

# Whoopers face whopper problems

## Environmental challenges threaten crane's future

[Watching the Whoopers](#) 🚩

BY TARA BOZICK - TBOZICK@VICAD.COM

December 26, 2008 - 1:00 a.m.

AUSTWELL - The biologists and self-described "craniacs" slowed the pickup to a stop.

"We'll wait here for a minute," whooping crane coordinator Tom Stehn said, his eyes fixed on the whooping crane family through his binoculars. "That's a pretty nice view."

Not five minutes into a tour of whooping crane habitat on the Matagorda Island refuge on Dec. 11, he spotted the Airport Family, called so because they reside near the small airport on the island. The adults and the tawny feathered juvenile kept dipping their heads into the saltwater marsh.

"They'll just walk along looking for more crabs," Stehn told wildlife biologist Bob Dusek with the U.S. Geological Survey and junior scientist Inga Bysykatora from Russia. "This is the type of habitat that's good for blue crab. It's very shallow."

But conditions this winter don't look promising for the flock that just migrated from its nesting ground in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. The summer drought in Texas meant little freshwater flow into the bays and estuaries, which means the cranes are struggling to find freshwater and food like the blue crab.

On Dec. 1, Stehn, who works with U.S. Fish and Wildlife at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, found a sick whooper resting by the refuge boat ramp, "so weak it could not stand." The crane died while he attempted to take it to a veterinarian in Port Lavaca.

The cranes will overcome this short-term food shortage, but a host of other environmental challenges threaten their future. The endangered species may never fully recover, but two reintroduced flocks on the East Coast give craniacs hope.

The next stop for Stehn and the biologists was a small dugout of what Stehn hoped was freshwater for the cranes. He spotted up to 13 cranes there at one time and wanted to chop down some brush to remove the threat of predators.

Upon arriving to a small pond, Stehn tested the salinity of the water and was disappointed. It was too salty to drink. But before heading back into the truck, he noticed a desk-sized pool of water around an old well.

Sure enough, this was freshwater, leaking just enough for the cranes to drink.

"There's a crane!" Dusek told the others, pointing as it flew circling the tiny watering hole.

"Oh, yeah," Stehn said as the crane flew over his head. "That was incredible. That guy was coming in to drink."

The cranes this winter have had to travel about two miles before quenching their thirst, Stehn said. That's more traveling and less energy intake because salinity levels are too high for a good harvest of blue crab, which makes up 80 to 90 percent of whooper diet.

"This winter, we're running out of food for the cranes," Stehn said with a worried look. "It's not good."

Stehn expects more deaths before the season ends. If the cranes use up all their fat reserves, that may make for a less-productive nesting season in the spring.

He estimates 270 cranes make up the flock now wintering around the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The recovery plan calls for the flock by 2035 to reach 1,000 individuals and 250 breeding pairs, which would be the amount needed to be considered for changing their status from endangered to threatened.

Those 270 cranes have been using about 500 acres of territory for each family, Stehn said, estimating they live in 71,016 acres along the Texas coast. He estimated about 68,518 acres habitat from Corpus Christi to Galveston are still suitable for crane expansion.

But the past 20 years of human growth and recent coastal developments in Calhoun County in what could have been expanded crane habitat worry Stehn.

"I think there is so much habitat loss in North America and so many development threats going on, I don't know if they'll be able to fully recover," he said. "But I think they can recover enough to be safe from any kind of immediate threat of extinction."

The species could recover from "endangered" if the two reintroduced flocks in the eastern United States reach populations of 100 with 25 breeding pairs. One reintroduced flock stays year-round in central Florida and numbers about 30 cranes.

The other reintroduced flock migrates from Wisconsin's Necedah National Wildlife Refuge to northwest Florida. This flock of 88 cranes expands to winter in Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee.

Unfortunately, neither of these two flocks are self-sustaining, Stehn said. The cranes nest and lay eggs, but don't hatch their eggs. About 150 cranes remain in captivity at zoos and five breeding facilities, which produce 30 to 40 chicks a year.

Stehn believes in the moral responsibility of man to not let these whooping cranes go extinct. If the ecosystem becomes less diverse, that hurts humans as well.

"Not only do we benefit from all wildlife in ways we don't even know, I think it's our role on the planet to protect other forms of life," Stehn said after returning from visiting the cranes. "I feel strongly about that. The positive thing is the flock has been absolutely maintaining. We just have to keep going like we're going."

---

Threats to whooping cranes:

Habitat loss: Building behind coastal marshes still makes those marshes unusable for cranes

Global warming: if sea levels rise the 1 to 2 feet projected by scientists, current marsh areas will become too deep for crane use

Drought and limited freshwater flows downstream affects crane food and water sources, resulting in mortalities

Power lines during migration: No. 1 source of mortality

Source: Tom Stehn, whooping crane coordinator

Visit [www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/aransas/whoopingcranes.html](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/aransas/whoopingcranes.html).

*FAIR USE NOTICE*

*This document contains copyrighted material whose use has not been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. The Texas Living Waters Project, which is a nonprofit undertaking, is making this article available in our efforts to promote comprehensive water planning in Texas. We believe that this constitutes a "fair use" of the copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. If you wish to use this copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond "fair use", you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.*