

Whooping Crane Making Tremendous Recovery

The tallest bird in North America has something special to “whoop” about. For the first time in 100 years, the population of whooping cranes exceeds 500 birds, according to Tom Stehn, whooping crane coordinator at Aransas Refuge Complex in Texas. The whooping crane, declared an endangered species in 1971, is still one of the rarest birds on the continent.

An estimated 270 cranes – members of the only remaining wild flock – spent the cold-weather months along a 35-mile-long stretch of Texas Gulf Coast that includes the 115,000-acre Aransas Complex. During his fall 2007 beak-count, Stehn counted approximately 275 cranes, 29 more than in the fall of 2006.

The higher numbers reflect an especially productive nesting season last summer 2,400 miles away at Canada’s Wood Buffalo National Park. There, a record 65 nesting pairs fledged 40 chicks. One whooping crane pair touched down in Texas with two chicks; the cranes normally hatch two chicks every year, but only one youngster usually survives. “The pair with two chicks has a territory on the southern tip of Aransas,” Stehn says. “They are the first cranes the tour boats usually see once they reach the refuge.”