



## ENDANGERED SPECIES

Status: Federal Endangered  
State Endangered

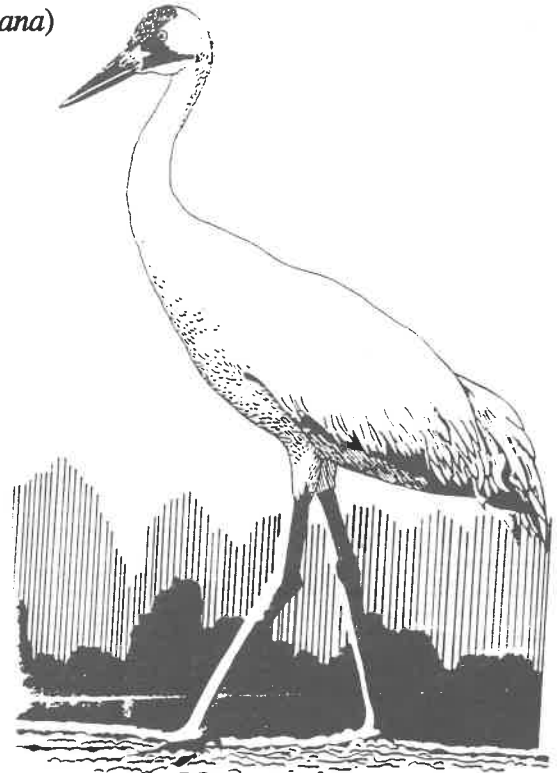
# WHOOPING CRANE

(*Grus americana*)

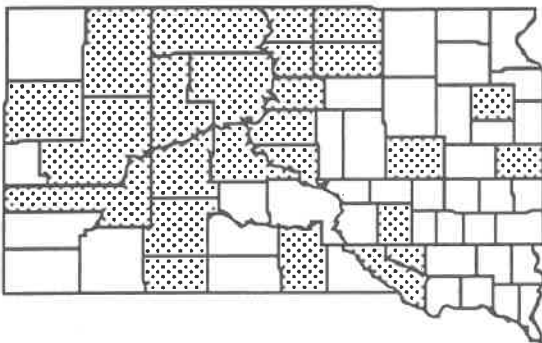
## Description

Whooping cranes are the largest wading bird species in North America, standing four to five feet (1.2 to 1.5 meters) tall with a wingspan of seven feet (2.1 meters). The species is named in English for its distinctive call. The Lakota name for white cranes is *pehaŋska*. The adult "whooper" is white with black wing tips and red facial skin. The legs and feet are usually black. In flight, the whooping crane extends its neck and legs.

One similar species in our area is the sandhill crane, distinguishable by its smaller size and uniform gray (or brown, if immature) coloration. Great egrets and white pelicans are two other species often mistaken for whoopers. Pelicans are also white and have black-tipped wings, but their large yellow bill is very distinctive. The great egret differs from whoopers by its smaller size, lack of any black marking, and by



its habit of flying with its head and neck pulled in toward the body.



Whooping Crane Migration Sightings

## Distribution

Whooping cranes once ranged throughout most of North America, and wintered primarily in Louisiana. For many years, no one knew where they bred until, in 1954, a pilot sighted a pair of whooping cranes in Wood Buffalo National Park in Northwest Territories, Canada. Today, most whoopers make a semiannual migration of 2,500 miles, nesting in Canada and wintering in the salt flats and marshes of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. In

South Dakota, whoopers sometimes can be sighted as spring and fall migrants along the Missouri River drainage and in the western part of the state. There have been rare sightings in eastern South Dakota.

## Natural History

Whoopers choose freshwater marshes, wetlands, and shallow river areas for feeding and resting during their migrations. They mate for life and build their nests in thick new vegetation of cattails, bulrushes or sedges in *sloughs*, lake margins or wilderness areas in northern Canada. The females usually lay two eggs.

Whoopers feed on both animals and plants. Food items include grasshoppers and crickets as well as berries and acorns. They also eat crabs, clams and amphibians. Whooping cranes are found in small flocks of two to seven individuals and take flight quickly when disturbed.

## Significance

The recovery of the beautiful whooping crane is a dramatic example of how people can successfully preserve the vanishing creatures of our world. Cranes have considerable cultural and religious significance to many people around the world. Examples include the Japanese and many American Indian groups. The Ojibwa people have 5 family clans named after animals they consider sacred, one being the crane.

## Conservation Measures

Whooping cranes are particularly vulnerable to extinction because of their long migrations and small population. Loss of stopover habitat suitable for whooping crane use is one cause for concern. During migration, whooping cranes have been killed by collisions with power lines. Occasionally, hunters have killed whoopers, which they mis-

took for sandhill cranes, a species that can be shot legally during hunting season. By the early 1970's, all known wild whooping cranes were in one small flock. The species, therefore, is especially vulnerable to disease, severe weather, or other hazards.

In 1941, the population was at an all time low of 16 birds, all wintering in Aransas, Texas. The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge had been created in 1937 to help protect the wintering cranes. Whooping cranes were not listed as federally endangered until 1967. Protection by the Endangered Species Act of the United States authorizes payment of up to \$2,500 for information leading to the conviction of any person shooting or trying to take a whooping crane.

In 1975, with whooping cranes still on the brink of extinction, an intensive restoration program was developed to establish a new wild flock of whoopers. Between 1975 and 1982, scientists removed 127 eggs from whooping crane nests in Canada and placed them in nests of sandhill cranes in Gray's Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Idaho. This foster flock wintered in Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. By 1987, 150 whooping cranes were in the wild in two flocks, one wintering in New Mexico, one wintering in Texas. The total population, including captive birds, was about 300. Unfortunately, some whoopers raised by sandhills did not recognize other whoopers as potential mates. For this reason and because of high mortality rates and low birth rates in the foster flock, the cross fostering program was discontinued.

Because long distance migration is dangerous for whoopers, efforts are now underway to establish a wild, non-migratory flock in Florida. Research continues with the population of captive-reared birds in preparation for their eventual release into the wild.

## References

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- South Dakota Ornithologists Union, 1991. *The Birds of South Dakota*. 2nd Edition. NSU Press. Aberdeen, SD.
- World Wildlife Fund, 1990. *The Official World Wildlife Fund Guide to Endangered Species*. Beacham Publishing, Inc. Washington, D.C.

## Selected Resource for Teachers

- Kids, Cranes and Conservation*, activity guides and videos from International Crane Foundation, E-11376 Shady Lane Rd. Baraboo, WI. 53913, grades 3-12.
- Flight of the Whooping Crane*, video from National Geographic Society, Wash., D.C., grades 4-12.
- Migratory Birds*, activity guide from National Institute for Urban Wildlife., Columbia, MD., grades 4-7.
- The Whooping Crane, A Comeback Story*, book by Dorothy Hinshaw published by Clarion, 1988., grades 4-8.

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