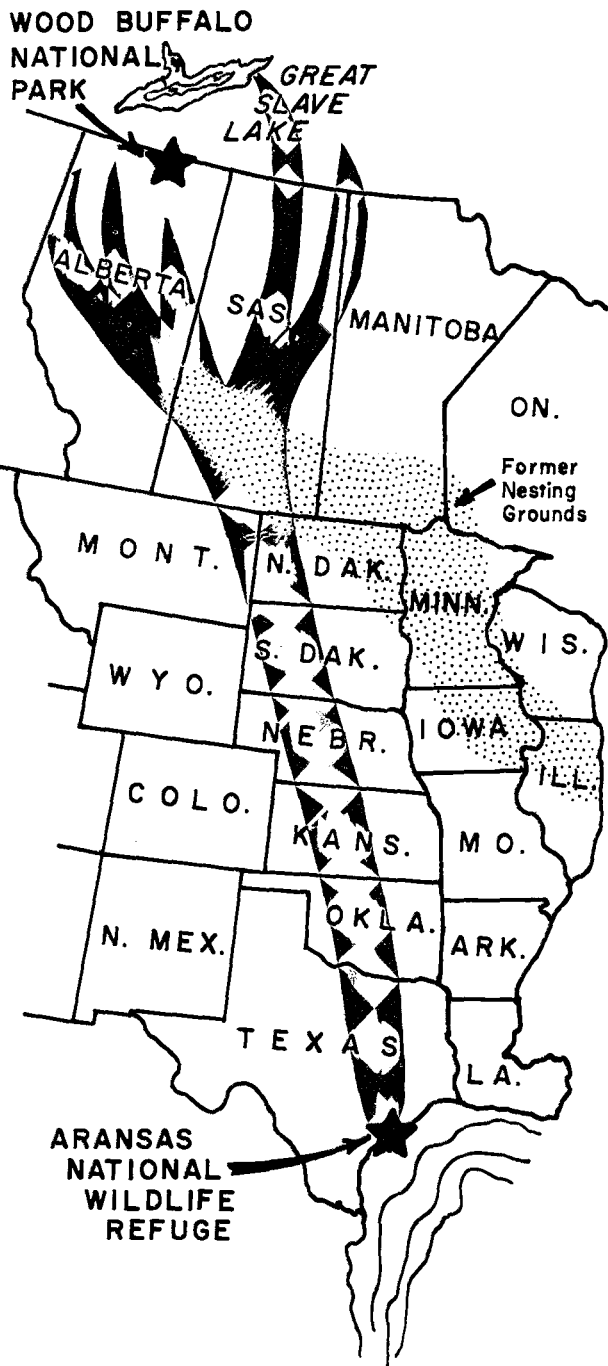
During the last 30 years, the whooping crane has staged a gallant battle for survival. Annual counts made on the Aransas Refuge since its establishment in 1937, dramatically reveal this. In the fall of 1941, only 15 whoopers came to the refuge. Their numbers have fluctuated up to a high of 34 in 1949, down to a low of 21 in 1952, up to an encouraging 38 in 1961, and down to 32 the very next year. In the fall of 1964, 42 cranes, including a record 10 young birds, reached Aransas safely; 44 in 1965, and 43 in 1966. Although whoopers were found in much larger numbers during the early exploration and settlement of the country, it is believed that they have not really been abundant since the early Pleistocene period, 500,000 years ago.

The population increases of the last few years, while encouraging, are not reason for optimism. Several times in the past, similar increases have been made, only to have their numbers fall off alarmingly again.

The whooping cranes make their home in Texas during the period from late October until mid-April. Their summer home is 2,500 miles to the north in and near Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park, almost touching the Arctic Circle. Over this 2,500-mile flight path, above farms and factories, the whoopers make their hazardous round trip every year. During fall migration, the cranes face the natural hazards that make their trip to Aransas exceedingly dangerous. They fly through provinces and states whose waterfowl hunting seasons are open. Their safety during this period depends upon the cooperation of hunters, conservationists, and all who have an interest in our nation's wildlife resources.

On the nesting grounds, each breeding pair of whooping cranes lays one or two buff and brown, mottled eggs in a mound-like nest on the ground. The eggs are laid two to four days apart, and the female begins incubation when the first egg is laid. The male bird assists in incubating the eggs while the female feeds. It takes about 34 days for whooping crane eggs to hatch, and the new chick is about half the size of an adult robin. The young crane grows rapidly and in about ninety days, is ready for its first flight. Several days of practice flight are required before the youngster is ready to accompany the parents on their long journey to the wintering grounds.

