



# EASTERN CRANE BULLETIN

## Eastern Crane Bulletin - March 2014

*The Eastern Crane E-bulletin is being distributed to those interested in cranes in general, and specifically, the Eastern Populations of Sandhill and Whooping Cranes, as well as the continuing work for the protection of these birds and their habitats.*

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### Whooping Cranes need our voices!

Recent reports of Whooping Cranes being shot in [Kentucky](#) (in Hopkins Co., November 2013) and [Louisiana](#) (Jefferson Davis Parrish, February 7, 2014), have added to the growing series of shootings of these federally endangered birds. Dr. Richard Beilfuss, President and CEO of [The International Crane Foundation \(ICF\)](#) was quoted recently as saying that "ICF is deeply troubled by the deaths of these Whooping Cranes. In this imperiled species, every crane counts toward recovery."

In the past five years, at least 16 Whooping Cranes have been shot. These disturbing acts of vandalism have happened in all three Whooping Crane populations – from breeding grounds in Wisconsin, to wintering areas in Texas, and all along the cranes' flyways. For the population re-introduced in the eastern U.S. migratory flyway, about 20% of all crane deaths have been from shootings – putting the future of this population at risk.

The actual cost of rearing and releasing one crane is estimated to be over \$100,000. To date, insufficient court sentences (Vermillion, IN juvenile charged with a misdemeanor and fined \$1 in the shooting death of the female WHCR with the highest breeding success rate in the eastern population) have done nothing towards discouraging "thrill-killers" from targeting Whooping Cranes. When the courts assign penalties that are woefully small compared with the value of Whooping Crane recovery efforts, they do not deter like tragedies from happening in the future (a TX hunter was not charged under the stricter Endangered Species Act after claiming he thought the juvenile WHCR he shot was a legally hunted Sandhill crane), as well as degrading the strength of the Endangered Species Act.

At least one court did recognize the significance of these crimes; in a South Dakota shooting case, the perpetrator was sentenced to an \$85,000 fine (that will help fund Whooping Crane conservation work) and two years' probation. This is a model that should be considered in all Whooping Crane shooting cases to maximize deterrence. *Even stronger would be to add the loss of hunting privileges – reflecting that illegal shooters have no place in ethical hunting communities.*

If you live in a community where Whooping Cranes live or are seen during migration and want to get involved with the education and outreach efforts coordinated by ICF to spread the word that Whooping Cranes are a valued resource, and to help young citizens understand that shooting them will not be tolerated, [click here](#).

*Share this video with your friends and help The International Crane Foundation spread the word that disturbing, harassing or killing Whooping Cranes is a crime. [Click here for "Help Us Save the Whooping Crane" video.](#)*



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**There is a \$16,000 reward for information leading to the arrest in the shooting of a pair of Whooping Cranes in Hopkins Co. Kentucky, in November 2013.** Anyone with information about the killings is urged to contact Special Agent Bob Snow at (502) 582-5989, ext. 29 or the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources dispatch at 1-80025ALERT (800-252-5378). [Read initial USFWS news release here.](#)

Reward increased to \$20,000 for information on pair of Whooping Cranes shot in Jefferson Davis Parish, Louisiana on February 7, 2014. [Read more from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries here.](#) Anyone with information on the shootings is asked to call: 1-800-442-2511.

[Click here to learn more about the LDWF's Whooping Crane re-population project.](#)

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## **CITGO Fueling Good Project Helps Non-Profit Save Endangered American Bird**

CITGO Petroleum Corporation has announced [Operation Migration USA, Inc.](#) as a winner of the 2014 Fueling Good Project. CITGO representatives and local CITGO Marketers presented \$5,000 in CITGO Gift Cards to Operation Migration Associate Director of Development Jo-Anne Bellemer on March 4, 2014 at the CITGO Marketer Roundtable Meeting in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. [Read the PR Newswire release here.](#)

For the migration mission each year, Operation Migration uses three ultralight aircraft, 4-5 vehicles on the ground: RVs for living quarters, tracking vans, an aircraft trailer and two trailers with portable pens where the birds can roost at each stopover. In addition to the migration vehicles, there are the winter monitoring vehicles in Florida and relocation trips to Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland where the chicks are hatched each year.

Each ultralight alone costs about \$50 to fuel for one leg of the migration. In total, there are 23 migration legs required to complete the 1,200 mile trip from Wisconsin to Florida. It goes without saying then that fuel costs represent a large portion of Operation Migration's budget. [If you would like to become involved and support Operation Migration's work click here.](#)

Congratulations to Operation Migration for this well-deserved recognition of the organization's continued role in the reintroduction of the endangered eastern population of Whooping Cranes!

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## **Update on the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes**

Earlier this month the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) released a status report for the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes for the period December 16, 2013 – February 28, 2014. The report covers last known locations of Whooping Cranes, including Direct Autumn Release, Ultralight and Parent-reared cranes as well as mortalities and missing birds.

