

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

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WHOOPER POPULATION AT ARANSAS HAS STEADILY INCREASED;
RECORD 55 ON HAND THIS YEAR

With this year's migration believed to be complete, a record 55 wild whooping cranes are wintering on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas operated by the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. The refuge gives the whoopers their only protected habitat on U.S. soil.

Aerial surveys of the refuge and adjacent Matagorda Island are continuing, however, in case additional birds should arrive.

The Federal Government began protecting the whoopers, North America's tallest bird, at Aransas when the refuge was opened in 1937. The first accurate census, taken in 1941, revealed only 15 of these majestic cranes on the grounds, but since then the population has been steadily increasing. It exceeded 30 in 1947, topped 40 in 1964 and reached 50 last year.

Probably there never was a large population of whooping cranes, but 100 or more years ago they ranged over much of the continent from the Arctic to central Mexico and from the Rockies to the Atlantic. As man tamed the land, their habitat shrank and their numbers diminished.

Now the whoopers are forced to nest in the summer in Wood Buffalo National Park in northern Canada. They normally arrive in family groups at Aransas over a period of several weeks beginning in mid-October. The migration is ended by late November or early December.

Winter food for the big birds includes plant and animal life. Blue crabs, shrimp, small fishes, frogs, worms, other marine crustaceans, and mollusks make up much of the diet. The cranes also feed on acorns and readily accept planted grains and vegetables grown for them in two 100-acre fenced food plots on the refuge.

While at Aransas Refuge, the cranes receive more attention than they do at any other time of the year. Aerial counts are made once a week and frequent boat patrols assure the whoopers' well-being.

Although visitors to the refuge are not permitted to enter the whooping crane habitat, they frequently can observe birds from a tree-screened observation tower.

Restlessness of the cranes in late winter signals the start of their spring migration to the nesting grounds. In late March and early April the family groups begin departing, and normally all of the cranes have left by April 15.

The Aransas managers then must wait another six months to hope for another new record as the whoopers come in for the winter.

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