



Thirty-eight aerial counts were made in the Aransas area between October 19, 1962, when the first whoopers landed from the north, and March 25, 1963. The build-up was gradual until a peak of 32 cranes was noted on December 7 and again on December 20, 1962. Since then the counts have fluctuated between 19 and 28.

Because six adult whooping cranes did not return to Aransas in the fall flight and because no young birds were produced during the year, Refuge personnel increased vigilance over the numbers which did return. The number and range of the reconnaissance flights were increased to areas north and west of the Refuge as well as to Texas points as far north as Galveston and as far south as Brownsville in an effort to locate the missing birds.

The behavior of the cranes during the winter is described as erratic and unpredictable. Over the years it has been the habit of the cranes to spend most of their time on the east shore flats of the refuge and in similar habitat on Matagorda and St. Joseph Islands.

Blue crabs and other marine invertebrates comprise the major portion of the whooper diet and are usually plentiful in the shore areas. Some months ago, however, cranes were unusually active in foraging in the scrub oak flats in the interior of the Refuge. A single bird was seen on three occasions on a ranch several miles north of the Refuge near Port O'Conner and three birds were sighted on a ranch near Port Lavaca, about 25 miles north of the Refuge. During the winter the birds also were seen utilizing experimental wheat plantings made by Refuge personnel in the spring of 1962. Because of this apparent food shortage, Refuge employees air-dropped wheat and milo several times in the more-frequented portions of the Refuge.

Many rumors have been received regarding the missing cranes. Some persons reported that the northern hunters had shot southbound cranes by mistake. Other reports heard in the United States were that the whooping cranes were shot by careless hunters seeking sandhill cranes. All such rumors were studied and none has been substantiated as factual. The only definite information is that 38 whoopers started north in 1962 and only 32 came back, none with young, and further that only 28 were sighted in the far-reaching air surveys made by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Texas Game and Fish Commission in March, 1963.

In 1937, the 47,000-acre Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was established on what was known as Blackjack Peninsula on the Texas coast, 75 miles north of Corpus Christi. The Refuge lies inshore from Matagorda Island and is separated from that island by the Intercoastal Waterway.

The usual migration path crosses Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, eastern Montana and into Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Occasional sightings have been reported in Idaho and elsewhere, but not been verified. The nesting area in Wood Buffalo National Park was discovered in 1954 and the Canadian Government protects it from human disturbance.

The population of wild whooping cranes has varied considerably since counts started in the winter of 1938-39. Beginning with a low of 14 that winter, a full decade elapsed before the number increased to 31. During most of the 1950's, numbers dropped into the twenties, reflecting both the low reproductive potential and losses from unknown causes. With the counting of 38 whoopers in the winter of 1961-62, the greatest number was recorded, while the zenith in production was reached in 1958 when nine young were counted. Last year's unsuccessful nesting season was duplicated once--in 1954.

In addition to the wild population, six whooping cranes, including the famous Crip and Josephine, reside in the Audubon Park Zoo, New Orleans, and a single bird lives at the San Antonio, Texas, Zoo.

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