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Severe Texas Drought Threatens Coastal Wildlife

By [ANA CAMPOY](#)

A severe drought gripping Texas is causing unusually salty conditions along the Gulf Coast, upsetting the region's ecological balance and threatening coastal wildlife including oysters, crabs and whooping cranes, the most endangered crane species.

The drought is one of the driest on record for Texas and is currently the worst in the U.S., which has seen persistent dry weather across several Western states, Florida and even Hawaii, according to academic and government monitors. The scarcity of rain has reduced fresh-water flow from rivers and streams into coastal marshes, estuaries and bays that normally dilute the salt content of water from the Gulf of Mexico.

This spring, the only migrating whooping-crane flock that exists in the wild lost 23 of its 270 members to hunger and disease brought on by the dry weather, said Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service whooping-crane coordinator. That is a big blow to conservation programs that have worked over the past 50 years to slowly increase the number of cranes.

A whooping crane, in this file photo, at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.



The coastal fishing industry also has been hit hard as salty conditions shrink populations of shellfish such as oysters and crabs.

Rainstorms across Texas during the past week have done little to ease worries. "One or two days of rain won't make a difference," said Sammy Ray, a professor emeritus at Texas A&M University who has studied oysters in the Gulf Coast for 60 years. "In two weeks from now you might not even notice" it had rained, he said.

For the past 18 months, the on-and-off appearance of La Niña, a phenomenon that consists of cooler sea-surface temperatures in the tropical Pacific Ocean, has resulted in fewer rainstorms, said state climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon. The south central region of the state surrounding Austin and San Antonio has seen drier conditions only a couple of times since recordkeeping began in 1895, he said.

Even weeds are having a hard time flourishing. Wild quail and turkey are having trouble finding enough insect feed. Farmers have delayed planting corn and cotton because the soil isn't moist enough for seeds to germinate, and some 7,000 wildfires across the state have burned through more than 400,000 acres and destroyed hundreds of structures.

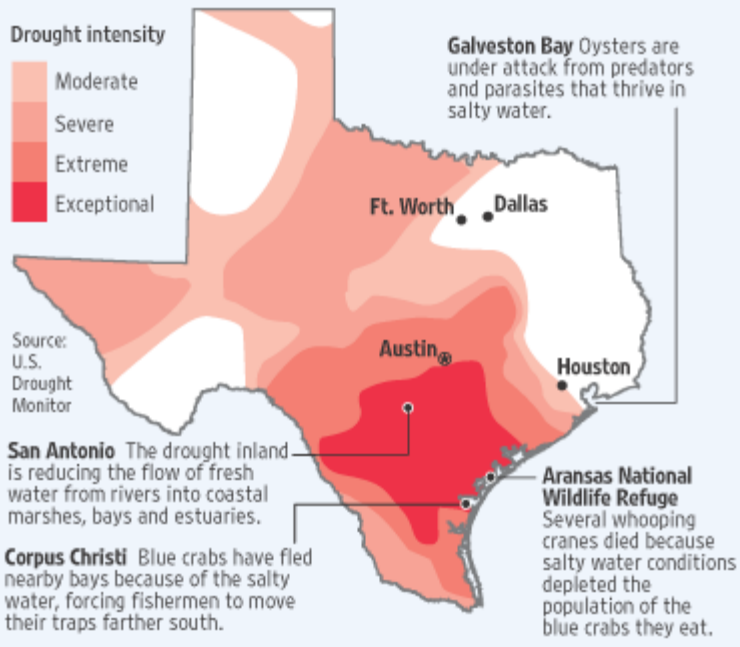
Along the coast, even before the drought intensified, bays and estuaries were already saltier than normal because of the vast amounts of ocean water Hurricane Ike pushed into the area last year.

In San Antonio Bay near Corpus Christi, the inflow of fresh water from rivers from December to March was the lowest in more than 50 years, said Norman Johns, water-resources scientist with the National Wildlife Federation in Austin. That has made the nearby marshes of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex, where whooping cranes winter, almost as salty as the Gulf.

The elegant white cranes white with black wingtips, the tallest birds in North America, dine on blue crabs -- a single crane can eat 80 a day. But salt levels are much higher than crabs like, and few of them could be found in the crane habitat this winter, said Mr. Stehn, the wildlife official.

Drying Up

Drought conditions in Texas have made bays and estuaries saltier than normal, hurting wildlife and the fishing industry.



Despite the fact that the cranes' diet was supplemented for the first time in 60 years, 8.5% of the flock died this season, the worst mortality rate in 26 years.

Given the small size of the flock, the deaths are alarming, Mr. Stehn said. There are fewer than 360 whooping cranes left in the wild, including a nonmigratory flock established by humans in Florida and another one that migrates with human guides disguised as cranes in ultra-light aircraft.

Not far away from Aransas, fishermen can't find crabs, either. The drought is the latest blow to a Gulf fishing industry already whipsawed by Hurricane Ike and increasing competition from shellfish imports from Asia.

Durwood Touchstone, a crabber who has harvested since 1972 in the bays around Corpus Christie, said his business is down 30% to 40%, despite the fact that he moved his traps further south along the coast where conditions are better.

Galveston Bay, the largest oyster-producing area on the Texas coast, took a direct hit from Hurricane Ike last September and is faring even worse. The storm destroyed about half the oyster reefs there, said Lance Robinson, regional director for the coastal-fisheries division of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Now the remaining oysters are being attacked by creatures that thrive in saltier water: snails that bore holes into their shells to suck out their meat, and a protozoan parasite commonly known as Dermo.

Ben Nelson, 70 years old, who said he has been in the oyster business since he opened his first shell at age six, observed that the few oysters he is pulling out now are skinnier, weighing 7.5 pounds per sack, compared with the usual 9-pound-to-11-pound sack.

"Unfortunately all you can do is pray for rain," said Lisa Halili, another Galveston Bay oyster harvester.

But even if the state gets enough rain this year to restore normal salt levels along the coast, it would take 18 months to two years for the oyster population to recover, fishermen say. The cranes would require two excellent years to regain their lost population, said Mr. Stehn, the crane expert.

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