

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Inez Connor 202/343-5634

DEATH CLAIMS THE GREAT WHITE BIRD

"Crip," the oldest whooping crane known, died unexpectedly Tuesday afternoon in the San Antonio Zoo where he was on loan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He was the first wild whooping crane to breed successfully in captivity.

"We've lost a living national treasure," said Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "Crip was a symbol of endangered wildlife to millions of Americans."

Crip was given his affectionate nickname by Service biologists when he was rescued in 1949 with an injured wing at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. The refuge is the wintering grounds of the original wild flock of whoopers that migrate from Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. He was an adult bird at the time of his rescue and experts can only guess that he was at least in his 30's when he died.

During his life in captivity, Crip and his three mates produced 10 chicks but only two now survive. A male and female, they are on loan to the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin.

With the loss of Crip, there are now 108 whooping cranes in the world. The most famous are the 74 wild ones that migrate between Canada and the United States. In a second wild flock, nine have been reared at Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho by sandhill crane foster parents in an experimental attempt to establish another wild population.

Twenty-two others are at the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Maryland, which has achieved remarkable success in its efforts to hatch and rear whoopers from eggs airlifted from nests in Canada. Sixteen of the Patuxent flock originated in that manner and they have produced and reared five additional whoopers. One other whooper at Patuxent, CAN-US, is now the only wild specimen in captivity. Like Crip, he is unable to fly because of a wing injury.

The whooping crane captive breeding program is a major effort undertaken by U.S. and Canadian wildlife officials in conjunction with the National Audubon Society to reduce the danger of extinction to the species. It got underway in 1967 when the United States and Canada decided to obtain whooping crane eggs from the wild for captive propagation after research showed the risks were minimal. In fact, production of young by the Canadian whoopers has been greater during the years when one of the two eggs in each clutch is removed.

The Patuxent captive flock produced 23 eggs last year, with this year's production just beginning. A majority of the eggs are sent to Grays Lake to enhance that effort. In addition, Crip and his mate, Ektu, produced six eggs this season.

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