

Whooping Crane

Grus americana



TPWD PHOTO



Whooping cranes are one of the rarest bird species in North America. Although they breed in Canada during the summer months, whooping cranes migrate to Texas' coastal plains near Rockport for the winter months.

Coastal Wetlands

Whooping Crane

Grus americana



APPEARANCE

Height: 5 feet (1.5 m)

Wingspan: 7.5 feet (2.3 m)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- White with rust-colored patches on top and back of head
- Black feathers on both sides of the head
- Yellow eyes
- Primary wing feathers are black but are visible only in flight.
- Long, black legs and bills

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Limited in Texas to the migratory flyway and coastal plain around Aransas.

Diet: Crabs, clams, crayfish, snails, minnows, frogs, larval insects and leeches; occasionally voles, lemmings and shrews; sometimes acorns and small fruit

Sexual maturity: Between three and five years

Mating season: Early spring

Nest: Made of bulrushes about 4 feet (1.2 m) wide with a flat-topped central mound up to 5 inches (12 cm) above the water

Eggs: Two

Incubation: 29 to 31 days

Young: Generally, one chick survives. It can leave the nest while quite young, but is still protected and fed by its parents. Chicks are rust-colored when they hatch; at about four months, chicks' feathers begin turning white. By the end of their first migration, they are brown and white, and as they enter their first spring, their plumage is white with black wing tips.

Life span: Up to 24 years in the wild

HABITAT

Whooping cranes winter on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge's 22,500 acres of salt flats and marshes. The area's coastal prairie rolls gently here and is dotted with swales and ponds. They summer and nest in poorly drained wetlands in Canada's Northwest Territories at Wood Buffalo National Park.

BEHAVIOR

Whooping cranes begin their fall migration south to Texas in mid-September and begin the spring migration north to Canada in late March or early April. They mate for life, but will accept a new mate if one dies. The mated pair shares brooding duties; either the male or the female is always on the nest. The hatchlings will stay with their parents throughout their first winter, and separate when the spring migration begins. The sub-adults form groups and travel together.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- Whooping cranes live in "families" with two adult birds, a male and a female, and one or two of their young. Whooping cranes migrate more than 2,400 miles a year.
- As many as 1,400 whooping cranes migrated across North America in the mid-1800s. By the late 1930s, the Aransas population was down to just 18 birds. Because of well-coordinated efforts to protect habitat and the birds themselves, the population is slowly increasing. In 1993, the population stood at 112. In the spring of 2002, it is estimated that there were 173 whoopers—a small, but important increase.
- Today, three populations exist: one in the Kissimmee Prairie of Florida, the only migratory population at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, and a very small captive-bred population in Wisconsin.

WHOOPING CRANES AND PEOPLE

Whooping cranes are protected in Canada, the United States and Mexico. Because some of their habitat is federally protected, the land is managed to preserve the animals. The greatest threats to whooping cranes are man-made: power lines, illegal hunting, and habitat loss. Because the Gulf International Waterway goes through their habitat area, the cranes are susceptible to chemical spills and other petroleum-related contamination. Public awareness and support are critical to whooping cranes' survival as a species.