

Wood Buffalo/Aransas Flock

Water levels throughout the whooping crane breeding grounds in the northeastern corner of Wood Buffalo National Park and adjacent areas were very poor during the fall of 2006. At weather stations on either side of the nesting area, below-normal snowfall levels were reported throughout the winter, so things were not looking good for the 2007 breeding season. When we began our nest surveys in May, we discovered higher than expected water levels, and near normal habitat conditions, however once the frost left the ground water levels began to drop rapidly. We carried out whooping crane breeding pair surveys between May 16 and 23, chick hatching success surveys June 13-18 with the assistance of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and finished our season's surveys August 16-19. In total we discovered a record 65 nesting pairs, another 4 adult pairs failed to nest and 4 new pairs were discovered bringing the total number of pairs observed to 73.

Of the 65 nests, two were predated and one contained no eggs, a record 84 young hatched from the remainder, including a record 28 pairs that had two young each. At fledging time there were at least 40 young alive in 35 different family groups, 5 of the families contained two young each and 4 of the June family groups could not be found.

The month of June had only 5% of normal rainfall and habitat conditions deteriorated throughout the nesting area. Large lightning induced fires were burning south of the crane nesting area, threatening the communities



Dry wetland in Sass River nesting area. Photo by Brian Johns.

of Peace Point and Garden River. Another smaller fire was burning along the Klewi River in the territory of one of the nesting pairs. The lack of rain in June had mixed blessings: The Good is that recently hatched young are not exposed to cool wet weather and survival in the first few weeks is high, however; The Bad is that the wetlands dry out and the area becomes more accessible to predators, resulting in reduced long term survival of the young. Habitat conditions were so bad (see photo) in the Sass River nesting area that most of the wetlands were dry resulting in only 4 of 16 nesting pairs producing young in that area.

We would like to thank Tom Stehn and Jim Bredy for survey assistance in June and our pilots Ivan Bourke, Brent Macdonald and J. Pauls from Northwestern Air Lease for May and August surveys.

The 'Recovery strategy for the whooping crane in Canada' was posted on the Species At Risk Registry in July 2007 for a 60 day public comment period. In it we describe some of the first Critical Habitat for an endangered species ever identified in Canada. The critical habitat identified to date is protected under both the National Parks Act and the Species at Risk Act and includes the habitat of over 95% of the breeding birds. Further study and consultations with nearby communities are currently underway to identify and protect additional critical habitat for future expansion of the population.

For more information on Wood Buffalo Whooping Cranes see:

<http://www.pnr-rpn.ec.gc.ca/nature/endspecies/whooping/index.en.html>

For more information on Canadian species at risk and the SARA Registry see: http://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/default_e.cfm

*****Brian Johns and Lea Craig-Moore, Canadian Wildlife Service*****

Grus Americana is a biannual newsletter for members of the Whooping Crane Conservation Association, a nonprofit tax exempt organization dedicated to the conservation of whooping cranes.

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Updates from Reintroductions

Eastern Migratory Population

After a year that began with tragedy, the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership is looking ahead to the fall migration with hope for the future. Change is on the horizon for this international coalition of public and private organizations on a mission to reintroduce endangered whooping cranes in eastern North America.

Seventeen whooping crane chicks—the Class of 2007—are training with Operation Migration ultralights at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin, preparing for an anticipated October 10 departure for Florida.

Each year since 2001, ultralight pilots have conditioned and led juvenile whooping cranes to follow their aircraft on their first migration south. After a record 76-day migration journey last year, pilots are hoping favorable weather allows them more flight days and a swifter trip south.

Meanwhile, ten young whoopers, reared by biologists from the International Crane Foundation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are at their own pen site at Necedah. These birds will be released in the company of older cranes in hopes that the young whooping cranes learn the migration route, part of WCEP's "Direct Autumn Release" program, which supplements the successful ultralight migrations.

WHOOPING CRANE NUMBERS – August 15, 2007

Wild Populations

	Adult	Young	Total	Adult Pairs
Aransas/Wood Buffalo	236	? ^A	236 ^A	69
Rocky Mountains	0	0	0	0
Florida non-migratory	40 ^B	1	41 ^B	16
Wisconsin/Florida migratory	55	28 ^C	83	4
Subtotal in the Wild	331	29	360	90

^A A record 84 chicks hatched from 65 nests in 2007, and 250+ cranes are expected to arrive at Aransas by early winter, including 45+ juveniles. The number of chicks hatched in Wood Buffalo in 2007 will not be added to population totals in this table until the flock is censused at Aransas in early winter, 2007.

^B This number reflects the birds regularly monitored in Florida. A few additional cranes could be present in unknown locations. One chick fledged in the wild in 2007.

^C The 28 chicks were raised in captivity and shipped to the Necedah NWR in central Wisconsin for later reintroduction. Seventeen will be led by ultralight to Florida, and 11 are scheduled to be released with other wild cranes in central Wisconsin. The 5 whooping crane breeding facilities (Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, International Crane Foundation, Calgary Zoo, San Antonio Zoo, and Species Survival Center in New Orleans) all either provided eggs or hatched and raised chicks in 2007. Two eggs came from a wild nest in Florida and 2 eggs came from wild nests in Wisconsin.

