



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release October 31, 1984

David Klinger (202) 343-5634

PATUXENT WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER REPORTS
DEATHS OF FIVE WHOOPING CRANES;
INVESTIGATIONS CONTINUE INTO CAUSE

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials have launched an extensive investigation to determine the cause of death of five endangered whooping cranes at its Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md.

The five birds, all of which have died since mid-September, were part of a captive flock of the large, snowy white cranes maintained at the research center for breeding. Offspring from the Patuxent flock, which now numbers 34 birds, are used to supplement numbers of wild whooping cranes in the western United States.

Researchers at Patuxent and at the Service's National Wildlife Health Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, have not determined the cause of the birds' deaths. Initial examinations have revealed depressed white cell counts, accumulations of fluid in abdominal cavities, and liver damage in the dead birds.

The five birds include a 3-year-old female that died September 17; a 1-year-old male that died September 24; a 5-year-old female that died September 26; a 16-year-old female that died October 25; and a 2-year-old female that died October 28. Only the 16-year-old female had produced young; the other birds were immature or adults that had not produced offspring.

(over)

The remaining captive whooping cranes have been quarantined to lessen the possibility of future deaths and to prevent any further disease transmission. Tissue samples have been analyzed by the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., and the Maryland Animal Health Laboratory in Salisbury, Maryland, but no further clues to the cause of death were identified. Additional tests conducted by the National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, Iowa, turned up no evidence of contamination by pesticides, heavy metals, or polychlorinated biphenyls.

"We're disturbed, of course, by this loss of cranes within the captive flock at Patuxent," announced Robert Jantzen, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. "As with any endangered species, the loss of even one individual is a blow to the recovery of the overall population. Mortality does occur, however, in captivity as well as in the wild. Our effort now is directed at quickly determining the cause of death and preventing further losses."

The low point for the whooping cranes was reached in 1941, when just 15 were left in the wild. The United States and Canada have worked jointly to build up whooping crane numbers through research, captive breeding, habitat protection, and strict law enforcement. Today, in addition to the 34 captive whooping cranes at Patuxent, there are approximately 90 whooping cranes in the wild flock that migrates from Canada's Wood Buffalo Park to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas; and 35 to 38 whooping cranes in a second, experimental wild flock that migrates from Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho to Bosque Del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. The second flock was established using eggs laid by wild cranes in the Wood Buffalo flock and eggs produced by the captive flock at Patuxent. The whooping crane eggs are hatched and reared by wild "foster-parent" sandhill cranes.