DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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THE 1975 WHOOPING CRANE PAGEANT

Man's intervention in the whooping crane's world this spring has been significant, and the preliminary results are tinged with nature's characteristic sternness. The life-and-death, cyclic drama of nature has been played out amid international, national, and State efforts to engineer an overall gain for these rare birds.

The final results are yet to be tallied but the high points of this spring's bio-drama include:

--frantic and finally successful attempts to scatter nine migrating whoopers off a Nebraska marsh boiling with infectious avian cholera;

--the hot-house hatching and death 15 days later of a fragile whooper chick named "Dawn;"

--the tryout of a bold new foster parent concept involving snatching whooper eggs from nests in Canada and slipping them under sandhill cranes in Idaho; nine of 14 of the eggs hatched;

--the natural hatching of 11 of 15 whooper eggs in the wilds of northwest Canada.

Preliminary results as of late June show man a half length or more ahead of nature--with a long way still to go. Yet to be answered is how many of the record number of 20 hatchlings in the wild can outpace nature and survive the year by successfully migrating south to wintering grounds. Obstacles cluttering the track include raccoons, coyotes, eagles, hawks, owls, disease, food limitations, storms, and other natural cataclysms.

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There were obvious lessons learned from these episodes, none more profound than the realization that man, who is chiefly responsible for the precarious nature of the whooping crane's existence in the first place, must continue to intercede on behalf of the whoopers if they are ever to be restored to a healthy population.

The footlights went up early on this season's pageant. Unseasonal snow and freezing rain in April over the Dakotas, Nebraska, and down into Kansas blocked or slowed the migration of dozens of waterfowl species north to Canada and beyond. Rafts of ducks, gaggles of geese, and flocks of sandhill cranes crowded into every available water surface along the storm's front in southern Nebraska and huddled down for the duration. Within days the stress on the overcrowded ponds and sloughs touched off an outbreak of avian cholera, a deadly disease that in a week spread and killed more than 15,000 of the birds.

Into this biological maelstrom flew nine unsuspecting whoopers enroute to Canada. Only the alertness of Nebraska conservation officials enabled Federal and State bureaucrats, farmers, and biologists to join forces, obtain the necessary emergency waivers of the Endangered Species Act, and use firecrackers and low flying aircraft to haze the whoopers up off the infected marsh where they settled. Nature intervened forcefully with freezing rain and sleet, and it was 36 hours before the birds were finally flushed. Scientists don't know if the whoopers contracted the disease or not. It is not even certain that whoopers are susceptible to it, although as a precaution it was assumed they were. If they did contract cholera they either would have died from it in a matter of days or become carriers. Since the flock ultimately showed up on the breeding grounds intact it is obvious that none died from the cholera. Whether they are carriers remains to be seen.

The hatching of Dawn on May 29 and his death 15 days later represents another, albeit disappointing, milestone in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's effort to breed whoopers in captivity. Captive breeding, which started in 1967 at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, is designed basically to produce enough of these birds eventually to permit restocking of wild flocks. One severe winter hurricane along the Texas Gulf Coast could wipe out the sole existing wild flock in a matter of hours, so the effort must go on. The road has been a troublesome one. As Dawn's death

indicates, nature can not be reproduced readily in the laboratory. Despite elaborate research with sandhill crane breeding, scientists are still encountering environmental, congenital, and pathological puzzles with the whooping crane breeding program.

Their search for the right way has been as cautious as an infantryman's probe with a bayonet tip for landmines. On five different occasions since 1967, 50 eggs were removed from nests in Canada with the help of the Canadian Wildlife Service. They were flown to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland, where 41 have been hatched and 19 of the chicks raised to maturity.

This year one pair of the 19 captive-reared birds mated, and the female laid three eggs. After the first egg was laid nature was assisted by artificial insemination. Two of the three were fertile and from one hatched Dawn. Dawn was the first of the second generation of captive whoopers and his birth gave new hope to scientist managing the whooping crane captive breeding program.

A possible congenital deformity that twisted Dawn's lower right leg bone prevented the chick from moving normally. Scientists tried to help the bird walk by taping its legs; but the bird gradually weakened and finally stopped eating and became dehydrated. On June 14, Dawn died.

Although the loss of the chick was regrettable, scientists at the Center are not pessimistic. They believe the breeding of the whooping crane was a major stride forward, and expect more eggs and chicks next year. They compare the whooper breeding program to one for the sandhill crane, another crane species studied and bred at Patuxent. Prior to 1969 no sandhills had bred and hatched in captivity. Last year, more than four dozen chicks were produced and production methods for these birds are now routine. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service believes similar success will ultimately characterize the whooping crane breeding program.

The day that Dawn hatched, May 29, also witnessed the opening act of yet another whooping crane cliff-hanger--the foster parent program in Idaho designed to start up a second wild flock with an entirely different set of winter and summer home areas--added insurance against natural disasters.

The egg-napping of 14 eggs from Canadian nests went off without a hitch. The eggs arrived and were placed on their sandhill crane foster parents' nests on May 29. Then the vigil began. Scientists from the University of Idaho involved in the project feared interlopers and, sure enough, two of the 14 whooper eggs disappeared for reasons still not known. Fish and Wildlife Service enforcement officers had been dispatched to patrol the refuge area during the critical hatching period because of reports of springtime vandalism at and near the refuge. In addition to the two eggs that disappeared, three others proved to be infertile.

Nine hatched successfully, though, and initial observations indicate the whooper chicks are adapting well to their new environment. Within the first 24 hours after hatching some of the chicks had wandered as far

as 100 yards from the nests. Other interesting observations were noted suggesting their adaptation to foster parenthood is working well. The proud father sandhill crane was seen to stop at the first hint of danger and emit a shrill note which prompted the chicks to freeze in place immediately. They remained glued to the spot until an all-clear signal was heard. Additionally, the parent birds have displayed vigorous defensive gestures at any glimmer of trouble. In several instances, parents have run away from the chicks and picked up sticks in their beaks, tossing them into the air away from the chicks in an obvious attempt to divert attention. One parent, upon sighting the scientist observing it, spread its wings fully and advanced with head and beak bobbing up and down threateningly. It approached to within 20 yards, which scientists say is unusual for a sandhill crane.

As of late June all nine of the Idaho chicks were reported doing exceptionally well. They have been seen foraging for insects, running in the tall grass, and even swimming like bobbing corks behind their foster parents. They have grown rapidly, and now stand about a foot tall, with their heads and beaks visible above the prairie grass. Predators are their greatest danger during the next two months or so, until they learn to fly. Coyotes or raccoons could attack them from ground level. Eagles, hawks, or owls could pounce on them from the sky. Quirks of weather and a wide variety of other natural influences could kill them one by one or in a group. High mortality among young whoopers is normal in the wild. Each year anywhere from six to 15 eggs are hatched in the wild, yet no more than one or two normally survive to migrate south to the Texas Gulf Coast.

In the Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada a total of 15 eggs were left after the egg-napping. Eleven of these have hatched and they are now reported displaying the same vigorous zest for life as their transplanted brothers and sisters in Idaho.

In summary, then, it has been a good year for the whooping crane—so far. The final score will not be tallied until late next fall when the adults and young migrate south. How many of the juveniles will make it is difficult to predict. Those in the naturally wild flock are expected to begin their fall flight south in late September or early October and reach the Texas Gulf Coast in staggered sequence through December. In Idaho, a Fish and Wildlife Service scientist will drive south following the whoopers and their sandhill crane parents to keep track of their migration to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. What perils await these birds is unknown, as theirs will be the first migration of this sort closely monitored by man.

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