Captive Populations

	Adult	Young*	Total	Breeding Pairs
Patuxent WRC, Maryland	60	3	63	13
International Crane Foundation, WI	35	1	36	11
Devonian Wildl.Cons.Cent./Calgary	21	2	23	6
Species Survival Center, Louisiana	8	0	8	1
Calgary Zoo, Alberta	2	0	2	0
New Orleans Zoo, Louisiana	2	0	2	0
San Antonio Zoo, Texas	8	0	8	1
Homosassa Springs Wildl State Park	2	0	2	0
Lowry Park Zoo, Tampa, Florida	2	0	2	0
Jacksonville Zoo, Florida	2	0	2	0
Milwaukee County Zoo, Wisconsin	1	0	1	0
Subtotal in Captivity	143	6	149	32

* Numbers are of young remaining at the captive centers after eggs and/or birds were shipped out for reintroduction programs. In most cases, these young are genetically valuable and will become future captive breeding stock.

TOTALS (Wild + Captive) 360 + 149= 509

There are now 53 whooping cranes in the wild thanks to WCEP's reintroduction efforts.



Wild-hatched crane W1-06 (far left) spent some time this spring in Wisconsin with cranes 3 and 7 from the class of 2005. Photo by Richard Urbanek, WCEP.

This year began on a somewhat tragic note as an unexpectedly severe thunderstorm hit Florida, taking lives and causing significant property damage. Seventeen out of 18 of the cranes from the Class of 2006 drowned in their enclosed pen at Chassahowitzka NWR, presumably after being stunned by a lightning strike.

The surviving bird managed to escape but found only marginal habitat and died several months later in Florida.

Following the deaths of the Class of 2007 birds, the WCEP Project Direction Team undertook an intensive review of the events leading up to the storm, with the goal of identifying actions that can be taken to minimize damage done by such catastrophic storms.

As part of this unusual mortality review, WCEP leadership used “lessons learned” from the events of February 1 and 2 to outline actions to minimize the risk to the reintroduced whooping cranes from extreme weather events.

WCEP determined two strategies to reduce the risk of large-scale mortality of juvenile birds over the winter: modify procedures, protocols and facilities at the Chassahowitzka NWR pen site to reduce the risk of a mass mortality from a severe storm event, and consider moving some or all of the juvenile birds to another

location in Florida to reduce the risk of a mass mortality from a severe storm event.

A team of WCEP biologists spent the summer analyzing potential locations for winter release of the young whooping cranes that may reduce the need to keep cranes in an enclosed pen (done to protect them from predators and from older cranes who often drop in for short periods and harass the chicks) and are also accessible to project staff but isolated from public access.

No decision has been made yet, but WCEP is giving serious consideration to using an alternative site—possibly St. Marks NWR in the panhandle of Florida—to overwinter some or all of the newly reintroduced crane chicks of the Class of 2008. WCEP hopes to announce a decision soon.

Meanwhile, as the air becomes crisp and leaves fall, another group of young cranes will take to the skies—behind ultralights and with older birds showing them the way—to join their predecessors and make history in the reintroduced Eastern Migratory Population.

*****Rachel F. Levin, Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership*****

Florida Resident Flock

The Florida population of whooping cranes currently consists of 40 birds (16 pairs). The sex ratio for the unpaired birds is 6 Females:2 Males, so the outlook for future pairing is quite limited. As you will recall, we have not released any captive-reared birds for several years, due to concerns over low productivity and high mortality of older males.

Rainfall in Central Florida 2006 and 2007 was lower than normal. Wetland water levels were very low during the breeding season this year (January-June 2007); all marshes, and even some small lakes, were dry. Wetland water levels were the lowest we'd seen since the beginning of releases in 1993, even surpassing the dry conditions witnessed in year 2000 during the peak of what was hailed as the “worst drought in Florida history”. Despite this, there were four nest attempts by 3 pairs.

The first of 4 nests this year was initiated 20 March by pair 1009/1016. It was abandoned by 4 April. No eggs or shells were recovered from the platform.

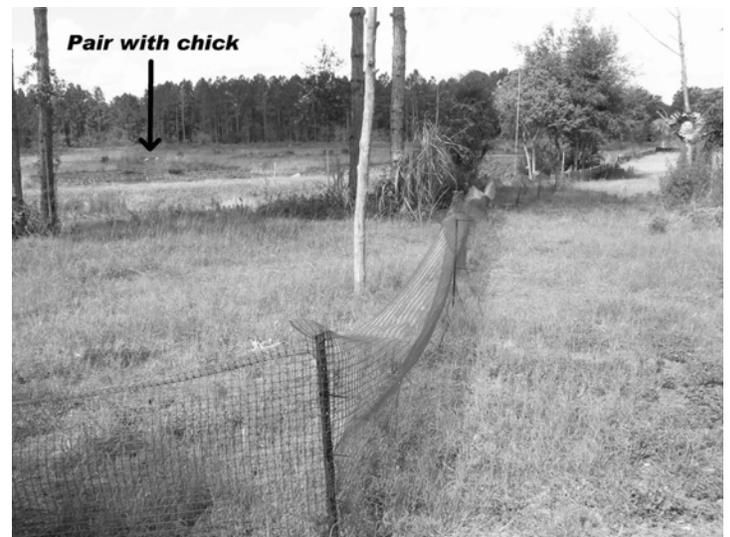
Surveillance video taken of the nest showed that a bird was incubating until dark on 3 March, but was gone by morning (the camera only functions during daylight hours). We have documented this before (nest abandoned in the dark) with video surveillance.

