DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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Frank Kenney 202/343-5634

THE LONG, THIN TRACK OF THE WHOOPING CRANE

Whooping cranes in the largest number in at least half a century are on their Texas wintering area at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, but not for long. In April, 70 glistening-white adults will leave for their nesting ground 2,500 miles north in Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park. They will take with them their 6 grayish juveniles, returning them to the marshy region where they were hatched last year.

Thus, the young whoopers will learn, as did past generations of whooping cranes, the 5,000-mile migration route from the nesting ground to the wintering area and back to the nesting ground.

Thousands of years ago, migrating cranes flew only as far north as the Great Ice Sheet would allow them to go. Back then, the cranes nested well down in what is now the lower 48 states. Some didn't migrate at all. But as the ice melted, other cranes found new marshes farther and farther northward, gradually creating the migration routes flocks of cranes would follow for thousands of years.

In those times, the part of the continent that was not covered with ice or marshes was largely lush grasslands and sparsely wooded savannas. Then, as now, there were pronghorn antelope, deer, cougars, grizzly and black bears, California condors, and humans--predecessors of the American Indians.

But the cranes also flew over huge, long-horned bison, mastodons, sabre-toothed tigers, and dire wolves. Through the millenia they shared the sky with gigantic teratomis condors as well as Laborador ducks, Carolina parakeets, and passenger pigeons. One by one all of these became extinct, and the whooping cranes, themselves, came very close to following when their number fell to just 15 in 1941.

In 1615, when Frenchman Samuel de Champlain described "cranes as white as swans" on Lake Ontario, substantial numbers of whoopers wintered in coastal areas of what is now South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas, and in the central highlands of Mexico. Each migratory flock had its own southern wintering area and its own northern nesting ground and followed specific routes between them.

With the increasing settlement of the land, however, the cranes disappeared from all their nesting grounds except for one that was so remote in the Far North that it would be decades before it was discovered. They were also gone from all of their southern wintering areas except for a single, sandy spit called Blackjack Peninsula on Texas' Gulf Coast.

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From the turn of the century on, this small band of remnant migratory cranes carried with it the secret not only of the northern nesting ground, but of the feeding and resting places along its migration routes.

Then, in the drought-ridden 1930's, the cranes faced an even greater threat when oil exploration and the construction of a huge barge canal were begun on separate parts of the small, Texas peninsula where they wintered. By the time the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was established on the Blackjack Peninsula in 1938, just 14 adults and 4 juveniles remained in the migratory flock. And though there was then a smaller non-migratory flock in Louisiana--subsequently destroyed by a hurricane--and a few more cranes in the New Orleans Zoo, only those 18 migrants remained. However, even a much larger population in the same wintering area, or flying the same route to the same nesting ground would have been just as vulnerable to a hurricane, a long drought, or other such calamity

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service biologists studying the remnant species came to the conclusion that a captive breeding flock might well be the only way to keep them from extinction. What was needed were a few fertile eggs to help get the flock started.

The eggs, of course, would have to be taken from the still unknown nesting ground--and it was only by the sheerest of chances that it was finally discovered. In 1954, a bush pilot and a Canadian forester were flying supplies to a fire when they crossed over a great marsh in the Northwest Territories between the Great Slave Lake and Alberta' north boundary. They found widely scattered nests on hummocks in the almost impenetrable marsh, and subsequently sighted a whooping crane pair and one juvenile.

But neither that juvenile nor any other young birds were seen with the 21 adults that arrived at Aransas that fall. Unexpectedly, the adults brought back 8 juveniles the next fall. And though there were many reverses, the total population was 33 by 1960 and 56 by 1970.

Though the number of whooping cranes was still extremely low, biologists thought there were enough nests to begin taking a few eggs for the proposed captive flock. It was known that while two eggs are usually laid in each nest, only rarely more than one hatchling livesto the flight stage. On that premise, it was decided that one egg could be taken from each of several nests without diminishing the production of the nesting ground.

U.S. and Canadian biologists worked together for several years collecting eggs that were incubated and hatched at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Research Center in Maryland. From these, a captive flock of 24 whooping cranes was developed. Though some of the females began laying when they reached five or six years of age, none would mate naturally. Fertile eggs, however, are produced by artificial insemination.

This captive flock was to play an increasingly important part in a plan whereby fertile eggs taken from wild nests in Wood Buffalo Park and from the incubator at Patuxent would be placed in the nests of smaller, grayer, and much more plentiful sandhill cranes. The hope was that the unsuspecting foster parents would raise the whooper chicks so that a second migratory flock of cranes--complete with a nesting ground, a wintering area, and a shorter, safer migration route between--could be established.

The Fish and Wildlife Service chose Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho for the experiment because a flock of sandhill cranes nested there and migrated each fall some 870 miles to their wintering area at Bosque del Apache Refuge in New Mexico.

The Grays Lake experiment seems to be working. Fifteen whoopers have been reared there since 1975. They have learned the migration route from their sandhill crane foster parents and now fly it independently. None, however, has matured enough to take a mate and nest, so it is too early to make any predictions about the future of the new flock.

What is important, is that now two flocks of whooping cranes are on their wintering areas. One's migration route was imposed by humans, the other's was imposed by the ice, and both are waiting for another April.

1980 WHOOPING CRANE COUNT

Whooping cranes flying Bosque del Apache/ Grays Lake migration route	15
Whooping cranes flying Aransas/ Wood Buffalo Park route	76
Whooping cranes in Patuxent captive flock	24
Whooping cranes at National Crane Center, Wisconsin	2
Whooping cranes at San Antonio Zoo, Texas	2
Total world population	119

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