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

Good Nesting Season in Canada

In This Issue

	Page
News Highlights	1
Good Nesting Season in Canada	2
Migration Begins	3
New Survey Methodology	4
Migration Continues	5
New Coordinator Announced	6
Honor Roll of Donors	7



Pair of whooping cranes with 2 chicks in Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada.
 Photo by Brian Johns, WCCA Trustee

Nesting Success Good For Whooping Cranes In 2012



Whooping crane with GPS transmitter and leg bands.

Whooping crane nesting success on Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada during 2012 was considered good but slightly down from previous years. This is good news after the poor winter season on Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas.

Sixty six (66) whooping crane nests were discovered in May by the Canadian Wildlife Service. Three months later in August, an additional three (3) family groups were identified indicating that there were at least sixty-nine (69) nesting attempts during the 2012 nesting season. In early August, just prior to fledging,

thirty-four (34) young were observed on the breeding grounds. Two (2) sets of twins were observed. Ten of the young whooping cranes were marked with leg bands and satellite

transmitters so details about their migration can be learned.

Martha Tacha, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that: “The whooping cranes began moving down into staging areas in Saskatchewan last month; a week ago about half of the GPS-marked cranes were in Saskatchewan. There are currently 30 whooping cranes carrying working GPS transmitters, and likely a handful of marked cranes with colored leg bands from 1978 to 1988 marking effort. As of this morning (Oct.5), there were no GPS-marked cranes in the United States except for one young whooper in Burke County, in extreme northwest North Dakota (this bird was also observed independently by biologists on the ground on and after September 22, 2012). However, I have also received confirmed, probable, and several unconfirmed reports of whooping cranes observed as far south as south central North Dakota, so apparently at least one or two whooping cranes without GPS transmitters have moved farther into the northern reaches of the U.S. Flyway.” Citizen birders have also reported to the Whooping Crane Conservation Association of their observation of whooping cranes in Saskatchewan and North Dakota.

The Whooping Crane Conservation Association is hopeful for a much better winter season on Aransas Refuge. As most whooping crane interests know, last winter on the refuge was abnormal in several respects, including severe drought conditions and poor food availability. Some of the cranes spent some or all of the winter away from Aransas making accurate counts of the birds impossible. During the past several months, the Aransas area has received more rain and habitat conditions are improved. Blue crab numbers have rebounded along the Aransas Refuge coast and the returning whooping cranes will, at least, start out with a good food supply. Hopefully the wolfberry crop will improve and be another source of food.

The retirement of Tom Stehn last year resulted in a change from a direct count method to a transect-based survey of the greater Aransas NWR area to estimate the number of whooping cranes wintering there. Therefore, the official estimate of 254 whooping cranes wintering at Aransas last winter is not comparable to previous years' estimates of flock size. There was much optimism that a record three hundred (300) whoopers would be counted on Aransas Refuge in 2012, but due to the unusual

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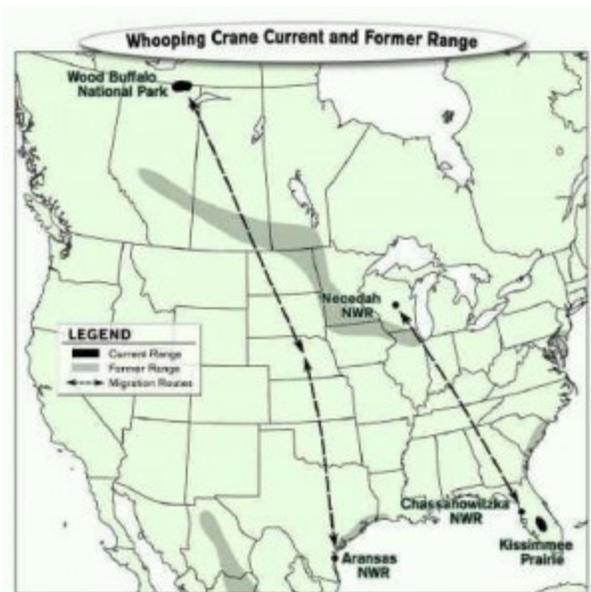
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movements of the cranes and the new census method, the accurate number will never be known. Hopefully, this winter will be more typical in terms of crane distribution and Aransas Refuge biologists will be successful in making an accurate count.