On 11 April we found a new nest on Lake Kissimmee between 2 airboat trails. Pair 772/369 normally would have nested, as most cranes do, on marshes that are not associated with navigable waterways. The pair apparently chose the lake for nesting because all marshes were dry. It was only the 2nd time in 9 years that whooping cranes attempted to nest on a lake. The following weekend there was heavy airboat traffic near the nest. The eggs and more importantly, incubating adults, were deemed at risk from airboat strike, especially at night when visibility is poor and the birds would be less able to avoid the airboats. A decision was made to pull the eggs, primarily to reduce the threat of airboat strike to the incubating adults. The eggs were brought to a waiting incubator at Disney's Animal Kingdom. Evidence from candling of the eggs suggested they were fertile. There were no other whooping crane nests that could potentially accept the eggs. Whooping crane geneticist Ken Jones determined that the eggs, genetically, were of value to the migratory reintroduction project. The Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, the primary captive-breeding facility for whooping cranes, indicated they would be able to accept the eggs for that purpose. On 27 April we flew the eggs to Patuxent. The eggs hatched on 3 and 5 May and were raised for migratory reintroduction. One chick died on 8 June. The other continues its training for following ultra-light aircraft from Wisconsin to Florida this winter.

That pair of whooping cranes on Lake Kissimmee re-nested, despite how late it was in the breeding season. We discovered them incubating on 8 May, less than 100m from where the previous nest was. This time we tried a different approach of reducing the threat of airboat strike. On 11 May we posted a protective zone around the nest to reduce human disturbance. On 19 May an airboat festival was centered at a boat ramp a mile from the nest. Prior to the event, a wildlife officer visited the local airboat club and stressed the importance of avoiding the nest area. On the day of the festival, 130 brochures, describing the reason for the closure, were made available. Two of our agency's law enforcement officers in an airboat and 2 biologists in

another airboat "patrolled" the edge of the closed zone around the nest during the festival. Most people respected the signs and went around the zone. However, several groups of airboats blatantly crossed the closed zone, ran over the nest, and destroyed the clutch. It could not be determined which boat was responsible for the act and so no one could be arrested.

The outcome of the season's last nesting attempt turned out better. Pair 1291/898 began nesting in rural Leesburg, Lake County, by 24 May. The female, 898, was the long-term Leesburg resident that raised 3 chicks to fledging with male 800 (who died last November). 898 paired with male 1291 and they began incubation. 1291 is an inexperienced 5 year old male that had broken his left tarsus in 2003 and it healed in the wild. The pair hatched a chick on 15 June (our latest hatch date within a breeding season). The nest marsh was separated from a distant feeding area by a busy 4-lane highway. Normally the parents would fly to the feeding area, but with a chick (who would be flightless for ~80 days) we had concerns that they would try to walk there (and encounter the busy highway). On 16 June we erected 675 linear feet of "barrier" fence between the nest marsh and the highway, in an effort to prevent the family from walking into harm's way. We used 375 feet of 40-inch tall plastic garden fencing (1 inch mesh) and 300 feet of "silt fence" as a "chick-proof barrier" (See photo).



It was hoped that even if the parents hopped over the fence, the chick would remain on the safe side and prevent all from walking to the highway. We felt there were enough resources in and near the nest marsh for raising a chick to fledging age-so keeping them from

walking to the distant foraging area should not limit their ability to raise the chick. This pair nested in a small lake that normally would be unavailable to cranes due to deep water. The small private lake had very little human traffic. The parents successfully raised the chick to fledging by 5 September. As soon as physically possible, just a few days later (8 September), the family flew to the feeding area across the busy highway. Therefore, the fence we had erected as a *walking barrier* apparently was successful in preventing the family from walking across the busy highway. This chick was the 9th chick to fledge in the wild for the project. All but one of the wild-fledged chicks survives.

Members of the partnership for the Florida flock are collaborating on studies to better understand the problems with productivity and survival. Biostatisticians Clint Moore and Sara Converse of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center are using computer models to examine the population and estimate the odds of future success based on various release strategies. Biostatistician Paul Kubilis (from our agency) is analyzing survival of release birds during the first year post-release. Paul's work is focusing on factors associated with successful releases of whooping cranes. Project veterinarian Marilyn Spalding and others are working on analysis of health data and the effect of environmental variables on the flock. The work by these colleagues will lend quantitative tools to assist in determining the future of the Florida flock of whooping cranes.

Lack of adequate rainfall, and the associated water in marshes, is an important factor affecting the productivity of the Florida flock. There are other challenges, also. The human population of Florida is rapidly expanding, directly affecting whooping cranes and other Florida wildlife. See the article in this newsletter that focuses on this issue in Florida and in Texas.

****Marty Folk, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission****

Today's Trivia Question: How do biologists capture whooping cranes in a safe and effective manner? See Page 15 for the answer.

Human Developments Threaten Whooping Cranes

Editor's preface: In this issue we feature 2 articles describing threats to whooping cranes from habitat loss and human disturbance. Lately, there have been cases in both Texas and Florida, and we thought it warranted these "companion" articles by biologists who work closely with the birds.

