



EASTERN CRANE BULLETIN

Eastern Crane Bulletin - June 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.

Necedah National Wildlife Refuge awarded USFWS grant for study of Whooping Crane nesting habits

Located in Wisconsin and "home" to the reintroduced eastern population of Whooping Cranes, Necedah National Wildlife Refuge has been awarded a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Cooperative Recovery Initiative grant. The funding initiative is designed to support threatened and endangered species found in and around national wildlife refuges. This highly sought after grant (only four were awarded this year), will provide biologists the research opportunity (2014-2016) to better understand the multiple factors influencing nesting Whooping Cranes at the refuge. Planned field work will focus specifically on when the refuge cranes chose to nest in an attempt to discover causes (black fly, etc.) behind the continuing high rate of failed nests.

Read more here: http://www.fws.gov/refuge/necedah/whooping_crane_funding.html

Ongoing efforts

The [International Crane Foundation](#) in Baraboo, [Operation Migration](#), the [United States Geological Survey](#) and the state Department of Natural Resources are partnership members that send people to work with the staff at the Necedah refuge in monitoring the cranes. This partnership is directly responsible for the 101 cranes (59 males and 42 females) that today are part of the eastern North American migratory population.

According to Brad Stroebel, biologist for Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, there have been 22 whooping crane nests hatched between 2005 and 2013 in the refuge, but just six of those resulted in chicks reaching the fledge stage. Weather and predators take a high toll on the young cranes during the 80 days it takes one to fledge. So, it was with great happiness that the first wild chick of the year hatched on May 8 at the refuge and was named W1-14. The "W" stands for a wild chick, "1" for the first hatch of the year and "14" for year. The proud parents are 13-03 (female) and 9-05 (male). Read more here: [First 2014 wild Whooping Crane chick hatches at Necedah NWR](#)

Unfortunately, senseless shootings of Whooping Cranes continue to occur accounting for a 20% mortality rate of the Wisconsin population. 18 Whooping Cranes have been reported shot and killed in recent years, including a breeding pair wintering November 2013 in Hopkins Co. KY. The deaths of potential successful breeders coupled with low nest productivity rates underscore that work done at captive breeding centers in [Baraboo, WI](#) and the [Patuxent Wildlife Research Center](#) in Maryland is increasingly essential to the rare species' survival. [Read more about captive chick hatching/rearing here.](#)



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On May 19, [In the Field with Operation Migration](#) reported the failed nest of a young pair of Whooping Cranes. The 3-year old pair constructed a nest in a secluded area of Marquette County, WI. and for whatever reason the nest failed. Remnants of a broken egg indicated it had been viable. Both adult birds were observed still close to the nest. [For photos of the nest site and to read more click here.](#)

Eastern population Whooping Crane update

Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership's (WCEP) [March 1 - April 30, 2014 Whooping Crane update](#) is available. Mortalities, suspected mortality/status unknown, reproduction, cohorts (includes Direct Autumn Release, ultralight and parent-reared), and long-term missing cranes are all covered in the report. The maximum size of the eastern migratory population at the end of the report period was 101 birds (59 males and 42 females). Estimated distribution at the end of the report period included 93 Whooping Cranes in Wisconsin, 4 not recently reported, 1 suspected mortality and 3 long-term missing.

Operation Migration 2014 MileMaker sponsorship

Please consider joining those working to return the endangered Whooping cranes to the eastern flyway of North America by becoming a MileMaker sponsor! Sponsorship is needed for the 1,200 miles covered by the Operation Migration ultralights and young Whoopers on their fall trek south to Florida. There are quarter mile, half mile and full mile sponsorships available. To become a MileMaker click here: <http://operationmigration.org/MileMaker2014/AllMilesSponsored.php>

FLORIDA:

[Middle school project leads to Sandhill Crane crossing sign](#)

When asked to come up with a project in civics class, seventh graders at Umatilla Middle School in Lake County Florida agreed that the biggest problem in their community was traffic associated with a local park and the fact Sandhill Cranes were regularly getting killed there by speeding vehicles. So, the students developed a plan to slow traffic and presented it to the Lake County Commission. As a result a Sandhill Crane crossing sign has been installed near the park and the students learned a valuable lesson in what concerned citizens, no matter what the age, can accomplish when working together towards a common goal.