This entry was posted on the WCCA web site Monday, October 8th, 2012 at 9:18 pm and is filed under [Aransas NWR Updates](#), [Association News](#), [Census Flights](#), [Flock Status](#), [Headline](#), [Migrating Reports](#). ****Chester McConnell, Whooping Crane Conservation Association****

Whooping Cranes Migrating South to Texas

They are on their way! The whooping cranes have departed from their Wood Buffalo National Park nesting grounds in Canada and are migrating towards Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas coast. For many thousands of years the endangered cranes have made this annual 2,400 mile migration. It is one of nature's wonders.



Whooping crane migration routes.

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. Hunters are urged to learn to identify whooping cranes to avoid mistaking them for some other birds. To help identify whooping cranes, please visit the following link: <http://whoopingcrane.com/whooper-identification/>.

The Whooping Crane Conservation Association has received dozens of reports of whoopers from birders in Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada and North Dakota, Nebraska and Texas. Approximately 300 whoopers are expected to arrive at Aransas Refuge by late November. Hopefully the thirty-four (34) juvenile cranes that were observed on the Canadian nesting grounds will all make it to Texas with the adult birds.

Whoopers usually follow a migratory path through Saskatchewan, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. In central Texas they fly near cities such as Wichita Falls, Fort Worth, Waco, Austin, and Victoria. During migration they often pause overnight to use wetlands for roosting and agricultural fields for foraging.

They usually migrate in small groups up to 4 to 6 birds, but they may be seen roosting and feeding with large flocks of the smaller sandhill crane. They are the tallest birds in North

Since beginning their slow recovery from a low of 16 birds in the 1940s, whoopers have, with few exceptions, always wintered on the Texas coast on and near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. However, in the winter of 2011-12, several groups of whooping cranes expanded their wintering areas to include more coastal areas and even some inland sites in Central Texas, Kansas and Nebraska—patterns that surprised crane biologists. Texas has initiated the “Texas Whooper Watch” program that asks the public to help us discover more about where whooping cranes stop in migration and to be ready to learn more about these potential new wintering areas. The Whooping Crane Conservation Association and Texas will share information collected about whoopers from birders to improve our knowledge about the birds.



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wolfberry crop will improve and be another source of food.

This entry was posted on the WCCA web site Wednesday, October 17th, 2012 at 9:22 pm and is filed under [Aransas Updates](#), [Association News](#), [Endangered Species](#), [Flock Status](#), [Headline](#). *****Chester McConnell, Whooping Crane Conservation Association*****

TAP Concerned About Whooping Crane Survey Methodology Changes

The Aransas Project (TAP) leaders announced their concerns about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposed new whooping crane survey methodology. TAP is urging its members to attend a critical public meeting being hosted by the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to address the changes being made in the survey methods used to count the endangered whooping cranes that winter at the Refuge. Beginning in the winter of 2011-2012, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) altered its methodology for tracking how many cranes are in the flock and this will be the first public meeting providing any insight or explanation of their methods. In July 2012, TAP released our [State of the Flock 2011-2012 report](#), documenting concerns with the methodology as well as how the flock fared in winter 2011-2012.

TAP members were strongly encouraged to attend to remain informed on this critical issue:

Thursday, October 4, 2012

6 PM to 8 PM

Paws and Taws Convention Center

402 North Fulton Beach Road Fulton, TX 78358

According to a USFWS news release, the presentation “will investigate and define aerial survey methods used historically and currently to count the Aransas-Wood Buffalo flock of whooping cranes.” Refuge Biologist Brad Strobel will lead the presentation, and there will be a Q&A session following the presentation.

