



# Grus Americana

May 2013 Volume 52, No. 1

\*\*\*\*\* News Highlights \*\*\*\*\*

## WCCA Dedicates this Issue to Web Administrator Chester McConnell

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See article inside about Chester McConnell's dedication to conservation of the whooping crane.

## Whooping Crane Conservation Association...

### Working to Conserve Whooping Cranes

The Whooping Crane is the symbol of conservation in North America. Due to excellent cooperation between the United States and Canada, this endangered species is recovering from the brink of extinction. Their population increased from 16 individuals in 1941 to 588 wild and captive birds in September 2012. The name



“Whooper” probably

came from the loud, single-note call they make when disturbed. The adult is 5 feet tall, the tallest bird in North America. When the wings are extended they are 7 feet from tip to tip. They are graceful flyers, elegant walkers, and picturesque dancers. Adults are a beautiful snowy white with black outer wing feathers visible when the wings are extended. The top of the head is red with a black cheek and back of neck, yellow eyes, and gray-black feet and legs.

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 about 300 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.

*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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**Trustees emeritus:** Lorraine Grassano, Dayton Hyde, Chester McConnell



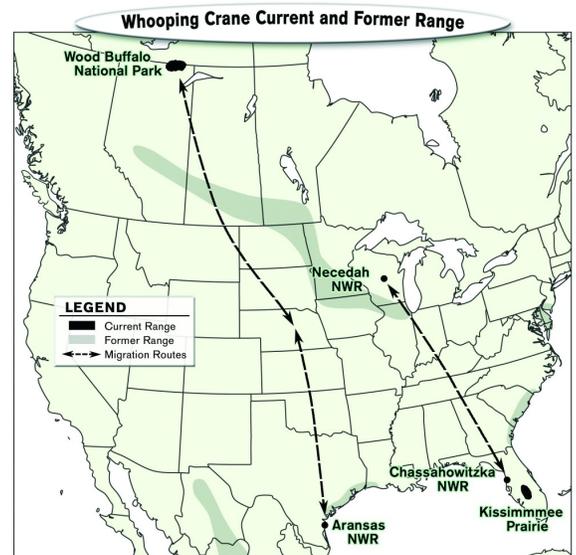
They begin pairing when 2 or 3 years old. Courtship involves dancing together and a duet called the Unison Call. Whooping Cranes mate for life. Females begin producing eggs at age 4 and generally produce two eggs each year. Usually only one chick survives. The pair returns to the same area each spring 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. Pairs 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 three other wild populations began as experiments to try to ensure that Whooping Cranes survive in the wild. There are 183 cranes in captivity including 23 young. Most of the young are released into the wild as part of the three experiments. In the first experiment, begun in 1993, juvenile captive-reared cranes were released in the Kissimmee Prairie of central Florida. Additional young cranes were released there each year. This was 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. Excessive Mortality and low productivity, both due in part to droughts, led to the halting of releases into that population.





In 1997, Kent Clegg was the first individual to teach captive-reared Whooping Cranes to fly and follow a small aircraft. He led them in an 800-mile migration in the western United States. His technique was then used in the second experiment beginning in 2001 to establish a population that nests in Wisconsin and migrates to western Florida. U.S. and Canadian federal agencies, provincial and state governments, Operation Migration, Inc., and other private sector groups are cooperating in this experiment. This flock now contains 104 cranes and others will be added in future years. Another non-migratory flock with 20 whooping cranes was established in Louisiana in

2011. The annual releases will stop when the two experimental populations produce enough young to maintain their numbers.

#### HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can help the endangered Whooping Crane recover its numbers so it can survive as a species. Join the Whooping Crane Conservation Association (WCCA) by clicking on: <http://whoopingcrane.com/membership/> The WCCA is a nonprofit organization and your donations are tax deductible. The Association helps purchase habitat, fund research and management projects that aid Whooping Cranes and assists in educating the public about the dangers to this beautiful bird. As part of your membership, you will receive a handsome newsletter twice a year. The newsletter provides the latest information on status of the various populations, recovery progress, and other items of interest. Tell others about the dangers to this bird and what is being done to benefit them. \*\*\*\**Chester McConnell and Jim Lewis, WCCA*\*\*\*\*

WCCA's web page at [www.whoopingcrane.com](http://www.whoopingcrane.com) includes current information, interesting facts and a coloring book for children.