Whooping cranes formerly nested in the states of Louisiana, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, and northward into Canada. The advance of civilization eliminated the southern segment of this nesting area. For years, the nesting area of the small remaining flock of whoopers was a mystery. In 1954, a fire in a remote section of the 11,000,000-acre Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada brought foresters into the area who discovered the cranes on their present nesting grounds. The short "ice-free" period of these northern nesting areas is a major hazard to the nesting cranes and probably partially accounts for the fluctuations in the production of young birds.



If initial nesting attempts are unsuccessful, it is likely that a second nesting attempt would fail because of the short summer season. The young must be raised to strong flight stage before heavy freezes in the fall.

Wood Buffalo Park is so vast and remote and the whoopers so scattered during the nesting season that total population and production counts are not possible. Only upon the return of the birds to the Aransas Refuge in the fall are the results of nesting known.

The young birds are easily recognized by their splotched, rusty-brown appearance. These rust-colored young have black wing tips like their parents. The feathers of the juvenile birds are lost in a gradual molt and are replaced with adult plumage during the first winter. By spring migration time, it is difficult to distinguish young from mature birds.

Wild whoopers are believed to mate for life, and they make excellent parents, continuing to guard and feed the young as long as eleven months after hatching. They keep the juveniles between them when flying, and close at hand when feeding and preening.

The first whoopers normally arrive at Aransas in mid-October. They appear in family groups over a period of several weeks with the usual migration season ending by late November. Each family establishes a territory of a few hundred acres which is guarded against intrusion by other whooping cranes, but left open for use by waterfowl and shore and wading birds which share the same wintering ground.

Winter food for the whooper includes a wide variety of plant and animal life, Blue crabs, shrimp, small fishes, frogs, worms, other marine crustaceans, and mollusks make up a large part of the diet. The cranes also feed on acorns and readily accept various planted grains and vegetables grown for them in two 100-acre mammal-proof food plots on the refuge.

While at the Aransas Refuge, the whooping cranes receive more attention than they do at any other time of the year. Aerial surveys are made each week, and frequent boat patrols assure the whoopers' well being. Although visitors to the refuge are not permitted to enter the whooping crane habitat, they frequently can observe birds from a well-concealed observation tower near the territory of one family group.

The "whoop" from which the bird received its name is a piercing call of Ker-loo, Ker-lee-oo, which can be heard for great distances. The whooper's trachea is four feet long and forms large loops, some of which are coiled inside the breast bone. This coiled length enables them to produce the bugle-like calls.

In addition to the wild whooping cranes, there are a few crippled birds and their offspring in the Brackenridge Zoo in San Antonio, Texas, and in the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans. Also, a few whooping cranes are being reared at the Bureau's Patuxent Research Station at Laurel, Maryland. Research conducted with sandhill cranes has made possible artificial incubation of eggs taken from the nests of wild whooping cranes. The normal clutch for these birds is two eggs, but usually they only succeed in rearing one chick to flight stage. Thus, removal of one egg from several nests in the Canadian breeding grounds does not have a material effect on production of wild birds. The research station's rearing of

whoopers hatched from "stolen" eggs is important to the survival of the species. Losses in the juvenile population reduce the life expectancy of wild whooping cranes to about seven years; captive whoopers have been known to live more than 25 years. Once adulthood is achieved, wild birds usually have a long life expectancy.

Restlessness of the cranes in late winter signals the start of their spring migration to the nesting grounds. In late March and early April, the family groups begin departing, and normally all of the cranes leave the Aransas Refuge by April 15. The family group is believed to remain together during spring migration, but when the nesting grounds are reached, the young birds are forced to leave their parents.

As the cranes depart the Aransas Refuge in the spring, the many interested organizations and individuals who have assisted this magnificent bird in its struggle for existence must wait until fall to see if their efforts have been rewarded. The Canadian Wildlife Service, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, state conservation departments, numerous individuals and clubs; all have played an important role in this, the symbol of our total conservation program. The success of these efforts depends not only on these people and their organizations, but upon you, the private citizen.

Number of whooping cranes reaching Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in the fall of each year:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Adults</u>	<u>Young</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Adults</u>	<u>Young</u>
1938	18	14	4	1955	28	20	8
1939	22	15	7	1956	23	21	2
1940	26	21	5	1957	26	22	4
1941	15	13	2	1958	32	23	9
1942	19	15	4	1959	33	31	2
1943	21	16	5	1960	36	30	6
1944	18	15	3	1961	38	33	5
1945	17	14	3	1962	32	32	—
1946	25	22	3	1963	33	26	7
1947	31	25	6	1964	42	32	10
1948	30	27	3	1965	44	36	8
1949	34	30	4	1966	43	38	5
1950	31	26	5	1967	48	39	9
1951	25	20	5	1968	49	43	6
1952	21	19	2	1969			
1953	24	21	3	1970			
1954	21	21	—				

For additional information, write to the Refuge Manager, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, P. O. Box 68, Austwell, Texas 77950.

Telephone: Austwell 2651



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

