

March 24, 2001

Dear Crane Enthusiast,

This has been a bad year for the whooping crane. Despite a record 51 nesting pairs, production was low in Canada in the summer of 2000. Although 30 chicks were present in June, only 9 completed the 2,500 mile migration and arrived at Aransas. In addition, two of the 9 have died at Aransas this winter. Total numbers in the only natural wild flock have plummeted. From last winter's record high of 188, there are currently only an estimated 176 whooping cranes in the flock. A number of birds died between the spring and fall, and 4 have died this winter.

This winter at Aransas, blue crab numbers are extremely low. Since the blue crab is the preferred food of the whoopers (one crane can eat as many as 80 crabs per day), the cranes are having to find different kinds of food to eat. Research has shown that although the whoopers can always find other foods, their overall nutrition suffers and they actually lose energy when blue crabs are in short supply. This leads to higher mortality during the winter, and may affect their ability to nest successfully in the upcoming summer.

Why aren't there enough blue crabs in the salt marshes for the cranes to eat? Texas went through a bad drought last spring and summer. The lack of freshwater flowing into the bays raised bay salinities, and blue crabs don't reproduce as well during drought. To make the natural drought even worse, human uses take water from the rivers so that not enough water reached the bays to keep them highly productive. This situation threatens to worsen as more and more people move to Texas and water consumption expands. Resource agencies are working to try to ensure enough water is kept in the rivers to help the bays which require a mixture of fresh and salt water.

This has been a year of bad news for the whoopers. But keep in mind that the history of the whooping crane flock is one of ups and downs, and that they have a record of bouncing back. Overall growth of the flock has averaged 3.7 % a year, but that some years the population is going to drop. This has been one of those years.

The whooping cranes are about to leave on their migration. Departures may occur anytime between the end of March and the end of April. The most departures normally occur between the 4th and 12th of April. So far I believe that 5 whoopers may have started the migration. However, there have been no reports of any sightings in the Flyway.

Tom Stehn, Whooping Crane Coordinator

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Aransas NWR
P.O. Box 100
Austwell, TX 77950