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### 2012–2013 Winter Whooping Crane Survey, Texas

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel conducted 7 surveys of the primary wintering grounds during December 2012. These efforts resulted in the training of 2 new observers and further refinement of the new survey protocol.

Preliminary analyses of the data indicated 257 (95% confidence interval (CI) = 178–362) whooping cranes inhabited the primary wintering grounds. Additional observations suggested that at least 22 whooping cranes were outside the primary wintering grounds during the survey period (see whooping cranes outside the primary survey area below). We estimated 105 (95% CI = 73–146) whooping crane pairs in the primary winter grounds and at least 33 (95% CI = 19–51) of those pairs arrived with at least one chick. We estimated the ratio of chicks to adults during the winter 2012–2013 was 14 chicks (95% CI = 9–21) to 100 adults. As our new observers gain experience and we work out methodological details, we anticipate precision in these estimates to increase.

Examination of the 60-year trend in whooping crane abundance reveals a slow, incremental increase with occasional declines. Such increase has been the rule rather than large year-to-year fluctuation. We do not expect to see wide swings in population growth from one year to the next unless there is a catastrophic event, like a hail storm or chemical spill. During winter 2010–2011, the traditional technique resulted in an estimate of 283 whooping cranes on the wintering grounds. We estimated 254 (95% CI = 198–324) whooping cranes in the primary wintering grounds plus approximately 13 were thought to occur in other areas (i.e., Bayside, Markham,

and Granger Lake) during winter 2011–2012. Modeling of the historical time-series of whooping crane abundances predicted 272 (95% CI = 253–298) whooping cranes for winter 2011–2012 and 273 (95% CI = 250–301) for winter 2012–2013.

Measures of the uncertainty in our estimates are new to whooping crane monitoring. In the past, we did not include confidence intervals or other measures of precision because it was assumed that the traditional technique resulted in a complete count. The traditional technique assumed that 1) none of the birds were missed, 2) pairs consistently used a defined area throughout the winter, and 3) a single observer was able to see and account for every single bird over repeated survey effort. Previously, the traditional technique had no established protocol, there was not a survey area or flight pattern determined before each flight, and the observer flew wherever they thought birds might be seen. This made sense when the whooping crane population was small and occupied a relatively small geographic area. Now, we have a pre-established flight pattern that covers the primary wintering area, we used 2 observers on every flight, and accounted for missed birds. Because no statistical model was applied in the past, we had no way of knowing the uncertainty in our estimates. Now, with the application of a protocol-based survey design and statistical models, we can characterize our uncertainty and develop ways to reduce that uncertainty.

Every year we do this survey we will learn something new and different and apply it to the next season. Our knowledge and precision will grow and we will have more solid information that leads to better management decisions. We expect this process will take several seasons before the obvious and not-so-obvious factors can be incorporated into the survey protocol and statistical models. This is how science progresses. It is a very typical process and ultimately helps us make the best decisions for the whooping cranes.

### **Whooping Cranes Outside the Primary Survey Area:**

It is important to note that in addition to the estimate of 257 whooping cranes within the primary survey area, approximately 6% to 11% of the whooping crane population can now be found outside the survey area. This is not because the primary survey area is smaller than what was surveyed in the past; in fact, it is larger. This use of “nontraditional” wintering areas is great news and we are trying to get a better understanding of the expansion and use of whooping crane habitat.

As many have stated, in the long-run, having whooping cranes winter in a variety of places across a broader geographic range gives us greater confidence that a catastrophic event will not wipe out the population. For decades there has been genuine concern that one catastrophic event near the refuge could lead to the extinction of whooping cranes. This is such an important part of the ongoing recovery of whooping cranes and cannot be understated. Between Texas Whooper Watch and the increasing number of birds marked with satellite transmitters via the tracking study, we are in a much better position to document birds using areas outside the primary survey area.

