

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center Whooping Crane Restoration Ecology Team



HISTORY: In 1941, only 21 whooping cranes existed. Though the wild flock increased to 44 by 1966, the species needed the insurance of a captive flock. The federal program began in 1962-63 at the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge and moved to Patuxent in 1966 with one whooping crane. Canada and the United States built Patuxent's flock by taking one egg from two-egg nests in Wood Buffalo National Park. There are now more than 120 whoopers preserved in captivity and over 170 in the wild flock.

DESCRIPTION: The rarest of all cranes, the whooping crane is America's tallest bird. This magnificent 5-foot-tall wading bird is pure white except for black primary feathers, black facial markings, a bright red crown, and dark legs. Gold eyes and a dark-colored beak add to its distinctive markings.

CAPTIVE FLOCK: Patuxent's flock consists of over 60 birds. This self-sufficient colony has started two other breeding colonies and contributes two-thirds of the whoopers released into the wild. Each pair of cranes at Patuxent averages 3 chicks per year, higher than any other facility, or wild pairs who produce only 1 chick a year. In 2000, Patuxent fledged 32 whoopers.

CAPTIVE PROPAGATION AND MIGRATION PROJECT: Since 1993, Patuxent has participated in the reintroduction program to establish a nonmigratory flock in Florida. There are now over 80 whoopers in Florida. In 2001, as part of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, Patuxent is participating in developing a flock that will migrate from central Wisconsin to Chassahowitzka, near Tampa, Florida. The partnership plans to release whoopers trained to follow an ultra-light aircraft to establish a second migratory flock.

GENETICS: Patuxent is a repository for whooping crane genetic material. By preserving whooper semen samples through cryopreservation, Patuxent safeguards the species against catastrophic loss and studies ways to better understand the whooper's genetic structure.

NEW PROJECTS AND RESEARCH:

Patuxent also conducts research on ways of improving whooper propagation, monitoring of wild populations, survival of released birds, and veterinary care.

NEED FOR VOLUNTEERS: Patuxent depends on volunteers for a variety of tasks. Opportunities in chick-rearing, husbandry tasks, and observing released birds in the field are often available. Further information can be obtained through the website:

www.pwrc.usgs.gov/whoopers

