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REMAINS OF "THIRTY NINTH WILD WHOPPER" FOUND ON MATAGORDA ISLAND IN TEXAS

Remains of the 39th whooping crane, the wild bird which the Canadian Wildlife Service reported last fall, but which did not show up in later counts made by the Fish and Wildlife Service in the United States, have been found on Matagorda Island, adjacent to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Gulf Coast of Texas, the Department of the Interior reported today.

The bird had been dead several months. Hence, the cause of death cannot be ascertained.

The finding verifies the Canadian report of last fall that 39 wild whooping cranes were en route to wintering grounds in the United States. While the whooping crane winters primarily on the Aransas Refuge and environs, it wanders over many miles of territory and frequently all are not sighted during the periodic tallies. Numerous flights over the wintering area by Fish and Wildlife Service biologists indicated only 36 whooping cranes for several months. Finally, a late mid-winter count disclosed 38 of these rare birds on or near the refuge, one short of the number counted by the Canadians before and during the early stages of the birds' fall migration.

First reports of the finding of a dead whooping crane were received in March, to the effect that a "big white bird with a red head and black wing-tips" was found in some hurricane debris which was being bulldozed on a ranch.

Because initial reports were that the bird was a hurricane victim and because Hurricane Carla occurred before the flight of the whoopers even neared Texas, the rumor was discounted. More recently it was learned that the person who identified the dead bird was a long-time resident of Matagorda Island and too well-acquainted with whooping cranes to have made a mistake. Refuge personnel, after further investigation, are now certain that the bird was actually a whooping crane although the carcass could not be found.

Thus, the "books balance," and the 39 whooping cranes which the Canadians reported finally have been counted. The northward migration to the whooper nesting area just south of Great Slave Lake in Canada has been underway for some weeks. The most recent tally made on Aransas Refuge and vicinity showed that five whoopers were still in winter quarters. This would indicate that 33 are making the 2,500-mile journey to the nesting grounds.

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