The tables below provide our best understanding of birds that were outside the primary survey areas during mid-December. These numbers are concurrent with our aerial surveys. Keep in mind some birds may have been missed. Also, we cannot ever be completely certain that the birds did not move between these locations and to/from the primary survey area while survey flights were being conducted.

These are three different data sources that help document the proportion of the whooping crane population using areas outside of the primary wintering area during mid-December.

**Table 1: Texas Whooper Watch***Birds documented outside of the survey area in mid-December via Texas Whooper Watch*

General Area	Adults	Chicks	Total	Notes:
<i>Granger Lake</i>	6	2	8	<i>Includes 1 marked bird.</i>
N. of El Campo	2	1	3	Includes 1 marked bird. One more pair was documented in the area but we do not have mid-December records.
<i>Total</i>	8	3	11	

**Table 2: Tracking Study***Birds documented outside of the survey area on December 17th via the tracking study*

General Area	Adults	Chicks	Total	Notes:
<i>Mission Bay (secondary survey area)</i>	1		1	<i>Marked as chick.</i>
North Matagorda Island (secondary)	2	1	3	Marked chick.
<i>Holiday Beach (secondary)</i>	2	1	3	<i>Marked chick located on the edge of the primary survey area in early morning prior to the aerial survey &amp; and in the secondary survey area twice in the afternoon.</i>
<i>Total</i>	5	2	7	

**Table 3: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Survey***Birds documented in the whooping cranes' secondary areas on December 13th via aerial survey*

General Area	Adults	Chicks	Total	Notes:
<i>Powderhorn Lake (secondary survey area)</i>	2		2	<i>Pair located on Myrtle-Whitmire Foster Unit of refuge.</i>
Guadalupe Delta (secondary)	2		2	Two pairs, total of 4 birds, were seen during the Christmas bird count on the 20th.
<i>Total</i>			4	

\*The data and results presented in this report are preliminary and subject to revision. This information is distributed solely for the purpose of providing the most recent information from aerial surveys. This information does not represent and should not be construed to represent any U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determination or policy. February 15, 2013 *Whooping Crane Update* is from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge webpage: <http://www.fws.gov/nwrs/threecolumn.aspx?id=2147512080>

## Judge Rules in Favor of The Aransas Project in Whooping Crane Case

Mar 12, 2013 | The Aransas Project | [Press Release](#)

### *Effective Management Plan Ordered for Guadalupe River, Bays and Estuaries*

(Rockport, TX — March 10, 2013)— Today, The Aransas Project (TAP) applauded a major federal court decision in its legal battle to protect the last naturally migrating flock of endangered whooping cranes as a vindication of the need for an effective water management plan, especially during times of drought, for the Guadalupe and San Antonio River basins.

On March 10, 2010, TAP filed a lawsuit against several officials of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) in their official capacities for illegal harm and harassment of Whooping Cranes at and adjacent to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in violation of the Endangered Species Act. The case went to trial before the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas in December 2011. Today's historic decision by United States District Judge Janis Graham Jack comes three years to the day after the original filing.

“We are both humbled and pleased by the Court's historic decision,” said TAP's Lead Counsel Jim Blackburn. “For this important river and for the whooping cranes, the Court's opinion provides a clear statement of the need for an effective management plan for this river basin during times of drought to ensure adequate freshwater flows reach the bay. The decision is also a vindication of the sound science and the dedicated efforts of the longtime Whooping Crane Recovery Coordinator, Mr. Tom Stehn, to preserve these magnificent birds.”

### **The Opinion**

In an exhaustive and detailed 124-page opinion, Judge Jack ruled that the water management practices of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) for the Guadalupe and San Antonio River basins violated the Endangered Species Act.

The Court issued an order preventing the TCEQ from approving or granting new water permits affecting the Guadalupe or San Antonio Rivers “until the State of Texas provides reasonable assurances to the Court” that new permits would not result in harm to the whooping cranes.

