

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

FEATURE MATERIAL

For Release On Receipt (prepared 11/13/73)

McGarvey 202/343-5634

ENDANGERED WHOOPING CRANES ARRIVE IN TEXAS

The major portion of the world's whooping crane population has arrived on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Gulf Coast of Texas. The rest of these magnificent endangered birds are due over the next several weeks from the Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada.

The first five of the whoopers to reach Aransas were spotted on October 23. By November 1 there were 36 adults and 1 young whooper on the refuge, and at last count, November 8, there were 41 adult and 2 young birds.

Canadian Wildlife Service reports indicated that only three young were believed reared this year on the breeding grounds.

Both the sight and the clarion bugle call of a "whooper" are spectacular. The whooping crane is one of the largest of North America's native birds, standing five feet tall with a crimson crown and pure white, black-tipped wings that spread some seven feet. It has long thin legs and web-less toes.

A hundred years ago the whoopers ranged widely but in limited numbers over much of North America from the Arctic to central Mexico and from the Rockies to the Atlantic.

Today there are fewer than 80 in the entire world, 21 in captivity and about 50 in the wild. As man tamed the North American continent their habitat shrank and their numbers diminished. They were hunted for their

(MORE)

feathers, and even after they came under the protection of the 1916 Migratory Bird Convention they were still killed. By the late 1930's less than two dozen were left on the face of the earth.

The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1937, and it soon became the wintering home of the remaining whooping cranes. The first accurate count of whoopers was made in the winter of 1939-40 when 16 older birds and six young wintered there. Each fall when the cranes return from their breeding grounds in Canada they bring a few chicks hatched that summer. The young are easily distinguished by their rusty color. Over their first winter it changes to adult white.

Their migratory route is well known. From Canada they head south over the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Their autumn passage is made more hazardous by the fact that the duck and goose season is well underway the length of their migration route over the United States. Last week a lone whooper lighted at a wildlife refuge in Kansas, and hunting in the area was immediately barred. In 1968 one whooping crane was shot accidentally by a hunter near the Aransas Refuge.

Each spring the remnant group of wild whoopers makes a return flight of 2,600 miles from Aransas to the region of the Great Slave Lake in Canada where they nest.

For years the nesting location of the whooping cranes in Canada remained a mystery. In 1954 a fire in a remote section of the 11-million-acre Wood Buffalo Park brought foresters who discovered the cranes on their present nesting grounds.

Wild whoopers are believed to mate for life, and they make excellent parents. They guard and feed their young about 10 months after hatching. They keep the youngsters between them when flying and close at hand when feeding and preening. Young cranes grow rapidly, and in about 90 days are ready for their first flight. The migration south requires several weeks' practice for the long journey to their wintering grounds.

In 1964 Canadian wildlife specialists spotted a youngster with a drooping wing on the nesting grounds. He had collided with a tree while learning to fly and had splinters in his wing and body. Eventually the wing had to be amputated, but the bird today resides at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, where he lives as a member of the Fish and Wildlife Service's captive breeding program. The eldest whooper in captivity is over 25 years old.

There are 21 whooping cranes in captivity today, four at zoos in New Orleans and San Antonio, and the rest at Patuxent.

In 1967 the U.S. and Canadian Fish and Wildlife Services decided to obtain whooping crane eggs from the wild for captive propagation after research showed the risks were minimal. It was learned that one egg could be removed from the normal clutch of two with little likelihood of nest desertion by the parents and with reasonable assurance that the remaining egg would be hatched and the youngster reared. It was also learned that although whooping crane pairs lay two eggs, over the years very few families appear at Aransas with more than a single chick.

Studies by Canadian wildlife specialists confirmed that the number of young cranes reaching Aransas each year averaged only about one-fourth as many as the total number of eggs laid by the wild whoopers. It was concluded that removal of one of the two eggs in each clutch for hatching in captivity could be done with little if any sacrifice to the productivity of the wild population.

A helicopter team of biologists took one egg from each of six nests and transferred them in insulated suitcases, warmed by hot water bottles, to Fort Smith, Canada. The carefully laid plans included the use of a Canadian Air Force jet to transport the team from Fort Smith to Washington after the pickup, but the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli Six Day War re-assigned the jet to transport United Nations Secretary-General U Thant to Israel. Commercial air had to be used instead, and one chick that hatched enroute didn't survive the difference in cabin pressures. Subsequent pickups, however, afforded the use of a pressurized jet, an incubator, and regulated temperatures for the eggs. No chicks have been lost since the first mishap, and a captive hatched stock of 15 whoopers now resides at Patuxent.

