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WHOOPING CRANES START MIGRATION TO NORTHERN NESTING GROUNDS

More than half the wild flock of 44 whooping cranes that wintered on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas have started their northward flight to traditional nesting grounds near Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park, the Department of the Interior announced today.

On April 6, 25 of the birds left the refuge, including one group of 20, the largest single mass exodus of whoopers ever recorded. This is also one of the few times that an actual departure has been observed. Refuge employees said the birds circled to gain altitude and then took a northward course. Departures usually are discovered only after the rare birds are periodically counted.

A mid-March aerial check of the Aransas area failed to tally all the wild flock, out since whoopers are normally quite restless prior to migration, such short counts are not unusual, the Department said.

Subsequent counts, however, also failed to record the entire flock and, when only 40 of the birds could be located April 5, refuge officials assumed that four whoopers had started the 2,500 mile migration flight.

The wild flock is the largest since record keeping began in 1938. Eight of the 44 birds are yearlings that have just completed their first winter at Aransas.

There are also seven whooping cranes in captivity. Three males and three females are at the New Orleans Audubon Park Zoo, and the seventh bird, an injured male that was rescued by the Canadian Wildlife Service on the whooper nesting grounds, is at Interior's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center near Laurel, Md.

The migration route for the flock normally crosses Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and into the northern part of Alberta Province. The Platte River valley in central Nebraska seems to be a favorite stopover for the birds. Whoopers have also been sighted on the Kirwin and Quivira National Wildlife Refuges in Kansas and the Des Lacs National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota.

Persons along this entire migration route are again urged by Interior's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife not to harm any large white bird. The whooping crane has been on the verge of extinction almost 30 years and must be safeguarded if it is to survive, the Bureau said.

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