DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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WHOOPERS HATCHING AT PATUXENT WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER

Some of the 13 endangered whooping crane eggs picked up in late May from nests in the wilds of Canada are now peeping and pipping in incubators at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

Peeping is the first audible sign of life heard from within an egg. Pipping is the attempt of the chick to break out of the shell.

The pickup of the eggs was carried out in cooperation with the Canadian Wildlife Service. Fifteen whooper nests were located by Canadian biologists, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists joined an expedition to the whoopers' only remaining nesting area, which is in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories, to assist in the egg removal.

Fourteen nests had the normal two eggs each. The 15th held only one. A single egg was removed from 13 of the 14 double-egg nests. The removal of one of a pair of eggs does not seem to materially effect the number of young whoopers arriving on the wintering ground. Few families arrive there with more than one chick even though they laid two eggs.

One nest with two eggs was left undisturbed so a concealed film crew can try to document what actually occurs between a pair of newly hatched whooping crane chicks. This film footage will become part of a joint U.S.-Canadian documentary on the entire life cycle of the magnificent whooping crane. The documentary will be completed within the next two years.

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At the pickup site, the 13 eggs were placed in two insulated suitcases heated with hot water bottles to maintain a 99 degree temperature. They were airlifted to Fort Smith, Canada, by helicopter, transferred to a Canadian Air Force jet and flown to Baltimore, and then were driven to the Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, and placed in incubators.

This is the fifth year whooping crane eggs have been picked up from the wild to build a nucleus of a captive breeding flock of this endangered species. A total of 50 eggs have now been taken. Scientists at Patuxent have experienced a 90 percent hatching success rate so far.

The captive breeding flock now numbers 17 whoopers. Initial nutritional problems with new chicks have been overcome, and the expectations of wildlife biologists at Patuxent are higher this year than ever before for more chicks to reach maturity than in years past when the scientists were developing whooper care procedures.

Twelve of the 17-crane captive flock at Patuxent have been paired off in separate areas because they have shown indications of pairing. The six pairs were placed together on the basis of study and observations by bird behaviorists. They seem compatibly paired, but to confirm pairing made on behavioral traits preparations are now underway to sex them by analyzing blood samples already taken from the birds. These complicated tests will not be completed until August.

Hopes for the first captive breeding of whoopers were dashed this spring. The males among the paired birds showed definite signs of the breeding urge, but the females didn't. Next spring an artificial lighting situation will be set up in all six breeding areas to achieve synchrony in the male and female cycles. This method has proven successful in captive breeding of sandhill cranes at Patuxent since 1969. Continual light at normal breeding time tends to stimulate hormonal activity which leads to breeding.

What the future holds for the endangered whooping crane is unknown. The wild flock numbers only 48 birds. Several options are now under study by both Canadian and U.S. wildlife biologists. Eggs produced in the wild or in captivity could be placed on nests in the wild to be reared by sandhill crane foster parents. Newly hatched chicks could be placed with foster parents, or young whoopers that have reached flight stage could be placed with whoopers about to migrate south for the winter. The decisions on which method to use will be jointly arrived at by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service based on the results of studies now in progress in the field and at Patuxent.

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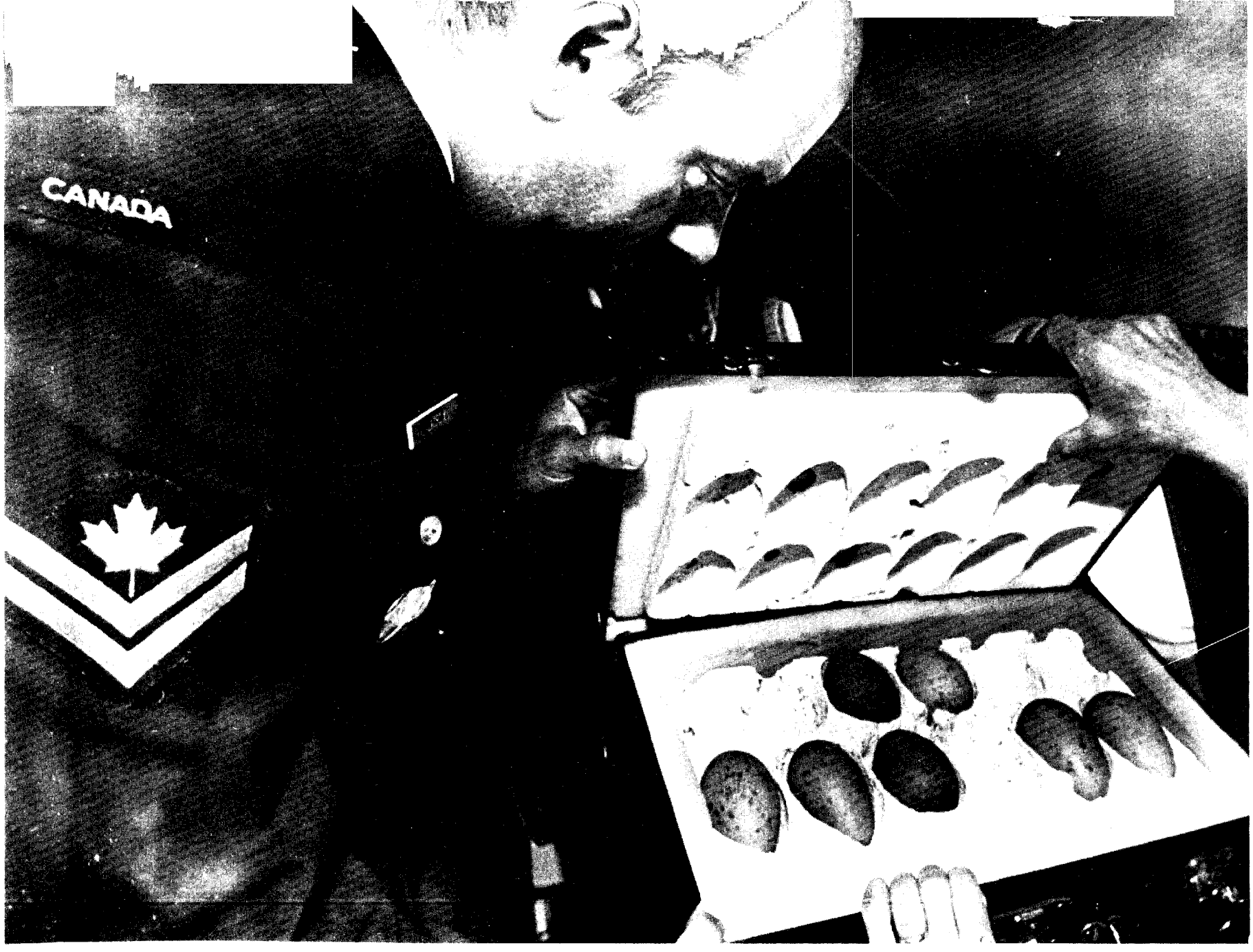

Whooping crane eggs in insulated suitcase enroute from Canada to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.

Three day old whooper chick wades in its drinking water at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.