

Drought Threatens Whooping Cranes

The drought that has plagued the Southwest for the past several years is taking a toll on the world's last wild flock of endangered whooping cranes. Staff at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge where the birds winter along the Texas Gulf Coast say flock numbers are down almost 7 percent from last year's record of 270 birds.

Thirty-four cranes never arrived at Aransas Refuge from their nesting areas in Canada and are presumed dead. Twenty-one others have died, apparently due to shortages of food and water. Declared an endangered species in 1971, the whooping crane has made a comeback from a low of 15 birds in 1941.

After noting a sharp drop in the birds' usual diet source – blue crabs -- Aransas Refuge staff supplemented the birds' diet with aflatoxin-free corn at feed stations. "Crabs need fresh water to reproduce," said Aransas refuge project leader Dan Alonzo. "If the water's too salty, they simply shrivel up and die. So they're smart enough to migrate out of the marsh when it gets hyper saline during droughts."

Aransas Refuge staff is also enforcing a longstanding regulation prohibiting commercial crabbing in marshes of the 115,000-acre refuge. "We mobilized to collect every trap," said Alonzo. "We picked up 411 traps."

The flock begins to fly north on its 2,400-mile annual journey to Canada by mid-April.