[Whooping Crane No. 1441 makes rare appearance near Lake Okeechobee](#)

In 1993, biologists developed a plan (that ultimately failed) to reintroduce Florida's non-migrating population in the Kissimmee Prairie area. 289 captive-bred cranes were released



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between 1999 and 2012. During that time 90 nests were found and only 37 chicks hatched. The likelihood of predator attacks on the young rose as wetlands surrounding nesting sites slowly disappeared. 11 chicks survived to fledge. While the flock is now less than a dozen birds, Whooping Crane No. 1441 (10 years old and still wearing her green leg bands), is thought to be one of the three remaining wild cranes born in Florida. She was spotted in April of this year and has been seen several other years, always foraging alone.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is interested in any sightings of Whooping Cranes in Florida. If you think you have seen one please report your sighting(s) here: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/whoopingcrane/sightings/sightingform.cfm>

LOUISIANA:

Louisiana announces first documented Whooping Crane nest in 75 years

History was made this March when a Whooping Crane nest containing two eggs was located by biologists in the northern Cajun prairie area of Louisiana. Until this discovery it had been 75 years since a whooping crane egg was documented in the state as the cranes disappeared from the Louisiana landscape in the early 1950's – victims of habitat loss and unregulated hunting. Read the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) press release here: <http://www.wlf.la.gov/news/37592>

The mated pair is part of 50 whooping cranes released by wildlife researchers since 2011 at the state's [White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area](#) in Vermilion Parish, the same general area where the last known flock of whooping cranes in Louisiana roosted decades ago. Of the introduced group, 30 cranes survive today. Others were killed by predators and 5 are known to have been killed by gunshot, including the [mated pair shot in February of this year in Jefferson Davis Parish](#) (pair had built a "dummy" practice nest but had not laid eggs).

In early May, LDWF made the announcement that the eggs were not fertile. Read press release here: <http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/news/37639> This was not totally unexpected news to the biologists as the pair is only 3-years old and Whooping cranes are not expected to become successful nesters until they reach four to six years of age.

"Although this nest did not produce chicks, it is still a very positive and progressive step for the reintroduction project for many reasons," said Robert Love, LDWF Coastal and Non-game Resources Division administrator. "This seems to be a strongly bonded pair, which produced two normal eggs, early in the spring and incubated them full term."

Team partners who assisted in bringing juvenile cranes to Louisiana annually since 2011 include the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, the International Crane Foundation, the Louisiana Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

For information on the whooping crane reintroduction project, visit www.wlf.louisiana.gov/wildlife/whooping-cranes.



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\$20,000 reward stands for information leading to arrest in Jefferson Davis Parish killings

There is a \$20,000 reward for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for shooting the two whooping cranes found in Jefferson Davis Parish, LA on February 7, 2014.

Anyone with information on this incident can contact the **Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) Enforcement Division** by calling **1-800-442-2511** or using the **tip411 program**.

To use the tip411 program, citizens can text LADWF and their tip to 847411 or download the "LADWF Tips" iPhone and Android app from the Apple App Store or Google Play free of charge. CitizenObserver, the tip411 provider, uses technology that removes all identifying information before LDWF receives the text so that LDWF cannot identify the sender.

KENTUCKY:

\$16,000 reward stands for information leading to arrest in Hopkins Co. killings

Anyone with information about the November 2013 shooting deaths of a wintering Whooping Crane pair in Hopkins Co. KY 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 1-800-25ALERT (800-252-5378)**.

Update on experimental three-year KY Sandhill Crane season

Officially the Kentucky experimental hunt was to have ended with the 2013-2014 season. However, the following was posted June 4 on the USFWS Federal eRulemaking site. The proposal announces the decision for extension of the KY season. There is no public comment period at this time.

Migratory Bird Hunting: Supplemental Proposals for 2014-15 Hunting Season; Meetings

<http://www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=FWS-HQ-MB-2014-0017-0015>

9. Sandhill Cranes

Council Recommendations: The Atlantic and Mississippi Flyway Councils recommended that Kentucky be allowed a 1-year continuation of their sandhill crane season for the 2014-15 season under harvest guidelines approved for their experimental season.



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HABITAT IS EVERYTHING

As the Eastern Crane Bulletin is issued quarterly sometimes important events, both positive and negative, fall between issues. The following are several we feel fall in this category.

