

HIGH HOPES FOR THE WHOOPER

by Paul M. Roberts, Somerville

Several times during this century the total number of migratory Whooping Cranes has dropped to less than 20, and the species has seemed on the verge of extinction. While the whooper's future is by no means assured, there is now more hope for the species' survival than there has been in decades. Reports from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service indicate that 1977 will be a banner year for the crane.

The major whooper flock, which breeds and summers in Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada, had 69 birds return to the nesting grounds in 1977. This flock produced 34 eggs, two of which were eaten by predators. Of the remainder, 16 were removed and placed in the nests of Sandhill Cranes in Gray's Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho. This marked the second year in which eggs were transferred from Canada to Idaho in an attempt to establish a second breeding ground, which would greatly improve the endangered species' survival potential. Of the eggs transferred in 1976, six birds fledged. That total was reduced to five in May when one of the yearlings was found dead in Wyoming, the victim of a mysterious three-inch gash on the under side of its left leg. Of the 16 eggs transferred this year, 12 have hatched and survived. Of the eggs left at Wood Buffalo Park 15 hatched, producing a total of 27 chicks.

Breeding success has also been reported from the U.S. Government's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center at Laurel, Maryland. After years of study and research, biologists have developed a successful breeding program for the center's 14 captive whoopers. Beginning in mid-February, the birds are exposed to an artificial prolongation of their daylight hours. The period of "sunshine" is increased about three percent weekly from 14 hours in February to almost 24 hours in June, in an attempt to simulate the photoperiod of the cranes' experience in their nesting grounds in Canada's Northwest Territories. The Patuxent birds have entered breeding condition, but as the Whooping Crane has not yet mated in captivity, the females have been artificially inseminated.

A whooper in the wild will normally lay two eggs, but usually only one chick will survive. Last year the four breeding pairs at Patuxent laid only five eggs. This year they produced 22! By regularly removing eggs from their nest, one pair of cranes was encouraged to lay a total of nine eggs! In May, eight of the Maryland eggs were flown to Gray's Lake, to be placed in the nests of the Sandhill Cranes. But a 17 1/2 inch snowstorm caused the foster parents to abandon their nests, including two whooper chicks and the six remaining eggs. Several weeks later six additional eggs were flown to Idaho, three of which hatched. Although one of these chicks died, a fourth egg was still being incubated by Sandhill Cranes in late June. At least three of the eggs kept at Patuxent also hatched.

The birds raised at Patuxent still confront a major problem. Long-legged birds raised in captivity are frequently afflicted with a serious leg problem which causes deformity and often death. Research

indicates that the problem might occur because the incubated chicks grow too quickly and do not receive sufficient exercise. In the future, eggs laid in Maryland too early to be transferred to Idaho will be incubated, hatched and reared in Maryland by captive Sandhill Cranes. The chicks will be fed a special diet designed to limit their calorie intake and they will be kept in large grassy enclosures which will enable them to get the exercise they need. Patuxent biologists are now considering a plan to keep the chicks with their foster parents for an entire year. The yearlings would then be transported to Gray's Lake where they would be stronger and better able to fend for themselves. This could considerably reduce the young whooper's mortality rate, often as high as 50 percent during the first year. Similar experiments with Sandhill Cranes have had encouraging results.

This year's captive breeding success has fostered even greater expectations for next year, since three additional pairs of whoopers at the research center are believed to be approaching sexual maturity. (There are five other Whooping Cranes in captivity: two breeding pairs at the San Antonio Zoo and one bird at the Audubon Park Zoo in New Orleans.)

The two wild flocks of whoopers are continuing to be carefully monitored. The chicks are quite vulnerable for several months following hatching, but this year the chicks at Gray's Lake are particularly susceptible to predation. The drought plaguing much of the nation has significantly lowered the marsh water levels, considerably reducing the amount of vegetation and saturated soil where the chicks can feed and find protection from coyotes. In an attempt to limit predation on the flock, refuge authorities have killed 12 coyotes so far this year.

There may now be as many as 126 Whooping Cranes in existence, but the final tally will not be taken until the Gray's Lake flock has migrated some 800 miles to New Mexico and the Canadian flock reaches the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, some 2,450 miles south of its breeding grounds. If only half the birds hatched this spring reach the wintering grounds, it will be a spectacular year for the Whooping Crane.

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The United States Fish and Wildlife Service recently announced the release of a 50-minute film, "A Great White Bird," which traces the history of the movement to save the magnificent Whooping Crane from extinction. Produced by the National Film Board of Canada, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service, the film was photographed on location in Canada's Northwest Territories and in Texas. "A Great White Bird" is available for a three-day rental at \$17.50, or for purchase at \$231.50. Inquiries should be addressed to the National Audiovisual Center, General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. 20409.

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