At the end of the report period the maximum size of the eastern migratory population was 103 birds (59 males and 44 females). Estimated distribution at this time included 29 cranes in Indiana, 10 in Illinois, 9 in Tennessee, 7 in Kentucky, 15 in Alabama, 2 in Georgia, 15 in Florida, 13 at unknown locations and 3 not reported in ten or more months. The total for Florida includes 8 newly released juveniles. Long-term missing cranes nos. 12-07 and 16-10 are now considered dead and are removed from the population totals above.



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[To read the entire report posted by Operation Migration on March 5, 2014 click here.](#)

To access previous project updates and additional information on the project visit WCEP's website at <http://www.bringbackthecranes.org/>

[For Individual Information for each whooping crane in the eastern flock click here.](#) In the PDF document, click on the hatch year to view more information about the individual whooping crane.

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## **Seventy years later, Whooping Crane survival remains tenuous**

In the late 1800s Canadians began farming the prairies expelling cranes from their breeding habitat. During the same time, Americans drained west coast marshes where Whooping Cranes overwintered. These two developments, along with hunting, triggered a precipitous decline in the North American population of what was once more than 10,000 cranes to a mere 14 known adults by 1938. In the early 1940's conservation measures began to try and save the Whooping Crane from extinction.

Over seventy years later with breeding-area protection (nationally protected in Canada), captive breeding, ultralight-led migration and relocation efforts the Whooping Crane is creeping back.

Today there are several captive-bred and non-migratory populations, but only one—shared by the U.S. and Canada—that is self-sustaining and wild. That group breeds every year in Wood Buffalo National Park, which straddles the Northwest Territories and Alberta, and winters in Texas, flying about 2,486 miles each way.

This route takes them over Alberta, Canada tar sands where juvenile birds risk landing in toxic tailings ponds, hitting power lines and exposure to water and air contaminated by the bitumin extraction process.

The daily possibility of a Gulf Intracoastal Waterway chemical spill at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, TX, threatens to contaminate the cranes' winter habitat, kill its main food supply of blue crabs or worse yet poison the cranes.

The fact that there is only one self-sustaining wild population of crane heightens the risk of a single, catastrophic event.

[Read David Suzuki Foundation article \*Majestic Whooping crane faces uncertain future\* here.](#)

[American Bird Conservancy's March 2014 report \*Still in Danger: Whooping Crane\*](#)

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## **Whooping Cranes Beginning Their Spring Journey to Canada**

Mid-March to early April marks the time Whooping Cranes (WHCR) wintering at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge begin their migration northward to Canadian breeding grounds.

*Texas Whooper Watch* (<http://tpwd.texas.gov/whoopingcranes/>) is a volunteer monitoring program that is a part of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Texas Nature Trackers program.



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The program was developed as a citizen science initiative to help the agency learn more about whooping cranes and their winter habitats in Texas.

This year several WHCRs expanded their wintering areas to include other coastal and some inland site in Central Texas. Last year several cranes from the experimental flock in Louisiana spent most of the summer in Texas. Texas Whooper Watch seeks the help of citizen scientists in identifying Whooping Crane migration stopover sites and non-traditional wintering areas, in assessing whether any hazards exist to whoopers at these sites, and in learning more about behavior and habitat use at these sites. Whooper watch volunteers were able to provide information to not only the Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. but to Louisiana Game and Fish and USFWS.

Citizens can help by reporting sightings of whooping cranes and by preventing disturbance of cranes when they remain overnight at roosting and feeding locations. Sightings can be reported to **whoopingcranes@tpwd.texas.gov** or (512) 389-TXWW (8999). Observers are asked especially to note whether the cranes have colored bands on their legs. Volunteers interested in attending training sessions to become "Whooper Watchers" in order to collect more detailed data may also contact TPWD at **whoopingcranes@tpwd.texas.gov** or 512-389-TXWW (8999).

Additional information, including photos of whooping crane look-alike species, can be found at <http://tpwd.texas.gov/whoopingcranes/> and at <http://www.whoopingcrane.com/report-a-sighting/>.

Read more here:

[http://www.brownwoodtx.com/news/community/article\\_773f486c-a708-11e3-bb86-0019bb2963f4.html](http://www.brownwoodtx.com/news/community/article_773f486c-a708-11e3-bb86-0019bb2963f4.html)

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## Drought threatens migration in California

With more than 90 percent of wetlands in the Central Valley turned to farms, birds are running out of places to land during their annual migration. "Pop-up Habitats" are an innovative way to meet the needs of birds and farmers.

