



International Crane Foundation

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INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION

# The ICF Bugle

Inspiring a Global Community

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## It's About Water!

Rich Beilfuss, ICF Interim CEO & President

**The Whooping Crane, among the rarest of all North American birds, is in trouble.** And so are the people and wildlife in Texas and around the world that depend on freshwater inflows from increasingly water-stressed river basins.

The last naturally occurring population of Whooping Cranes in the world breeds at Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada and migrates more than 2,500 miles to spend the winter on the coastal wetlands near and within Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. This population, called the Aransas-Wood Buffalo flock, has been slowly recovering from a low of only 15 birds in 1941 to about 270 birds today.

On their Texas wintering grounds, Whooping Cranes feed almost exclusively on blue crabs when crabs are abundant. The Aransas coastal marshes provide excellent habitat for blue crabs if salinity levels, determined primarily by the amount of freshwater inflows

from the Guadalupe River basin to its bays and estuaries, remain moderate. When freshwater inflows are reduced, due to drought or upstream water diversions, fewer crabs are available for Whooping Cranes. In such cases, the cranes' physical state weakens, resulting in higher mortality in Texas and low reproductive success on breeding grounds in Canada the following spring.

During the winter of 2008-09, a prolonged drought in southern Texas reduced freshwater flows in the Guadalupe River basin. Water rights holders continued to divert upstream waters, resulting in a much longer period of very high salinity levels than would have occurred under natural conditions. When the cranes arrived from their long migration, many former feeding areas were either hypersaline or had few crabs. Some cranes were forced to move in search of food and drinking water, and others died on their territories. That winter 23 cranes perished, or 8.5% of the population.

*Continued on page 2*

*An Evening with the Cranes*

June 19, 5 - 8 p.m.

★ Enjoy wines, hors d'oeuvres & live music from around the world

★ Meet ICF Co-founder George Archibald, ICF Scientists & Educators

★ View all 15 species of the world's cranes & learn about global crane conservation

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All proceeds benefit global conservation programs




Whooping Crane at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. Photo by Mike Sloat



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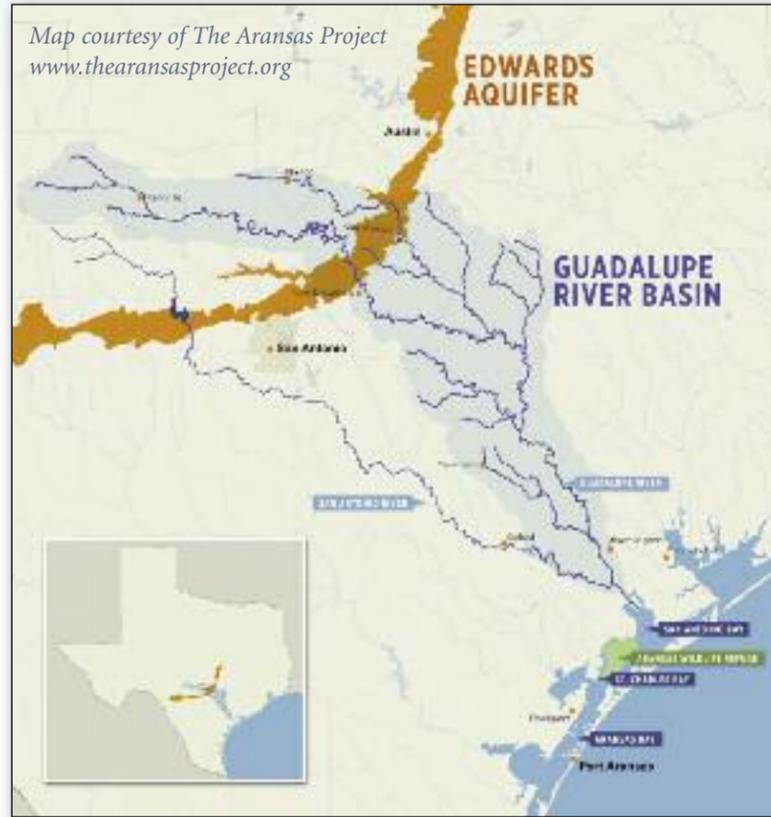
Droughts are a natural phenomenon, and the Whooping Crane population can recover from such setbacks when these conditions occur infrequently. However, the state of Texas is granting permits for upstream water diversions from the Guadalupe basin to such an extent that the severity, frequency, and duration of drought conditions on the coast will increase dramatically in the coming years. As a result, scientists expect increasing mortality of cranes and possible extinction of the flock, unless a more sustainable approach to water management can be realized.