TEXAS

Land development is happening on the Texas coast, and happening quickly. I know of 4 developments planned for lands on which I have observed whooping cranes foraging. The proposed developments are waterfront canal lot subdivisions, places for folks from Houston and San Antonio to keep a boat on the coast and have a second house. This pressure near the crane wintering area has literally sprung up in the last 3 years; I don't know of anyone that expected it to happen this rapidly.

This type of development is not unprecedented. The small town of Holiday Beach on the Lamar Peninsula was built next to salt marsh that is now occasionally used by whooping cranes. When that development was built, whooping cranes numbered less than 70 in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo flock and the cranes had no need back then to use the salt marshes next to what is now Holiday Beach.

What does all the impending development mean for whooping cranes, and can the species be adequately protected? Let me give you some examples of what is happening. Two developments will potentially impact the 24 whooping cranes that utilize Welder Flats which is located across San Antonio Bay north of Aransas. In 2006, a developer

applied to build 776 homes on 680 acres in a development to be called "The Sanctuary" located across the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway from one whooping crane winter territory near Port O'Connor. I had seen whooping cranes on a few occasions using the salt marsh on the edge of the proposed development, and once watched a family



"The Sanctuary" development near Port O'Connor, Texas that has begun construction. The photo shows the close proximity of the developed area (light color) to a whooping crane territory on nearby Dewberry Island. Photo by Tom Stehn, taken 8/3/07.

group walk from the marsh into the uplands to forage. In the process of formal consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the USFWS decided that the development would not likely jeopardize the continued existence of the whooping crane. The Service negotiated with the developer who agreed to do certain things to avoid and/or minimize impacts to the cranes. These included not building any houses in the salt marsh, protecting the salt marsh with a non-development easement, creating freshwater wetlands on one edge of the development to replace wetlands impacted, and providing \$200,000 to a conservation group to be used to purchase non-development easements on lands important to whooping cranes. Although a salt marsh and freshwater marsh will be created and include a buffer between them and the homes, no buffer was established along the existing salt marsh strip, so I anticipate that whooping crane use in the remaining narrow strip of salt marsh will be very low due to human presence. A permit for this development was granted by the Corps of Engineers and construction is ongoing.

Currently, the pending application by a developer to build 918 residential lots and marina on 700 acres near Seadrift, Texas will remove 136 acres of whooping crane critical habitat. However, that habitat is not the valuable salt marsh used by the cranes on a daily basis. Instead, it is more of an upland/drier marsh habitat, the type of habitat that the cranes only occasionally use to search primarily for wolfberries in the fall or for other food items when foods in the marsh are scarce. Again, I anticipate some kind of conservation easement will be provided to create a buffer between the houses and the salt marsh used by the cranes. I have recommended 300 yards as a

reasonable buffer that the cranes need for areas they use to be mostly protected from human development. The developer will also create some small freshwater marshes and provide a permanent source of drinking water needed by the cranes.

It is important to note the size of these two developments (918 homes and 776 homes). Presently, the only 2 towns in that immediate area are Port O'Connor (population 1,184) and Seadrift (population 1,352). Each development will basically be adding another small town to the Texas coast, increasing demand for fresh water and electricity, and putting more recreational pressure on the lands where the whooping cranes winter. So far, the 2 developments have not physically destroyed the valuable salt marsh habitat preferred by the cranes, but the presence of so many houses near the marsh has me very concerned about human disturbance issues. The purchase of non-development conservation easements on salt marsh and adjacent upland properties used by the cranes would adequately provide needed habitat with a minimum of human disturbance and is an action needed to protect the cranes.

I hope in the next year to update a paper I wrote in 1985 about territory size and the slow expansion of the crane range at Aransas that I have observed in 25 years of doing census flights. With the help of our refuge GIS person, we will measure the acreage of the current crane range, assess how it has changed in size over the years, measure how much adjacent unoccupied habitat is available, and come up with a figure of how many whooping cranes the existing habitat at Aransas will support. I've always said there is enough habitat to support 500 whooping cranes at Aransas as the cranes continue to spread out the length of Matagorda and San Jose Islands. But I'm anticipating that our analysis will show that there is not enough existing habitat to provide for 1,000 whooping cranes, the minimum number required for downlisting from endangered to threatened status. And as the Texas coast gets developed, will enough habitat be preserved to winter 5,000-7,000 whooping cranes, possibly the minimum number needed for recovery?

Whooping cranes face many threats including development, reduction of fresh water inflows that will reduce blue crab populations, sea level rise that is expected to make much of the crane marshes too deep for the cranes to use, increasing development in the migration corridor (power lines, wind farms, cell towers), and introduced diseases. I am working closely with the USFWS –Ecological Services to analyze the cumulative impacts that the cranes are facing to determine at what level jeopardy would occur. Currently, I feel strongly that the whooping cranes are facing “death by 1,000 cuts” which is hindering the recovery of the species.

Tom Stehn, Whooping Crane Coordinator, USFWS

FLORIDA

Habitat loss in Florida has accelerated at an alarming rate the last few years. Suitable crane habitat declined an average of 16.6% in each of the 10-year increments between 1974 and 2003 (Nesbitt and Hatchitt, In press, Trends in habitat and population of Florida sandhill cranes. Proceedings North American Crane Workshop 10). Some of the most important crane habitat in Florida is now slated for development. A 3,750 acre ranch just west of Okahumpka (Lake County), along the Lake/Sumter County line, consists of large, high-quality marshes interspersed with grassy pastures. At times, nearly half of our current population of whooping cranes lives on and near this ranch. In spring 2006, during our most successful breeding season, 3 whooping crane chicks were fledged on this ranch. This property supports a healthy population of Florida sandhill cranes, and in the winter supports hundreds of migratory eastern greater sandhill cranes. In January 2005, we learned that the ranch owner had sold the ranch to developers.