The whooping cranes normally arrive in family groups at Aransas over a period of several weeks beginning in mid-October. By late November or early December most of the migration is over, although some birds may straggle in later. Each family establishes a territory of a few hundred acres which it guards against intrusion by other whooping cranes although it shows little aggression towards waterfowl, shore, and wading birds which share the same wintering grounds.

Winter foods for the big birds include plant and animal life. Blue crabs, shrimp, small fishes, frogs, worms, and other marine crustaceans and mollusks make up much of their diet. The cranes also feed on acorns

and readily accept planted grains, sedge tubers, and vegetables grown for them in two 100-acre fenced food plots on the refuge.

While at Aransas 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 area, they frequently can observe the birds from a tree-screened observation tower and, even more closely, from an excursion boat in the Intracoastal Canal.

Restlessness of the cranes in late winter signals the start of the spring migration to the nesting grounds. In late March or early April the family groups begin departing and normally all will have left by mid-April. Family ties are thought to be broken during the spring migration, so that only adults reach nesting grounds. Where most youngsters spend their summer remains a mystery, although a few have been spotted on the plains of southwestern Saskatchewan.

The management of the whooping crane is a responsibility shared by Canadian and U.S. conservation interests. The protection of the vast Wood Buffalo National Park which contains the only remaining nesting grounds; the special publicity and other attention given by the Provinces and States through which the bird travels; the concern of private citizens in both countries; and the intensive management of the Aransas Refuge are essential to the continued survival of this great bird. Past and present studies of the whooping crane on its wintering grounds have been sponsored by the National Audubon Society and have yielded information that is indispensable to purposeful management.

While the cranes have been making slow and persistent progress to safer numbers, fear has always haunted their protectors that a major oil spill will drastically alter their wintering grounds or that a severe wind-storm or unseasonal blizzard will catch them in migration. In such an event the survival of the species could rest upon the small flock at Patuxent, and those in captivity elsewhere.

Both the wild and captive populations of whooping cranes is growing. None have yet bred in captivity, although biologists at Patuxent are preparing for this event by constructing pens for several pairs of whoopers now approaching maturity. It is hoped that next breeding season these pairs will mate and firmly establish a captive breeding stock.

As far as the future of the whooping cranes goes, it is still not assured that the bird will survive as a wild species, but its chances are improving. Biologists at Patuxent look forward to the day when they can transplant captive-born whoopers to the wild and have them successfully take hold and thrive there.

The whooping crane, whose extinction was predicted by ornithologists more than 30 years ago, may eventually join the trumpeter swan as a species which returned from the brink of extinction to a more secure status.

WHOOPING CRANE POPULATION

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>ADULTS</u>	<u>YOUNG</u>
1938	14	10	4
1939	22	16	6
1940	26	21	5
1941	15	13	2
1942	19	15	4
1943	21	16	5
1944	18	15	3
1945	17	14	3
1946	25	22	3
1947	31	25	6
1948	30	27	3
1949	34	30	4
1950	31	26	5
1951	25	20	5
1952	21	19	2
1953	24	21	3
1954	21	21	0
1955	28	20	8
1956	24	22	2
1957	26	22	4
1958	32	23	9
1959	33	31	2
1960	36	30	6
1961	38	33	5
1962	32	32	0
1963	33	26	7
1964	42	32	10
1965	44	36	8
1966	43	38	5
1967	48	39	9
1968	50	44	6
1969	56	48	8
1970	57	51	6
1971	56	51	5
1972	51	46	5

