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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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THIRTY-TWO WHOOPING CRANES NOW WINTERING IN TEXAS

During a number of extensive aerial searches made in December and January over the wintering grounds of the whooping crane in Texas, observers counted 32 of this nearly extinct species, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society reported today.

The known continental population of one of America's rarest birds consists of four young whooping cranes and 28 adults, two of which are captive birds, all located now at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the east coast of Texas. During the 1949 winter season, the count revealed 32 adults (including the two captives) and four young.

Service officials are of the opinion, however, that the recent counts may not reflect the total number of birds which are in existence on the Texas coast. Because of adverse weather conditions this year, the area is experiencing one of the worst droughts in its history. This has brought about a change in crane behavior. Formerly the birds could be found in the salt flats and along tidal pools, primarily on the east refuge shoreline. This year, however, they are also using the low brushy areas of the interior, usually in association with or near the few remaining sources of fresh water.

Under drought conditions, the number of suitable fresh water areas along that section of the coast is limited. Since the birds tend to establish definite territories of some size, it is quite possible that they have found the refuge crowded this year, and consequently have sought feeding and watering areas elsewhere which, so far, remain undiscovered.

After a transcontinental flight from their unknown breeding grounds, which are in the Far North, the cranes arrive regularly at the Aransas Refuge in late October, usually reaching peak numbers in November and December. Several times in the past a few stragglers have shown up in February--too late to be included in the late-fall and winter count. Additional aerial surveys will be made this year from time to time by refuge personnel in the hopes that any itinerant cranes so far not recorded on the refuge area will be located.

The majority of the birds leave the refuge during late March and early April on their northward migration. So far all attempts to locate the nesting sites of these birds have been unsuccessful. It is feared that civilization may be forcing them slowly northward to the limits of vegetation. A half century ago they nested from Iowa northward. Efforts to prevent the extinction of whooping cranes are being jointly sponsored by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society.

Last winter the two captive birds, Crip and Josephine, built a nest and hatched a single egg at the Aransas Refuge. The chick, which was immediately nicknamed "Rusty", lived for just four days and then mysteriously disappeared.

During his short life span he probably was the focus of more international attention than any single bird in history.

The whooping crane which was transferred from the Louisiana marshes to the Aransas Refuge, in the hope that it might add to the breeding population, died recently. According to a report from the cooperating agencies, the bird had been healthy after adjusting itself to its new environment. The cause of its death could not be determined.

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