

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## HUNTER SENTENCED FOR SHOOTING AT WHOOPING CRANES

A New Mexico man, convicted of trying to kill two whooping cranes near a Federal refuge last fall, has been sentenced to serve 30 days of a 6-month jail sentence and has been prohibited from hunting or carrying a firearm for 3 years.

Thurman Ural Witt, 28, of Albuquerque was also given a 3-year term of supervised probation by U.S. District Judge Edwin Mechem. Sentence was imposed February 27 in Albuquerque. Witt was found guilty in January on two counts of violating the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

The violation occurred near the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico's central Rio Grande Valley. The whoopers Witt attempted to take were part of an experimental flock that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Canadian Wildlife Service, and State wildlife departments, are trying to establish. Crane biologists believe that establishing a second, separate wild flock will greatly increase the endangered whooping crane's chances for survival. Greater sandhill cranes, which nest in Idaho and winter in New Mexico, are being used as "foster parents" to hatch and rear young whoopers. This winter, there are six whooping cranes in the experimental New Mexico flock, and 70 in the original flock that winters on the Texas Gulf Coast.

Witt pleaded not guilty to the charges. In an affidavit, he said he shot three times at a snow goose flying with two sandhill cranes, but missed. Two agents of the FWS, part of a special team assigned to patrol areas in the Rio Grande Valley were on the scene. Agents testified that they saw a whooping crane flying with two sandhill cranes, and heard three shots fired at them. Later, they heard another two shots fired at a single whooping crane, and located Witt. An agent testified that he saw no snow geese in the area at the time of the shootings. Witt's brother-in-law, subpoenaed by the prosecution, testified that he was in Witt's hunting party at a nearby location. He said he saw the whoopers and heard shots fired at them, but saw no snow geese.

Also at the trial was Dr. Rd Drewien, an expert on whooping cranes whose studies are funded by the FWS. Drewien showed slides and models of snow geese and cranes to show the differences between them. While the birds share similar markings and color, whoopers are much larger, and trail long legs behind them in flight.

Drewien said one of the whoopers might have picked up a pellet because it remained in its roost for 3 days after the shooting.