October 3, 2012: USFWS Posts Report

On October 3, the eve of their public meeting in Fulton, the USFWS has posted to their website a report that they titled, “[Aransas-Wood Buffalo Whooping Crane Abundance Survey \(2011-2012\)](#)”. The report states that its first objective is “to share information in a timely manner;” however, the report was promised by August and was posted October 3, one day in advance of the public meeting noted above.

The report primarily focuses on criticizing the previous census method and introducing their new statistical modeling method of estimating peak flock size. The previous census method was used since 1982 by USFWS's

own prior Crane Coordinator, Tom Stehn. Stehn's work led the recovery and survey of this species until he retired in September 2011.

Given the timing of the release of this report, TAP's review has identified, at a minimum, a number of issues of concern:

Territoriality: The report states that, "[the] assumption of territoriality is unnecessary and untenable given recent data." This conclusion is stunning, and flies in the face of the established scientific literature, decades worth of banding data, and earlier GPS tracking data. This conclusion appears to be based solely on one year's GPS tracking data that was collected in a year when the cranes were clearly dispersed due to severe drought.

The End of Crane Counting?: *Because the new method is designed to statistically estimate only peak flock size, it appears that USFWS no longer intends to track or tell the public how many cranes are in the flock, or how many cranes die at Aransas in any given year.*

Basis and Data for New Peak Count Unclear: In contrast to the previous method that clearly counted and reported the number of cranes, the new statistical style instead counts some cranes and then estimates the peak flock count, a number that is buried in pages of complex statistical lingo. Additionally, because USFWS does not share the underlying raw data, it is difficult to determine how a new peak flock estimate of 254 birds was derived.

These are only a few of the questions that are prompted by this report, and TAP is concerned that the report was not provided further in advance of this public meeting to allow full analysis by researchers and the public. We hope that USFWS will be able to shed additional light on the reasoning and conclusions reached in the report in light of the concerns expressed above.

This entry was posted on the WCCA web site Thursday, October 4th, 2012 at 12:45 am and is filed under [Association News](#), [Census Flights](#), [Endangered Species](#), [Headline](#). **** Ron Outen, Regional Director, The Aransas Project****

Whooping Cranes Continue Migration South

Whooping cranes are on the move southward and have been spotted all along the migration pathway. The Whooping Crane Conservation Association has received reports of cranes along their migratory path from Saskatchewan, Canada to Aransas, Texas.



Whooping cranes migrating south.

Martha C. Tacha, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nebraska reports that, "The whooping cranes with GPS transmitters are on the move, with the bulk of these marked cranes in North Dakota and South Dakota, and two already in Texas. We know that one unmarked whooper stopped over at a lake near Oklahoma City recently. While the early confirmed sightings have been single birds, there was a group of nine adult-plumaged whoopers in northern North Dakota recently."

One of the GPS transmitter marked whooping crane arrived on the Texas coast on October 18 and has been using the marsh habitat extensively. Aransas National Wildlife Refuge officials report that, "All other GPS marked whooping cranes are north of South Dakota awaiting favorable

migration conditions. Biologists expect the cranes will take advantage of the strong north winds associated with seasonal cold fronts. On October 23 Aransas Refuge Biologist Brad Strobel and Refuge Manager Dan Alonso observed one adult whooping crane feeding in the refuge marshes on the Blackjack peninsula. The bird ate at least two prey items during the 3-5 minutes it was observed.

The winter home of the whooping cranes at Aransas Refuge is improved compared to this time last year. Refuge personnel advise that salinity levels in the bay waters are fresher than they were at this time last fall and winter. The salinity levels in San Antonio Bay were recorded as 23.9 parts per thousand.

