



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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### ENDANGERED WHOOPING CRANES PROPOSED FOR REINTRODUCTION INTO FLORIDA

The stately whooping crane, the flagship species of the Nation's endangered species recovery program, has been proposed for reintroduction into the State of Florida. The project is a joint effort of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

The proposal announced in the September 29, 1992 Federal Register, calls for the release of from 9 to 12 juvenile whooping cranes within the State's Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area in south-central Florida, approximately 75 miles northwest of Vero Beach. The reintroduction site is part of the nearly 260,000-acre Kissimmee Prairie region of Florida, more than half of which is in public ownership. The release could take place as early as November or December.

At nearly 5 feet, whoopers are the tallest birds in North America. Their wing span can grow to more than 7 feet. Adults

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are snowy white with black wing tips. A field naturalist reported a flock of 14 whoopers in Florida in the early 1900s. The last documented whooping crane in Florida was shot near St. Augustine in 1927 or 1928.

"The return of the magnificent whooping crane to Florida is a highly significant event, both from historic and biological standpoints," according to Service Director John Turner. "Florida is a part of the whoopers' historic range, so its return after some 50 to 60 years' absence is most appropriate. But more importantly, the proposed reintroduction is an effort to establish a second, self-sustaining wild population of whooping cranes, which is a critical step in protecting the species from extinction and moving it forward along the road to recovery," he said.

The whooping crane was named to the Federal list of endangered species in 1967. Today, about 145 birds comprise the only remaining self-sustaining natural wild population of whoopers in existence. The birds winter at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and adjacent areas on the Texas Gulf Coast and nest in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories. The flock rebounded from a population low of 16 birds in the winter of 1941-42.

Due to its limited wintering distribution along the intracoastal waterway of the Texas coast, the population is vulnerable to destruction from a natural catastrophe, such as a hurricane, red tide outbreak, or contaminant spill. The Gulf Intracoastal Waterway handles some of the heaviest barge traffic of petrochemical products in the world, creating the possibility of an accidental spill that could destroy the flock or its food resources. The establishment of additional self-sustaining wild flocks is outlined in the species' recovery plan as a safeguard against such catastrophic loss and a requisite for the downlisting of the bird from endangered to threatened.

The Florida flock will be made up of captive-reared birds from the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, and the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The birds to be used in the reintroduction have been conditioned for release into the wild by being reared in isolation from humans.

In the reintroduction proposal under consideration, the population will be designated "experimental non-essential." This designation, authorized by the Endangered Species Act, permits the Service to treat the reintroduced population as threatened and declares it not essential to the continued survival of the species. The Service has more discretion in managing threatened

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species than endangered species, especially in regard to incidental or regulated "takings." Under the Act, "take" is defined as "to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct."

The newly created Florida flock would be nonmigratory and remain in the Kissimmee Prairie region year-round. Studies of whooping cranes have shown migration is a learned rather than innate behavior. The captive-reared cranes are expected to develop into a nonmigratory population.

Such a population will have a greater chance of success, according to biologists on the Whooping Crane Recovery Team, because the birds would not face the hazards of migration. Furthermore, nonmigratory birds inhabit a more geographically limited area, which will increase the opportunity for the birds to find compatible mates. Whooping cranes are known to mate for life, normally producing only one to two eggs per year.

Failure to mate and mortality during migration have hampered a previous Service attempt to establish a second, migratory wild flock of whoopers at Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Idaho. This project, begun in 1975, involved sandhill cranes acting as foster parents to whooping crane chicks, and teaching them migration routes. To date, more than half of the fledged cranes have been lost during migration, and natural breeding has yet to occur.

Federal and State biologists plan a "soft" release of the Kissimmee Prairie whoopers. The birds will initially be confined to conditioning pens, open-topped enclosures allowing them to gradually adjust to their new surroundings. The birds' flight will be restricted by using wing restraints that prevent full wing extension. After the conditioning period, the birds will be fitted with legband-mounted radio telemetry transmitters. The wing restraints will then be removed and the birds will be allowed to fly from the pen. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission biologists will intensively monitor the whoopers for two years to identify movements, habitat use and other behavior. If results from the initial release are favorable, other releases may take place late in 1994, with the goal of releasing 20 birds annually for 10 years.

Florida's Kissimmee Prairie was chosen as the site for reintroduction of the whooping crane because of the suitability of its habitat. The area currently sustains one of the largest and most productive populations of Florida sandhill cranes, a relative of the whooper, as well as numerous Federally

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listed endangered or threatened species. The whooping crane will be added to the State list of endangered species before the releases are initiated.

Kissimmee Prairie has also experienced limited impacts associated with human population growth over the past 30 years due to its distance from major population centers and the pattern of land ownership in the area. Eight large private ranches and seven public ownerships, including the National Audubon Society Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary and three State wildlife management areas, compose the Kissimmee Prairie.

Landowners have been contacted concerning the proposed reintroduction and will receive copies of the Federal Register notice by mail. A public meeting on the matter was held March 12, 1992 in Kenansville, Florida, near the reintroduction area.

A copy of the proposal to reintroduce the whooping cranes can be obtained by contacting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 3100 University Boulevard South, Suite 120, Jacksonville, Florida 32216-2737. The Service will collect written public comments on the proposal for 30 days, through October 29, 1992. Respondents may request a public meeting to further discuss the proposal.