By combining crowd-sourced data, hard science and economic incentives, [The Nature Conservancy](#) has created a new market-based system to provide temporary Pop-up Habitats for birds on farm land. It's an efficient, scalable model that allows the Conservancy to rent rather than buy habitat, ensuring millions of birds have a few inches of water to rest, roost and feed as they make their epic journey along the Pacific Flyway.

See more at: *How Farmers and Birds Find Common Ground*

[http://www.conservca.org/blog\\_multimedia/precision-conservation.xml](http://www.conservca.org/blog_multimedia/precision-conservation.xml)

*Birds Find An Unlikely Resting Place In Drought-Stricken California*

<http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/01/28/3215141/temporary-wetlands-birds/#>

Almost all of the 550,000 acres of rice planted in the state is in the Sacramento Valley – where farmers keep rice fields flooded in the winter as much to create "surrogate wetlands" for birds as to decompose rice straw. That flooding is considered crucial to waterfowl, given that only 3 percent of the state's historic wetlands remain, the rest displaced by farmland and urban growth.



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Nearly 7 million waterfowl and 300,000 shorebirds annually visit the Sacramento Valley, a key stop on the Pacific Flyway. A majority of the food they eat comes from ricefields.

Studies have shown that when rice field burning was replaced with flooding in the 1990s, the change had a positive effect on waterfowl. "We saw an increase in the winter body weight of many duck species," said Greg Yarris, wildlife biologist with the Central Valley Joint Venture. "Birds that have higher weight have higher survival weights and will reproduce at higher rates come spring." Disease rates also plummet when weights are higher, he said.

Male and females, after going through a nesting cycle, require bodies of water for molting. The water keeps them safe from land predators and also offers food.

A reduction in the number of flooded rice fields means birds also take to congregating in tighter geographic spaces wherever water can be found. This leads to overcrowding in some areas, and the outbreak of avian diseases such as avian cholera, Weaver said.

Read an excellent article in the March 2014 **Birding Community E-bulletin newsletter/ California Water, California Birds**

<http://refugeassociation.org/2014/03/the-birding-community-e-bulletin-march/>

*You can access an archive of past Birding Community E=bulletins on the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA):*

<http://refugeassociation.org/news/birding-bulletin/>

Read more from the Sacramento Bee

<http://www.sacbee.com/2014/01/31/6117139/prolonged-drought-forces-birds.html>

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## **UPDATE: Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes hunt seasons**

### **Kentucky:**

First year - 50 cranes killed

Second year - 92 cranes killed

Third year - 87 cranes killed

While the number of Sandhills killed in each of the three-year experimental seasons was far below the 400 birds approved by USFWS to be "harvested," the majority of cranes killed were in Barren County, KY – site of the sole Sandhill Crane festival weekend in Kentucky.

At the recent meeting of the Mississippi and Atlantic Flyways Council, Kentucky did not be apply for "operational status" for the 2014-2015 season. Unable to completely assess all the survey and information received from hunters for the 2013-2014 season the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) decided it would be premature to ask for operational status. A one year extension of the experimental season with no changes from the previous seasons was requested and approved by the Flyways Council.

Public comment can be made following the June SRC meeting after USFWS posts the proposed rule on the Federal eRulemaking Portal (more information will be posted in the June Eastern Crane Bulletin).



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KDFWR will make a final report on the experimental season to the tech section and Flyways Council in July 2014 (Des Moines, IA). Details for an operational season would be in a proposal which goes to tech section in February 2015 (Baton Rouge, LA).

## **Tennessee:**

339 of a possible 1,200 Sandhill Cranes were killed in the first of Tennessee's three experimental seasons. Tennessee only issued 400 permits so even if every hunter killed three birds each, the state would not go over the USFWS limit. Therefore Tennessee has a mail-in reporting system rather than Kentucky's daily electronic reporting system.

The TN hunt zone includes land immediately surrounding the Hiwassee Refuge, site of the annual Tennessee Sandhill Crane Festival. Visitors come from across the country to witness tens of thousands of Sandhills and the occasional Whooping Cranes (and once a rare Hooded Crane) descend on the refuge each fall during their migration south. Many cranes end up spending the entire winter at Hiwassee before heading north again in the spring. The festival took place after the hunt season ended and there are conflicting reports as to how it impacted the festival.

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## **Stress level may effect egg fertility in captive Whooping Cranes**

Since 1967 the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland has been the headquarters for the captive-breeding program of the endangered Whooping Crane (WHCR). The juveniles led by the Operation Migration ultralights on their first migration south each year, as well as the Direct Autumn Release (DAR) juveniles all come from Patuxent.

Despite ongoing successes with the breeding program there was mounting concern among Patuxent's scientists that only about 55 percent of the program's WHCR eggs were fertile. The Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute (SCBI), a Front Royal, Virginia-based facility associated with the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. and known for its major advances in understanding the reproduction of other endangered species such as giant pandas and cheetahs, was asked to assist in identifying problems with particular crane pairs.

