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***** News Highlights *****

WCCA Conserves Critical Habitats WCCA Sets up Reward Fund

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Salt marsh on the Texas Gulf Coast. Read inside about how WCCA and partners have been conserving important wintering habitat for whooping cranes.*****Photo by Marty Folk*****

WCCA and Partners Preserve Important Whooping Crane Habitats

News Release by The Nature Conservancy

For Immediate Release

Date: 31 May 2012

Contact: Vanessa Martin, (512) 623-7249, vmartin@tnc.org

Critical Wintering Grounds for Rare Whooping Cranes Protected in Texas

The Nature Conservancy, Whooping Crane Conservation and USFWS protect 111 acres of coastal wetlands

Houston, TX – The Nature Conservancy announced today the protection of more than 100 acres of critical habitat for North America’s last wild flock of migratory whooping cranes. With funding assistance from Whooping Crane Conservation Association and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Conservancy purchased a conservation easement on Falcon Point Ranch in Calhoun County, Texas.

The whooping crane population, which breeds in Canada and then migrates 2,400 miles south to the Texas Gulf Coast, plummeted from 1500 to just 20 birds between 1850 and 1941. Since then, cooperative conservation efforts between the U.S. and Canada have increased the population twentyfold. Today there are roughly 400 wild cranes in North America.

“North America all but lost one of its most iconic species,” said Laura Huffman, state director of The Nature Conservancy in Texas. “Although the whooping crane is slowly rebounding, it is still a precarious situation given our state’s growing water challenges and projected growth. If we want our children and grandchildren to experience this majestic creature, conservation efforts to safeguard its habitat aren’t just important, they are absolutely essential.”

The Conservancy purchased the conservation easement for \$605,000 with funding from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as well as private donors and foundations, including a \$200,000 grant from the Whooping Crane Conservation Association.

“Limited and threatened wintering habitat on the Gulf Coast is one of the greatest challenges facing North America's tallest birds, said Lorne Scott, president of Whooping Crane Conservation Association. "The WCCA congratulates The Nature Conservancy for their successful efforts in securing the Falcon Point Ranch.”

Falcon Point Ranch is located in a coastal region known as Welder Flats. Today scientists estimate that at least 10

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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percent of the remaining flock (approximately 25 – 30 birds) winters here. The topography of the property and its waterfront views on San Antonio Bay made it a prime target for development.

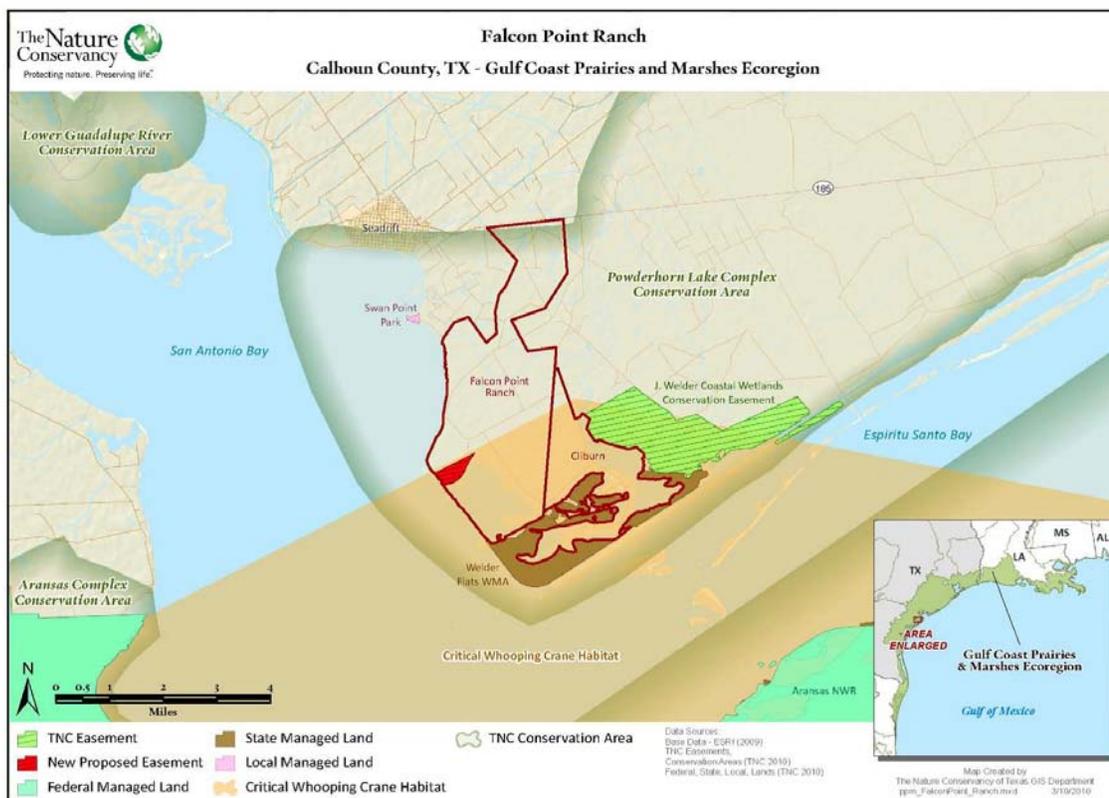
“The owners of Falcon Point Ranch have been working to conserve this property for more than five years,” said Bill Ball a representative of the ranch. “It is very exciting to see this important project come to fruition and to know that this truly special place will be protected.”