Galveston Bay Oil Spill – aka. Texas City “Y” spill

On March 22, 2014 an oil tanker collided with another ship resulting in 168,000 gallons of oil being dumped into Galveston Bay – less than 186 miles from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge where the federally endangered, only wild flock of Whooping Cranes overwinter each year. At the time of this environmental disaster, only 30% of the crane population had begun its migration back to the Canadian breeding grounds in Wood-Buffalo National Park. Luckily, despite the timing of the disaster, the population successfully made its return north.

Since the collision the U.S. Coast Guard in coordination with state wildlife officials mobilized a massive cleanup effort on the Texas Gulf Coast, particularly along Mustang, South Matagorda and North Padre Islands. As of April 7 workers had removed 200,775 pounds of oiled sand and debris from the shorelines of these barrier islands. These figures include 102,700 pounds of material from Mustang Island, 93,550 pounds from South Matagorda and 4,525 pounds from Bob Hall pier. There was also the attempt to clean reefs and lagoons on the northeast end of Galveston Island and Pelican Island. At that time over 500 workers continued the cleanup. [Read more of the Galveston cleanup efforts here.](#)

After reading the following USFWS description of the Aransas Wildlife Refuge one cannot help but be fearful as to the fate of such a delicate ecosystem and the species it supports – its very existence, as well as the existence of the ONLY wild Whooping Cranes in the world, at the mercy of seemingly inevitable oil spill(s)?

[USFWS/Aransas NWR](#)

“...The mild winters, bay waters and abundant food supply attract more than 400 species of birds to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, including the whooping crane, one of North America’s rarest birds.

...Situated primarily on the Blackjack peninsula, the main unit of the Aransas Refuge lies behind the protective influence of Matagorda Island, part of a long chain of barrier islands extending down the Texas coastline. The refuge is surrounded by several shallow bays where strong winds push bay waters onto a landscape that, on the mainland, gradually shifts from salt to brackish and eventually freshwater marsh. It is this range of habitat that supports a diversity of wildlife....

...Directly across the bay from the Blackjack peninsula is the Matagorda Island Unit, part of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The Island serves as a barrier to the winds and ocean waves generated in the Gulf of Mexico and it absorbs the energy of hurricanes and winter storms. The beach and dune system are not only important buffers, they provide nesting grounds for Kemp’s Ridley sea turtles and foraging habitat for piping plovers. On the backside of the dune system are shallow freshwater lagoons, habitat utilized by whooping cranes as well as coyotes, reddish egrets and many other species. This unique barrier island ecosystem supports one of eight major estuaries along the Texas coast and is host or home



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to a diversity of wildlife species that have evolved with, and grown to depend upon, the ever changing ecosystem..."

It is also of grave concern that the full impact of oil spills on species and the aftermath is not being accurately reported. There seems to have been a shift since the disastrous Exxon Valdez spill in 1989 when volunteers and professionals kept every step of the clean-up in the public eye, to the March 2014 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico where professionals were turned away and restrictions put on the publication of data. *Read an eye-opening article: [Galveston Bay Oil Spill: What Birders Can Do](#) by Laura Erikson of the American Birding Association.*

Read more by the National Wildlife Federation here:

[Lost at Sea: Study Estimates Around 800,000 Birds Killed During BP Oil Spill](#)

Read more by the Audubon Society here:

[More than One Million Birds Died During Deepwater Horizon Disaster](#)

Therefore, it is crucial that anyone who values coastal habitat and the wildlife it supports to demand that Oil companies are held accountable for their impact on the environment. Initial spill clean-up is only the first "bandaid" step. The detrimental effects of an oil spill – to the ocean, sand, sea-life, birds migrating through the area, local breeders, coastal marshes, species inland from the coast, etc. can still be seen decades after it happens.

