

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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FEATURE

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WHOOPING CRANE WINNING ITS BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL

North America's largest bird, the whooping crane, continues to wage its dramatic battle against man's technological encroachments. It appears to be winning.

On the verge of extinction in the early 1940's, the whooper population in the wild now numbers about 60. An exact count will be taken when the birds arrive for the winter on the Texas Gulf Coast at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, operated by the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service.

Perhaps there never was a large population of whooping cranes, but a century ago they ranged over much of the continent from the Arctic to central Mexico and from the Rockies to the Atlantic. As man tamed the land, their habitat shrank and their numbers diminished.

Now their nesting area is confined to Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park, a tremendous wilderness area in northern Alberta and the adjacent Northwest Territories. On their annual migrations to and from Aransas, they fly over Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Montana, and Saskatchewan. Even this journey has become more perilous. Whoopers have been known to succumb after colliding with power lines and to be victimized by careless shooters.

Aransas Refuge was established in 1937 to protect whoopers and other wildlife. The first accurate count of whoopers made there, in 1940, showed 22 adults and 6 young on the refuge or on nearby Matagorda Island. Last winter, the figures were 51 adult and 6 young.

In addition, 21 cranes now exist in captivity, most of them resulting from whooping crane egg pickups in the Canadian wilds during recent springs in a joint venture of the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service. The eggs are subsequently hatched at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center at Laurel, Md. Scientists hope that some day the descendants of these captive birds may be released into the wild as an additional means of bolstering the survival chances of Grus americana.

Standing five feet tall or more, with a crimson crown, the whooping crane is pure white except for black-tipped wings that spread some seven feet. And now the majestic birds are moving across America on their continental journey, flying in small units, arriving on the coast from late October to mid-November or even later.

The whooper gets its name from its ringing, buglelike call. That sound soon will dominate the Aransas air as anxious lovers of wild things proclaim, "the whoopers have returned!"