Ecologists worried that the development of the ranch would not only compromise important habitat on the property, it would compromise surrounding conservation lands as well, including properties the Natural

Resources
Conservation

Service (NRCS) division of the USDA has protected within the last three years.

“NRCS is proud to be a part of this regional effort to protect and restore vital Texas wetlands, for not just the incredibly rare whooping crane but all wetland wildlife species,” said Claude Ross, NRCS Program Manager.



“Working with the local landowners, NRCS has worked to protect and restore more than 11,000 acres of habitat in Welder Flats. The Nature Conservancy’s easement on Falcon Point Ranch will help safeguard those investments.”

The Nature Conservancy is the leading conservation organization working around the world to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. The Conservancy and its more than 1 million members have protected nearly 120 million acres worldwide. In the Lone Star State, The Nature Conservancy of Texas owns more than 30 nature preserves and conservation properties and assists private landowners to conserve their land through more than 100 voluntary land-preservation agreements. With public and private partners, we have permanently conserved nearly 1 million acres in Texas. Visit The Nature Conservancy in Texas on the Web at www.nature.org/texas.



Additional Whooping Crane Habitat Now Under Protection

More than 170 acres of undeveloped whooping crane habitat is now under conservation protection in Lamar Peninsula, north of Rockport, Texas, in a property purchase coordinated by Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, Whooping Crane Conservation Association and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The groups partnered to purchase the privately-owned 178 acres in Holiday Beach area. Sale of the property closed last week. The endangered species spend the winter in the area, and have been seen on this property.

“The acquisition of this property is important to CBBEP because it is occupied whooping crane habitat,” said Jake Herring, CBBEP property manager.

CBBEP received the funds for the purchase through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Endangered Species Recovery Land Acquisition Grant Program, administered by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Matching funds were provided by the Whooping Crane Conservation Association. The Nature Conservancy also assisted in the property purchase.

Whooping Crane Conservation Association President Lorne Scott said the wintering habitat in Texas is more confined and threatened than the Canadian breeding grounds.

“The wintering habitat is so scarce and so unavailable, anything that does come up and has potential, we try to secure it,” he said.

The whooping crane has become a symbol of wildlife conservation in North America, Scott said.

“The whooping crane saga has shown that after decades of work and partnerships, we can save a species and work for conservation,” he said. “We have an obligation to make every effort to secure all our native flora and fauna.”

The whooping crane (*Grus Americana*) remains listed as an endangered species. Hunting and habitat loss reduced the wild whooping crane population from tens of thousands to a mere 16 birds in 1941. Conservation, management, and protection have helped the population rebound to more than 500 birds today.



The whooping crane is the tallest flying bird in North America with height of 5 feet, and wingspan between 7 and 8 feet.



*The whooping crane (*Grus americana*) winters along the south Texas coast and migrates 2,500 miles to its breeding grounds in northern Canada.*

Photo: Liz Smith

Photo: TPWD

The whooping cranes that winter in Texas travel here 2,500 miles from their breeding grounds in northern Canada in mid-October and stay through spring. They travel in family pairs (a male, a female and a juvenile) or in small flocks and once here feed on blue crabs and wolf berries. Recent drought and reduced freshwater inflows have resulted in reduced food supply.

This now-protected habitat will provide additional feeding grounds for these birds.

“We plan to work with all the experts to be sure our property is maintained as the best possible whooping crane habitat,” Herring said.



CBBEP will manage the 178 acres, shown in yellow above, as whooping crane habitat.



The Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring bays and estuaries in the 12-county region of the Texas Coastal Bend. CBBEP is partially funded by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

For more information about the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, contact Beth Becerra at (361) 885-6246 or bbecerra@cbbep.org.

This report published in June 2012.

WCCA Sets up \$10,000 Reward Fund

Whooping Crane Killing – One Investigation Completed–More to Go

Indiana Conservation Officers, with assistance from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service agents, have completed an investigation into the killing of a male whooping crane in early January 2012 in Knox County, **Indiana**.

The Knox County Prosecutor is reviewing the case, and charges are pending against Jason R. McCarter, 21, of Wheatland, and John C. Burke, 23, of Monroe City.

According to the case report filed with the prosecutor, ICO Joe Haywood received information in mid-January that a whooping crane had been spotlighted at night and shot and killed with a high-powered rifle.

The ensuing investigation involved multiple law enforcement agencies, wildlife biologists and private individuals and provided information that identified the suspects and also linked the bird to a federal program to reintroduce whooping cranes in the eastern United States.

Whooping cranes are an endangered species protected by both state and federal laws. Efforts to save whooping cranes began after their nationwide population dwindled to 15 birds in 1941, according to the Whooping Crane Conservation Association.

The Association advises there are approximately 600 whooping cranes in existence, with approximately 445 in the wild. Approximately 300 are in the original western flock that migrates between Aransas NWR, Texas and Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada. Also more than 100 are in the eastern reintroduction flock that travels through Indiana on a migratory path between Wisconsin and Florida. Roughly 150 captive-raised birds are used in the reintroduction programs at a cost exceeding \$100,000 per bird.

The whooping crane shot in Knox County, Indiana was part of a nesting pair that was taught its migratory path by ultra-light aircraft. For more on the bird, see: www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/crane/08/BandingCodes827.html

An investigation into the killing of a second whooping crane in Jackson County, **Indiana** continues. Anyone with information can call the Turn In A Poacher hotline at 1-800-TIP-IDNR.

The Whooping Crane Conservation Association reminds the public that the Indiana case is just one of four cases. Three more whooping crane killing cases are still under investigation. One case is in South Dakota, one in Indiana and one in Alabama.

The whooping crane killed in **South Dakota** on April 20, was a member of the original wild western flock. The migrating adult bird was traveling with two additional whooping cranes before being shot with a high-power rifle as it was standing in a corn field. The Whooping Crane Conservation Association will pay a reward not to exceed \$10,000 to anyone who provides information which leads to the conviction of any individuals responsible for the killing of the whooping crane which took place on the afternoon of Friday, April 20, 2012 along 354th Avenue, approximately 17 miles southwest of Miller, **South Dakota**.

The purpose of all rewards is to encourage the public to share information they might have about criminal activities involving whooping cranes. Federal, State, Provincial, and other public law enforcement personnel, and criminal accomplices who turn “states” evidence to avoid prosecution, shall not be eligible for this reward. If more than one informant is key to solving a specific case, the reward will be equally divided between the informants.

Anyone with information should call either the 24-hour “Turn in a Poacher Hotline” at 1-888-OVERBAG (683-7224) or the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service at 605-224-9045 to report any information which will aid officers in the apprehension of the shooter. Callers can remain anonymous.

Eleven whooping cranes of the experimental Eastern Migratory population and non-migratory Louisiana population have been shot in the last two years. The Alabama case of January 2011 is still active. The Louisiana shootings have been solved by State Law Enforcement personnel and a reward will not be involved. One case is still active in Indiana. In Indiana the State has offered \$2,500, the Fish and Wildlife Service \$2,500 and the Humane Society \$2,500 in reward.

Donations (which are tax-deductible) are being requested for the Whooping Crane Conservation Association’s Reward Account. We are only part way toward our goal of \$10,000. Donations should be mailed to Whooping Crane Conservation Association, 2139 Kennedy Avenue, Loveland, CO, USA 80538 or to donate on-line visit this site: <http://whoopingcrane.com/whooping-crane-shot-10000-reward/>. Donors will receive a complimentary 1-year subscription to our WCCA newsletter. Thanks. *****Chester McConnell, Whooping Crane Conservation Association Web Administrator*****

WCCA Thanks the Following Contributors to the New Reward Fund:

**Harold S. Cohen
Sharon Gaskill
Otilie Halstead
Evelyn Horn
Suzanne H. Johnson
Nancy Martin
Chester McConnell
Dorothy McConnell**

