



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (7:11)

WHOOPING CRANE (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH JOHN FRENCH)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

PROCEEDINGS

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello, there, this is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and I'm on the phone today with Dr. John French, Research Manager and head of the USGS Whooping Crane Project at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. Hi, John, how are you today?

MR. FRENCH: Good morning, I'm fine, thank you.

MS. LEON: Now, John, I have you on the phone today to talk about Patuxent's involvement in the Whooping Crane recovery effort. So to get us started, can you tell us a little about this species?

MR. FRENCH: Sure. Whooping Cranes are one of the most if not the most endangered bird in North America. It's a bird is native in North America found in no other continent, and this bird is kind of special in that the population in North America was down to about 22 birds in the early 1940s, which really is essentially extinct. Now, here in 2011, there are something over 500 birds alive in the North American continent. About 150 of those are in captive flocks that are used for breeding and producing chicks for restoration.

Something like 250 are found in the one native wild flock of Whooping Cranes that remains from that very small number alive in 1942, and the rest are in flocks that have been restored in North America. But all the birds that are alive in North America derive from the very, very small number back in 1942. So they're quite rare, and while they've come back from a very low level, they're still dangerously low population numbers.

MS. LEON: Right. So what are the major causes for this species' decline?

MR. FRENCH: The major causes of decline were believe it or not hunting. These are very big birds they've got lots of meat, and also habitat destruction. They're really a bird of the wet shores grass prairies. They like to breed in the wet shore grass prairies, the Midwestern part of the continent, and almost all of that habitat has been taken over by agriculture. So there's really very, very little left for them in their primary habitat. So those are the causes of their great endangerment.

MS. LEON: I understand that Patuxent has the largest breeding flock of about 60 birds, is that right?

MR. FRENCH: That's right. Here at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, we got the first bird in captivity in 1967, and that bird really started the captive propagation efforts for Whooping Cranes that have continued to this day. At the moment Patuxent has about 60 or so whooping cranes in captivity, and there are a number of other centers that do a little bit of breeding in North America. The next largest flock is at the International Crane Foundation in Terabit, Wisconsin. All of those birds and these other flocks came from captive birds that we've produced here at Patuxent.

MS. LEON: Now, what has the facility's role in research and recovery been?

MR. FRENCH: Well, we have a varied role with our captive flock of full breed – we form pairs of adults that mate and produce chicks, and we train those chicks or raise them for release into flocks that we're trying to restore. But there's an awful lot of research that is undertaken that kind of underlies that breeding and restoration activity. Research and such things as captive husbandry, nutrition, how to breed these birds properly in captivity, and a lot of about their behavior because one of the great challenges that we have in restoring captive bred birds to the wild is to somehow train them the best we can to succeed in the wild.

Of course, the pen environment in which they are raised is pretty artificial not much like the wild environment. So we have to do a few things to give them a best chance of surviving when we release them.

MS. LEON: We all see these images of individuals like yourself dressed up in white suits when working with these species. Can you tell the listeners what this is all about?

MR. FRENCH: Sure, yeah, it's kind of striking to sort of look like Casper the ghost running around in these costumes. The idea here is that for chicks that we raise that are destined to go back into the wild, we want them to be as "wild" as possible. And by wild we mean animals that are afraid of humans or not comfortable around humans. So the point of the costume is much less to look like a whooping crane because we presume that these big blobs don't really look like whooping cranes to little crane chicks, but to hide human form. And we know it works pretty well.

We really want these birds to seek out secluded habitats in the wild, and not be comfortable of landing on someone backyard and looking for the dog dish of food that might be in the backyard that kind of thing. That really will lead to great risk for these birds, so we want them to stay away from humans, away from human structures and such. So when we raise them we're in costume, and the handlers are forbidden from speaking. So they don't hear human voices when they're being raise, and to the extent we can, we keep vehicles away from them, and we kind of camouflage the buildings to look more naturalistic I guess.

We also spend a lot of time with them in wetland habitats, walking them around in the marshes and grassland so that they're used to those kinds of habitats when they're released.

MS. LEON: Just a couple of weeks ago in late February you actually released ten whooping cranes in Southwestern Louisiana. Tell us why Louisiana was chosen for this reintroduction.

MR. FRENCH: Right, yeah, this is kind of an exciting development in the recovery of the whooping crane. There was a portion of the population of whooping cranes in historical times that we know inhabited the marshes of Southwest Louisiana, and probably elsewhere along the gulf coast as well. But we certainly more definitely about their presence in those great big marshes to the west of New Orleans, say from New Orleans west to the Sabine River. There are hundreds and hundreds of square miles of wetlands area that really look like excellent habitat and indeed lived there before. So it was interesting in the whooping cranes that inhabited those areas were a non-migratory portion of the population.

That is, they spent the whole there, bred there, and spent the winter there. So part of the whooping crane population is migratory and part is non-migratory. So we're restoring now a non-migratory flock of whoopers to Southwestern Louisiana in these vast marshes in an area where whoopers had died out over 60 years ago. So there really hasn't been a wild whooping crane in Louisiana for over 60 years. So it's kind of exciting to start to restore this additional flock to help with the recovery of the whoopers overall.

MS. LEON: Thank you so much, John, for taking the time today to tell us a little about the whooping crane and the whooping crane product there at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. It was a real pleasure having you on today.

MR. FRENCH: Sure, my pleasure.

MS. LEON: From the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Sarah Leon. Thanks for listening.