

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Immediate Release (prepared 4/18/75)

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FIRST WHOOPING CRANE EGG LAID FROM CAPTIVE BREEDING FLOCK

The laying of a whooping crane egg in a breeding enclosure at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Md., on April 18 is being hailed by biologists as an event of major scientific importance. It is the first egg laid by the Patuxent flock of endangered whoopers established to provide insurance against extinction and to produce stock for restoration of wild populations, Director Lynn Greenwalt of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said today.

Wild whoopers captured as adults had previously laid eggs in captivity, but this is the first time that a whooper hatched and reared in captivity has, in turn, laid an egg. The whooper that laid the egg was hatched in 1968 from an egg taken from the whooping crane nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park in northwestern Canada in cooperation with the Canadian Wildlife Service.

The four-inch, olive-colored egg with brownish splotches was dipped in disinfectant and placed in an incubator where it will remain for 30 days. Patuxent scientists are uncertain about the egg containing a chick because no mating was actually observed before the egg was laid. Still, the event is considered a major step in the direction of breeding these exceedingly rare birds. Removal of the egg should stimulate laying of one or more additional eggs, and semiweekly artificial insemination of the female bird should greatly increase the prospects of fertility in subsequently laid eggs.

(over)

Since whoopers normally breed in northwestern Canada where days are longer at this time of the year, clock-controlled floodlights at Patuxent are set to simulate this condition. While most whoopers lay only two eggs during the breeding season, usually only one chick survives to reach the Arkansas National Wildlife Refuge wintering grounds in Texas. The causes of loss of one of the chicks in each brood are not known with certainty, though sibling aggression may be a factor. Because of this, scientists during five of the years since 1967 have removed one of each clutch of two eggs in whooper nests and hatched them artificially at Patuxent. Nineteen of 21 whooping cranes now at Patuxent have been obtained in this way, one of which produced the egg laid on Friday, April 18. If the egg hatches, it will be reared in the company of some of the many young sandhill cranes also being hatched at the Center.

Six other pairs of whooping cranes at this location are showing pre-nesting behavior, of which at least half are believed to be of breeding age and now capable of reproduction. The season is very early, however, and the combination of artificially lengthened light and local temperature is only now approaching conditions which stimulate wild whoopers to nest in Wood Buffalo National Park, so the Patuxent staff is hopeful of obtaining additional eggs from the whooping cranes this spring.

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