

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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YOU CAN FOOL MOTHER NATURE

Sometimes it is nice to fool Mother Nature. Wildlife biologists did just that in 1975 to help make it the best year ever for the whooping cranes as their numbers soared to at least 83, including 12 juveniles-- both records.

On three separate fronts, U.S. and Canadian biologists fought to save the whooping crane from extinction. And if this year's successes are any indication of the future, it looks as though they might win.

The successes include:

- The start of an experiment to establish a second population of whooping cranes in the wild as insurance against the possibility that a hurricane, oil spill, or other disaster would wipe out the entire wild flock;
- The first hatching of a chick from captive-reared birds at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center;
- The survival of a near-record eight whooping crane chicks hatched by the 48-bird wild flock in Canada's Wood Buffalo Park.

The whoopers benefitted from good weather, an abundant food supply, and by a trick played on some of their close cousins, sandhill cranes. The sandhills were hoodwinked into hatching and rearing whooping cranes after biologists slipped the eggs into their nests.

So far, the sandhills have readily accepted the chicks as their own, even though the whoopers are now taller and whiter than their grey-colored foster parents. At least four have migrated from the Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho to their winter home in and around the Bosque del

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Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. This 800-mile journey is far shorter and less hazardous than the present 2,600-mile Canada-Texas migration of the main flock. When the whoopers mature in about 5 years, biologists expect their distinct mating calls, ritual dances, and plumage will naturally lead them to select whooper mates. The project is jointly sponsored by the Canadian Wildlife Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and will continue until at least 1981.

For several years, scientists have been removing whooping crane eggs from nests in Canada for incubation at the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. The purpose is to establish a captive breeding flock that would eventually produce enough birds to permit restocking in the wild. This year, for the first time, a pair of the 20 captive-reared birds produced three eggs. Two of them were fertile and from one hatched "Dawn."

Dawn was the first whooper ever produced by parents who themselves were hatched in captivity. This event gave new hope to scientists managing the whooping crane captive breeding program. Although the chick died after 15 days of a possible congenital deformity, scientists believe the breeding of the whooping crane was a major stride forward and expect more eggs and chicks next year.

Meanwhile, mild fall weather and a plentiful food supply significantly increased the survival rate of the chicks hatched by the wild flock in Canada. Eight juveniles migrated to Texas with their parents. Only twice before had more whoopers done so--last year only two made it.

Whoopers have never been known to be good reproducers. Of the two eggs normally laid in each nest, both usually hatch but one almost always dies because of sibling rivalry and competition for food. In fact, some biologists believe that the removal of one of the two eggs actually increases, not decreases, the number of chicks that survive each year.

But despite the spectacular gains made this year by the whooping crane, scientists stress the dangers that remain ahead. Migration time is perilous and storms, accidental shootings, disease, predators, and food limitations can inflict a high toll. Although both the transplant and captive breeding projects appear encouraging, they are still in the experimental stage and it will take years before scientists know if they will work. They may not. Both projects largely depend upon the continued good nesting success by the flock in Canada.

So although the future of the whooping crane has never looked brighter, the only certainty in it will be man's intervention.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Attached drawing shows the main whooping crane flock's migration route from Canada to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas gulf coast and the transplanted birds' route from the Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico.

Photos are available to editors, call 202/343-8770.



