

Nature Notes, Sept 2023

The Flight and Plight of the Whooping Crane

By Jim Lee

It's that time of the year when one of our most majestic yet endangered birds, the whooping crane (*Grus americana*), begins to make its annual migratory trek from its summer breeding grounds back to its wintering territories further south.

The whooping crane is the tallest bird in North America (up to 1.5 m), has one of the largest wingspans (2-2.3 m), and can weigh up to 7 kg. They are also long-lived birds, reaching 22-30 years in the wild. While the adults are a beautiful pure white with distinctive black wing tips, visible in flight, young cranes are typically greyish-white to reddish-cinnamon in colour. The whooping crane gets its name from one of its most distinctive calls - a loud, bugle-like note that it makes to advertise its breeding territory to other cranes.

The whooping crane, often considered to be a symbol of endangered species worldwide, was pushed to the brink of extinction because of a severe loss of habitat and unregulated hunting. The original population is estimated to have been 10000+ before European settlement of the continent, dropping to around 1300 birds by 1870. Its population further dipped as low as 14 adult birds in the early 1900's; in 1941, the total number of individuals in the world was 23 (21 in the wild and 2 in captivity).

Canada is home to 100% of the naturally occurring global breeding population of whooping cranes. This self-sustaining population breeds every summer in a unique wetland along the Alberta/ Northwest Territories border (in what is now Wood Buffalo National Park) and winters in marshes in and around Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the southeastern coast of Texas. Part of the reason for its low numbers is that although each mating couple produces two eggs every year, typically only one hatchling will survive. During migration, the cranes rest and feed in a variety of wetlands and croplands along a very narrow migration corridor. Fortunately for us, part of this corridor lies just north of Saskatoon, making this one of the best places to see them. Fall migration begins in mid-September with birds spending from 1-5



Whooping cranes show their black wing tips as they take flight, after feeding in a harvested grain field north of Saskatoon. Photo by Blair McCann

weeks in south-central Saskatchewan fattening up on waste grain in stubble fields. During migration, they can fly up to 750 km per day and up to 10 h on a single flight.

You may be aware of conservation efforts to save the whooping crane. These efforts required international collaboration (between Canada and the US) and had to be multipronged in scope, involving an extensive captive breeding program and wetland management. Since the dark days of the first half of the 20th century, these conservation efforts have led to a limited recovery. In 2020, it was estimated that about 677 birds were living in the wild, in addition to another 177 birds in captivity, bringing the total population globally to just over 850.

Despite the conservation efforts, the threat of extinction still remains. Natural events such as hurricanes, severe droughts, and fires can result in habitat destruction. Natural predators such as bears, wolves, foxes, and other birds prey on both the eggs and fledglings. Human development continues to be a significant threat, through habitat loss, collisions with power lines during migration, and coastal oil spills. Illegal hunting also remains a problem, particularly in the US, where it is estimated that 20% of crane deaths are due to shootings.

We are very fortunate to be close to the narrow pathway that whooping cranes use during their fall migration, and the Saskatoon Nature Society organizes members-only fall trips each year to view this awe-inspiring, endangered bird.

Jim Lee is President of the Saskatoon Nature Society.