

WHOOPING CRANE RECOVERY ACTIVITIES  
SEPTEMBER, 2000 - FEBRUARY, 2001  
By Tom Stehn  
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WOOD BUFFALO / ARANSAS - FALL MIGRATION

The fall migration was the 51<sup>st</sup> migration monitored since tracking began in the fall of 1975. It is a cooperative effort by private organizations, state and federal conservation agencies and CWS. U.S. records are ably compiled by Wally Jobman of USFWS-Endangered Species in Grand Island, Nebraska.

The first dates for confirmed whooping crane sightings were August 29 in Canada and August 30 in the U.S. On October 2nd, 52 whoopers had been accounted for in Saskatchewan, and 5 singles in North Dakota. The first sighting south of North Dakota was October 6 with a single whooper in Kansas at Quivira NWR. At the end of October, a few whoopers were still in Saskatchewan, but most sightings derived from Kansas to North Dakota. Snow storms and frigid temperatures in the central and northern plains the first two weeks in November quickly pushed the whooping cranes south of Nebraska.

The 2000-2001 Federal-State Cooperative Whooping Crane Contingency Plan was updated and about 80 copies distributed in mid-October. Revisions primarily involved updates of contact names and addresses. A re-ordering of recommended actions was done to ensure that managers understand that hunting closures are not a mandatory requirement when whooping cranes are in a hunt area. However, closures can be instituted when other options will not adequately ensure the safety of the cranes.

Tom Stehn joined other crane biologists in Nebraska September 26-27 for a workshop held to write a USFWS response to the tri-state cooperative agreement's plan for endangered species. The whooping crane group was chaired by Dr. Jim Lewis. Over the next 13 years, plans call for developing 10,000 acres of whooping crane habitat. This would include clearing river roosts and protecting adjacent wet meadows and buffer zones. These whooping crane areas would be spaced out along the Platte with one situated every 10 miles. Each habitat complex would ideally be 2,900 acres in size.

ARANSAS - WINTER 2000-2001

Weekly aerial census flights were conducted with contract pilot Dr. Tom Taylor out of Rockport. We are thrilled that Dr. Taylor has made a complete recovery from heart surgery and is back in the commercial aviation business.

The estimated peak population of whooping cranes for the 2000-2001 winter was estimated at 171 adults + 9 juveniles = 180. This was a drop from the record high of 188 the previous winter. Losses were high between spring and fall, 2000, (an estimated loss of 16 birds, or 9 % of the spring population of 187), and production was poor on the

nesting grounds. Nine family groups were present at Aransas on November 15, and one additional family group was reported in Nebraska on November 16. This last chick apparently didn't make it to Aransas. The winter total of 9 chicks indicated fair survival from the 11 chicks found by the Canadians in mid-August. An unexpected family to arrive was from nesting pair 46/99 with color-banded crane R-YbY. The location of their 2000 nest was not determined, and was an undiscovered 51<sup>st</sup> nest in WBNP.

Two-adult plumaged birds were confirmed in West Texas on December 28 (south of Lubbock), and were added to the population total. One whooper was confirmed present near Key, Texas on February 3, about 30 miles southeast of the previous sighting. Three were present west of Amarillo at the end of February, traveling with huge flocks of sandhills starting to move north. I believe these three wintered in West Texas since it seems improbable that they had been at Aransas and were extremely early spring migrants and off-course to the west.

Evidence of mortality between spring and fall was detected during the winter census flights. One chick that arrived was accompanied by a single adult, evidence of mortality of one parent subsequent to nesting. Another mortality subsequent to nesting was the arrival of only one of the Hippo Lake adults as a single on its winter territory.

An estimated two adults and two chicks died during the winter, leaving the population at 176. The Boat Ramp New family lost their chick which was last seen around November 24. Adult crane R-GwG, a 1988 male, was last seen November 22. Only one white-plumaged carcass was found, a bird of unknown origin on the edge of Sundown Bay.