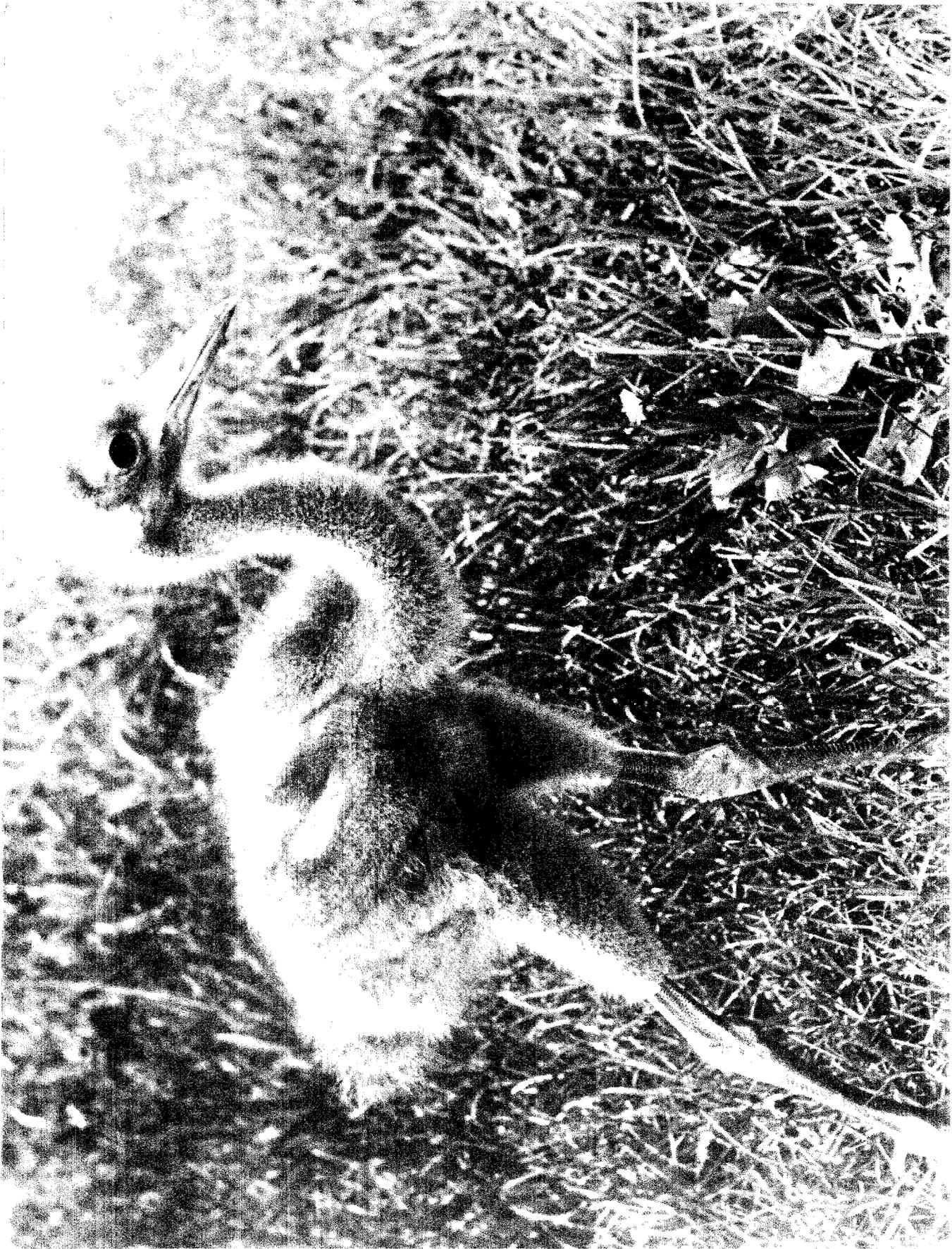
x x x



Whooping cranes migrate south from Canada each autumn over a 2,600-mile hazardous course. The flock above contains three immature birds stacked at left and two mature birds flying below to the right. Coloration on the neck reveals the immature birds.



With legs adangle one whooping crane pursues another across a pond in defense of its territory. Note the webless toes on whoopers. This photo, taken at the Aransas Refuge in Texas, evokes the impression of a Japanese print.



This young whooper was hatched from the first batch of eggs picked up in the wild in Canada. Today this chick is nearing maturity at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center at Laurel, Maryland, and may be among the first to breed in captivity.



The magnificent wingspread of a whooping crane is reflected above as one crane pursues another in defense of its territory. An immature, rust-colored crane watches at left. Other fowl like the Canada geese sharing the waterhole shown above right do not prompt a defensive reaction in whooping cranes.