

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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ADDITIONAL CRITICAL HABITAT PROPOSED FOR WHOOPING CRANES

Eight areas in five States have been proposed as critical habitat for the endangered whooping crane, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The proposal, published in the August 17, 1978, Federal Register, would list as critical habitat for the whooping crane areas in Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. These areas are separate from and in addition to nine areas designated as critical habitat for the whooping crane in the May 15, 1978, Federal Register.

"Critical habitat" means, briefly, that the loss of the area so designated would appreciably decrease the likelihood of the survival and recovery of an endangered or threatened species. Under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, Federal agencies are prohibited from authorizing, funding, or carrying out actions that would adversely affect the critical habitat of a listed species. Critical habitat designations affect only the actions of Federal agencies and do not automatically close an area to most human uses.

All of the areas proposed here were selected because they provide secure nightly roosting sites and food during the spring and fall migrations of the Wood Buffalo-Aransas whooping crane flock. This flock, which numbered 70 in April 1978, migrates annually between September and early

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December to its wintering grounds on or near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas. In April and May the flock returns along the same narrow route to its nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories. Along the way the cranes need open, undisturbed expanses for nightly roosting sites and generally use sand and gravel bars or very shallow water in rivers and lakes. They also need areas that provide a variety of food, such as insects, crayfish, frogs, and other small animals as well as some aquatic vegetation and cereal crops.

Included in the critical habitat proposed here are areas in northwest North Dakota that are extremely important because they are among the last areas where the cranes will rest and feed before flying to their nesting grounds. From the North Dakota-Saskatchewan border area the cranes usually fly without stopping to Wood Buffalo National Park and begin to lay eggs almost as soon as they arrive. If the cranes were to be deprived of their feeding grounds in North Dakota and were to arrive at the park during one of the common spring snow storms, they might die of malnutrition or reabsorb their egg material for nourishment, thereby reducing the likelihood of reproductive success.

An unusual feature of this critical habitat proposal is that it includes two dams, Garrison Dam in North Dakota and Oahe Dam in South Dakota. Critical habitat designations usually do not apply to existing man-made structures because most of these are not necessary to the survival of the species. The Garrison and Oahe Dams, however, have created reservoirs that deposit sediment in certain areas, forming sand bars that the cranes use for roosting. If the critical habitat proposal for the dams becomes final, it will not change the traditional operation of the dams because it is the dams that have created favorable habitat for the whooping cranes.

Interested persons should send comments on these proposals to the Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240, by October 16, 1978.

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