## ARRIVALS

The first two whoopers to arrive at Aransas were sighted on Heron Flats Marsh on October 13. This brought the whooper total to three, since one bird had over-summered on San Jose Island. During the first annual refuge celebration on the 14<sup>th</sup>, the pair spent the afternoon on Heron Flats Marsh near the headquarters, providing close-up views to the public. By October 26, only 16 whoopers were at Aransas.

An estimated 49 whooping cranes arrived associated with a strong cold front that reached the Texas coast November 07. This was the first push of Canadian air to reach south Texas since October 7. Another low pressure system on November 13 provided excellent migration conditions for two days and aided an estimated 91 whoopers, about 50 % of the flock, in completing the migration. About 90 % (i.e. 159 cranes) of the arrivals at Aransas occurred during November 3-22.

## HABITAT CONDITIONS

Habitat conditions were unfavorable for the cranes going in to the 2000-01 winter.

Record heat that hit Texas in early September made the summer drought even worse. During the summer, 15 record high temperatures were recorded in Corpus Christi, and rainfall was 15% below average. Corpus Christi reached an all-time record high 109 degrees on September 5, the hottest day ever recorded since record-keeping began 113 years ago, and had seven consecutive days of 100+ degree temperatures. The refuge recorded a high of 102 degrees and Victoria, Texas reached 110.

A microscopic algae bloom known as red tide occurred in Texas starting in August. These outbreaks, historically reported once every 20+ years on the Texas coast, have now occurred in 6 of the last 7 years. It is another indication of the changes occurring on a global scale. Most of the outbreaks were in the Gulf of Mexico but also spread into the bays. Red tide can be toxic to fish and can cause difficulty breathing and irritation to mucous membranes of people. Dead fish counts approached 2 million. Red tide in whooping crane critical habitat was first noted October 21 in the Army Cut near Port O'Connor. On October 23, dead fish were reported in Shoalwater Bay. Red tide was found on the October 26 flight about a half mile northeast of the refuge headquarters in San Antonio Bay opposite Hopper's Landing. The discontinuous patches were also found off Heron Flats, and a single patch was sighted near the refuge observation tower. No evidence of red tide was found on any of the November flights as rain and colder temperatures the first week in November changed bay conditions.

The cranes arrived at Aransas to face a winter of food shortages. When abundant, crabs can make up 80-90 % of the crane's diet. Because of the summer drought in Texas that greatly reduced freshwater inflows to the bays, blue crab reproduction was below average with fewer small crabs moving into the marshes. Monthly blue crab surveys were done by researcher Mike Baldwin of the National Wetlands Center in Lafayette, Louisiana. This is the 4<sup>th</sup> and final year of this USGS research project. Crabs were at very low levels pretty much throughout the winter, but really scarce during mid-winter. Few crabs were present in February, with a slight increase in numbers at the end of the month as tides rose slightly. Based on research done in 1993-94 by Dr. Chavez-Ramirez in a similar poor blue crab year, it is believed the cranes lost energy reserves for parts of the 2000-01 winter. Crane droppings were picked up at dugouts along East Shore Road on December 11 and mailed to Patuxent for analysis of stress hormone levels.

Marsh salinities were high enough the first half of the winter so that the cranes were forced to fly daily to fresh water to drink, using up energy. Without their primary source of food, the whoopers moved extensively in search of food. In the fall, the cranes fed extensively on the wolfberry crop. However, observations indicated that the wolfberry crop was not as plentiful as in some years. Prescribed burns were conducted near all the crane wintering areas to provide additional foraging areas. Refuge units 43E and 30N, burned in January, received heavy crane use for a period after the burns. The crane response on Unit 43 E was dramatic. A family group was sighted on the burn an hour after completion of the burn, with smoke still in the air. The next day, 26 whoopers were on the burn. In February for the rest of the winter, crane use of prescribed burns tapered off to very low levels since the drought had also resulted in a poor live oak acorn crop.

Prescribed burns on Matagorda Island received use by a few cranes.