The St. Johns River Water Management District is the lead agency responsible for the initial permitting for the development. Early on, the District recognized the importance of the ranch as crane habitat, and began involving biologists from our agency. We attended planning meetings, provided reports regarding crane-use of the area, and were involved with the review and comment on a management plan for cranes prepared by the environmental consultant as part of the conceptual permit application process. Whooping cranes of the Florida flock are federally classified as “experimental non-essential”, not “endangered”, so they do not benefit from the protections associated

with the Endangered Species Act. Florida sandhill cranes are listed by the state as “threatened”, and are afforded more protection than the experimental whooping cranes. Therefore, the management plan for this development was written



Aerial view of central Florida showing urban sprawl encroaching on crane habitat near high quality marshes. Photo by Marty Folk.

specifically for Florida sandhill cranes, but with the recognition that what benefits sandhill cranes will also benefit whooping cranes.

The high quality wetlands on the ranch will be almost entirely preserved. In addition, a narrow buffer of adjacent uplands will be preserved for cranes and other wildlife. During construction, active Florida sandhill crane nests will be protected by a 400 foot zone around the nest. Marsh edges and adjacent uplands will be managed with seasonal mowing to ensure that they do not grow too rank for cranes to use. Educational signs will be posted to inform people of the importance of some areas to cranes, and additional signage will be used to identify “crane crossing areas” to motorists.

There is some uncertainty with regard to the effect of development on cranes in Florida, but we suspect it is significant. Not only is there the loss of their habitat, resulting in less space for the birds, human development brings increased hazards associated with roads, power lines, and fences. Then there is the human disturbance factor-the behavior of the birds is impacted to some degree by humans even if the birds can tolerate the habitat

change. Florida sandhill cranes reside in almost every subdivision in central Florida; cranes have a very strong sense of “tradition”, and their ancestors have occupied territories in Florida for untold generations. So, when their habitat is altered by humans, they often don’t “give up easily”. It is suspected that cranes in urban areas are less likely to survive and reproduce effectively enough to contribute to the overall population. There is a need for a formal study to document these things. The development of this ranch presents a timely opportunity to document what happens to sandhill cranes and whooping cranes when their habitat is developed.

Another important property, adjacent to the above mentioned property, has also been sold for development. Other adjacent ranches are expected to be developed in the near future. This pattern is not isolated to this particular area. At the current rate of development, if it goes unchecked, within 50 years, much (most?) of the crane habitat in peninsular Florida will be urbanized. This massive habitat conversion will not only affect cranes, but countless other animal and plant species.

Members of 4 flocks of cranes are dependent on Florida-the reintroduced Florida non-migratory flock of whooping cranes, the reintroduced migratory flock of whooping cranes (most of which winter in Florida), the Florida sandhill crane, a non-migratory subspecies, and the eastern greater sandhill crane, a migratory subspecies that winters in Florida. Cranes have inhabited Florida for millennia; wouldn’t it be a terrible shame if humans ended their existence here?

*****Marty Folk, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*****

Kohlers Recognized for Monumental Contributions to Crane Conservation

Editor’s preface: If the previous 2 articles are the “bad news”, then the following are the contrasting and proverbial “good news”! While humanity encroaches on crane habitat, some people are dedicating incredibly generous resources to help cranes.

During the past two decades, Terry and Mary Kohler and their corporation, Windway Capital, and their foundations have provided a plethora of support to the conservation of Whooping Cranes. This aid has included transporting eggs from Wood Buffalo National Park to ICF and Patuxent, ferrying month old juveniles from ICF to Idaho for the first ultra-light experiments, tracking cranes in Wisconsin, during migration and on the wintering grounds in the southeast, moving off-track cranes back to the wilds of Wisconsin and captive cranes and eggs between breeding centers. In addition, they have provided substantial financial resources to ICF and Operation Migration. Their contributions to Whooping Cranes, Siberian Cranes and Trumpeter Swans, are described in a comprehensive account of recovery efforts for these species in a brilliantly documented new book by David Sakrison, “Chasing the Ghost Birds”. His comprehensive accounts contain a wealth of information, some of which was new and of great interest to me. It’s a most fitting tribute to a remarkable husband-wife team who have done so much to help these great white birds thrive. (See photo on front cover).

*****George Archibald, Co-Founder, International Crane Foundation*****

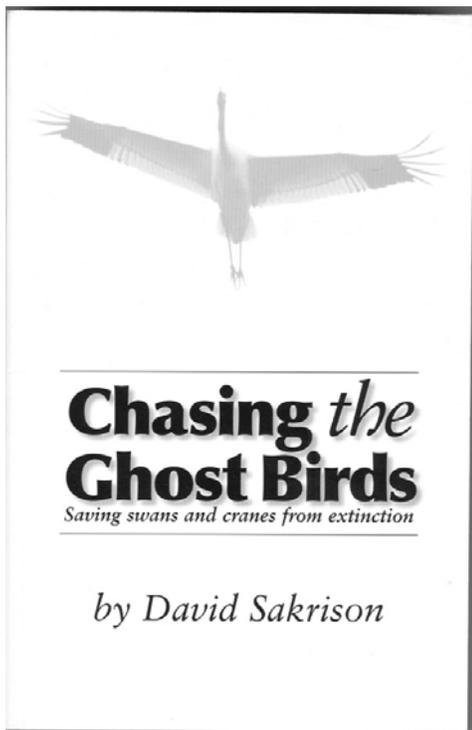
Printed below, with permission from the author, is the Introduction to David Sakrison’s book *Chasing the Ghost Birds*. Introduction by George W. Archibald, Co-founder and Senior Conservationist, The International Crane Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