**Mobile Bay Audubon Society, Inc.
John H. Noel III
Jon Olofson
Christy Smith
Barbara M. Snowfield
Mary Lynn Tucey
Ian Walters
Anne Weston**

Update on Whooping Crane Flocks

Western Whooping Crane Flock

“Only 5 whooping cranes remain on Aransas National Wildlife Refuge as of April 21” according to Dan Alonso, Refuge Manager. All others have begun their migration towards their nesting grounds at Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada. “Only 3 of the 29 whooping cranes carrying GPS transmitters remained on the refuge this past week” said Brad Strobel, Aransas Refuge biologist. Further north on the whooper migration route, Martha Tacha, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, reports that, “most of the cranes with GPS transmitters have now passed southern Nebraska and are continuing on their migration north. The cranes are currently distributed from northern Texas to northwestern Saskatchewan with some being within three days flying time of their Canadian nesting grounds. Some of the migrating



whoopers were probably slowed last weekend due to the extensive strong storms from Oklahoma through South Dakota.”

Further north on the migration route, wildlife technician Lea Craig-Moore, Canadian Wildlife Services reports that, “Whooping crane migration is in full swing in the Saskatchewan area.” She advised, “We have had the first flush of arrivals in the province and have birds spread from the SE prairie to the NW boreal. Family groups have been seen in a number of locations. Young cranes are learning the preferred stopover sites from their parents as they migrate.”

Eastern Whooping Crane Flock

Most of the whooping cranes in the eastern experimental flock have now reached their Wisconsin nesting area. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources pilot Bev Paulan conducted an aerial survey April 17th and reported that there are currently 10 active nests located in the core reintroduction area in Wisconsin. Three nests were abandoned earlier. Ten more pairs could possibly nest. Heather Ray, Operation Migration advises that “Hopes are high for baby chicks!”



For several weeks, there has been much interest on the 9 young whooping cranes led south by Operation Migration ultralight planes to Alabama. Due, in part to government regulations, the young birds were finally placed on Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama to spend the winter. On April 12 the 9 departed Alabama together on their first unaided journey north. They split into two or more groups

during migration, and may be back in Wisconsin as you read this. Not quite a year old, the cranes are too young to pair up or breed. They will wander around the Wisconsin area nesting area and learn how to be whooping cranes.

Louisiana Non-Migratory Flock of Whooping Cranes

On December 1, 2011, a second cohort of juvenile whooping cranes was shipped to Louisiana from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. As with the first cohort, the 16 new birds (7 males, 9 females) were initially held in the top-netted pen. Permanent bands and transmitters were attached to their legs on 8-9 December and the birds were released into the open pen on 27 December.

On 31 December L4-10, a survivor from the first cohort, returned to the pen site and joined the 16 chicks. He had spent almost all summer and fall in the marsh just west of the release area and therefore had the strongest ties to the area. The 16 juveniles initially attempted to chase him away and while they continue to keep him away from the food shelter and the feeders they generally became more tolerant of his presence. Food continued to be provided for the birds in the open pen but will soon be discontinued.

The young whoopers have shown a similar pattern of movement and pen use to the previous cohort – roosting outside the pen at night but using the pen during the day,



primarily in the afternoons. However, with more water across the marsh this group of birds is beginning to range further away from the pen and use areas on the east side of the property which the first cohort did not use.

Florida Non-migratory Flock of Whooping Cranes

Marty Folk, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission reports that, “As of 1 February 2012 we estimated there were 19 whooping cranes in the Florida resident population (8 males, 11 females) including 7 pairs. Again, this year, we will study the nesting ecology of these whooping cranes and Florida sandhill cranes. The goals are to determine causes of nest failure, compare the incubation behavior of the 2 species, and determine the efficacy of several research tools for these purposes. The nesting season has begun with our first sandhill crane nest just discovered in Polk County. Drought continues to plague Florida’s wetlands. The northern range of these cranes is very dry and unlikely to support much crane nesting. Fortunately, further south, we have some water for nesting.”

*****Chester McConnell, WCCA Web Administrator*****



This entry was posted on Saturday, April 21st, 2012 at 6:41 pm and is filed under [Association News](#), [Endangered Species](#), [Florida Updates](#), [Headline](#), [Migrating Reports](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. Responses are currently closed, but you can [trackback](#) from your own site.



The WCCA has made a \$2500 donation this year to Operation Migration. This is the non-profit organization that leads whooping cranes on migration with ultra-light aircraft in the eastern US.