## REFUGE MANAGEMENT

Kingfisher Marine worked on the Section 216 construction project during the summer and finished in mid-October. They placed flexible cement mats along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) to stop erosion, dredged sections of the GIWW and the refuge boat canal, and placed mooring buoys along Bludworth Island for barges to tie up to during storms or fog. The Section 216 initiative has protected 21.5 miles of shoreline from erosion within the critical habitat of the whooping crane. Oil spill response equipment was also purchased and is stored on the refuge. Construction was done during the past three summers at a total project cost of \$15,430,000.

In the fall, closed to entry signs were put up at major water bayous entering the refuge crane marshes. The increased number of air boats and kayaks has increased disturbance and measures have become necessary to prevent this intrusion of people into the crane area during the winter. This is the third year that signs have been put up restricting access between October 15 and April 15.

The proclamation boundary was posted in October. This is a boundary designated by Presidential Proclamation in 1939 that closes the area around the refuge's Blackjack Peninsula to migratory bird hunting. The line was surveyed and new posts and signs erected at ½-mile intervals.

The refuge celebration festival was held on October 14 with about 1,400 people in attendance. This is a new event brought into existence by the new Refuge Manager for Aransas, Mr. Charles Holbrook. It received considerable local support.

## RESOURCE ISSUES

Cellular towers are springing up like mushrooms across the U.S. The Ecological Services office in Grand Island, Nebraska has done 220 tower consultations in the last year, although only 12 involved new towers. In order to minimize take of migratory birds, USFWS recommends that facilities need to be co-located on existing towers, kept below 200 feet to eliminate the need for lighting that attracts migratory birds, and built without guy wires with which the birds collide. A new cellular tower was erected in October just north of the refuge's Tatton Unit on the west side of Highway 35. USFWS was not consulted about this tower that is just over 200 feet tall. Ecological Services - Corpus Christi was notified about the new tower and will work with the company to get guy wires marked.

In August and November, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) personnel assisted by refuge staff and public volunteers spent about 6 days picking up abandoned and illegal crab traps in the bays. Efforts were focused on crane areas including Aransas, Shoalwater Bay, and the interior marshes of Matagorda Island. These efforts are a step

forward in protecting marine resources since abandoned traps can act as a death trap with the traps remaining intact for many years. Basically, all traps encountered were picked up since few commercial fishermen are following the new regulations requiring door fasteners or panels that will rust through within a relatively short time period.

On February 7, a meeting was held with TPWD looking at various aspects of blue crab regulations. The number of large blue crabs in the bays is in a dramatic downward trend. Matagorda Island will implement closure of marshes to crabbing in the fall since commercial activities are not prohibited on National Wildlife Refuges. Tom Stehn requested that Sundown Bay, Dunham Bay, and Mustang Lake be closed seasonally (September 1-April 15) to provide additional large blue crabs for the cranes. New regulations requiring biodegradable panels and escape rings, a “buy-out” limiting total number of crabbers, a 100-foot trap spacing requirement, and closure of Ayres, Carlos, and Mesquite Bays to shrimping may help some to protect crab populations. However, many trapping regulations are not enforced and/or not considered seriously by the Justices of the Peace. The biggest problems for crab populations may be the reduction of fresh water inflows and trawling by-catch during the bay shrimping season as much or even more than commercial trapping.

A landowner on the Lamar Peninsula with a resident whooper pair has approached the refuge about protection of his land in perpetuity as a conservation area. On November 8, I traveled to Albuquerque to present the Johnson Ranch to the USFWS Region 2 Lands Acquisition Review Committee. The committee directed Realty to proceed with protection of this property. Realty was also asked to assess how the Cliburn Ranch can be protected, an area at Welder Flats with 30 wintering whooping cranes. In February, the Cliburn Ranch was put up for sale because of pending estate taxes. The Nature Conservancy of Texas is scrambling to try to figure out how to protect this property from development.