Many efforts have tried to address this problem. In 2000, the San Marcos River Foundation filed an application to secure water rights to ensure that enough fresh water in the Guadalupe River would discharge to the Aransas Bay. The permit was denied on the basis that state law did not allow the appropriation of water for “instream” (non-consumptive) flows. In 2007, Texas Senate Bill 3 established a process to implement environmental flows in all Texas river basins.

Unfortunately, the process does not address existing water permits, only future permits, and in the case of the Guadalupe and other rivers that already have more permitted water use than water in the river, this legislation provides no future for the coastal marshes. A Recovery Implementation Program is underway to determine sustainable pumping levels for the Edwards Aquifer, which provides water to 1.7 million people in South Central Texas and sustains up to 80% of Guadalupe basin flows during droughts, but this process has no jurisdiction over river diversions downstream of the headwater springs. The South Central Texas Regional Planning Group, which regulates the flows of the Guadalupe River, includes no representatives for downstream coastal interests, and serves to promote large-scale water diversions driven by unrealistic expectations for future water availability and use.

With no other available legal or public recourse, The Aransas Project, a Texas-based non-profit organization, recently filed a federal lawsuit against the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, the agency responsible for permitting water use. The lawsuit charges violations against the Endangered Species Act for illegal harm and harassment of Whooping Cranes that resulted from the current water rights permit program. The lawsuit seeks to guarantee minimum water flows in the Guadalupe basin to ensure the long-term survival of the Whooping Cranes. These minimum flows are also essential to maintaining the productivity of economically important and ecologically characteristic sport and commercial fish and shellfish species and the food webs that support them.

In our 37 year history, ICF has never engaged directly in a lawsuit.



Map courtesy of The Aransas Project www.thearansasproject.org

Our approach to the conservation of cranes, and the ecosystems and river basins on which they depend, has always focused on bringing together diverse interests to find win-win solutions. Although we are not a direct litigant in this case, ICF has joined The Aransas Project because we support its efforts as the last, best chance for reasonable, sustainable, and environmentally-sound water management in the Guadalupe River basin for people and wildlife.

Many of us may think back, with trepidation, to the extremely divisive debate over the fate of the endangered Northern Spotted Owl in the 1990s. While conservationists viewed the spotted owl as a surrogate and flagship for protecting old growth forests, the timber industry framed the argument as “people vs. owls” and blamed the Endangered Species Act for causing economic hardship in the Pacific Northwest.

The Aransas Project is different. It is a diverse alliance of citizens, organizations, businesses, and municipalities that depend on river flows for their livelihoods, and seek responsible water management of the Guadalupe River basin. Members include the Aransas, Rockport, and Fulton municipalities, the Aransas County Republican Party and Democratic Club, numerous Texas fishing, hunting, recreation, and tourism businesses, as well as local, regional, national, and other international conservation organizations. We seek an alternative to the divisive notion of “cranes vs. people” by clearly demonstrating how sustainable water management can benefit upstream and downstream users, as well as endangered Whooping Cranes and other denizens of the coastal bays and marshes, for future generations.

In addition to participating in The Aransas Project, ICF aims to undertake new research and outreach activities in Texas to support the long-term survival of Whooping Cranes on their wintering grounds. Our research will include new studies of Whooping Crane energetics and the ecology of blue crabs to improve our management of cranes and their habitats during crisis periods. Our outreach activities will focus on water users throughout the Guadalupe basin, especially the upstream ranchers, farmers, nuclear power interests, municipal authorities, and others, and their options for water management that can meet their needs while sustaining downstream livelihoods and healthy coastal ecosystems.

In 2002, the organization *American Rivers* named the Guadalupe one of the 10 most endangered rivers in the United States. Perhaps the Whooping Crane, recently back from the brink of extinction, can serve as a flagship for the survival of the Guadalupe River, and a new way of thinking about sustainable water management in Texas and throughout the country.

## Charging Ahead for Whooping Cranes

### Dear Friends,

In late March, a small group of friends and I visited the great plains of Nebraska where along the shallow waters of the Platte River some 500,000 Sandhill Cranes pause to rest and feed each spring as they migrate north, creating one of Earth’s most remarkable wildlife spectacles.

