

WHOOPING CRANE (*Grus Americana*)

Description

A very tall, mainly white bird with a long neck, long legs, and red facial skin; black primaries are evident in flight; immatures are mainly white but have pale reddish-brown head and neck and similar color scattered elsewhere on the body. Whooping cranes are slightly larger than Sandhill cranes; approximately 4.5 feet tall with a wingspan of 7 feet. During the summer it feeds on insects, crustaceans, and berries, while the winter diet includes grains, acorns, wolfberry fruit, and aquatic species.

Distribution

Wild birds are nesting in Florida. Presently whooping cranes in the Wood Buffalo-Aransas population only nest in Wood Buffalo National Park, Northwest Territories, Canada. Whooping cranes migrate through Nebraska from late March through early May during the spring migration and from October to mid November during the fall migration. The primary migration corridor is through central Nebraska from Grand Island to North Platte. However, they have been documented from York County in the east. High use areas include the Rainwater Basin wetlands, the central portion of the Platte River, wetlands in Custer county west of Broken Bow, the Loup River around Taylor, wetlands in Cherry, Brown, and Keya Paha counties, and the Niobrara River.

Habitat

Whooping cranes roost in wide river channels, wetlands, and farm ponds. They feed in nearby grassland and cropland. Wetlands used include permanent wetland as well as shallow, temporary wetland occurring in cropland. Major prerequisites of suitable stopover locations appear to be resting areas with shallow water (standing or flowing), good horizontal and overhead visibility, close proximity to feeding sites, and reasonable isolation from human developments and/or disturbances. Critical habitat for whooping cranes has been designated as a strip of river bottom south of I-80 with a north-south width of three miles, extending from about Lexington to the Interstate 80 interchange for Shelton and Denman.

Status

Global: G1-Critically Impaired. Federally Endangered. State Endangered. Nebraska: S1-Critically Imperiled. Habitat destruction and indiscriminate shooting in the late 1800's and early 1900's were the primary factors that caused the drastic reduction in numbers. Another contributing factor to their continuing small numbers is their low rate of reproduction. There are rarely more than two eggs per breeding pair and often only one chick survives. In the spring of 2000 there were about 188 whooping cranes in the wild. One self-sustaining population nests in Canada, winters primarily along the Texas coast; two additional reintroduced populations, one group migrates Wisconsin to Florida, the other is nonmigratory in Florida.

Management

Recovery strategies involve: protection and enhancement of the breeding, migration, and wintering habitat. Maintenance of a captive breeding flock to protect against extinction; with the offspring of captive breeding released into the wild is necessary; as well as maintaining water flows, maintaining and restoring open river channels and wet meadows, reducing woody vegetation, and limiting encroachment by development. The protection, restoration, and management of wetlands and wet meadows throughout the corridor are also very important in maintaining and protecting whooping crane habitat.

More Information

<http://www.fws.gov/northflorida/WhoopingCrane/whoopingcrane-fact-2001.htm>

<http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?spcode=B003>