Importantly, the Court ordered the agency seek what is known as an Incidental Take Permit and develop a Habitat Conservation Plan. An Incidental Take Permit is a permit issued by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) that allows the holder to proceed with an otherwise lawful activity that results in “incidental” harm to an endangered species, but requires the permit holder to design, implement and fund a plan that minimizes and mitigates harm to the species while carefully balancing competing interests of various stakeholders in the basin.

Jim Blackburn remarks, “At the heart of this ruling, and this case, is the need for a habit conservation plan which will fairly protect the needs of all the river system, upstream interests and the vital whooping crane habitat.”

### **Background on the Case**

The Aransas-Wood Buffalo flock of Whooping Cranes that winters on the Texas coast is the only natural wild flock remaining in the world. This flock of whooping cranes travels 2500 miles from their nesting grounds in Canada to reach this unique and rare ecosystem along the Texas coast. The flock has increased from 16 birds in the early 1940s to a high of 270 in the spring of 2008. The 2008-2009 year was the worst in recent history for the Whooping Crane, with a death toll of 57 birds, a staggering loss of 21.4% of the flock—of which 23 deaths,

or 8.5% of the flock, occurred in Texas during their winter at Aransas. The lack of freshwater inflows to the bays from the Guadalupe and San Antonio Rivers, especially during times of low flows, resulted in very high salinity levels and depleted food and water sources for the Cranes.

The Aransas Project, a nonprofit alliance of municipalities, businesses, organizations and citizens, brought the lawsuit under the Endangered Species Act against officials of the TCEQ in their official capacities in March 2010.

At the heart of the case was the claim that TCEQ's failure to properly manage the state-owned freshwater inflows to the San Antonio and Guadalupe Bays during time of low flows had resulted in elevated salinity in the bays, lower availability of necessary food and water resources for the cranes, and the resulting death of at least 23 endangered cranes.

The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority (GBRA), responsible for conserving and protecting the water resources of the Guadalupe River Basin, and the Texas Chemical Council, representing the interests of numerous industrial water permit holders in the basin, were allowed to intervene in the case. The San Antonio River Authority was later allowed to intervene following an appeal to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. Numerous other interventions were denied.

The case was tried before the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas (Corpus Christi Division) over eight days in early December 2011.

This article is from the TAP web page: <http://thearansasproject.org/basin-management/judge-rules-in-favor-of-the-aransas-project-in-whooping-crane-case/>



**Whooping cranes foraging in a marsh by Steve Baynes.**

## **WCCA Takes Position on Wind farm**

February 4, 2013  
Jennifer Turnbow, Project Manager, KLJ  
128 Soo Line Drive,  
PO BOX 1157,  
Bismarck, ND 58502-1157

Dear Ms. Turnbow.

The Whooping Crane Conservation Association (WCCA) would like to express our concerns over the placement of the proposed Merricourt Wind Power Project in North Dakota.

Wind Power projects have been identified in the International Recovery Plan for the Whooping Crane as a potential threat to flying Whooping Cranes. As you know the Whooping Crane is listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN as well as both the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service. The Aransas/Wood Buffalo population (AWBP) which contains fewer than 300 individuals is the only self-sustaining wild population of whooping cranes. With such a limited population, the genetic contribution of each individual is critical to the survival of the species.

The proposed placement of this wind power project directly within the migration corridor of the AWBP seems like an accident waiting to happen. We understand that the USFWS may grant an Incidental Take Permit, which would allow the project to proceed. The WCCA is opposed to locating any wind power projects within the migration corridor. If such a project were to proceed, we would expect the USFWS to ensure that all mitigation measures listed in the Whooping Crane Wind Development Issue Paper are taken to avoid harm to the AWBP of Whooping Cranes.