Unusual Wintering Distribution

Editor’s note: This winter, whooping cranes of the Wood Buffalo/Aransas Flock wintered in places never before documented. This press release by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department provides a nice summary.

News Release March 27, 2012

Media Contact: Steve Lightfoot, 512-389-4701, steve.lightfoot@tpwd.state.tx.us

Endangered Whooping Cranes Winding Down Unusual Year

AUSTIN — It’s been an unusual year for whooping cranes in Texas and the endangered species’ spring migration is the latest example. Researchers report several whooping crane families initiated their spring migration nearly a month earlier than usual, with some birds having already reached South Dakota.

Texans are asked to report sightings of these large white birds as they progress along their migration route northward from the coast through Central Texas and the Wichita Falls area.

After a winter distribution that surprised biologists and kept birders enchanted with unprecedented sighting opportunities for one of North America’s most ancient bird species, the unusually early start of the migration to nesting grounds in Canada does not surprise Texas Parks and Wildlife Department biologist Lee Ann Linam.

“This winter seemed to produce a ‘perfect storm’ of mild winter weather, reduced food sources on the Texas coast, and crowding in an expanding whooping crane population, which led whooping cranes to explore new wintering areas,” Linam said. “Those same conditions have likely provided the impetus for an early start of their 1500-mile spring migration.”

Texas provides wintering habitat for the only self-sustaining population of whooping cranes in the world. Traditionally, whooping cranes spend December through March in coastal wetlands on and near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, between Rockport and Port Lavaca. In recent years whoopers have slowly expanded their winter range—usually using coastal marshlands adjacent to already occupied areas.

However, in 2011-12 whoopers made significant expansions southward and westward of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, and one whooping crane apparently spent the winter with sandhill cranes in upland habitats near El Campo. Even more significantly, nine whooping cranes, including six adults and three chicks, spent most of the winter near Granger Lake in Central Texas, and one family group of whooping cranes only traveled as far south as Kansas before heading back north to spend most of the winter in Nebraska.

The unprecedented shifts may be indicators of both bad news and good news for the Texas flock, which is thought to now number about 300 birds, according to Linam. “We are concerned about the health of our coastal estuaries and long-term declines in blue crabs, one of the traditional primary food sources for this population of whooping cranes,” she said. “At the same time, these cranes seem to be showing adaptability as the increasing population may be causing crowding in traditional habitats and drought may be producing less than ideal habitat conditions. I think it’s a good sign that whooping cranes are exploring and thriving in new wintering areas.”

This winter, birders and wildlife watchers in Texas have helped the state track some of the movements of whooping cranes, and Linam is asking Texans to be on the lookout for whoopers during the spring migration, which may extend through mid-April in Texas.

Whooping cranes are the tallest birds in North America, standing nearly five feet tall. They are solid white in color except for black wing-tips that are visible only in flight. They fly with necks and legs outstretched. During migration they often pause overnight to use wetlands for roosting and agricultural fields for feeding, but seldom remain more than one night. They nearly always migrate in small groups of less than 4-5 birds, but they may be seen roosting and feeding with large flocks of the smaller and darker sandhill crane.

Anyone sighting a whooping crane can help by reporting it to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department at 1-800-792-1112 x4644 or 1-512-656-1222. Sightings can also be reported via e-mail at whoopingcranes@tpwd.state.tx.us. Observers are asked especially to note whether the cranes have colored leg bands on their legs. Additional identification aids can be found online at <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/species/?o=whooper> and <http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/CurrentBirdIssues/SandhillCranes/SandhillCraneHunters.htm>

Endangered: Texas Water and Whooping Cranes that Winter on the Texas Coast

The whooping crane – the tallest bird in North America and one of the rarest – is the leading symbol of wildlife-conservation efforts in the United States. In 1941, the species' total population had dwindled to 15 cranes, discovered wintering on the Texas coast. The American Birding Association reported a species population of 599 last September, including 278 cranes in the group that migrates 2,500 miles between nesting grounds in Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park and wintering habitat around Texas' San Antonio Bay, north of Corpus Christi.

In 1991 a blind, cave-dwelling salamander, two species of beetles, an eyeless crustacean and an inch-long fish helped change how Texas manages underground water. Using the federal Endangered Species Act, conservationists won a federal court order to protect these creatures by limiting the amount of water that can be pumped from the Edwards Aquifer.

