

## **Whooping Crane mortality rate highest in years**

**by: Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**

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The year 2009 was a struggle for the whooping crane that remains very endangered. A record 270 whooping cranes had arrived at Aransas in the fall of 2008, but they faced harsh conditions from the ongoing drought. Their favorite foods of blue crab and wolfberry were in short supply due to the salty conditions in the marsh. A record 23 whooping cranes, or 8.5% of the flock, didn't make it through the winter, with some of the cranes found to be emaciated. In the past 20 years, the 2008-09 winter ranks as the worst in terms of mortality. Whooping Crane Coordinator Tom Stehn of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service noted "These were the worst conditions I have ever observed for the cranes at Aransas, with some birds looking thin and with disheveled plumage". The Service for the first time in over 40 years dispersed corn from game feeders to try to give the flock a boost of energy and pull them through the hard times. Only 247 whooping cranes made it through the winter.

The survivors upon returning to Canada to nest found that habitat conditions looked great with lots of water on the crane's nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park in Northwest Territories, Canada. However, only 22 chicks fledged from 62 nests, a below average production year. Perhaps the weakened condition of the birds from the previous winter had taken its toll. With the drought continuing in south Texas into the fall of 2009, wildlife officials are leery of what conditions for the flock will be like at Aransas in the 2009-2010 winter. Water holes were re-conditioned on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge to ensure the cranes will have fresh water to drink if the marshes remain above the threshold salinity of 23 parts per thousand when whooping cranes must find fresh water to drink.

Threats faced by the whooping crane flock are growing, according to Stehn. In addition to ongoing sea level rise that would make the marshes too deep for the cranes to use, decreased inflows from the Guadalupe River due to water withdrawals for human uses threaten to reduce bay productivity and negatively impact blue crabs, the main food of whooping cranes. Housing developments are springing up next to marshes where wintering cranes have foraged in the past, and wildlife officials are questioning whether the whooping crane flock will have enough room to expand to reach recovery targets. In the migration corridor, the cranes are facing a proliferation of wind farms and associated power lines. Collisions with power lines is the number one cause of mortality for fledged whooping cranes, and the miles of lines continues to grow substantially.

The whooping cranes spend every winter at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and nearby marshes with the first birds arriving starting in mid-October and staying through mid-April. Twice a year they complete a 2,500-mile migration to and from their nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada. In North America, the total number of whooping cranes in both the wild (384) and in captivity (152) has reached 536. Young whooping cranes bred in captivity are being reintroduced in the wild in two flocks in the eastern U.S. In the fall of 2001, in a historic return to their former range, eight whooping cranes were flown behind an ultralight aircraft between Wisconsin and Florida. Five of the cranes survived the winter and started the migration back north on their own in April 2002. Additional birds were reintroduced in the next eight years, with 108 whooping cranes now migrating in the eastern U.S. However, the birds are struggling to hatch young with the adults abandoning their nests just prior to hatching the eggs due to swarms of black flies bothering the adults. Officials are planning to experiment with controlling black flies, and/or may look to find suitable habitat free from the pests. The second wild flock consists of 29 remaining non-migratory whooping cranes in central Florida. That reintroduction

effort has been abandoned as the cranes struggled with poor rates of reproduction and low survival mostly tied to re-occurring drought.

The path to recovery for whooping cranes remains rocky. It will take increasing vigilance by man if this species is to survive and provide a thrill for your great great grand children to see, just as they provide enjoyment for Texans and thousands of visitors from around the world annually that visit Rockport to see this magnificent species.

Whooping crane statistics:

Height: five feet, the tallest bird in North America

Wingspan: seven feet

Weight: Males 16 pounds; females 14 pounds.

Call: A trumpeting kerloo ker-lee-oo.

Flight speed: 30-45 mph

All time population low for North America: 21 birds in 1941

All time low at Aransas: 15 birds in 1941

Current size of the Aransas/Wood Buffalo flock: 247

Reproduction: Whooping cranes mate for life, but will find a new mate if one dies.

Courtship: Dances appear to keep the pair's bond strong.

Nesting: Cranes normally lay 2 eggs, but usually only one chick survives.