



# Whooping Crane Fact Sheet



## Fast Facts

**Genus/Species:** *Grus americana*

**Height:** 5 ft.

**Wing Span:** 7-8 ft.

**Weight:** 14-17 lb.

**Number of Eggs:** 1-2

**Mate:** For life

**Longevity:** 20-25 years

**Migration:** >2,500 miles/migration

**Young Cranes:** "colts"

**Adult Female Cranes:** "mares"

**Adult Male Cranes:** "roans"

## Migration Facts

- Whooping cranes migrate as individuals, pairs, family groups and small flocks (5-12 individuals).
- Whooping cranes use the Platte River area as a stopover, spending 2-3 days to rest and feed.
- On occasion, one or two individual whooping cranes will be observed migrating with flocks of sandhill cranes. These cranes tend to stay longer (22 to 33 days).
- Whooping cranes migrate primarily during daylight hours, covering a large area during their long migration day and may never be spotted along their migration path due to their small numbers.
- Radio tracking of juveniles and sub-adults in the 1980's revealed that some cranes travel over 500 miles in a single flight and nearly 1,140 miles in 2 days.
- Fall migration is completed in an average of 29 days. Spring migration is completed in an average of 18.5 days.

The whooping crane is not only the tallest bird in North America; it is also one of the rarest. There are approximately 304 whooping cranes in the wild migratory flock that breed in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada and winter at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. An additional 293 birds are in captivity or part of reintroduction efforts in eastern North America. With fewer than 600 individuals in total, the whooping crane remains one of the scarcest birds on the planet and continues to be protected under the Endangered Species Act.

## Coming Back From the Brink of Extinction—Slowly

Since European settlers arrived in Nebraska in the 1840's, there have been written accounts of whooping cranes observed here during their spring and fall migrations. Never as numerous as sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*), whooping cranes were on the brink of extinction early in the last century. Fewer than 20 birds remained in 1941 after more than a century of habitat loss and over-hunting.

After 70 years of intensive conservation efforts, including those of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Whooping Crane Recovery Team, the species has come back slowly from the brink of extinction but still faces many challenges. The whooping crane's intrinsic rate of increase gives the species potential for doubling its population every eight years, as happened in the 1980's. Due to environmental and anthropogenic factors (including habitat loss, altered wetland conditions, climate change, and collisions with power lines), the population is recovering at a much slower rate than its potential will allow.

## A Long and Perilous Migration

Whooping cranes spend the winter from November to March along the Gulf Coast of Texas at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Each spring from late March to late April, the cranes migrate through central Nebraska to their breeding grounds in northern Canada at Wood Buffalo National Park, where they remain from May through September. Hence, the wild population is often called the "Aransas-Wood Buffalo population" or "AWBP", referring to their wintering and breeding grounds.

Fall migration takes place from September through the end of November, when the last cranes arrive at their wintering grounds. Adult cranes that have a successful breeding season in Canada migrate with their young from that year. Whooping cranes normally lay two eggs but typically only one egg/chick survives. On rare occasions the second egg/chick survives and adult pairs are seen migrating with their twins. In 2010, five pairs brought twins to Aransas, which was the second highest number of twins ever to reach the refuge.



The annual migration from wintering grounds in Texas to nesting grounds in Canada is 2,500 miles—a long way for a bird as large as the whooping crane. Photo by G. Wright