Now a group of conservationists called The Aransas Project (TAP) is using the Endangered Species Act to challenge the management of surface water. The animal in question is no obscure salamander, but the most famous and charismatic animal in North America: the whooping crane. If a federal judge rules in favor of TAP, the way Texas manages the Guadalupe River and its estuary, San Antonio Bay, will be fundamentally changed. The state may have to guarantee that enough freshwater is allowed to flow from the Guadalupe into San Antonio Bay to nourish the blue crab population, the primary food there of the whooping crane.

During the first two weeks of December, experts on the cranes and estuaries argued in federal court about what caused the loss of 23 whooping cranes during their 2008-09 wintering season in Texas. Experts for TAP argued that the birds had died of emaciation and predation brought on by extreme drought. Experts for the Guadalupe Blanco River Authority, which represented the state's case, said that the birds had survived other droughts and are highly resilient. There was no solid proof that 23 died, since U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials found only four carcasses. The GBRA argued that the cranes are omnivorous and when blue crabs are down, whooping cranes can survive on other foods such as clams, snails, insects, snakes, fiddler crabs and fish as well as plants, including acorns and wolfberries, a wild pepper that favors brackish marshes. The defendants questioned whether whooping cranes need to drink fresh water at all and whether blue crabs need freshwater inflows to reproduce.

A reporter for the Corpus Christi Caller-Times [characterized](#) the scientific testimony as tedious. But Judge Janis Graham Jack, who declared that she and her husband were birdwatchers and appreciated the annual \$5-million ecotourism business that has grown around the cranes, seemed both sympathetic and skeptical about the testimony. When she learned that U.S. Fish and Wildlife's most eminent specialist on the cranes was not available as an expert witness for either side because of federal rules, she had him subpoenaed. Before he retired last spring, Tom Stehn spent 29 years managing the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge where the cranes winter, and had made no secret that he thought the cranes deserved some measure of freshwater inflows.

In 2003 he [told](#) writer Joe Nick Patoski of the San Antonio Current, "We'd like to see environmental considerations done at an early stage. One of the problems with the Texas Water Plan [the state's water-supply blueprint] is the environment got short shrift. I bet there weren't a lot of biologists being talked to. Now they'll have to prove their case that the project [to take additional water from the Guadalupe River] won't impact endangered species."

Judge Jack pressed Stehn about his conviction that the 23 cranes died because of lack of freshwater inflows into the bay. "I just want to make sure they didn't go to New Mexico or to Antigua for the holidays," [she said](#). Stehn explained that unlike most birds, the flock of 260 or so whooping cranes is easy to count. They stake out family territories, usually two, three or at most four birds, and were readily observed during his frequent airplane surveys. Stehn added that while he could only count 23 cranes as missing, he thought that more had probably died because of the drought.

Proving the cause of death of even a few birds is a tough problem. There have been periods of low freshwater inflows when large numbers of cranes did not die. But as drought continues on the Texas coast, more data is accumulating. One crane with a radio collar was [found dead in mid-December](#) and its body had been sent for a necropsy.



Human-caused climate change is probably a factor in aggravating the current record drought, according to Texas state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon, who has said it is likely to last another year because of the La Niña weather pattern and to cause “continued drawdown in water supplies.”

Natural droughts are hard to predict, but Texas faces another drought that is predictable, the one that will be produced by its increasing population. Texas is estimated to grow from 25 million people to 46 million by 2060. In December, the Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) issued a sweeping update of its [statewide water plan](#), which outlines projects estimated to cost \$53 billion. That number accounts for less than a quarter of the more than \$200 billion worth of infrastructure costs that the TWDB estimates the state needs during the next 50 years. Although state law requires that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department study the freshwater needs of each Texas bay system, environmentalists have been complaining for several years that the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the Water Development Board have not fairly allocated water for the bays in regional water plans that comprise the state plan.

The TWDB explains the allocation of surface water this way:

“When issuing a new water right, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality assigns a priority date, specifies the volume of water that can be used each year, and may allow users to divert or impound the water. Water rights do not guarantee that water will be available, but they are considered property interests that may be bought, sold, or leased. The agency also grants term permits and temporary permits, which do not have priority dates and are not considered property rights. The water rights system works hand in hand with the regional water planning process: the agency may not issue a new water right unless it addresses a water supply need in a manner that is consistent with the regional water plans and the state water plan.

“In general, Texas has very little water remaining for appropriation to new users. In some river basins, water is over appropriated, meaning that the rights already in place amount to more water than is typically available during drought. This lack of ‘new’ surface water makes the work of water planners all the more important. Now more than ever, regional water plans must make efficient use of the water that is available during times of drought.”



