



News Release

Public Affairs Office
PO Box 1306
Albuquerque, NM 87103
505/248-6911
505/248-6915 (Fax)

Southwest Region (Arizona • New Mexico • Oklahoma • Texas) <http://southwest.fws.gov>

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Contacts: Elizabeth Slown 505-248-6909 or National Whooping Crane Coordinator Tom Stehn 361-286-3559

WHOOPING CRANE RECOVERY PLAN REVISED

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has revised the Recovery Plan for the endangered whooping crane. The Recovery Plan provides objectives and actions needed to change the crane's status from endangered to threatened and ultimately recover the species so that it no longer requires the protection of the Endangered Species Act. This third revision to the Recovery Plan was developed by an international team of experts and interested parties from the United States and Canada, and has been adopted by both countries as the roadmap to recover the species.

In the United States, the whooping crane was listed as endangered in 1970, and critical habitat was designated in 1978. In Canada, it was designated as endangered in 1978. The current recovery goal is to reclassify (downlist) the species from endangered to threatened status.

The recovery strategy includes: protecting breeding, wintering, and migration habitat; protecting and facilitating the growth of the current wild population that migrates from Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas; establishing two additional self-sustaining populations of whooping cranes in the wild in North America; and maintaining a genetically healthy captive population.

Downlisting can be achieved when: (1) there are a minimum of 40 productive pairs in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population (AWBP) and 25 productive pairs in each of two additional self-sustaining populations, *or* there are 100 productive pairs in the AWBP and 30 productive pairs in a second self-sustaining population, *or* there are 250 productive pairs in the AWBP; *and* (2) there are at least 21 productive pairs in the captive population. A productive pair is defined as a pair that nests regularly and has fledged offspring.

“While the whooping crane still faces a number of threats, we believe that recovery is within our grasp,” said Benjamin N. Tuggle, Ph.D, Regional Director for the Service’s Southwest Regional Office. “Because of the dedication of many individuals and organizations in the U.S. and Canada, this species has made a remarkable comeback. Our recovery plan builds on that success. With that continued partnership and this new roadmap to recovery, future generations will have the opportunity to appreciate this magnificent bird in the wild.”

Growing from a low of only 21 birds in 1941, the total estimated number of whooping cranes today is 485, with 145 in captivity. They occur only in North America, and currently exist in the wild at three locations: the self-sustaining AWBP, an eastern U.S. population reintroduced beginning in 2001, and a

non-migratory population in central Florida. Captive populations are maintained at nine sites. Historic population declines resulted from habitat destruction, shooting, and displacement by human-related activities. Current threats include limited genetics of the population, loss and degradation of migration stopover habitat, collisions with power lines, degradation of coastal habitat, and potential chemical spills.

With adults approaching five feet in height, the whooping crane is the tallest, and one of the rarest birds in North America. Adult birds have snow-white plumage with black wingtips. Cranes are known for their longevity and life-long pair bonds. Wild birds are known to live nearly 30 years, while captive whooping cranes live 35-40 years.

The whooping crane breeds, migrates, winters and forages in a variety of habitats, including coastal and inland marshes, lakes, ponds, wet meadows, rivers, and agricultural fields. In the summer and winter, whooping cranes stay within a 50-mile range. The 2,400-mile long migration corridor for the AWBP is about 150 miles wide. These birds migrate for one to three months each spring and fall through prairie states and provinces, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, eastern Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Low numbers, slow reproductive potential, and limited genetic diversity characterize the wild whooping crane population. The possibility exists that a stochastic, catastrophic event could eliminate the wild, self-sustaining AWBP. Therefore, the principal strategy of the draft revised Whooping Crane Recovery Plan is to augment and increase the wild population by reducing threats, and through the establishment of two additional and discrete populations. Offspring from the captive breeding population will be released into the wild to establish the populations in Florida and the eastern United States. Reproduction by released birds and their offspring will ultimately result in self-sustaining wild populations. The continued growth of the AWBP and the two additional populations will also stem the loss of genetic diversity.

Interested persons can obtain a copy of the revised plan on a compact disc from the Whooping Crane Coordinator, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 100, Austwell, Texas 77950, or download it from the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/endangered> (species search, whooping crane).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies. Visit the Service's website at <http://www.fws.gov>.

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