The projected decline of freshwater inflows into whooping crane critical habitat and correlation with a reduction in blue crab numbers is one of the most important issues facing the survival of the whooping crane. A private organization spear-headed by Diane Wassenich has completed a water rights application and submitted a \$25,000 application fee for 1.15 million acre-feet of in stream flows on the Guadalupe River for wildlife/ecological purposes. Water rights are needed to maintain bay productivity since inland Texas is sucking the rivers dry. It seems incredible that government is NOT sufficiently protecting the rivers and that a private organization has to become a player in the water right issues.

## RESEARCH

German crane vocalization expert Dr. Bernhard Wessling and Canadian Whooping Crane Coordinator Brian Johns spent a week at Aransas at the end of January recording crane vocalizations. Decoys and taped unison calls were used to get the cranes to respond. Brian recorded calls last summer in Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP), and Bernhard

is able to match some of them with calls from Aransas. During one day out in the boat, parts of a whooping crane carcass were found along the edge of Sundown Bay. Identification was confirmed by the U. S. Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.. This was the fourth known mortality of the winter.

#### ADMINISTRATION

A report entitled "Whooping Crane Recovery Activities, March-August, 2000" was sent out to about 200 recipients in mid-September.

CITES import and export permits were obtained to move whooping cranes between the U.S. and Canada. Three juveniles were imported in the fall from Calgary Zoo to the International Crane Foundation (ICF) for subsequent release in Florida. One whooper was exported from Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, Florida to Calgary for breeding purposes.

The MOU between Canada and the U.S. on the Conservation of the Whooping Crane was revised after feedback and approval of changes by all signatories. The previous MOU expired in October and covered the past five years. The draft was sent in to USFWS - Region 2 the last week in October for approval and forwarded to Washington in early December. Plans call for the signing to be done at the Trilateral Conference in April, 2001.

With a grant from the Whooping Crane Conservation Association (WCCA), Dr. Jim Lewis is updating and revising the Canadian and U.S. recovery plans into a single document. Revisions to the whooping crane recovery plan were sent to Jim at the end of October, with more revisions made at the Recovery Team meeting in January.

Dr. David Ellis of Patuxent has agreed to compile papers from the last North American Crane Workshop to get the proceedings published. This is of great help and is much appreciated.

Whooping Crane Coordinator Tom Stehn spoke to a Smithsonian tour group on February 15 and at the Whooping Crane Festival at Port Aransas on February 25.

#### CAPTIVE MANAGEMENT AND RECOVERY TEAM MEETINGS

The Whooping Crane Captive Management and International Recovery Team meetings were held January 22-26 at the Audubon Center for Research on Endangered Species (ACRES) in Belle Chasse, Louisiana with over 50 participants. Much time was spent by me and the staff at ACRES making arrangements. It was decided to add on another 1 ½ days to the meeting on January 27-28 to discuss and plan for the eastern migratory reintroduction project. With Doug Bergeson no longer at Wood Buffalo National Park, the park position on the Recovery Team is now held by Mark Bradley.

Highlights of the meetings included the following;

- a) Planning for the movement of whooping cranes in 2001, including genetic management of captive pairings and the non-migratory flock in Florida. Two scenarios were developed for the placement of captive birds depending on whether a cohort of juveniles currently at Patuxent is released in Florida this summer.
- b) Over flight of crane habitat in southwestern Louisiana including Marsh Island and White Lake in a Windway Capital Corporation aircraft provided by Terry and Mary Kohler.
- c) Recommendation to proceed with a migratory reintroduction of whooping cranes in the eastern U.S. in 2001 if all the necessary approvals are received in time.