Wetland habitat restoration in Nebraska Rainwater Basin

We all know how important breeding and wintering habitat is but just as important to the survival of migrants is the habitat along the way. Whooping Cranes, waterfowl and other wetland birds need stop-overs where they can rest and refuel in preparation for the next leg of their journey whether north or south. Such an area is the Rainwater Basin region of Nebraska. Located throughout a 21-county area across the southern part of the state it falls within the Central Flyway corridor. In the past its playa wetlands (shallow, ephemeral ponds) were drained for agricultural use and irrigation pits dug as part of a gravity irrigation system. *To read more of the story click here: [Wetlands, Watersheds and Whooping Cranes](#)*

As farmers have moved to pivot irrigation the pits are no longer needed. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in partnership with other agencies and private landowners, is now working to fill the pits and restore the wetlands. *For more information about this innovative collaboration click here: [Rainwater Basin Joint Venture](#).*

USFWS water release benefits Kearney, Nebraska cranes during migration

In early April the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) began releasing water from its "environmental account" stored in Lake McConaughy into the Platte River, primarily to benefit the Whooping Cranes during their migration stopover in central Nebraska.

In a dry year the minimum flow of 1,700 cubic feet per second provides and maintains



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adequate roosting and feeding habitat for not only the Whooping Cranes but hundreds of thousands of other migrants, including approximately 500,000 Sandhill Cranes. The release continued until May 10.

The Platte River Cooperative Agreement's Environmental Account (EA) was established in 1999 and is managed by the USFWS in augmenting or enhancing downstream flows when low water conditions could adversely affect the Platte River federally listed threatened or endangered species – Whooping Cranes, Least Terns, Piping Plovers and Pallid Sturgeon.

Source: <http://www.kearneyhub.com/>

Falcon Point Ranch easement provide vital habit for wintering Whooping Cranes

The enhancement, restoration and preservation of critical habitat for North America's last wild flock of migratory Whooping cranes is being carried out along Texas' mid coast area through the [USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\) Wetlands Restoration Program \(WRP\)](#). NRCS is voluntarily working with local landowners, to restore and manage the easements to provide habitat for all wetland wildlife species. These farm and ranchlands provide winter habitat for threatened and endangered species such as the Whooping crane, Aplamado falcon, and Piping plover among many others.

Three years ago the owners of Falcon Point Ranch in Calhoun County, Texas entered into a perpetual easement with the federal government through a WRP conservation easement. Falcon Point is located in a coastal region known as Welder Flats. Scientists estimate that at least 10 percent of the remaining flock (approximately 25 – 30 birds) winter in this area. [Click here to read more about the Falcon Point Ranch easement.](#)

With the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, many of the NRCS' programs like the WRP, Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection (FRPP) were consolidated under one program called the [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program \(ACEP\)](#). The ACEP provides financial and technical assistance to help conserve agricultural lands, forestland and wetlands.

Visionaries Film Promotes Great Sandhill Crane Migration and Conservation

PBS stations around the country continued this spring/summer to schedule programming for the 2014 Visionaries series featuring five non-profit organizations that are making a difference in the world. [The Crane Trust](#) was honored to be among them. As part of the 2014 series, the new documentary film titled The Crane Trust, tells an inspiring story about the pioneering work being done in Nebraska to save the critical habitat necessary to sustain the spring migration of sandhill cranes. [To read more click here.](#)



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PAST SCIENCE NEWS of interest

Fusarium mycotoxins from peanuts suspected in 1980's Sandhill Crane deaths

The following is an abstract from the *Journal of wildlife diseases*, Vol. 25, No. 1. (1 January 1989), pp. 38-46 Key: citeulike:943103. Article by R.M. Windingstad, R.J. Cole, P.E. Nelson, T.J. Roffe, R. R. George and J.W. Dörner

An estimated 9,500 sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) died in Gaines County, Texas and Roosevelt County, New Mexico between 1982 and 1987. The predominant clinical sign observed in sick cranes was their inability to hold their heads erect, both while standing and flying. Multiple muscle hemorrhages and submandibular edema were the most common lesions seen at necropsy. Mycotoxins produced by *Fusarium* sp. growing during cold, wet weather on peanuts left in the field after harvest, the predominant foods of the dead cranes at the time of these mortality events, were identified as the most likely cause of this mortality. Rendering moldy peanuts inaccessible to the cranes by conventional tillage resulted in reduced crane mortality in these areas.

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

Mary W. Yandell
Kentucky Coalition for Sandhill Cranes
kyc4sandhillcranes.com
kycoalition4sandhillcranes@gmail.com
mtwyandell@gmail.com

Or

Cynthia Routledge
The Tennessee Ornithological Society
www.tnbirds.org
routledges@bellsouth.net

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