Watershed of the Guadalupe River, which empties into San Antonio Bay

Here and there, the TWDB acknowledges environmental issues. In the [Water Plan study for Region L](#), which includes the Guadalupe River and its estuary, San Antonio Bay, the agency states: “Concerns have also been expressed that increased uses of existing water rights may reduce freshwater inflows to bays and estuaries.” But that’s as far as it goes.

The study notes that endangered migratory species, such as the whooping crane, must be protected, but the concern seems to be whether proposed reservoirs might be disruptive: “Reasonable and prudent measures should be taken to avoid and minimize the potential effects of project activities on threatened and endangered species...”

Although the state of Texas has been studying freshwater inflows into the bays since the 1980s, the need for such inflows does not appear in the technical summaries of the TDWB’s regional and statewide plans. In projecting the state’s future water needs, for example, the numbers come in only six categories: municipal, manufacturing, mining, steam-electric, livestock and irrigation. Wildlife does not figure centrally in the regional

planning, yet freshwater is essential for the bays' nurseries, where fish, oysters, shrimp, and crabs spend part of their early lives.

"The only exception in the Region L plan," its authors state, "comes with regard to the Edwards Aquifer. Development of new water supply sources for Bexar, Comal, and Hays Counties reduces reliance on the Edwards Aquifer during drought thereby contributing to maintenance of spring flow and protection of endangered species. The Regional Water Plan recognizes the on-going efforts of the participants in the Edwards Aquifer Recovery Implementation Program (EARIP) to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan which will help to define the requirements for maintenance of spring flow and protection of endangered species and meet with approval from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service."

A "Recovery Implementation Plan" for the whooping crane, or RIP, to use the federal lingo, is just what The Aransas Project hopes to get the state to agree to. Such a plan requires both sides to negotiate the science and the water planning numbers.

The Edwards Aquifer Plan, for example, guarantees 320,000 acre-feet of water during a drought of record.

TAP's expert witness on the correlation of freshwater inflows to whooping crane mortality, Ron Sass of Rice University, used these numbers as evidence:

Year	Jul-Dec Flow (Acre feet)	Whooping Crane Winter Mortality (%)	Whooping Crane Winter Mortality (#)
1988-89	349,774	4.30	6
1989-90	209,089	3.40	5
1990-91	668,959	7.80	11
1991-92	1,479,729	0.70	1
1992-93	1,113,110	0.00	0
1993-94	598,466	4.90	7
1994-95	923,221	0.00	0
1995-96	499,553	0.60	1
1996-97	394,376	0.00	0
1997-98	1,371,562	0.50	1
1998-99	4,095,870	0.00	0
1999-00	327,744	0.50	1
2000-01	372,035	3.30	6
2001-02	2,161,718	1.10	2
2002-03	5,419,319	0.50	1
2003-04	987,272	0.50	1
2004-05	3,385,520	0.90	2
2005-06	570,863	2.70	6
2006-07	513,614	0.00	0
2007-08	3,399,637	0.00	0
2008-09	344,119	8.50	23

Freshwater inflows and crane mortality

The red numbers in Sass's analysis represent the correlation between crane mortality and low inflows. The GBRA lawyers attacked Sass's numbers and conclusions, which lie at the heart of the plaintiffs' case.

Lawyers for the Guadalupe Blanco River Authority complained in court that if the Aransas Project wins its case, it would confiscate all the inflow for nature and devastate industry and agriculture in the basin.

But Jim Blackburn, the Houston environmental lawyer and lead attorney for the plaintiffs, contends that argument is nonsense. He has said his hope is that during times of extreme drought that everyone, including the whooping cranes, would get a share of the water.

How much water would be enough to protect the whooping crane and bay ecosystem? [TAP's expert witness](#) on bay salinity, Joseph Trungale, stated in a court deposition: "Changes in inflow as a result of decreased or increased diversions can have a significant impact on salinities. i.e. this analysis shows that 100,000 acre feet difference over several months or a year, can make a difference and significantly raise or lower salinities over large parts of the bay." GBRA experts on salinity testified that 100,000 acre feet was too little to affect the bay's salinity.

At the end of the trial in mid-December, Judge Jack told both sides to write their final arguments and present them as briefs later this spring. She said she expected to immerse herself in the trial documents and arguments during the summer and then make a ruling. She also urged both sides to talk about a settlement.

Bill West, the general manager of the GBRA, said there is a possibility of a settlement, but "senior water rights are off the table." Under state law, the holders of senior water rights are entitled to priority over those who hold junior rights during periods of drought and can take all the water they want. The GBRA, which supplies agricultural, industrial and municipal users, is the largest holder of such rights. TAP argues that it would be fairer if all users, including the bay, got a share of the water during drought.