## FLORIDA

Initial plans during the 2000-2001 winter for the non-migratory reintroduction in Florida called for releasing 38 juveniles in 5 cohorts. The extreme drought that continued into its third year in Florida changed those plans, with fewer birds released. Because of the drying up of many marshes, Florida did not have satisfactory places to release all the whooping cranes produced in captivity in 2000. After an aerial search of habitat conditions in mid-October, Florida biologists did find a new release site that was usable. Twenty-one chicks were released in three cohorts on a lake in Polk County. The first cohort was made up of birds from Calgary and ICF, while the second two cohorts came from Patuxent. One cohort at Patuxent will be kept in isolation in case rains come in the summer of 2001 and a release of these "subadult" birds seems possible. A decision was reached to keep in captivity one additional Patuxent cohort made up of some of the more valuable genetic birds. Discussions were held with all five captive breeding facilities about holding additional birds. The two juveniles produced at the San Antonio Zoo were kept there and withdrawn from the release program.

Mortality continues to be a concern with the Florida population. Sixty-four birds were present in Florida in the fall of 1997. Three years later, numbers were about 74. Part of this slowing down of the population's growth despite continued captive releases is bound to be related to the three-year ongoing drought. Releases in 2000-2001 brought the estimated Florida whooper population to 66 adults and 20 young.

Florida just couldn't win because of the drought. Although Hurricane Gordon hit the coast north of Chassahowitzka NWR on September 17, the crane area in central Florida got only 1-2 inches of rain, certainly not enough to break the drought. Cranes were observed walking on lake beds where in previous years people had been fishing from their bass boats. The reduction in the amount of crane habitat available is causing much dispersal of the Florida whooping cranes. In particular, many of the birds released last winter have dispersed, their locations not known, and all probably have not survived. Missing are three groups totaling 11 birds, plus some single cranes.

On September 12, Florida biologists for the first time used a drop net for capture of a crane to remove fishing line on the leg of a 4-year-old female. The bird was limping substantially but seemed to recover after removal of the line. This trap design was a modification of one used to capture Mississippi sandhills.

On November 26, two Florida whooping cranes were shot with a rifle in an incident unrelated to legal hunting. Previously, there had been one bird lost to shooting in Florida. An 18-year-old suspect was apprehended and charged with the crime.

The two Florida whooping cranes that summered in Michigan departed to the south on November 21. Hot in pursuit were interns from the International Crane Foundation (ICF) and an airplane provided by Terry Kohler of Windway Capital Corporation. Followed to the north shore of Lake Erie, tracking was discontinued in snow showers late on the first day. The male and female apparently subsequently became separated in the first 24 hours, and the male could have been lost over Lake Erie. The male had a broken radio antenna that put out only a weak signal, and was not heard from again despite an extended search. The female was re-located the next morning on the south side of Lake Erie. The female held a straight-line course to Florida except when she encountered the Appalachian Mountains and flew parallel to the range and set down for two days in Greenville, TN before resuming her journey. She was observed mostly in flapping flight, flying less than 200 miles per day. The crane was tracked into Georgia on November 28. The female, after returning to her former territory in Florida on November 30, flew the following day an additional 90 miles and joined other whooping cranes. A production company hired by Terry Kohler produced a documentary video of the migration, including some footage that Mr. Kohler took from his helicopter of the two cranes on the Michigan Peat property in Sandusky, Michigan.

A crane that had been in the wild that became sick was captured and is being kept at Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, Florida. The bird is doing much better, but it was decided to keep her in captivity because of her valuable genetics.

Dr. Lowell Wilder, originally an Earthwatch volunteer for the Florida crane program, completed a whooping crane video with special emphasis on captive breeding and the Florida release program. He also shot some footage at the San Antonio Zoo and at Aransas.

Genetic specialist Ken Jones traveled to Patuxent in February to conduct a genetic analysis of the Florida flock. Future releases should be managed to improve the genetic imbalance of the flock.

## SPECIMENS

About 100 museums were contacted about the placement of whooping crane specimens. Nearly all partial specimens derived from birds released into the wild in Florida were



shipped to the U.S. National Museum of National History in Washington, D.C.. A few specimens also went to University of Nevada - Las Vegas, U. of Alaska, and U. of New Mexico. Patuxent shipped 6 eggs to the USFWS National Conservation Training Center in October, and a 17-day old specimen and 4 eggs to U. of California - Davis in mid-February, 2001.

