

Record Number of Whoopers

The tallest bird in North America has something special to “whoop” about. For the first time in 100 years, the total population of wild and captive-bred whooping cranes exceeds 500 birds. In 1945, the flock was down to just 15 birds. The whooping crane, declared an endangered species in 1971, is still one of the rarest birds on the continent.

An estimated 266 cranes spent the winter along the Texas Gulf Coast, which includes Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. They represent the only remaining wild flock on the continent. By mid-April, 87 percent of the flock had begun migrating to their summer homes in Canada.

Five whooping crane breeding facilities, including Patuxent Research Refuge in Maryland, provided eggs or raised chicks in 2007. Twenty-eight chicks were raised in captivity and shipped to Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin, to be prepared for reintroduction to the wild. Seventeen followed an ultralight plane to Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, where they spent the winter. These 17 birds are now making their spring migration back to Wisconsin.

The progress of each tagged crane is recorded in online travel journals and podcasts at Operation Migration (<http://www.operationmigration.org/>) and the International Crane Foundation (<http://www.savingcranes.org/>).