Perhaps equally impressive is that these birds nearly vanished from large parts of their range, including Wisconsin, in the 1930s due to overhunting and loss of wetlands and grasslands. Today, however, Sandhills are the most abundant of all 15 CRANE species, effectively adapting to feed on waste grains and insects in agricultural fields.

The United States’ other native crane, the Whooping Crane, experienced even greater declines around that same period and has yet to recover. The global population for this endangered bird stands near 500 – with 270 in the flock that migrates between Texas and Canada, 100 in the reintroduced migratory population of Wisconsin and southeastern states, and the balance in zoos and breeding centers (including about 30 at ICF).

During the March Nebraska trip, we were very fortunate to see two of these magnificent white birds trailing winter’s retreat north. For a number of my travel companions, these were first-ever wild Whooping Crane sightings. These two cranes survived the food shortages in Texas during the very difficult winter of 2008-09.

My friend and photographer Mike Sloat visited Aransas before migration and captured the spectacular series of images at right. Each Whooping Crane pair defends hundreds of acres of wetlands as their personal real estate. With “whooping” duets that carry miles and dramatic “charge threats” (pictured), Whoopers protect fragile food resources for fast-growing chicks.

As we are seeing in Texas, suitable habitats for the cranes – sufficient in size and food availability – are very threatened. But there is hope for the species. Like the Whooping Crane in these images, ICF and partners are charging ahead to save these birds and the delicate ecosystems in which they are found, vital to wildlife and people.

In addition to our work with The Aransas Project mentioned on the preceding page, and along the flyway north, we are using radio and satellite transmitters together with field observations to gain a better understanding of the movement patterns, unique habitat requirements and specific threats facing Whooping Cranes. These findings will improve crane conservation efforts and help identify new opportunities for their protection.



Photos by Mike Sloat

Because of the extreme vulnerability of Whooping Cranes – existing in one small self-sustaining population – we continue efforts with partners to reintroduce a second, distinct population to reduce the likelihood of extinction for the species. This work, begun in 1999, helps fulfill the bi-national species recovery plan created by the U.S. and Canada. Today, approximately 100 cranes in this experimental population successfully migrate between the upper Midwest and southeastern states.

This flock also faces challenges. Large numbers of black flies have driven cranes from their nests in and around Wisconsin’s Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Already this season, nine nests were abandoned after these bird-specific flies emerged. Because of an early spring, we remain hopeful for re-nesting. We also continue studying the nesting behaviors and habitat uses of the cranes while supporting research led by Dr. Peter Adler, the world’s foremost expert on black flies, to identify potential solutions to this problem. A recent pilot study employing a benign natural substance to reduce fly larvae showed positive early results.

At our world headquarters in Baraboo, ICF’s aviculturists are working diligently to breed our captive Whooping Cranes. We plan to raise and release 10 or more chicks into the wild again this fall. You will be able to see some of this activity live this summer over monitors in our Donnelley Family Education Center. ICF is also taking a lead role in strengthening overall data management and sharing of information within the partnership and beyond.

So, truly, we are *charging ahead* and remain optimistic that together – through partnership, sound science, strategic actions, and your continued support – we can secure a future graced by Whooping Cranes and healthy wetlands for all.

Please consider a special gift at this time to help us *Charge Ahead for Whooping Cranes* with your support for these critical, diverse efforts to save these magnificent birds. I also invite you to consider becoming a *Whooper Keeper* with a gift of \$1,000 or more. To acknowledge your gift of this amount or greater, your name or special tribute will be added to an individual recognition plate attached to a bench within ICF’s celebrated Whooping Crane exhibit on our campus in Wisconsin.

Thank you for joining me in doing all we can to save Whooping Cranes. We hope you will visit us soon to see our resident Whoopers, explore our new *Spirit of Africa* exhibit, and to experience the world’s 15 species of cranes.

Warmest regards always,

**George Archibald, Co-founder, Senior Conservationist**

# Crane News *Around the World*



Blue Crane. Photo by Mark Anderson

## Blue Cranes Return to the Wild!

Kerryn Morrison, Manager–African Crane Conservation Program

Several Blue Cranes, the national bird of South Africa, were recently removed from the wild in the Eastern Cape in South Africa for the illegal trade market. Four of these cranes (1 adult and 3 chicks) were released back into the wild shortly after their confiscation. Each bird was banded with a unique leg band color combination in order to monitor their movements. The chicks have fledged successfully and are now keeping close contact with a wild family group in the area. Reports are that all four cranes are still doing well.



