



The whooping crane is the tallest bird in North America and the rarest of 15 crane species in the world.

- Wingspan up to 8 feet!
- Weigh 11 - 16 pounds
- Can live 22 - 30 years in the wild
- Migrate more than 2,500 miles (between Canada and Texas)
- Eat plant tubers, blue crabs, small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, insects
- Usually lay 1-3 eggs per clutch
- Mate for life

When the Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973, fewer than 50 Whooping Cranes existed in the wild



Genus/Species:
Grus Americana

Whooping Cranes usually migrate as individuals, pairs, family groups, and small flocks of 5-12 birds.

They migrate primarily during the day at high altitudes.

Cranes can travel over 500 miles in a single flight!

Fall migration takes an average of 29 days. Spring migration takes an average of 18.5 days.

Whooping Cranes



MAJESTIC BIRDS THAT NEED OUR PROTECTION

The Whooping Crane is not only the tallest bird in North America, but also one of the rarest. In 2023, there are approximately 506 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 296 birds are in captivity or part of reintroduction efforts in eastern North America. With 802 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 (*Antigone 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 more than 70 years of intensive conservation efforts, including those of the U.S. Fish and 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.

Long and Perilous Migration

Many Whooping Cranes spend November to March along the Gulf Coast of Texas at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Each spring from late March to late April, these 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 to wintering grounds happens in September through November. 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 chick survives. On rare occasions, the second chick survives, and adult pairs migrate with their twins.



The annual migration from wintering grounds in Texas to nesting grounds in Canada is 2,500 miles.

Photo by G. Wright

MORE 

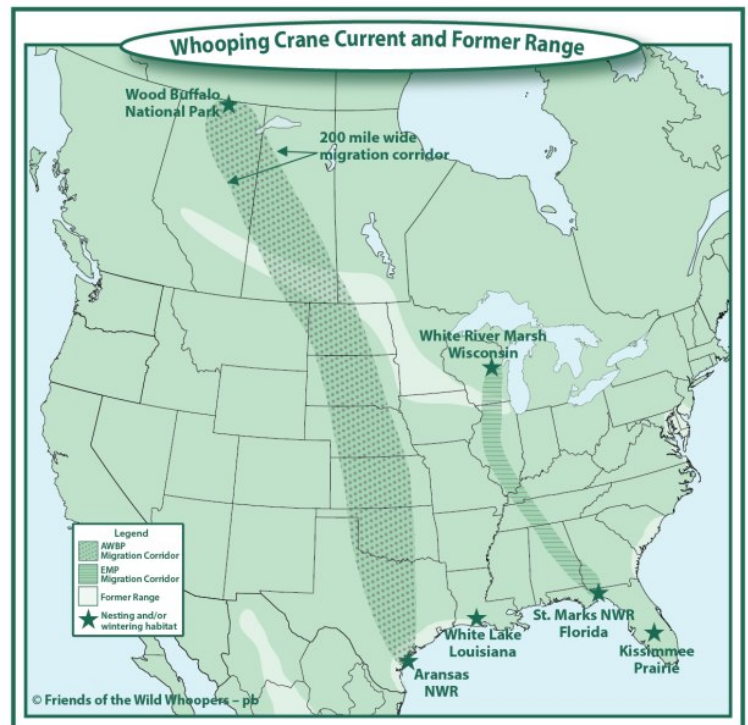
Whooping cranes are territorial, and they use the same breeding and winter territories each year. However, they occasionally gather in larger numbers of family groups at key migration stopover locations, including the Platte River. Young cranes rely on their parents to learn the migration route (dark green on the map). Whooping cranes travel from wintering grounds on the Gulf Coast in Texas to the Canadian breeding grounds in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Northwest Territories.

Stopover Areas are Vital for 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 contains physical or biological features that are essential to the conservation of the species and, therefore, may require special management considerations or protection.

Critical habitat areas for Whooping Cranes:

- Platte River between Lexington and Denman, NE
- Cheyenne Bottoms State Waterfowl Mgmt Area, KS
- Quivira National Wildlife Refuge, KS
- Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, OK



in family groups like the one shown above. Colts learn migration routes from their parents. Photo: Joanne Kamo, BirdNote

In Nebraska, Whooping Cranes rest and feed for 2 to 3 days in wet meadows, sloughs, and fields. At night, they roost in shallow waters for protection against predators. Occasionally, individuals that migrate with flocks of Sandhill Cranes will stay for several weeks. These stops are important to help ensure the cranes arrive at their destination in good health.

Food Supplies at Risk

The Whooping Crane is an omnivore, which means it lives on a mixed diet of plants and animals. While the Whooping Crane can be opportunistic in its diet, it is also vulnerable to abrupt and significant shifts in food resources. Blue Crab populations thrive on highly variable levels of salinity in the water. However, long periods with a lack of freshwater inflow may negatively impact the population. Blue Crab can also be negatively affected by pollutants, over-fishing, and land development. As a result, the Whooping Crane population has expanded its territory along the Gulf Coast in search of food. This exposes the population to greater risk of hunting, power lines, and natural predators.

The typical whooping crane diet varies depending on location, available species, and season. However, they have been documented consuming frogs, snakes, fish, diving beetles, snails, acorns, razor clams, and fleshy fruits. A diverse, 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

Foods above, plus waste grain in fields



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 prolonged drought conditions on water salinity in the region. Photo: International Crane Foundation