

Historically, there may have been at least 10,000 whooping cranes, but their numbers declined to about 1,300 by the late 1800s. In the mid-1800s, they nested within a narrow corridor from central Illinois to central Alberta. Their main wintering areas were the Gulf Coast of Texas, southwestern Louisiana, and northeastern Mexico near the Rio Grande Delta. Whooping crane numbers were reduced to a low of 15 or 16 during the winter of 1941-42. Destruction and degradation of their wetland habitat and uncontrolled shooting were the primary causes of their decline. Wetland conservation, primarily funded by hunters, and protection from uncontrolled shooting have allowed their numbers to increase to about 215 prior to the 2005 spring migration. Today, the main threats to the whooping crane population are loss and degradation of their habitat and collisions with power lines and fences.

Currently, there are three populations of whooping cranes; one remnant of the historic population and two reintroduced populations. Whooping cranes that migrate through Kansas are part of the remnant population. They nest only in Wood Buffalo National Park in Alberta and the Northwest Territories, and winter at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge along the Gulf Coast of Texas.

In January 1993, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began establishing a non-migratory population in central Florida by introducing juvenile whooping cranes. By summer 2005, there were about 60 cranes in this population. Introduction of a second migratory population was initiated in 2001. Immature whooping cranes in this population were released in Wisconsin, raised by people dressed as cranes, and taught to migrate to northeastern Florida by following an ultralight aircraft. By summer 2005, there were 42 birds in this population. Numbers in the re-introduced populations are in addition to the 215 in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population.

Sandhill cranes, snow geese, and Ross' geese are migratory birds hunted in Kansas that are most similar in appearance to whooping cranes. These species have been hunted in the Central Flyway for many years with very few accidental shootings of whooping cranes. Since 1950, throughout the Flyway, whooping cranes have been mistakenly shot by snow goose hunters (two incidents: 1968 and 1989), sandhill crane hunters (2004), and a poacher (2003). These incidents resulted in the deaths of five whooping cranes and occurred over the course of more than 60 million days of waterfowl hunting and 500,000 days of sandhill crane hunting.

Hunters are more likely to encounter whooping cranes where they concentrate during migration. Whooping cranes use the same habitats as sandhill cranes and geese, and they are often found together. In Kansas, whooping cranes have been reported throughout the state, but most often at or near Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area. These two sites account for over 75 percent of the whooping crane sightings in Kansas. Thus, hunters in these areas must be especially aware of the potential to encounter whooping cranes.

As whooping crane numbers increase, we all must work harder to minimize the chance of accidental shootings. Those opposed to hunting, and sandhill crane hunting in particular, are watching for migratory bird hunters to make a mistake. Future accidental shootings may end sandhill crane hunting in Kansas or elsewhere where it is currently legal.

There are two important things hunters can do to minimize the chance of accidentally shooting a whooping crane.

- 1) make sure to identify game species and all the nongame species that look similar to game species, and
- 2) only shoot when absolutely sure of the target.

The latter may mean that you pass up some legal shots, but with a fine of up to \$100,000 and prison time of up to 1 year for shooting a whooping crane, it's better to be safe than sorry.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT WHOOPING CRANE PRESENCE, CONTACT:

Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area
(620) 793-7730 or
(620) 793-3066

Quivira National Wildlife Refuge
(620) 483-2393 or
www.fws.gov/quivira

KS Dept. of Wildlife & Parks
(620) 672-5911 or
www.kdwp.state.ks.us



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Whooping Crane Information for Migratory Bird Hunters



Photo: Brian Johns, Canadian Wildlife Service

Whooping cranes are an endangered species that migratory bird hunters may encounter, especially in central Kansas. Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks staff believe that hunting can continue when whooping cranes are present as long as hunters are aware and diligent in their responsibility to absolutely identify their quarry. This brochure provides information on whooping cranes and tips on how to identify them, as well as other similar looking birds.

ILLEGAL NONGAME SPECIES



WHOOPING CRANE

Adults: white with black wingtips
Juveniles: white/brown with black wingtips
Neck: long and extended during flight
Wingspan: up to 7 feet
Legs: long, extend beyond tail in flight
Wingbeat: slow
Flock Numbers: 2-7 birds



SWAN

Adults: white with white wingtips
Juveniles: gray to white with white wingtips
Neck: long and extended during flight
Wingspan: up to 7 feet
Legs: short, do not extend beyond tail
Wingbeat: slow
Flock Numbers: 2-10



GREAT BLUE HERON

Adults: gray with gray wingtips
Juveniles: gray with gray wingtips
Neck: long and folded during flight
Wingspan: up to 6 feet
Legs: long, extend beyond tail in flight
Wingbeat: slow
Flock Numbers: 1-2 birds

LEGAL GAME SPECIES



SANDHILL CRANE

Adults: gray with dark wingtips
Juveniles: gray with dark wingtips
Neck: long and extended during flight
Wingspan: up to 5 feet
Legs: long, extend beyond tail in flight
Wingbeat: slow
Flock Numbers: 2 to several hundred birds



SNOW GOOSE

Adults: white with black wingtips
Juveniles: gray to white with black wingtips
Neck: short and extended during flight
Wingspan: up to 3-4 feet
Legs: short, do not extend beyond tail
Wingbeat: fast
Flock Numbers: 20 to several hundred birds



WHITE PELICAN

Adults: white with black wingtips
Juveniles: white with black wingtips
Neck: long and folded during flight
Wingspan: up to 8 feet
Legs: short, do not extend beyond tail
Wingbeat: slow
Flock Numbers: 20 to several hundred birds