Aransas Refuge also has experienced improved rainfall in recent months. According to refuge officials, to date, the refuge has received 25.6 inches of rain, which is a foot more than we had last winter at this time. The area is still unusually dry but the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts south Texas will see a wetter than average winter and spring in 2013. To make certain freshwater is available to the whooping cranes when they arrive, refuge staff have been working on water well sites previously used by cranes on the Blackjack peninsula to ensure they are in good working condition.

Whooper food sources on the refuge have also improved during this growing season. Refuge biologists have noticed many flowering and budding wolfberry plants while conducting field work during the last few weeks. Wolfberry conditions in the marsh appear to be much better than this time last year. Peak berry abundance typically occurs in November and December and the plants seem to be on schedule according to biologists. Blue crabs also appear to be abundant in the marsh currently based on surveys conducted by refuge personnel.

This entry was posted on the WCCA web site Saturday, October 27th, 2012 at 3:51 pm and is filed under [Aransas Updates](#), [Association News](#), [Census Flights](#), [Endangered Species](#), [Flock Status](#), [Headline](#). *****Chester McConnell, Whooping Crane Conservation Association*****

New Whooping Crane Coordinator Announced

It is my pleasure to announce the appointment of Dr. Wade Harrell as the new Whooping Crane Recovery Coordinator. Wade will become a member of the Region 2 Recovery staff in Albuquerque, but he will be based on the Texas Coast. Wade brings a rich variety of skills and experiences to the position that will benefit the continued recovery of this flagship endangered species. He looks forward to the challenge and to working with the many Service divisions, other agencies, and partners that contribute so much to the conservation of the whooping crane.

Wade, a fifth generation native Texan, was born in Corpus Christi, Texas and spent his formative years exploring and fishing the marshes and beaches of the Gulf Coast and hunting in the thorn scrub region of South Texas. These early experiences led to a great interest in wildlife conservation. Wade received a B.S. in Wildlife and Rangeland Science from Texas A&M Kingsville in 1998. He earned both his M.S. and PhD from Oklahoma State University in Rangeland Ecology. His graduate research involved the importance of ecological disturbance, particularly fire, in maintaining wildlife communities in grassland and shrubland ecosystems of the Great Plains.

Wade has served in his current position with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program coordinator for the Austin Ecological Services office since 2009, leading a team of biologists in restoring and maintaining diverse wildlife habitats, from Desert grasslands in the Trans Pecos of Texas important for wintering migratory birds, springs and creeks important for rare and listed aquatic species, forest and shrublands ecosystems on the Edwards Plateau of Central Texas that are key for the survival of the endangered Golden cheeked warbler and Black capped vireo, sub-surface karst & cave environments that host a number of listed endemic species and pine-oak forests in east-central Texas that provide habitat for the endangered Houston Toad.

Prior to coming to work for the Service, Wade was employed by The Nature Conservancy of Texas, serving as the Coastal Prairies Project Director for 6 years. During his time with TNC, Wade provided science support and direction for the Gulf Coast Prairies and Marshes ecoregion, led diverse stakeholder groups in the development of landscape scale conservation plans, initiated and directed the successful Attwater's prairie chicken reintroduction program on private lands, assisted private landowners with grassland habitat management and managed land acquisition and conservation easement programs along the Texas Gulf Coast.

Wade and his wife Shandee are proud parents of two active sons (Griff, age 9 & Sam, age 7), and attend a seemingly endless variety of sports, cub scouts and church events. When not otherwise engaged in work or family activities, some of Wade's favorite activities include wading or kayaking shallow grass flats of the Texas coast pursuing redfish or walking the grasslands of Nebraska or South Dakota in search of grouse and pheasant.

****Michelle Shaughnessy & Wendy Brown, US Fish and Wildlife Service****

Honor Roll of Donors to the WCCA

Thanks to the following individuals who contributed extra money over and above their annual dues; all contributions will be used toward conservation of the whooping crane:

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You now can sign up for membership, renew your membership, or make a donation online 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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Close-up of whooping crane face. *****Photo by Marty Folk*****