

Whooping Crane

Grus americana

Fact Sheet

April 2011

Natural Resources Conservation Service



Official Status: Endangered.

Endangered species are species that are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range. It is unlawful to kill, harm, or harass endangered species.

Listed

35 Federal Register 8495; June 2, 1970.

Historical Status

The historical breeding range of the whooping crane extended from Illinois, northwest through North Dakota and up to the Northwest Territories. The birds historically wintered along the Gulf of Mexico. By 1941, there were only an estimated 16 whooping cranes left in the world. All were from a flock that wintered at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the coast of Texas. It was later discovered that the birds were breeding in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories.

Present Status

About 145 whooping cranes migrate across Montana from Wood Buffalo National Park to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The spring migration occurs from late April to mid-June. Whooping cranes are occasionally sighted in southwestern Montana's Centennial Valley and in the extreme northeast corner of the state near Medicine lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Habitat

Whooping cranes inhabit shallow wetlands that are characterized by cattails, bulrushes, and sedges. They can also be found in upland areas, especially during migration.

North America



Montana



Present Distribution of the Whooping Crane

Life History

Whooping cranes do not appear to reach sexual maturity until their 2nd or 3rd year. Courtship occurs at Wood Buffalo National Park in late April and May. Courtship rituals are eccentric with the pair of performing loud vocalizations, wing flapping, head bowing and leaps into the air. Whooping cranes mate for life. Two eggs are laid in a nest made of bulrush and other vegetation. Incubation is about 29 days. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the young. Usually, only the larger chick survives due to its more aggressive behavior. Young cranes are capable of flight in about 90 days. Whooping cranes may live 20 years. They feed on crabs, crayfish, frogs, and other small aquatic life as well as plants.

Aid to Identification

The whooping crane is the tallest bird in North America. It is a white bird with black wingtips and red markings on the head. Young birds have a brown-mottled appearance until their second summer. Whooping cranes are 5 feet tall and have wingspans of 7 feet. They fly with a slow downward flap and a



rapid upstroke. Whooping cranes may migrate with the smaller, gray, sandhill crane. The trumpet like call carries for miles.

Reasons for Decline:

Loss of habitat and shooting are the main reasons for the whooping crane's decline.

Recommendations

Many of the wild whooping cranes are marked with colored leg bands. Make observations of these birds and report them to a wildlife agency.

Comments

The status of whooping cranes in the wild is precarious because the birds concentrate during the winter. Oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico are a potential threat. Eggs from wild birds (1 per nest) have been removed and hatched in captivity. The captive birds are now reproducing.

References

Whooping Crane Recovery Plan by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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