West said that instead of arguing over water rights, TAP and the GBRA should work toward acquiring and protecting more habitat on the Texas coast for the whooping cranes. The federal goal is to establish a flock of a

thousand migrating cranes in the Aransas area. He said that through purchases and conservation easements, the flock's territory could be expanded further north along Matagorda Bay, and further south along Copano, Corpus Christi and Nueces Bays. "We're saying that even if the salinity varies, they can accommodate to that if they have adequate habitat."

Blackburn said he was open to a settlement if it is reasonable, "but this litigation was about water. We think we proved a significant statistical relationship between freshwater inflows and whooping crane mortality."

If Judge Jack agrees with that science, she can force the GBRA to yield its senior water rights to the cranes and the bay. Such a settlement might win water for San Antonio Bay, but what about the other major Texas estuaries? [Advocates for Galveston Bay](#) have complained that in April the state approved such low freshwater inflows that the bay's wildlife is unprotected. The whooping crane suit could serve as a signal to Texas water planners to include the Texas bays, including their multimillion-dollar fishing and tourism industries, as part of the planning, along with cities, industry and agriculture. Or it could be a signal that in the coming water wars – which increasing droughts and other climate-change impacts that scientists have projected for Texas could undoubtedly aggravate – both planners and conservationists need to lawyer up.

While Judge Jack considers the data for the winter of 2008-09, whooping cranes have returned to their refuge along the shores of the San Antonio Bay-Guadalupe Estuary during Texas' worst drought on record. The GBRA presented evidence from a \$2.1-million [study called SAGES](#), an acronym for the San Antonio Guadalupe Estuarine System. The SAGES study states that crabs reproduce well in high salinities, but crane expert Tom Stehn strongly contested this conclusion, saying it was based on laboratory studies only. The general observation of field biologists is that crabs decline when the salinity of the bays is high. Indeed, the usually robust crab fishery that operates in San Antonio Bay has dwindled to two or three boats going out for half a day. Whooping crane guide [Tommy Moore](#), who watches the cranes almost daily from his boat, says the cranes are not finding crabs, but feeding on dead fish, and he fears that such a diet increases their susceptibility to disease. The GBRA's experts contend that whooping cranes are highly adaptable to brackish conditions and may not even need to drink fresh water. Again this contradicts years of field observations in which biologists have seen cranes fly as much as three miles to fresh water to drink. Frequent daily flights for water, they contend, weaken the birds, making them vulnerable to hunger and predators.

At least one family of three whooping cranes flew to the Aransas refuge this fall and found conditions so bad that they flew a couple of hundred miles inland to [Granger Lake near Austin](#). It appears that as many as six cranes may spend the winter there, attracting hundreds of bird watchers who have never seen whoopers so far from their natural territory on the coast. *****Michael Berryhill, Texas Climate News, January 19, 2012. Image credits: Photo – Donald Auderer; Map – Kuru, Wikimedia Commons*****

WCCA has New Trustee

WCCA is happy to announce that Rod Drewien is a new Trustee. Rod, though semi-retired, has worked on western cranes and waterfowl for decades. You may recognize his name from the Rocky Mountain whooping crane cross-fostering experiment. Rod has studied sandhill cranes throughout the Rocky Mountains and down into Mexico. He is a life member of the WCCA.



In Memoriam



Erwin (Erv) L. Boeker (11/06/1920-12/26/2011)

WCCA Life Member Erv Boeker was a pilot, biologist, and conservationist who lived a very full life devoted to conservation. At times during his long career he was in the Navy, worked for the USFWS, and then the National Audubon Society. Erv was a pioneer in flying aerial surveys for waterfowl and also worked with cranes, eagles, and other charismatic species. For many years after his retirement he continued to volunteer his services.

Photo by Wendy Brown



Whooping Crane and its favorite food (blue crab) on the Texas wintering grounds. Photo courtesy Dave and Liz Smith.

Remember WCCA Membership Dues Can be Paid On-line

You now can sign up for membership, renew your membership, or make a donation on-line to the WCCA. Go to this link <http://whoopingcrane.com/membership/> and do your part today!

While on your computer, be sure to check out our website (<http://whoopingcrane.com/>). It is packed with good, up-to-date information!

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Whooping cranes flying over their Texas wintering grounds. *****Photo courtesy Dave and Liz Smith*****