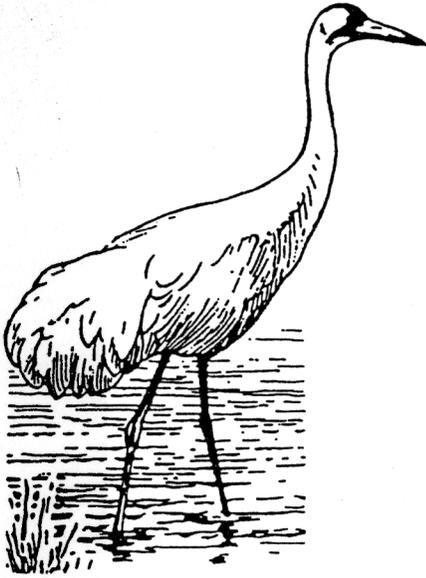


# WHOOPING CRANE

*Grus americana*



## Official Status: Endangered

Endangered species are species that are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range. It is unlawful to kill, harm, or harass endangered species.

**Listed:** 35 Federal Register 8495; June 2, 1970.

**Historical Status:** The historical breeding range of the whooping crane extended from Illinois, northwest through eastern North Dakota, and up to the Northwest Territories. The birds historically wintered along the Gulf of Mexico. By 1941, there were only an estimated 16 whooping cranes left in the world. All were from a flock that wintered at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the coast of Texas. It was later discovered that the birds were breeding in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories.

**Present Status:** There are presently about 145 whooping cranes in the wild. About 132 birds are in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo flock, and 13 birds are in a flock that migrates between Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho and Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. The Aransas-Wood Buffalo population migrates through South Dakota. These whooping cranes are predictable spring and fall migrants, often traveling with large flocks of sandhill cranes along the Missouri River drainage in late September to mid October and then again in late April to mid-June. Although most sightings occur along the river and in the western part of the state, migrating whooping cranes often travel through the eastern part of South Dakota.

**Habitat:** Whooping cranes inhabit shallow wetlands that are characterized by cattails, bulrushes, and sedges. They can also be found in grassland and cropland areas, especially during migration.

**Life History:** Whooping cranes may live up to 20 years and do not appear to reach sexual maturity until their second or third year. Courtship occurs at Wood Buffalo National Park in late April and May. Courtship rituals are eccentric with the pair performing loud vocalizations, wing flapping, head bowing, and leaps into the air. Whooping cranes mate for life. Two eggs are laid in a nest made of bulrush and other vegetation. Incubation is about 29 days. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the young. Usually only the larger chick survives. Young cranes are capable of flight in about 90 days. Whooping cranes feed on crabs, crayfish, frogs, and other small aquatic life as well as plants.

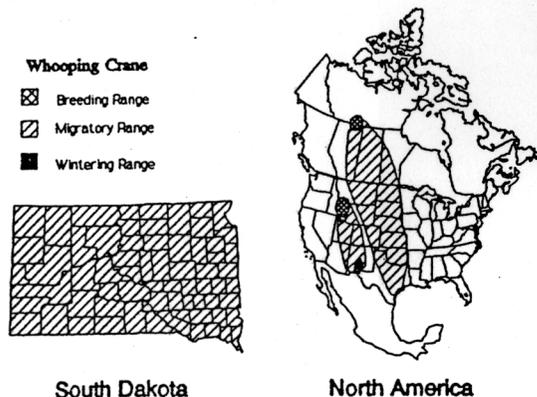
**Aid To Identification:** The whooping crane is the tallest bird in North America, with a height of five feet and a wingspan of seven feet. It is a white bird with black wingtips and red markings on the head. Young birds have a brown-mottled appearance until their second summer. Whooping cranes fly with a slow downward flap and a rapid upstroke. Whooping cranes may migrate with the smaller, gray, sandhill crane. Their trumpet like call carries for miles.

**Reasons For Decline:** Loss of habitat and shooting are the main reasons for the whooping crane's decline.

**Recommendations:** Watch for migrating whooping cranes in the spring and fall. Many of the wild whooping cranes are marked with colored leg bands. Make observations of these birds and report them to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (605) 224-8693, or the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, (605) 773-4345.

**Comments:** The status of whooping cranes in the wild is precarious because the birds concentrate during the winter. Oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico are a potential threat. Eggs from wild birds (one per nest) have been removed and hatched in captivity. The captive birds are now reproducing.

**References:** *Whooping Crane Recovery Plan* by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Present distribution of the whooping crane.

• 1993 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Pierre, South Dakota