

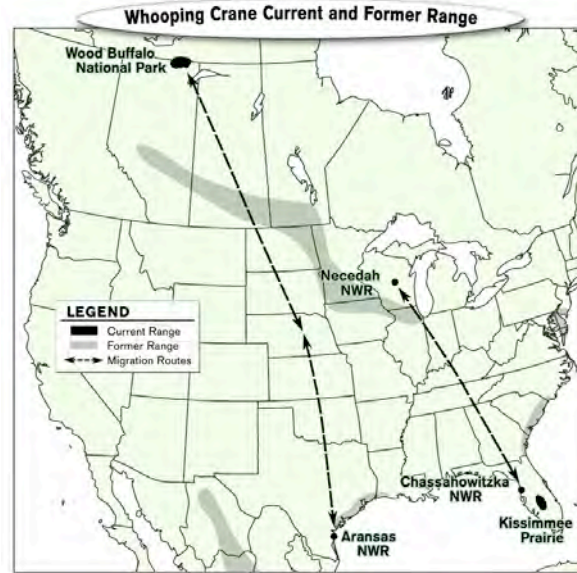


Soft down covering the cute baby chicks is buff-brown. At about 40-days-of-age, cinnamon-brown feathers emerge. When they are one-year-old they have their white adult plumage.

Despite progress in increasing the numbers of these birds, only one population maintains its numbers by rearing chicks in the wild. This flock now contains 266 birds that nest in Wood Buffalo National Park, in the Northwest Territory of Canada. They migrate to the Gulf Coast of Texas on Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and bordering private land where they spend the winter. It is on their wintering ground where they are especially vulnerable. A hurricane could destroy their habitat and kill birds, or an oil spill could destroy their foods. Less abrupt, but equally dangerous, is diversion of river waters that flow into the crane's habitat. This fresh water is being used upstream for agriculture and for human uses in cities. The steadily diminishing flow into the Gulf of Mexico is making the area less productive for Whooping Crane foods. They need these foods to remain healthy, and to fatten for strength on their 2,500-mile migration and for producing young when they arrive in Canada where winter is just ending.

Whooping Cranes were once more abundant in the 1800s, nesting in Illinois, Iowa, the Dakotas, and Minnesota northward through the prairie provinces of Canada, Alberta, and the Northwest Territory. Drainage and clearing and of areas for farming destroyed their habitat, and hunting reduced their numbers. The only wild population that survived by the 1940s was the isolated one nesting in Northwest Territory.

In March-April these cranes fly from Texas across the Great Plains and Saskatchewan to reach their nesting area.



They begin pairing when 2 or 3 years old. Courtship involves dancing together and a duet called the Unison Call. Whooping Cranes mate for life. Females begin producing eggs at age 4 and generally produce two eggs each year. Usually only one chick survives. The pair returns to the same area each spring and chases other cranes from their nesting area that is called a "territory". It may include a square mile or a larger area. Chasing other cranes away ensures there will be enough food for them and their chick. At night they stand in shallow water where they are safer from danger.

They build a nest in a shallow wetland, often on a shallow-water island. The large nest contains plants that grow in the water (sedges, bulrush, and cattail) and may measure 4 feet across and 8 to 18 inches high. The parents take turns keeping the eggs warm and they hatch in about 30 days. The two eggs are laid one to two days apart so one chick emerges before the other. They can walk and swim short distances within a few hours after hatching and may leave the nest when a day old. The chicks grow

rapidly. They are called "colts" because they have long legs and seem to gallop when they run. In summer, Whooping Cranes eat minnows, frogs, insects, plant tubers, crayfish, snails, mice, voles, and other baby birds. They are good fliers by the time they are 80 days of age. In September-October they retrace their migration pathway to escape winter snows and reach the warm Texas coast. During migration they stop periodically to rest and feed on barley and wheat seeds that have fallen to the ground when farmers harvested their fields.

In Texas they live in shallow marshes, bays, and tidal flats. They return to the same area each winter and defend their "territory" by chasing away other cranes. The territory may contain 200 to 300 acres. Winter foods are primarily blue crabs and soft-shelled clams but include shrimp, eels, snakes, cranberries, minnows, crayfish, acorns, and roots.

An individual bird may live as long as 25 years. But, Whooping Cranes face many dangers in the wild. Coyotes, wolves, bobcats, and golden eagles kill adult cranes. Bears, ravens, and crows eat eggs and mink eat crane chicks. When they are flying in storms or poor light they sometimes crash into power lines. And they die of several types of diseases.

In addition to the single self-sustaining population there are birds in captivity at seven locations and two other wild populations began as experiments to try to ensure that Whooping Cranes survive in the wild. There are 152 cranes in captivity including 5 young. Most of the young were released into the wild in October 2003 as part of the two experiments. In the first experiment, begun in 1993, juvenile captive-reared cranes were released in the Kissimmee Prairie of central Florida. Additional young cranes are released there each year. This is a cooperative effort by U.S. and Canadian federal agencies, the state of Florida and the private sector, to start a population that does not face the hazards of migration. Cranes learn a migration route from their parents. These cranes were raised in captivity so they did not learn to migrate. There were 30 cranes in this flock in