Sincerely,  
Brian Johns, President  
Whooping Crane Conservation Association

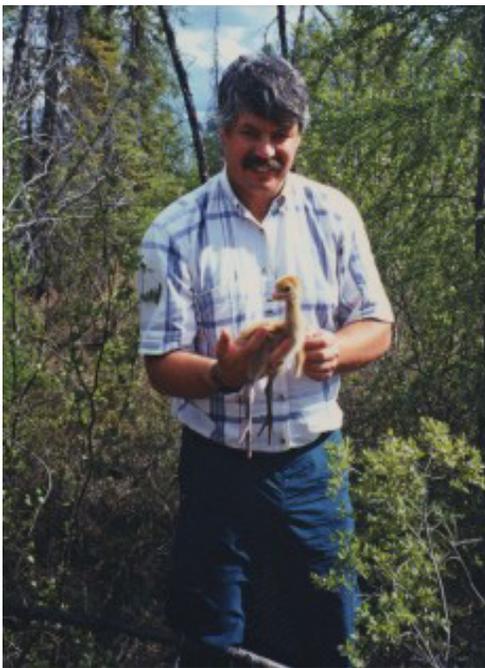
## **WCCA Partners in Offering Reward Money**

The WCCA has established a fund to help protect whooping cranes from being killed by vandals. That fund authorizes money to go towards persons who provide information that leads to a conviction. A Whooping Crane was killed in Louisiana in April 2013. State and federal organizations as well as private interests are contributing funds toward information that leads to the conviction of the person or persons responsible. The WCCA has offered \$1000 to help move the case along.

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## **Brian Johns New President of Whooping Crane Conservation Association**

Brian Johns of Canada has assumed the role as President of the Whooping Crane Conservation Association for 2013. Brian replaced Lorne Scott. Scott, also a Canadian, will remain as a Trustee with the Association.



Brian Johns, Canadian Wildlife Service (retired) with whooping crane chick, Wood Buffalo National Park. Brian was recently elected as President, Whooping Crane Conservation Association.

Brian Johns is a retired wildlife biologist with the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS). He received his Bachelor of Science Advanced degree from the University of Saskatchewan in 1973 and began his career with the CWS that same year. During his time with the CWS Brian conducted research on sandhill cranes, whooping cranes, loggerhead shrike and various songbirds in the grasslands, parklands and boreal forests of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

In 1981 Brian began monitoring whooping crane migration through prairie Canada and participated in the whooping crane radio tracking program. Between 1984 and 1987 he researched habitat use by migrant whooping cranes. Brian began directing the CWS whooping crane program in 1992 and has been involved in research and monitoring studies of Whooping Cranes on the breeding grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park and along their migratory flyway.

Brian's research has included population monitoring, philopatry, effects of egg collection and the banding of juvenile whooping cranes. Brian has also studied potential reintroduction habitat in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and tracked sandhill crane migration routes from those habitats. He has logged over 1500 hours of aerial surveys over the crane nesting area.

Brian is the past chair of the National Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Team and Canadian Whooping Crane Coordinator. He co-chaired the Canada/United States Whooping Crane Recovery Team from 1995 – 2009. He is the recipient of Nature Saskatchewan's Conservation Award and the Whooping Crane Conservation Association's Honor Award and the Jerome Pratt Whooping Crane Award. Brian retired in 2009 after 36 years with the CWS. *\*\*\*Chester McConnell, WCCA\*\*\**

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## **Chester McConnell Retires as Web Site Administrator**

Trustee Emeritus Chester McConnell (see cover photo) recently announced his desire to retire as Web Site Administrator for WCCA. He did an outstanding job in keeping the site updated with the most current

information about whooping crane matters and developed many friendships as he responded to questions from interested readers. His volunteer work for WCCA over the years has amounted to thousands of contributed hours. He began as a Trustee in the late 1990s, became President in 2002, served with his wife Dorothy as editors of *Grus Americana* in 2002 and 2003, and maintained the web site since then. Thank you Chester and Dorothy for your years of service to whooping cranes.