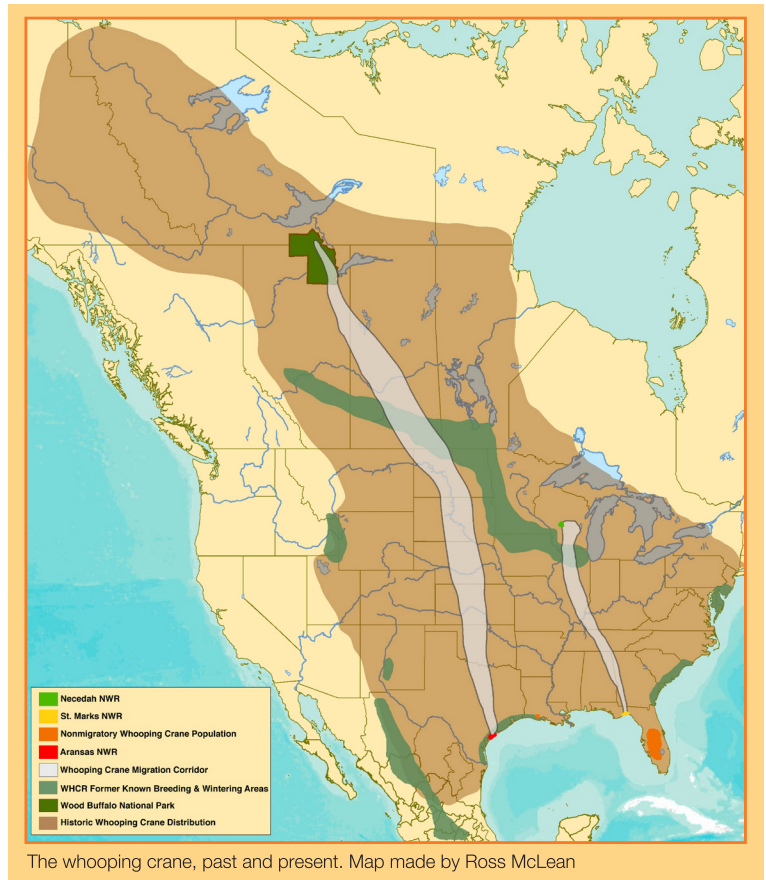


Whooping cranes are territorial at both their breeding and their wintering grounds, and they use the same territories year after year. Importantly, the young cranes rely on their parents to learn the migration route, which is long (approximately 2,500 miles) and narrow (less than 300 miles wide). The migration extends from the southern wintering grounds on the Gulf Coast in Texas through Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota to the Canada breeding grounds in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Northwest Territories.

### Stopover Areas are Vital for a Successful Migration

Because the cranes' migration route is so long, the International Recovery Plan for the Whooping Crane designated four sites in 2005 as "critical habitat" along the route, including a section of the Platte River in central Nebraska. Critical habitat is habitat that contains physical or biological features that are essential to the conservation of the species and, therefore, may require special management considerations or protection.

From north to south, the critical habitat areas for whooping cranes are: the Platte River between Lexington and Denman in Nebraska; Cheyenne Bottoms State Waterfowl Management Area and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge in Kansas; and Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma.



Whooping cranes mate for life and travel in family groups, giving the young a chance to learn age-old migration routes. Photo by Don Brockmeier.

In Nebraska, whooping cranes rest and feed in wet meadows, sloughs and crop fields. At night, they roost in shallow waters for protection against predators. Whooping cranes use the Platte River area as a stopover, spending 2-3 days to rest and feed before continuing their migration. A few have spent more than a month

on the Platte, typically individuals that migrate with flocks of sandhill cranes. These stops are important to help ensure the cranes arrive at their final destination in good health and condition.

### Diversity in Food Supplies is a Risk Factor

The whooping crane is an omnivore, which means it lives on a mixed diet of plants and animals. But while the whooping crane can be opportunistic in its diet, it is also vulnerable to abrupt and significant shifts in food resources. Currently, we can see this with a significant reduction in the blue crab population in the Texas Gulf due to prolonged drought conditions exacerbated by upstream water diversions for human consumption. The blue crab is a vital food source for cranes as they winter in the region. As a result, we've seen the whooping crane population expand its territory along the Gulf coast in search of food, which exposes the population to greater risk from hunting, power lines, and natural predators.

The typical whooping crane diet will vary depending on location, available supplies and season. At the end of the day, a healthy diet must provide the whooping crane with the protein, energy, vitamins and minerals it needs to reproduce, migrate, and thrive.

### Typical Food Sources

**Breeding Grounds:** Mollusks, crustaceans, insects, minnows, frogs, snakes

**Wintering Grounds:** Blue crabs, shrimp, clams, small vertebrates, plants

**Nebraska Stopover:** Left-over field corn and all of the above, except the saltwater species



The blue crab is an important source of food for the whooping crane on its wintering grounds in the Texas Gulf. This major food source is under significant stress due to the effects of prolonged drought conditions on water salinity in the region. Photo by G. Wright