“SIBES!” I COULD HEAR TERRY KOHLER’S EXCITED ROAR, even over the roar of the gigantic and ancient Russian helicopter. Peering from a small circular window in the helicopter’s cabin, Terry had spotted two rare Siberian cranes on the tundra a few hundred feet below us. Locating those white birds against the white snow was no small accomplishment, given our speed and our limited field of vision from the helicopter’s cabin. It seemed like a

miracle sighting. And though we were in the heart of the Sibes' nesting grounds in Yakutia, in far northeastern Siberia, those two were the only Siberian cranes we saw that June day in 1997.

Our Russian pilots set us down near a low hill, where a house trailer on skis served as a field research station for Kytalic Nature Reserve, a protected area for nesting Siberian cranes, far above the Arctic Circle in eastern Russia. After the helicopter departed, the silence was broken only by the scolding calls of a rough-legged hawk and the more distant trumpeting of Sandhill cranes. Like us, the Sandhill cranes were visitors from North America. Their primeval calls color our Wisconsin landscapes. In this remote place, half a world away from home, we felt as if we had met old friends.

We searched with spotting scopes for the Sandhills but saw none. Mary Kohler and I ventured out onto the tundra along a ridge top, searching for more ornithological treasures. Mary is an avid, lifelong birder, and her tenacity was impressive. Our search was rewarded by the sight of a screaming peregrine and several Sandhills.



There are two places one may order this book:

From the author:

Watson Street Press, P.O. Box 354, Ripon, WI 54971

(920) 748-6125 / www.ChasingtheGhostBirds.com

Price: \$16.50 + \$4.99 for Priority Mail = \$21.49

He will ship two copies to the same address for \$4.99 or up to 14 copies for \$8.99.

All books ordered from the author will be signed. He will customize the imprint if buyers request it.

From the International Crane Foundation Gift Shop

P.O. Box 447, Baraboo, WI 53913

608-356-9462, ext. 117 / www.savingcranes.org -- click on "Shop"

Price: \$16.50 + \$3.95 for the first item, \$2.95 each additional item.

*The International Crane Foundation receives 35% of the proceeds of all sales of the book.

The Sandhill cranes we encountered in Siberia had migrated thousands of miles, from wintering grounds in Texas, through Canada and Alaska, and across the Bering Sea, to nest here in the Siberian Arctic. We—my wife Kyoko and I, and Mary and Terry Kohler of Sheboygan, Wisconsin—had flown across the North Atlantic and Europe, to Moscow, then on to Siberia, in the Kohlers' private jet. We brought with us precious Siberian crane eggs from captive Sibes at Baraboo, Wisconsin

We visited the crane conservation/restoration program at Russia's Oka Nature Reserve, near Moscow. Then, in the pleasant company of Russian colleagues, including crane specialists Vladimir Flint and Sasha Sorokin, we flew on to visit the three nesting grounds of the only remaining flocks of Siberian cranes—one of the three most endangered species of cranes. In one of those nesting areas, we placed our Sibe eggs in the nests of Eurasian cranes, in the hopes that these "foster-parents" would raise new Siberian cranes to sustain the rapidly dwindling western and central flocks of Sibes.

The days of our journey were filled with flights across the vastness of half a world—15 time zones, in all—social gatherings with old and new Russian friends, and caring for our captive-produced Sibe eggs. It was a historic flight across a country that just a few years before was closed to foreigners. We landed in places that had

not been visited by an American aircraft since World War Two, more than fifty years earlier. During the Cold War, which ended less than a decade before our journey, our American-registered airplane would have been a military target. Now we were welcomed as goodwill ambassadors and as friends.

Leaving Yakutia, northeastern Siberia, we followed the Sandhills' migration route across Alaska, then veered east and home to Baraboo. There, the Kohlers dropped Kyoko and me at the tiny airport from which, 11 days before, with precious Sibe eggs in a portable incubator, we had departed to the east on our round-the-world journey. The trip was a gift to the International Crane Foundation from Terry and Mary Kohler. It was a wonderful journey that gave me new insights into the world of Siberian cranes and into the character of a most remarkable couple.

The Kohlers are world travelers involved in a diversity of issues related to politics, sports, business, and conservation. They have supported and participated in conservation programs of the Wisconsin and Michigan Departments of Natural Resources, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, the ICF, the Milwaukee County Zoo, and other public and private organizations. Mary was instrumental in the creation of the Riveredge Nature Center, a conservation education center for public schools in east central Wisconsin.

Bob Hallam, a former Director of Development at the International Crane Foundation (ICF), arranged my first meeting with the Kohlers in the early 1990s. A federal election was in the wind, and Mary was wearing the colors of the Republican Party. The Kohlers' enthusiasm for the work of the ICF was obvious. Our meeting hatched a friendship and helped to bring about Terry and Mary's in-depth involvement in the conservation of whooping cranes and Siberian cranes.

