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RARE WHOOPING CRANE INCREASES ON REFUGE: BIRD NEAR EXTINCTION

Twenty-six whooping cranes are on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Texas now, an increase of 18 percent over last year's wintering population of 22, but the rare, big white bird that utters the peculiar, hysterical-sounding cry that has given it its name is making a struggle for survival, the Fish and Wildlife Service reported today to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

The cranes on the Aransas Refuge constitute the largest single concentration known in wintering areas.

How many whooping cranes are still in existence is not known. Some ornithologists place the figure at not more than 80, and James O. Stevenson, manager of the Aransas Refuge, believes that the entire population of the species certainly does not exceed 200.

The birds have been reported only in two places during the winter months; on the coastal prairies and lagoons of southeast Texas and in the marshes of southern Louisiana. The birds are thought to nest in western Canada, but in recent years reliable information has not been received to verify this point.

Whether the whooping crane can win its battle for existence is problematical. "The chances of the bird's population increasing to the point where the species is out of danger is doubtful," declared Manager Stevenson, "but the Fish and Wildlife Service is using all the facilities and information at its disposal to help the whooping crane avoid extinction if it can possibly do so."

Whooping cranes are tall, pure white birds with a deep red forehead and crown and a black wing tip. Standing more than 4 feet high, the bird is a conspicuous object in the marshes, shallow waters, or on the prairies where it habitually ranges. It was given the name whooping crane from the fact that the bird often raises its head skyward and shrieks the whooping call note that has often been likened to the hysterical cry of a person.

Along the Gulf Coast, former market hunters who killed and sold the bird gave it the name "bugle crane," because they thought the call sounded like a trumpet.

Killed for Market and Curiosity

Though the number of whoopers wintering on the Aransas Refuge this year is larger than last year's wintering population, officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service are not particularly elated over the fact. The conservation agency pays particular attention to the number of young birds rather than to the total population found on the refuge. In 1939-40 there were 15 adults and 7 immature birds on the Aransas, while this year there are 21 adults and 5 immatures.

During the winter of 1938-39 there were 14 whooping cranes on the area, 10 adults and 4 young. "Because there are proportionately fewer young each year, it is not certain the bird can avoid extinction," Stevenson said.

Why the bird, which once numbered in the thousands, is now on the verge of extinction is not definitely known, but it is suspected that market hunters and individuals who shot the bird out of curiosity contributed to the marked depletion of the stock.

"The birds run a 2,500-mile gauntlet twice a year as they migrate from Texas to Canada and back again each spring and fall," Stevenson said, "and being a little-known bird, I suspect that people seeing them along the flyway route shot the whoopers out of curiosity, not realizing that these were, even in 1900, rare birds."

Whooping cranes have a precarious time feeding in unprotected areas, the refuge manager pointed out, because the birds are so white and conspicuous and so large a hunter would have little difficulty in killing the bird. It has been illegal by Federal law to shoot whooping cranes since 1918.

Studies Bird's Habits

Stevenson studies the habits of the birds while they winter on the Fish and Wildlife Service refuge on the Gulf Coast of Texas. In the past, ornithologists studying the bird learned that the whooping crane nest usually has two, and rarely three, eggs. Knowing this, the refuge manager is able to judge how well the birds are reproducing.

Apparently the birds are clannish. The Service official has noted that they usually remain in family groups, each family apparently having its own feeding territory. On occasion Stevenson has seen two males fight, sparring with their bills and jumping and trying to peck each other, when one male strolled into an area where the other had his family.

During dry periods the birds on the refuge must use the same watering holes and several family groups may go there at the same time. But even then the family groups avoid each other, and if they become too crowded sometimes the males fight.

Good Parents

It appears that the whooping crane is a good parent. Stevenson frequently observes the young flanked on either side by a male and female. The refuge manager suspects that this is an instinctive protective trait in the adults. The young are easily recognized because they are cinnamon colored, not pure white like the adults.

Cranes differ from the herons, with which they are popularly confused, by being largely vegetarian. The whoopers at times have been seen feeding on frogs, crustaceans, all types of insect life, and apparently small fishes. On the refuge they often can be observed on dry land, sometimes as much as 5 or 6 miles from the bays, eating acorns.

In flight, the cranes can be readily distinguished from herons, because the cranes fly with their necks extended while the herons fold their long necks back.

Though the birds nest in the north, they have often been observed courting on the refuge late in spring, about a month before they leave. The courtship performance is not characteristic of all the males on the refuge but by those that have been paired all winter. "It may be that the whooping crane pairs for life, though of course this has not been proved," Stevenson said.