



Whooping Cranes Coming Back, But Nearby Barges Pose a Threat

By ROBERTO SURO

THE whooping crane, beneficiary of one of the longest and most intensive efforts to protect an endangered species, may become a victim of its own success.

After facing extinction for decades, the tall, snowy white birds have multiplied so rapidly in recent years that they may soon start crowding their wintering grounds on the Gulf Coast about 50 miles north of Corpus Christi.

News of their comeback has brought an invasion of tourists to the once-remote marshes, and biologists are now trying to determine how the human contact is affecting the birds. But conservationists worry most of all that the need to protect the cranes will seem less urgent just as a battle looms over threats to their wetlands habitat from erosion, pollution and the possibility of a barge accident spilling toxic substances in shipping lanes that pass through the refuge.

Making a Comeback

The whooping crane hit a low point in 1941 when only 16 birds made the annual migration from Canada to Texas. The flock grew slowly until 1983, when it numbered 75 birds. Then, for reasons that are not fully understood, it began to expand quickly. This winter the count reached 146 birds.

"It is reassuring to look at what has happened over the past few years, but people should not be too reassured because the whoopers are 15 minutes from catastrophe every day they spend down here," said Brent Giezentanner, manager of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, which encompasses most of the wintering grounds.

The fertile marriage of land and water that draws the cranes and many other species to the marshes, bayous and tidal pools here belongs to the refuge and is protected by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as an endangered species habitat. But

a 12-mile-long stretch of the busy Gulf Intracoastal Waterway runs through the refuge. Managed by the Army Corps of Engineers, the waterway is about the same age as the wildlife refuge and is a highly efficient conduit for the Texas petrochemical industry.

Standing on reedlike legs in muddy pools that provide a rich diet of clams and shrimp, the cranes seem unconcerned by the traffic that sometimes passes less than a hundred feet away. About 3,000 barges carry more than 23 million tons of cargo, mostly bulk chemicals and petroleum distillates, through the refuge every year, according to the Corps of Engineers.

"The question is not whether a barge collision is going to occur, but when," said Mr. Giezentanner.

Traces of Heavy Metals

The Fish and Wildlife Service and a variety of environmental groups are clashing with the Corps over even more immediate issues than the possibility of an accident resulting in a chemical spill.

Mud from dredging has produced a string of artificial islands parallel to the coast that cover marshes and oyster reefs formerly used by the birds. The wildlife service blames the dredging as well as apparent leakage from barges for worrisome traces of heavy metals like cadmium, mercury and arsenic and petroleum products found in soil and water samples taken from areas near the waterway.

Erosion apparently caused by barges' and boats' wakes is another concern. The wildlife service said one to three acres of marsh disappear each year.

Objections by the wildlife service and threats of legal action by environmental groups over the waterway's impact on the refuge prompted the Corps of Engineers to begin to study the situation last year, Corps officials said. The study is the first phase of a review process that could eventually involve Congress.

Mr. Giezentanner argued that only the drastic and very expensive action of rerouting the waterway will solve all the problems. But there are major pollution problems up and down the Gulf coast, and a multimillion-dollar construction project to protect the birds would have to compete with many other proposals aimed at cleaning up air and water for human benefit.

"Our concern is that people will look at the numbers and think the whooper has been saved when in fact it is still endangered and is going to need a lot of public support to deal with issues like the waterway," said Mr. Giezentanner. 60,000

Visitors a Year Public awareness of the birds is certainly increasing. More than 60,000 people visited the refuge last year, and there are five tour boats plying the refuge's waters as often as twice a day in the winter.

"The birds have definitely become more tolerant of human contact, but we are only now collecting data on how their behavior is changing," said Tom Stehn, the chief biologist for whooping cranes at the refuge. The shallow-bottom tour boats often pull within 20 yards of the birds, regularly interrupting their feeding activities.

The impact of human visitors, however, is only one of the biological issues being debated.

Although the birds were never as prolific as many other species, hundreds of years ago there were flocks that nested across much of the northern plains and wintered all along the Gulf Coast. Intensely territorial, the birds, which mate for life, return in family groups to the same spot each year at both ends of their migration. And, a nesting pair of whooping cranes will claim anywhere from 300 to 1,000 acres of the flock's territory as their own, running off any other members of the species that try to infringe.

As their habitat was destroyed, primarily by farming in their nesting areas, the flocks disappeared. When the Aransas refuge was created in 1937, it was the winter home to the last migrating flock. The flock had survived primarily because its nesting grounds are 2,600 miles away in a section of the vast Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada.

Flourishing in Canada

The rapid growth of the Aransas flock in the last six years is due in part to favorable weather conditions in its Canadian nesting grounds and efforts by wildlife biologists to insure that every nest hatches one fertile egg. But, said Mr. Stehn, "the rate of growth has outpaced every one of our projections and models." Now, the question is how to handle the growing number of birds.

The wildlife service and the State of Texas are developing a new joint management plan for land they each own on Matagorda Island, which is just a few miles from the refuge, so that there will be more wintering areas as the Aransas flock grows.

Mr. Stehn said the whooping crane will continue to face the threat of extinction until there are at least 200 birds in the Aransas flock and two other flocks are well

established. So far efforts to create a new migrating flock have failed. In a cooperative program between Canada and the United States that began in 1975, whooping crane eggs taken from nests in Wood Buffalo were taken to a sandhill crane nesting ground in the Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Idaho. The sandhills incubated and reared the whooping cranes as adoptive parents, but none of the mature whooping cranes, now numbering 13 birds, have ever mated. The practice of taking eggs to Idaho was abandoned last summer.

Egg transfers have been more successful in producing two captive flocks, now totaling 54 birds, at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md., and the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wis.

Ernie Kuyt, who has headed the egg-capturing efforts for the Canadian Wildlife Service, said discussions are now under way to determine whether the program should continue.

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