



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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ILLNESS STRIKES RARE CRANES AT PATUXENT WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER

An unknown malady at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, has killed 14 cranes, including 3 endangered whooping cranes, and sickened over 100 others since September 19, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said today.

In addition to the whooping cranes, one Mississippi sandhill crane, also an endangered species, eight Florida sandhill cranes, and two greater sandhill cranes have died. The latter two species are not endangered. Thirteen cranes, including two whooping crane chicks, are being intensively treated in hospital pens and about 100 additional cranes are being treated in their own pens.

So far, scientists at the Federal wildlife research center have been unable to determine the cause of the illness in spite of exhaustive tests. As of September 29, however, they were able to report that the sick birds appear to be improving as a result of treatment with fluids, antibiotics, and vitamins. No crane has died since September 27.

"Research scientists are doing everything possible to find the cause of this illness and try to prevent losses of any more birds," said Frank Dunkle, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A special response team from the Service's National Wildlife Health Research Center in Madison, Wisconsin, has been called in to help determine the cause of the illness. Tests are being conducted at Patuxent laboratories, at facilities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Ames, Iowa, and at the University of Maryland's Agriculture Department in College Park, Maryland.

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The scientists are testing the cranes' food, water, and surroundings for molds, fungi, bacteria, and contaminants. The birds' food and water supplies have been changed in case they are the source of the problem, and the nutritional components of the food are being re-analyzed. Studies are being made of the birds' blood and tissues to try to isolate viruses or bacteria that might have caused the illness.

Sick birds are listless or depressed, do not eat well, and exhibit dehydration and emaciation. Veterinarians presently do not believe the illness to be Eastern equine encephalitis, which killed seven whooping cranes at the research center in 1984.

Before the illness outbreak, Patuxent housed a total of 44 whooping cranes, 49 Mississippi sandhill cranes, 126 Florida sandhill cranes, and 80 greater sandhill cranes.

Whooping cranes are bred in captivity at Patuxent and the eggs are placed in nests in the wild to help the recovery of this endangered species. There are about 160 whooping cranes in the wild, including 133 in the original wild flock that migrates from Canada to Texas and 27 in a reintroduced flock that migrates from Idaho to New Mexico. One whooping crane is in captivity in the San Antonio Zoo in Texas and another at the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin.

Mississippi sandhill cranes also are bred in captivity at Patuxent for reintroduction to the wild at the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge in Mississippi. The Florida sandhill cranes and greater sandhill cranes serve as foster parents for the endangered species, incubating eggs and rearing the chicks of the whooping cranes and Mississippi sandhill cranes. These cranes are also used at the center to test diet and drugs before they are given to endangered crane species.

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center is the Nation's largest Federal wildlife research facility and is well known for pioneering work on endangered species, migratory birds, and the effects of contaminants on wildlife.