In 1989, Terry introduced me to the award-winning film "C'mon Geese" by Canadian artist, pilot, and conservationist, Bill Lishman. This captivating 28-minute video tells the story of a flock of hand-reared Canada Geese trained by Lishman to follow an ultra-light aircraft. Terry is an active pilot and aviation enthusiast, and he posed a question to me: Could Lishman's methods be used to teach captive-raised whooping cranes how to migrate? Less than a year later, I showed the video to my fellow members of the International Whooping Crane Recovery Team. At that meeting, I was pretty sure what the rest of the team was thinking: "Here we go again with one of George's out-of-the box ideas."

But the crazy idea struck a chord. With financial backing from Terry and Mary, "out-of-the-box" got off the ground. By 2001, Bill Lishman and his colleague, Joe Duff, the co-founders of *Operation Migration*, were leading whooping cranes behind ultra-lights, successfully teaching the birds to migrate from Wisconsin to Florida. By 2005, we had successfully established a new, wild population of whooping cranes, migrating between Florida and Wisconsin.

The Kohlers have used their own Windway Capital Corp. aircraft and corporate pilots to bring eggs to breeding centers, to move chicks to release sites, and to track and monitor released cranes throughout their wide ranges. On occasion, they have sent a plane to rescue a migrating crane that wandered far off course. Terry and Mary have provided major financial support to ICF and our partner Operation Migration, allowing us to meet our budgets and continue our crane recovery and conservation programs. A long and complicated chain of people and events has brought about a significant conservation success story—the return of wild whooping cranes to eastern North America. Through their enthusiasm and their considerable financial and material support, the Kohlers have been—and remain—a critical link in that chain.

Chasing the Ghost Birds chronicles just three of the conservation projects to which the Kohlers have lent substantial support; there are many more. Knowing Mary and Terry, I was not surprised that they did not want to be the main characters of this book. That role, they insisted, was for the cranes, the swans, and the many other people who took part in these efforts. The author has honored that wish, and it is the Kohlers' sincere hope that the story of these three conservation projects will inspire others to learn about, and become involved in, programs to preserve wildlife and wild habitats.

Intellectually and motivationally gifted, warm and unpretentious, and blessed with resources to realize their dreams, the Kohlers are also committed Christians who begin meals with prayer and who are faithful members of the Anglican church. As fellow believers, Kyoko and I have found much enjoyment in the Christian fellowship and friendship we have shared with this most remarkable couple, on an amazing journey.

Message from the President

Dear WCCA members,

First, I'd like to update you on the status of the Board of Trustees for

CHINA BIRD WATCHING 2008 *Wintering Cranes, Waterfowl and Wildlife*

In February of this year Walter Sturgeon and I co-led an incredibly successful trip to Japan. The primary purpose of the trip was to observe red-crowned cranes dance above the snows of Hokkaido; see wintering white-naped, hooded, Eurasian and sandhill cranes among the marshes of Arasaki; and seek out wintering waterfowl and other birds. Secondly, we raised money for the Whooping Crane

Conservation Association's ongoing efforts*. Walter Sturgeon and I are leading another trip which will benefit WCCA and we are proud to invite you to join us as we offer a fantastic bird watching journey to the extraordinary country of China.

From the sheer magnitude of the Great Wall and the ancient splendor of the Forbidden City to the shimmering marshes of Poyang Lake and the bamboo forests of Wolong, China offers a plethora of cultural and natural wonders. China is most often visited for its cultural riches, but the wildlife, especially the birdlife, is diverse and unique. We have chosen to travel in January/February to take advantage of the abundance and diversity of cranes, waterfowl and pheasants in particular. After a brief stint in Beijing we will begin our explorations in east-central China among the massive complex of lakes and marshes around Poyang Hu. Poyang Hu is an incredibly important wintering ground for thousands of birds including most of the world's Siberian cranes. Surrounding the great white Siberian cranes are hooded, red-crowned and white-naped cranes making Poyang Lake one of the world's largest gatherings of these breathtakingly beautiful birds. No less spectacular is the huge gatherings of swan, bean and lesser white-fronted geese. From Poyang we journey to the west to the shadow of Tibet in the foothills of the Himalayas and extensive wetlands of Cao Hai Reserve. The marshes of Cao Hai are famous for supporting one of the world's largest flocks of wintering black-necked cranes. To be able to observe both Siberian and black-necked cranes on the same journey will be both a privilege and a highlight! We will also offer an optional extension to the home of the giant panda. Wolong Reserve is tucked away in the mountains of Sichuan and its bamboo forests are home to a spectacular array of animals. Particular attention will be given to the area's pheasants including golden, white-eared, koklass and blood pheasants. The spectacularly colored Chinese monal and Temminck's tragopan also call these mountains home. We invite you to join us as we explore the fantastic birdlife, natural wonders, cultural sites and magic that is China.

This trip will depart on January 18, 2008 and will return on January 30, or February 3 if you choose to participate in the Wolong Extension. For further information, including the trip itinerary and costing, please contact either myself (Dave Davenport, Zoologist and President – EcoQuest Travel, Inc. (919) 963-3038, info@ecoquesttravel.net; www.ecoquesttravel.net), or Walter Sturgeon, Past President – Whooping Crane Conservation Association, (919) 733-7450 ext. 201, candwsturgeon@worldnet.att.net). Also, we plan to offer our Japan trip again in 2009. Further information on this trip will be forthcoming in future newsletters.

