

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WHOOPING CRANES ARRIVE AT ARANSAS

Six endangered whooping cranes arrived on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge along the gulf coast of Texas last week after completing their 2,600-mile fall migration from Canada's Northwest Territories.

These first arrivals, sighted by aerial observers at Aransas, are expected to be followed over the next several weeks by the rest of the world's population of wild whoopers which nest in Canada. Last fall, 49 whoopers--47 adults and 2 young--migrated to Aransas.

The six birds now at Aransas are all adults. Those whoopers which have raised young this year are expected to arrive later. Canadian biologists located 15 whooper nests in Northwest Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park this summer and also sighted 4 young whoopers which reached flight age. Young of the year are easily identified by their beautiful rust-colored plumage.

The plight of these magnificent birds as a dying species gained national attention in the late 1930's, and a refuge was established for them where they winter at Aransas. The first accurate count of whoopers was made in the winter of 1939-40 when 16 older birds and 6 young wintered there. Since then their population has risen and fallen in cycles. Scientists have noted a certain rhythm over the past four decades that suggests population declines at about 11 or 12 year intervals. The best explanation for this seeming pattern is a combination of varying weather and habitat conditions on the whooping crane nesting grounds in Canada during summer months.

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In addition to affording the whooping crane the protection of a refuge, the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service has engaged in intensified research on cranes in general. This has included studies of the behavior and biology of sandhill cranes, the whooper's closest and more numerous relative, and attempts to breed captive whooping cranes.

As a prelude to captive whooping crane propagation, studies of the captive propagation of the sandhill crane have been underway for over 15 years. This research gave scientists enough knowledge of crane behavior and biology to attempt an experiment with the whooping cranes. In 1967 the Service, with the cooperation of the Canadian Wildlife Service, moved to set up the first captive flock of whoopers. Scientists took several whooper eggs from nests in Wood Buffalo National Park and brought them back to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, where they incubated, hatched, and reared the chicks.

Since the first pickup, five other "egg-napping" trips have been made. The captive flock now numbers 21, and scientists have paired 12 of the young, adult whoopers at Patuxent. It is hoped the pairs will breed successfully and produce the first viable whooping crane chicks ever in captivity. What comes next is not yet known. Detailed discussions with Canadian scientists are underway on future directions for whooping crane research. Among steps under consideration is a foster parent program in which whooping crane eggs would be incubated and reared by sandhill cranes as foster parents. Migration with the foster parents would then imprint a migratory pattern on the young whoopers that could help the species survive.

As far as the future of the whooping cranes goes, it is still not assured that the bird will survive as a wild species, but its chances are improving. Biologists at Patuxent look forward to the day when they can transplant captive-born whoopers to the wild and have them successfully take hold and thrive.

The whooping crane, whose extinction was predicted by ornithologists more than 30 years ago, may eventually join the trumpeter swan as a species which returned from the brink of extinction to a more secure status.

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