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ANOTHER RECORD YEAR FOR THE WHOOPING CRANE

America's wild whooping cranes are continuing their slow but steady recovery from near extinction with a record number of birds on their wintering grounds.

The main flock of 78 birds, two more than last year, will soon be migrating from the Texas Gulf Coast to nesting grounds in Canada. Meanwhile, a transplanted flock of about 17 whooping cranes are now migrating with their "foster" sandhill crane parents from the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico to the Rockies.

Prospects for future growth in the main flock are even more encouraging, with about half of them--19 pairs--now active breeders. U.S. and Canadian wildlife officials predict a jump in the flock's population in the next few years "unless something unforeseen happens or unless most are the same sex."

Six young hatched last spring are among the 78 whoopers wintering at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas and nearby, after the 2,600-mile fall migration from Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park. Upon arrival at Aransas, families and breeding pairs staked out territories of about 400 acres where they feed on clams, blue crabs, and occasionally acorns. Refuge officials say there is ample space at Aransas for the "hoped-for" expansion of the flock.

Later this month, the breeding pairs will begin their spectacular courtship rituals--dancing and leaping into the air, their satiny black-tipped wings spread in what one observer has called a "joyous celebration of life." Whoopers are known to form pair bonds as early as two to three years of age, but their exact breeding age is not yet known. They will begin mating before reaching Canada, some at Aransas and others during migration. By mid-April, most of the flock will have left Texas for their hopscotch journey north.

As the main flock approaches courtship ritual time, the young "foster" flock already has departed from Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico for its 750-mile return to the Grays Lake refuge in Idaho. At least 15 have arrived at a favorite midway stopover at two national wildlife refuges in Colorado's San Luis Valley.

Twenty young whoopers, including four fledglings, left the Rockies last fall but three birds could not be found during the winter. A fourth, missing for a time, was found near Willcox, Az., with a flock of sandhill cranes. The remaining 16 whoopers wintered at or near the Bosque refuge, where they do not exhibit the territorial behavior of their Aransas relatives. They seem to recognize their own kind, however, and often stay in groups, aloof from larger numbers of sandhills. The sandhills, in turn, seem to accept their larger, more aggressive cousins and respect their need for extra space, yielding to them in observed confrontations.

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The foster flock was started at Grays Lake in 1975 with greater sandhill cranes hatching whooper eggs from wild nests in Canada and from a captive breeding flock at the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland. The "foster parent" sandhill cranes have successfully reared the whoopers as their own and have taught them the migration route to New Mexico.

By last summer all three surviving whoopers hatched in 1975 had staked out and defended nesting territories, exhibiting the characteristic behavior of breeding-aged males. But they may have trouble finding a female whooper mate of suitable age.

Dr. Rod Drewien, a research biologist who oversees the foster flock for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, believes males in the flock far outnumber females, based on their size and behavior. "Females apparently suffer higher mortality rates, especially in the first 30 days and when weather conditions during nesting are poor or predation is high," he said. "This also appears true for whooping cranes reared by sandhills in captivity, but we don't know why yet."

Drewien is hoping that part of the answer may come from a technique to determine the sex of whooping cranes through blood samples. The technique has been successfully tested on 37 species of birds, including the cranes, by researchers at the University of Calgary and the U.S. and Canadian wildlife agencies. "If we can identify the females soon after hatching, we can watch them more carefully to find out what is causing this early mortality," Drewien said.

Meanwhile, Patuxent scientists are considering a plan to transplant female whoopers, reared by captive parent birds at the center, to the Grays Lake flock. Dr. Scott Derrickson, in charge of Patuxent's crane propagation program, tested the feasibility of such a transplant last summer with the release of a group of sandhill cranes. Eleven birds, aged one, two, and three years, were transferred from the research center to the Idaho refuge to see which age group would adapt best and also to learn if they would migrate. Seven survived through the summer and began their migration with wild sandhills.

However, biologists observed that only one bird, a one-year-old female, integrated into the wild flock. That bird, which was approached by a wild male and then stayed with him, was the only one to have been found in New Mexico this winter. The other birds did not migrate from Grays Lake until the very last group of sandhills left and they have not been located since.

"We now know, based on this experiment," Derrickson said, "that captive-reared sandhill cranes, transplanted to the wild, must integrate with the other birds to know when and where to migrate. The same will apply to whooping cranes."

Derrickson thinks the most successful technique for transplanting Patuxent-reared whoopers to Grays Lake would be to place a young female ontc the territory of a male from the foster flock, keeping her safe until the two formed a strong pair bond.

He may get a chance to try the experiment this summer in yet another of the innovative techniques that have restored the whooping crane from a low of 15 in 1941 to this year's record number of nearly 100 birds in the wild and 24 in captivity.

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