



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Whooping Crane Update – February 16, 2012

Precipitation/Salinity:

The first two weeks of February produced a total of 1.89 inches of rain for the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Salinity levels in San Antonio Bay are currently recorded as 19.9 parts per thousand. These levels have dropped due to recent freshwater inflows from rain in Central Texas, as well as localized rainfall. Salinity levels in surrounding bays still remain higher than normal. High salinity levels affect the whooping cranes by forcing them to expend more energy trying to access fresh water.

Food Sources:

The refuge continues to help alleviate low food resources by adding to the prescribed burn totals. This winter the refuge has burned 8,095 acres of habitat, where the whooping cranes have been observed eating the roasted acorns and other food sources. There are still an additional 6,129 acres planned for the remaining whooping crane season.

Reports:

The refuge is still waiting for the final report on the second chick carcass sent to the National Wildlife Lab in January.

Research and Science:

Over the years the whooping crane population has been growing, the habitat changing, and the birds naturally dispersing. The primary goal is to ensure the recovery of the species and to do that the refuge and its partners must adjust with the ever-changing conditions.

In 2009, biologists began putting radio telemetry bands on the cranes. Using leg snares, and other trapping techniques, the birds are captured and equipped with GPS leg bands. This technology records birds locations and allows biologists to learn which habitats they are using, where they stop during their migration, and much more. This technology is extremely valuable but it will be several years before sufficient data from the individual birds can be collected and fully analyzed. It will take a considerable more amount of time before the data will reflect patterns of the population as a whole. To date, the refuge and its partners are tracking approximately 30 whooping cranes with leg bands.

In previous years, the refuge gauged the whooping crane population by counting individual birds within the survey area. The aerial surveys objective was focused on counting every individual bird regardless of where they were located within the survey area. This technique is no longer feasible because the population is increasing. Biologists are flying along a transect, straight lines set at specific distances within the survey area. Previously each survey consisted of a single flight, now one survey includes three flights on three separate days (weather permitting) within a preset timeframe. The birds counted represent an estimate of the population within the surveyed area. It is expected that some birds will be not be included in the count, but this method (known as Distance Sampling) is commonly used to determine rare and endangered wildlife populations, including fin whales, Karner blue butterflies, and raptors.

Surveys:

The January 2012 survey consisted of three flights conducted on January 26, 27, and 29th. The flight of January 26th was cut short due to high winds. Surveys conducted on the 27th and 29th were approximately four and a half hours and each systematically searched Matagorda Island, San Jose Island, Blackjack Peninsula, Lamar Peninsula, Dewberry Island and Welder Flats. Preliminary analysis estimates the population at approximately 245 individuals within the survey area. The second round of survey flights will take place in mid to late February.

Dispersing:

Refuge officials have surveyed the primary wintering area but this does not represent all birds of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population. Biologists are receiving many reports of whooping cranes outside the survey area in the following Texas counties: Matagorda, Refugio, Calhoun, Aransas, Williamson, San Patricio, Maverick, and Caldwell. There are also whooping cranes of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population currently residing in Nebraska. These cranes are naturally supplementing their own food sources by wintering around freshwater lakes and other marshes.

Supplemental Feeding:

Many people have inquired whether the refuge plans to implement a supplemental feeding program for whooping cranes this winter. At this time, the refuge is concerned about the negative impacts of supplemental feeding. Previous efforts to supplemental feed were not considered successful, as only a small portion of the birds actually fed on the shelled corn. Whooping cranes are territorial and do not naturally gather together to feed. Encouraging them to do so changes their natural behavior; it also creates greater opportunities to transmit diseases, parasites, and makes them more vulnerable to predators. Furthermore, when left out in warm and moist environments, like coastal marsh areas, corn can grow Aspergillus molds. Aflatoxins, which are produced by the molds, can be lethal to whooping cranes and other wildlife. Where whooping cranes may be present, landowners should be aware of the risks that aflatoxins pose. If corn is being used for feeding other wildlife in areas where whooping cranes may be present, we highly recommend purchasing aflatoxin-free corn.

Helpful Information:

Whooping Crane Draft Revised International Recovery Plan (2006):

<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/aransas/pdf/WHCR%20RP%20Final%207-21-2006.pdf>

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