#### WHOOPING CRANE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION (WCCA)

October, 2000 was the final issue of the "Grus americana" quarterly newsletter put out by Jerry Pratt. Jerry has done this task for exactly 40 years and is to be heartily congratulated for such an accomplishment. Marie Maltese of USFWS in Baltimore, MD will take over compiling the newsletter.

The WCCA has always supported research studies to benefit the cranes. Currently they are funding several projects, including combining the Canada and U.S. recovery plans into a single document, a whooping crane food analysis in WBNP by U. of Alberta publishing a Great Plains Whooping Crane Migration study, and material aid to nonprofit organizations for conservation education in the Rocky Mountain Region. The effort from the volunteer membership and lobbying support of WCCA is tremendous.

#### WHOOPING CRANE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP (WCEP)

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, made up of numerous organizations, continued at full stride towards the goal of reintroducing a migratory population of whooping cranes between Wisconsin and Florida. Many of the activities revolved around National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. Work continued on drafting the 10j rule that would establish a nonessential experimental population (NEP) and an environmental assessment (EA). Letters were sent out the first week in September advising states about the preparation of draft documents. Drafts were negotiated between the three Regions of the USFWS, and then further refined with input from the Washington office and government solicitors. One of the biggest issues was the required designation of a geographic area within which all whooping cranes would be NEP. All whooping cranes outside that area would be endangered. The alternatives in the EA were re-written in October at the request of the Washington office NEPA coordinator. Other documents written included a record of compliance, public outreach table, and question and answer sheets. Draft documents were completed and submitted to USFWS Region 2 on November 20<sup>th</sup> and forwarded to Washington in December where more reviews took place. Multiple conference calls were held throughout this process to coordinate document content. The documents were not published before the presidential election and faced a freeze of the Federal Register imposed by the new administration. High-powered lobbying urging quick action due to the desire to reintroduce whooping cranes in 2001 resulted in the rule being published March 9. Although this process took a long time, much work is involved and the whooping crane rule is actually being acted upon in good time compared to some others. Throughout the process, there was much discussion

of deadlines and “drop dead” dates if this process was to be completed in time to reintroduce whooping cranes in 2001. It was generally agreed that a final rule would have to be signed by the end of June to allow whooping cranes prior to fledging to be shipped from Patuxent to Wisconsin for flight training.

Field work for the sandhill crane ultralight project continued throughout the summer and fall at Necedah NWR in central Wisconsin. Two cohorts were trained to follow ultralights with about 30 hours of flight training. A third cohort ended up being released successfully one by one in the fall with wild sandhills and migrated with the wild flocks. Most of the Cohort Three birds were accounted for later in the winter. I traveled to Wisconsin September 21-22 for planning meetings at Necedah NWR with both the Project Direction Team and the Bird Team, and for donor and media briefing events.

Eleven sandhill cranes were successfully led behind an ultralight between Wisconsin and Florida by Operation Migration. This effort took 40 days (October 3 to November 13), including a few days the cranes stayed in salt marshes at Chassahowitzka before being flown to a wintering pen at St. Martin’s Marsh Aquatic Preserve. Great care was taken so that the sandhills did not see un-costumed people or hear human voices throughout the journey. The project received an incredible amount of publicity, including coverage from faraway places such as Bombay, London, and South Africa. Two outreach coordinators traveled with the team, along with a veterinarian and mobile hospital. The generous amount of hospitality poured upon the Team by private landowners was truly appreciated.

The start of the migration was pushed back due to bad weather and lack of flight training for the birds. One sandhill split off from the ultralight the first day of the migration on October 3 and returned to the summer grounds where it joined wild sandhills. Attempts to re-capture this bird were unsuccessful, but would be possible in many situations. By October 11, the migration team had gone 380 miles, with the cranes becoming much stronger fliers. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, they covered 90 miles in just less than two hours. Two cranes had to be euthanized during the migration. One hit a wire on the ultralight, and the other apparently was spooked at night in the pen and crashed into the wall.

