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WHOOPING CRANES IN BLAINE COUNTY

On 7 April 1986 John Manning, of Norfolk, and I observed a pair of Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*) in southeastern Blaine Co., about 20 miles west of Taylor. I was notified by a local rancher, who found them while feeding his cattle that morning. John and I were guided to where the birds were feeding in a field. We observed them from about 1400 to 1500 hours as they fed leisurely. About 1500 hours they took off and flew out of sight, heading toward the Middle Loup River. They were found again in the same field about 1745 and observed until about 1915 hours, when they went to roost. The pair was kept under observation the next day by Greg Wingfield, a biologist from the Game and Parks Commission. They spent that night in a marshy area about half a mile northwest of the field where they fed. On the 9th they were observed taking off about 1100 hours, catching a rising thermal and flying off to the north.

Both were adults in white plumage with black primaries. Their foreheads were red, bordered on the rear with black. Both were marked with colored plastic leg bands and had been seen in Nebraska previously. Gary Lingle of the Platte River Whooping Crane Trust and Ross Lock of the Game and Parks Commission were kind enough to supply the following information on past movements of the birds.

One bird was banded with a white band on the left leg, a tan-appearing band on the right. The "tan" band was actually red, but because of a radio transmitter attached to it, the band appeared to be tan. It had been banded as a chick at Wood Buffalo National Park in Alberta, Canada, in 1982. That fall it was seen with its parents in Brown Co., near Ainsworth, about 55 miles north of where we saw it. In 1983 it was tracked across the state in the spring and back in the fall, but it did not stop in the state. In the spring of 1984 it was observed near North Platte for 22 days, and then tracked to the nesting grounds in Canada.

The other bird had a red band on the left leg, yellow on the right. It was banded and fitted with a radio transmitter as a chick at Wood Buffalo in 1983. It crossed the state that fall without stopping. The next spring (1984) it was seen near Brownlee, in Cherry Co.

The birds were seen together as a pair at Wood Buffalo in the fall of 1985. They migrated south together and spent the 1985-86 winter together at Aransas NWR in Texas.

Two weeks later, on 21 April 1986, a group of five adult Whooping Cranes were observed about a mile northwest of Milburn, in Custer Co., about 5 miles south of where we saw the pair. This group did not include either of the birds we saw. The group was observed for about 2 hours before they
flew off to the north.

These are the third and fourth confirmed sightings in this area. In the spring of 1984 a pair was observed for several days at the same site near Milburn. In 1984 three birds were seen on the same ranch where John and I saw the pair. There have also been a number of unconfirmed sightings in the area in the intervening years. This must lead to speculation that the area is being used more or less regularly. It also raises questions about the possibility of the migration corridor being shifted slightly to the east.

A note of caution is in order for any birders who might think of driving out there on the chance of finding Cranes. The birds we were shown were on a private ranch, nearly two miles from the only road in the area, and were never visible from the road. There are literally hundreds of square miles that are roadless and inaccessible for every mile that can be seen from one of the few roads in the area. The odds of finding a Crane by chance are astronomically small.

Thanks go to Gary Lingle and Ross Lock for sharing information on the birds' history, to Greg Wingfield for information on the second group of birds, and to all of them for reviewing a draft of this note. Special thanks go to the ranchers for alerting me to the Cranes' presence and for the warm hospitality extended during our visit.

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In addition to the two sightings mentioned above (7 and 21 April), the Fish and Wildlife Service, Grand Island, reported these other confirmed sightings:

Two adults and one young 2-3 April in Furnas Co., 2 mi. west and 2 mi. north of the intersection of Highways 14 and 136, and the same group 3-6 April in Lincoln Co., .5 mi. south and .5 mi. west of Maxwell.

Two adults and a young in Custer Co. 5 April, 4 mi. northwest of Callaway. The same group was seen 11-17 April 4 mi. east and 2 mi. south of Ardath, Saskatchewan, Canada.