

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

Status of the Whooping Crane

Thirty-five years ago E. H. Forbush stated that "the Whooping Crane is doomed to extinction." According to Myron H. Swenk, who compiled so much valuable migration data in Nebraska, the most rapid decrease in the species in that State took place between 1890 and 1910. The year 1910 also seems to approximate the beginning of serious decline on the wintering grounds in Louisiana, but there was an earlier period of decline. By about 1800, for example, the Whooping Crane evidently was no longer observed on the Atlantic seaboard, and by the end of the nineteenth century it was gone from wintering areas east of the Mississippi.

We can find less than thirty of these magnificent birds alive today. Before discussing the status of this small remnant and our present efforts to prevent the long-threatened extinction of *Grus americana*, let us consider briefly some of the major reasons for its decline. They are fairly obvious. In a wild state, the Whooping Crane is a bird of vast open country. Its primitive breeding range appears to have included considerable portions of the central prairie region—northern Iowa, much of Minnesota, most of North Dakota, eastern Montana, and large areas in the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. After the Civil War, as railroads were extended into much of this region, as lumbering became "big business" in Minnesota, as settlers moved rapidly into all the southern half of the area, great changes gradually took place in the environment. Drainage was soon intensive. Heavy cultivation of corn and grain crops followed. Vast breeding grounds of many of our waterfowl—and the best of the Whooping Crane nesting area—were soon gone. Prairie swales, marshes, and potholes that had produced a crop of young birds annually for countless years were suddenly destroyed.

Not only the breeding areas were affected by the Nation's expansion. In the heart of the Whooping Crane's wintering grounds, southwest Louisiana, and elsewhere on the Gulf Coast, there was a similar march of events. During the 1850's the first settlers had come to the interior prairie country of Louisiana. Cattle replaced bison; the wintering cranes and waterfowl provided a source of regular food for the pioneers. In the 'eighties came the railroad and more people. In the next decade the prairies were diked and plowed and became the country's new "rice bowl." The decline of many wildlife species, particularly the Whooping Crane, was rapid. In the 'nineties the only wintering range left to the cranes was the coastal marsh, where fur trapping had not yet become a general occupation. But the coastal strip was not sanctuary for long. When muskrat pelts went to one dollar and more in the 1920's the Whooping Cranes that wintered there were doomed. They lasted until about 1935.

Renewed interest in the fate of the Whooping Crane and more intensive coverage of the Gulf Coast by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Audubon Society personnel resulted in the "discovery" of only two wintering groups. In the winter of 1935-36 George B. Saunders reported fourteen Whooping Cranes on the St. Charles Ranch, Refugio County, Texas. The following winter this isolated coastal area was established as the Aransas Waterfowl Refuge by the (then)

U.S. Biological Survey. A second group of Whooping Cranes was found near White Lake, Vermilion Parish, Louisiana. The largest count here was made by John J. Lynch, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who on May 15, 1939, saw eleven adults and two immatures.

In the spring of 1939 the known population consisted of eighteen birds in Texas (including four young-of-the-year) and thirteen in Louisiana (including two young-of-the-year). The Louisiana flock was resident. The continental total was then thirty-one Whooping Cranes.

There were two important welfare factors present on the Texas wintering grounds that were lacking in Louisiana: in Texas the Whooping Crane had literally thousands of acres of safe, adequate range that provided both protection and isolation. (An extension of the Intracoastal Waterway in 1940 threatened to cut through the best of this range, but the U.S. Engineers were persuaded to move the route so as to affect only six miles on the rim of the area instead of twelve miles right through the heart.)

In Louisiana a segment of the same waterway had been dredged in 1934 over a new route that crossed the deep marsh north of White Lake, destroying its isolation. Then, in the period from August 6 to 10, 1940, there was a rainfall which averaged twenty-two inches over that portion of the State. The water elevation at White Lake reached five feet above normal Gulf level. The flock of Whooping Cranes fled to the high ground near Gueydan or to near-by cheniers. When the flood subsided to normal (September 15), only three Whooping Cranes returned. It is likely that all ten missing birds had been shot. Within less than one month, possibly in a period of a few days, approximately thirty-three per cent of the known continental Whooping Crane population had been wiped out.

Today, with one or two birds left in Louisiana and twenty-five in Texas, the National Audubon Society and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are cooperating in an effort to find some means of saving this splendid North American species from extinction. Conditions on the wintering grounds are being studied and welfare factors increased, possible destructive factors controlled. Migration routes are under scrutiny, and search is being continued for the unknown nesting grounds.
—Robert P. Allen.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE
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