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THE WHOOPING CRANE IN MEXICO: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE?

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Abstract: We reviewed ornithological, historic, anthropological, and archaeological records for evidence of whooping cranes (*Grus americana*) in Mexico. Records of whooping cranes in Mexico span 88 years (1863-1951) and cluster in 3 areas. Wintering records come from the northern highlands (Durango, and possibly Chihuahua), the central highlands (Guanajuato, Jalisco), and northeastern Tamaulipas, where the bird was also found in summer and might have bred. Later records (1970's and 1980's) of whooping cranes in the northern highlands are from individual birds released into the experimental migratory population that formerly migrated from Idaho to New Mexico, USA. Many of the wetlands used by whooping cranes remain and, though faced with a variety of threats, are conservation priority areas and some are already protected.

We suggest 3 scenarios by which whooping cranes might return to winter in Mexico. The first 2 involve dispersal by birds wintering at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas, USA, by either population growth or ecosystem changes or degradation (e.g., climate change, reduced freshwater inflows) at the refuge. Finally, reintroduction of a migratory population might target part of Mexico as a wintering area. We encourage investigation of wetlands in Mexico, especially in northeastern Tamaulipas for their potential as future wintering areas.

Our preliminary survey of historic Spanish language publications covering the 1500's to early 1600's found clear references to cranes in which, for example, cranes are described feeding with geese in grain fields. Cranes are mentioned in accounts of the DeSoto and Coronado expeditions as well as the travels of Bishop Alonso de la Mota y Escobar. Unfortunately, these accounts do not adequately describe the birds for species identification. Only, the Florentine Codex by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun provides a description of the sandhill crane (*G. canadensis*) from near Mexico City at the time of Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. Continued searches of early Spanish language publications might yield more information of the historic distribution of cranes in Mexico.

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