He received his Bachelor's degree in Biology and Political Science from Livingston University and a Master's degree in Wildlife Biology from Auburn University. His professional career included time as an officer in the Marines, an employee of the FBI, and nine years with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. In 1974 he became Southeastern Representative for the Wildlife Management Institute with responsibilities in nine southeastern States. He retired from that position in 1999. Among the awards Chester received during his career are the Appreciation Citation from WCCA in 2003 and the 2006 National Wetlands Award for Wetland Community Leader. He has always been a champion in protecting wetlands for wildlife and more recently a champion for the endangered whooping cranes. He will continue to have opportunity to benefit the species in his role as Trustee Emeritus. \*\*\*\**Jim Lewis, WCCA*\*\*\*\*

### **WCCA Seeks new Web site Administrator**

Do you have an interest in becoming the next volunteer web site administrator for WCCA? This involves keeping up with whooping crane news and passing the information on to a webmaster for posting on our website. Experience with websites would be a bonus. If you have an interest please contact the newsletter editor at [martyfolk@embarqmail.com](mailto:martyfolk@embarqmail.com).

### **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:**

Doug Aanes  
 Jane Chandler  
 Fred Conrad  
 Sherryll Fisher  
 Michael Hartshorne  
 Kathleen Kaska  
 Lorne Scott  
 Leontine van der Meer

### **Remember WCCA Membership Dues Can Be Paid On-line**

**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!**

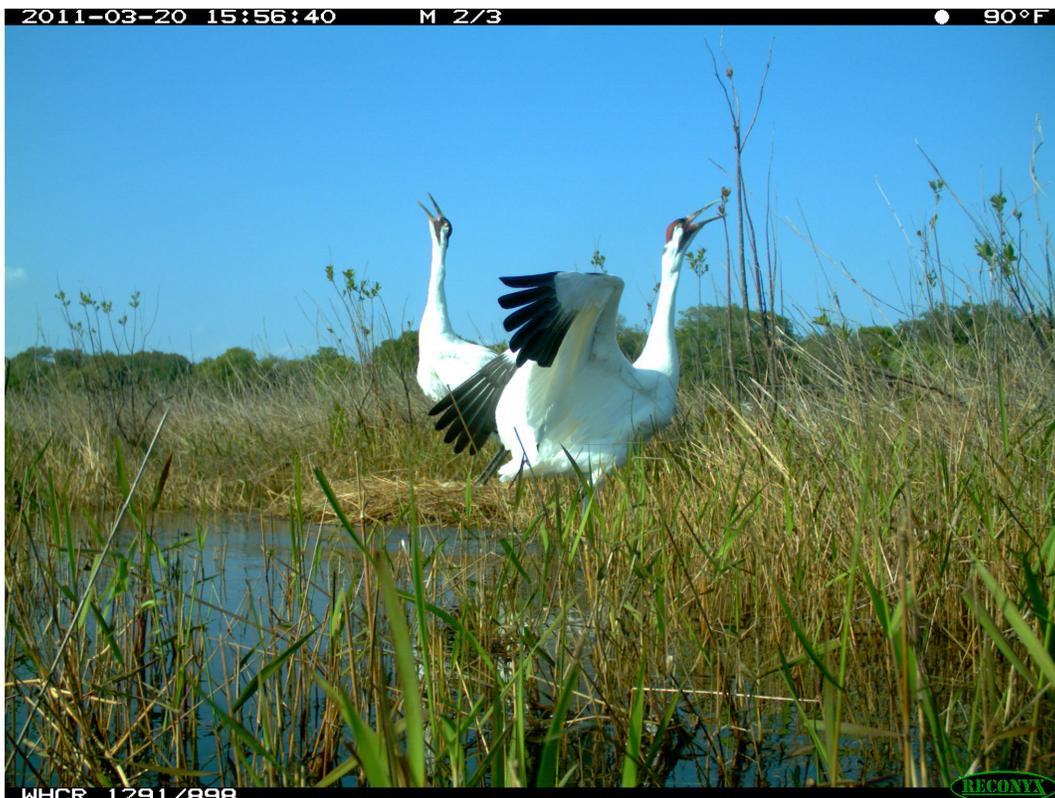
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Pair of whooping cranes unison call at their nest. The image was taken by a “trail camera” installed near the nest as part of a study of incubation. \*\*\*\*Photo by Marty Folk \*\*\*\*