Problems may include low sperm quality, genetic incompatibilities or nutritional deficiencies. One promising line of research is the birds' hormone levels. The scientists are looking in particular for levels that would indicate whether the birds are stressed – a condition that could be caused by environmental factors, such as too-small holding pens.

[Read the 2011 Smithsonian Magazine's \*A Call to Save the Whooping Crane\* here.](#)

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## **Sandhill adapts well to prosthetic leg**

While this story concerns our Canadian neighbors in the town of Abbotsford, British Columbia (southeast of Vancouver and just north of the border with Washington state), it is so unique and uplifting that we wanted to include it in the bulletin.

Sandhill Cranes are rare in British Columbia as most live on the prairies in the interior plains region of central Canada. This particular Sandhill is the offspring of only four breeding pairs in the



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BC Lower Mainland. It was born on a golf course several years ago and is therefore accustomed to people. Unfortunately, in March 2013, the crane's leg was shattered by a flying golf ball.

After capture by wildlife biologist Myles Lamont, with the help of some corn and a Titleist golf bag (put over its head to keep it calm), it was taken to the Whatcom Road Veterinary Hospital for assessment. Veterinarian Dr. Ken Macquisten amputated the damaged lower portion of the leg and fashioned a prosthetic for the bird. The crane quickly adapted to its new "leg" and once able to hobble about was taken to the Elizabeth's Wildlife Center in Abbotsford to convalesce. [Read story about Sandhill getting an artificial leg here.](#)

Viewed mainly as a temporary solution, the crane now needed a more permanent prosthetic in the hope that one day it could be released – a solution that would not only enable it to walk on mud without sinking, but allow for better weight distribution between both legs. Currently, as a result of putting most of its weight on its good foot, the crane (now called "Bunker") developed an infection known as "bumblefoot," resulting in the need for several more surgeries.

Happily, through all this, media coverage brought Bunker's plight to the attention of [OrthoPets](#), a company in Denver, Colorado that produces prosthetic devices for animals (mostly dogs). Now, sporting the black plastic prosthetic leg since December 2013, Bunker strides without a limp. While his recovery looks promising, Bunker won't be released until he has gone a long period with no complications. If that day does come, the hope is to monitor Bunker and his prosthesis with a tracking device. [Read update on Bunker here.](#)

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## **Mississippi Sandhill hit by car returned to refuge**

The Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge located in Jackson County was established in 1975 under authority of the Endangered Species Act to safeguard the both the endangered Mississippi sandhill crane and its unique wet pine savanna habitat. The refuge consists of more than 19,000 acres in four units and is now part of the Gulf Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

This non-migrating crane population, beginning with only 30-35 birds, is currently at approximately 110 birds. Through captive rearing and reintroduction to the area as well as wild birds nesting in the savannas, the crane population continues to grow.

No. 346 was hatched in captivity and released on the Refuge in 2003. Its mate, No. W29 was born in the wild. The pair nested successfully in 2008 and again in 2012 producing 2 chicks each year.

On February 6, 2014 while with its mate and other cranes, No. 346 was hit by a car in a local high school-crossing zone. The crane suffered cuts, skinned knees and some internal bleeding but no broken bones. After almost two weeks at the [Audubon Species Survival Center](#) in New Orleans, Mississippi National Sandhill Crane Refuge senior biologist, Scott Hereford, made the decision to release the crane back on the refuge in hopes of it reuniting with its mate. The crane was recovering well and as it was approaching nesting time there was concern over losing a successful breeding pair to the captive breeding program if the pair was apart for too long.

[To read more about the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge click here.](#)



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[Read the SunHerald.com story "Injured sandhill crane back on Jackson County refuge, looking for his mate"](#)

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## **Equine Encephalitis Virus and Whooping Cranes**

In eastern North America there is a viral disease called Eastern Equine Encephalitis, or EEE. This virus is transmitted among native bird species by the mosquito, *Culiseta melanura*, but does not cause disease in these passerine species. However, the virus is capable of causing severe disease or death in horses, some game bird species, humans and Whooping Cranes. In the fall of 1984 during an epizootic at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center endangered species captive breeding facility, 21 of 39 whooping cranes (54%) were infected with the virus and of the 21 infected whooping cranes, 7 or 33% died.

Patuxent now vaccinates all its Whooping Cranes to protect them from EEE. Each whooping crane chick gets its first vaccination at 35 days-of-age using a commercially available killed-virus equine vaccine. A booster vaccination is given 3-4 weeks later, and all adult whooping cranes receive annual re-vaccinations.

Read the following USGS publication: "A Vaccination Program to Protect Endangered Whooping Cranes from Encephalitis Virus"

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/Scientist/EnvironmentalHealth/Disease/EncephalitisVirus.pdf>

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If you have any friends or co-workers who would like to receive this quarterly E-bulletin please have them contact:

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