***Editor's note: \$2400 was donated to the WCCA by EcoQuest Travel after that trip to Japan.**

Honor Roll of Donors

Donation in memory of Don Folk by Judith Buhrman and Steve Nesbitt

Donation in memory of Raymond J. Willy by Rita E. Willy

Donation in memory of the "class of 2006 Migratory Whoopers" by Emily White

Other Donations:

Jack C. & Suzanne G. Kemp

Carl Racchini

Lisa Togni

TIME TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP IN THE WCCA!

Please use the convenient envelope, attached to this newsletter, to renew your membership for 2008. In the past we've been lenient for those who have not renewed, but that is an expense we no longer wish to bear. Those failing to renew in a timely fashion will be removed from the newsletter mailing list.

Our basic annual dues are so low, I hope you will also consider a donation over/above. Please remember that all of your dues money and donations are going to a *non-profit organization* dedicated to conservation of whooping cranes and the creatures they share their habitats with. In addition, your conservation dollars, through the WCCA, go a "long ways" because our "overhead" or administrative expenses are basically "nil". All officers and Trustees donate their time for the cause.

Thanks for renewing early, and perhaps considering renewing at a higher level than you did previously. Remember the letter in this issue from WCCA President Wendy Brown-she points out the importance that our members have in the conservation effort for the whooping crane. Let's take that to heart and not only sustain our membership-but invite others to join. Please consider giving a gift membership, or a membership in someone's honor or memory. What a terrific way to recognize someone!

What does the WCCA do with its money?

Dues money is used toward the costs of printing and mailing the biannual newsletter. In addition, the Association awards grants for efforts that directly benefit the whooping crane. These awards often are for research, management, or educational needs. The most recent grant provided by the WCCA was to Operation Migration for \$5000. As many of you know, Operation Migration is the team of pilots and support staff that use ultra-light aircraft to lead whooping cranes on a migration from Wisconsin to Florida. For more information, visit <http://www.operationmigration.org>.

Answer to Today's Trivia Question (from page 6): Whooping cranes are one of the rarest birds on the planet, so we cannot use "conventional" capture methods that involve a risk of harming or killing the birds. For example, rocket nets and oral tranquilizers, commonly used on sandhill cranes, have not been used on whooping cranes.

The team of biologists that work with the Florida flock of whooping cranes have used 10 different capture methods, some of which the team invented. Pictured here is a hand-triggered device called the Clap-Trap. Rather than rockets fired by an explosive charge, the trap net is triggered by a human pulling on some "reins". This makes it much gentler and safer! Watch future issues of the newsletter for more information on how cranes are safely captured and handled.

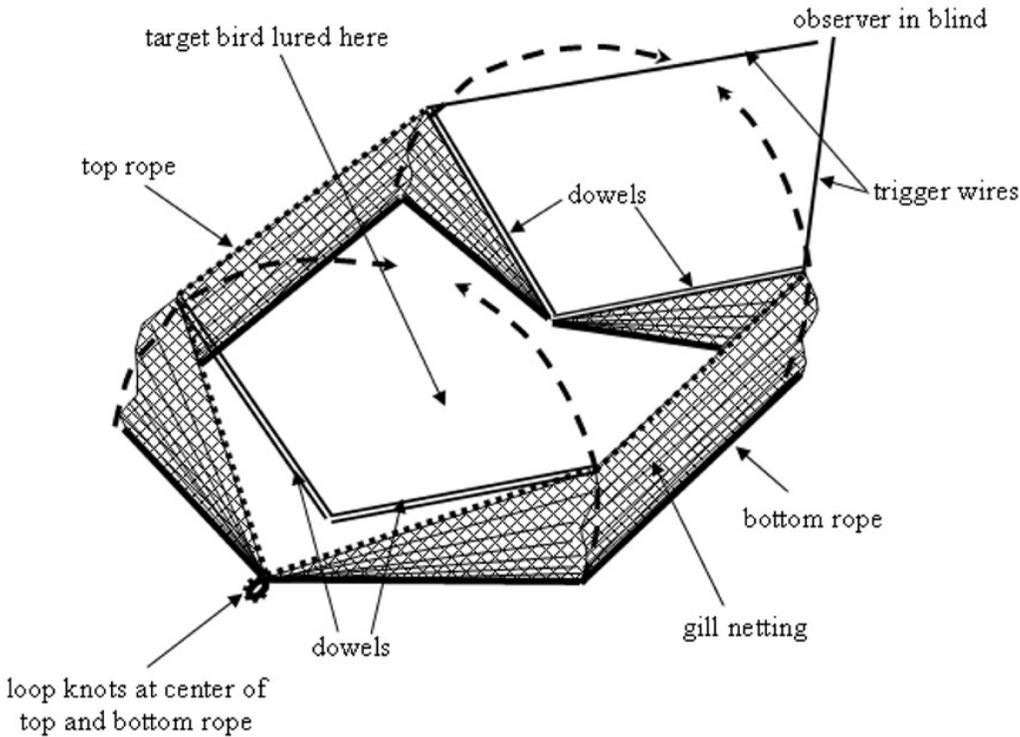


Diagram courtesy of Jeannette Parker, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.