Weekly conference calls of the Bird Team were held throughout the migration. Updates on practically a daily basis were posted on the Operation Migration website <http://operationmigration.org>. Information was also available on the WCEP web site [www.bringbackthecranes.fws.gov](http://www.bringbackthecranes.fws.gov). Pens were constructed at St. Martin’s Marsh and Chassahowitzka NWR in preparation of the cranes arrival.

On October 26, the migration reached the halfway point in Kentucky, having covered 624 miles. Mainly bad weather was slowing them down. The sandhills did not want to fly in warm weather, and cold fronts were lacking the second half of October. All reached Florida on November 6, hit more unfavorable weather, but finally arrived at St. Martin’s Marsh Aquatic Preserve on November 11. The birds were flown the following day and dropped off in the salt marsh at Chassahowitzka NWR to test logistics of the operation in the salt marsh. They stayed there for two nights and then returned to drier sandhill habitat

back at St. Martin's Marsh. Eleven of the original 14 sandhills at Necedah completed the entire migration behind the aircraft. This was the longest ever ultralight-led bird migration in the world.

The ultralight sandhills spent the winter primarily in a large pen, flying out to a nearby pasture for part of the time. They were fed throughout the winter and kept isolated from human contact. Ten of the 11 sandhills started the return migration February 25. Despite intensive searching by project biologist Richard Urbanek, the birds had not been located as of March 13. One bird remained in the pen.

WCEP reports on all aspects of the eastern project were presented to the Recovery Team at the January meeting. The report analyzed the 2000 sandhill crane ultralight migration, including what went right and what needed refinement, and did detailed planning for the proposed 2001 whooping crane project. The trial using sandhills, although it took a lot of effort, was felt to be a valuable learning tool prior to doing the project with whooping cranes. The Recovery Team felt that the ultralight sandhill project had met all goals and endorsed a migration with whooping cranes in 2001 if all the necessary approvals can be received on time.

John Christian, Joe Duff, Richard Urbanek and Barb Zellmer made presentations to the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyway Technical Committee sessions the week of February 19. The project received support and the necessary recommendations to be passed along to the Flyway Councils.

On September 15 in Quebec City, Bill Lishman was one of 32 Canadians who received the Meritorious Service Medal from the Governor General Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson. This award is given to Canadians who have brought honour to their country through some deed. Bill received the award for his aviation and ornithological breakthrough; in 1988, he led a flock of Canada geese with an ultralight. He has put great effort towards establishing a second migratory flock of endangered whooping cranes. Bill can now add the letters M.S.M. to his name. Congratulations, Bill.

### CAPTIVE FLOCKS

#### PATUXENT WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER

Patuxent raised 32 chicks in 2000 and set the standard for other captive facilities to aim for next year. Fifteen young were shipped to Florida for release in two cohorts on December 6 and January 17. One cohort is being kept in isolation and may be released late in the summer of 2001 if Florida wetlands are replenished by rains. Because of the drought in Florida, one cohort will be kept permanently in captivity. All the work rearing and forming cohorts, health management and shipping birds, are performed at the highest levels of professionalism. Dr. Steve Nesbitt visited Patuxent in the fall to coordinate aspects of the Patuxent programs with the Florida reintroduction.

The Patuxent crane program has undergone many recent changes. The Patuxent Science Council in mid-September communicated a renewed commitment to support whooping crane propagation at Patuxent. This was a major shift in policy endorsing captive crane propagation as a legitimate role of USGS since it supports their research function. Dr. Jay Hestbeck will have a much greater role overseeing the crane program and provided valuable insight at the Recovery Team meeting. In a reorganization of staff duties, Jonathan Male will handle more management tasks, allowing George Gee to focus on research. B. H. Powell will handle public outreach. A major need of the program is an infusion of money for facility maintenance, and to get the whooping crane caretaker term positions converted to permanent positions so that valuable experience is not lost.

Although an application was submitted for the Patuxent crane program to receive a piece of the \$3.4 million of new money going to USGS to do research for USFWS, this project did not rank out high enough on the list to be funded.

#### INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION (ICF)

From the 28 whooping cranes at ICF, 7 females laid 26 eggs. Of 12 fertile eggs, 6 hatched and five fledged. Two birds from Calgary and 4 from ICF were shipped to Florida on November 30 for release. ICF is working towards adding large ponds to two of the breeding pens to try to get pairs to come into breeding at a younger age. In November, Dr. George Archibald stepped down as President of ICF and passed many responsibilities into the capable hands of Jim Harris who has been at ICF since 1984. The move was a re-structuring to give George a little time to breath. But don't write George off - he was subsequently elected Chairman of the Board and has more than one person can handle.

#### CALGARY ZOO

Calgary has 20 whooping cranes made up on 9 pairs and 2 single birds. One bird is on public display. Twenty-one eggs were laid from 4 pairs, the most ever for one year at Calgary. Eleven eggs were fertile. Six chicks hatched and three fledged. The three chicks were isolation-reared for release in Florida. They were shipped to ICF where one subsequently died in a pen accident.

#### SAN ANTONIO ZOO

A new exhibit pen has been completed at San Antonio where one breeding pair is kept on display. A wide stream flows through the pen so the cranes have excellent access to water, and the pen is enriched with vegetation. Whooping Crane Coordinator Tom Stehn visited the San Antonio Zoo in September to see the new display pen and wrote a thank you letter to the Zoo Director and staff for all their efforts in making these improvements and supporting the reintroduction program.

The zoo raised two chicks from their two breeding pairs. Because of the drought in

Florida, it was decided in mid-October to withdraw the two juveniles from the release program. The two youngsters were removed from isolation-rearing and have tamed down nicely. San Antonio is willing to expand their crane program and will receive one additional pair of cranes in 2001. Curator of Birds Jeff Rouse has moved on to a zoo in the Dallas area. I will miss working with Jeff and wish him good fortune.

#### LOWRY PARK ZOO

The Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, Florida is playing a valuable role in the recovery effort by rehabilitating injured birds from the Florida release program. The one young bird that they have had on display that is reaching breeding age needs to be paired. A CITES permit was obtained for exporting this bird to Calgary, and the bird shipped on November 9.

An injured whooping crane picked up from the wild in Florida was treated in Gainesville, but required a longer rehabilitation and was transported to Lowry Park. When the genetics of this bird were re-evaluated, it was decided the bird will enter the captive breeding program. Another bird, over-represented genetically will be put on permanent display at Lowry Park.

#### AUDUBON INSTITUTE CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON ENDANGERED SPECIES (ACRES)

Located in Belle Chasse, Louisiana, ACRES hosted the whooping crane meetings in January. They have a marvelous facility and a wonderful staff. ACRES is very active in the Mississippi Sandhill Crane breeding program, and currently has 4 whooping cranes. Plans call for ACRES to hold 5 pairs of whoopers, including getting two more pairs in 2001. Movement of cranes in or out of ACRES is currently on hold while tests are conducted after one sandhill had a positive avian tuberculosis culture. The New Orleans Zoo will receive one crane in 2001 to put on display.

**WHOOPING CRANE NUMBERS / MARCH 1, 2000**

**Wild Populations**

	<u>Adult</u>	<u>Young</u>	<u>Total</u>
Aransas/Wood Buffalo NP	169	7	176
Rocky Mountains	2	0	2
Florida	<u>66</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>86</u>
Subtotal in the Wild	237	27	264

**Captive Populations**

	<u>Adult</u>	<u>Young</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Breeding Pairs</u>
Patuxent WRC, Maryland	45	17	62	10
International Crane Foundation, WI	28	0	28	6
Calgary Zoo	19	0	19	2
San Antonio Zoological Gardens	4	2	6	2
Lowery Park Zoo, Tampa, FLA	1	0	1	0
Audubon Institute, New Orleans	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>
Subtotal in Captivity	101	19	120	20

TOTALS (Wild + Captive) = 384