Photo by Bradley Gibbons

## Black-necked Cranes Increase at Ruoergai Marshes, China

Li Fengshan, China Program Coordinator

Sponsored by the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund and the Hamill Family Foundation, ICF working with Chinese colleagues reported the largest number of Black-necked Cranes found up to now at Ruoergai Marshes during a survey from June 24 to July 10, 2009. The Ruoergai Marshes extend across the frontier area between Sichuan and Gansu Provinces in the upper Yellow River Basin on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau (3,400 to 3,900 m altitude). The marshes form



Two women working near their tent at Ruoergai with their yaks in the background. People in Ruoergai are still practicing traditional livestock grazing. Still, overgrazing has become one of the challenges to the survival of Black-necked Cranes and wetland ecosystems in Ruoergai. Photo by Qian Fawen

the largest high altitude wetland in the world – approximately 1 million hectares of peat bogs, sedge marshes, lakes and wet grasslands, interspersed with low hills and drier grasslands. Our survey involved ICF, Kunming Institute of Zoology, Ruoergai National Nature Reserve, Sichuan Wildlife Conservation and Management Station of Sichuan Forestry Department, and other nature reserves in the greater Ruoergai area. We found 728 Black-necked Cranes, including 47 birds in families with one or two chicks. A single largest flock had 120 birds. We calculated the area of suitable wetlands covered by our survey team, through use of GIS technology, as well as total area of wetlands at Ruoergai. Based on these calculations and our survey results, we estimated a total population of Black-necked Cranes of 2,635 at Ruoergai. Two decades ago, Black-necked Cranes were estimated less than 650 in Ruoergai. Our data will help guide restoration and management for these marshes, that are threatened by heavy grazing, water diversions, and climate change. The Chinese Government has committed substantial funding to protect Ruoergai.



A Black-necked Crane roaming in the grassland at Ruoergai. Photo by Qian Fawen

## Lesser Sandhill Crane Migration from Homer, Alaska

Gary Ivey, ICF Western Crane Conservation Manager

In August 2008, ten Lesser Sandhill Cranes near Homer, Alaska were marked with satellite transmitters to track their movements during migration and winter. The study was funded by a grant to the International Crane Foundation from Ed Bailey and Nina Faust and was conducted by Gary Ivey, ICF's Western Crane Conservation Manager, with assistance from Caroline Herziger. Oregon State University's Dept. of Fisheries and Wildlife and the USGS's Western Ecological Research Center are partners in this project. You can access detailed information on the movements of these birds since they were marked on Google Earth at the following web link:  
[www.werc.usgs.gov/sattrack/cranes/maps.html](http://www.werc.usgs.gov/sattrack/cranes/maps.html).



Pair of Lesser Sandhill Cranes near Homer, Alaska. Photo by Caroline Herziger

## A Note from the Chairman of ICF's Board of Directors

This past March, Jim Hook resigned from his position as CEO and President of the International Crane Foundation where he has served since mid 2006. During his tenure, Jim applied his considerable skills, talents, and enthusiasm to help ICF successfully achieve its mission. Jim Hook came to ICF with a broad business background. He improved financial management and reporting and led ICF through the challenges related to the recent economic downturn. Jim led ICF's involvement in the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) for the reintroduction of Whooping Cranes to the eastern United States. Jim also worked to enhance the physical infrastructure of ICF's world headquarters including the development and construction of *Spirit of Africa*, the first new live crane exhibit at ICF in 14 years. We are grateful to Jim for all he accomplished and for his commitment to ICF's future.

During this transition period, Dr. Richard Beilfuss, ICF Vice President - Programs, has agreed to serve as ICF's Interim CEO and President. Rich has a long history with ICF and extensive

experience in conservation management. Rich first joined ICF in 1988 as a restoration intern, and served for 13 years as ICF's Director of Africa Programs. He has played an instrumental role in ICF's successful conservation actions in more than a dozen countries in Africa and Asia. Rich has a Ph.D. in Land Resources (Hydrology and Wetland Ecology) and is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After a recent four-year hiatus, when he served as Director of Scientific Services for the Gorongosa Restoration Project in Mozambique, Rich returned to ICF in September of 2009. He will serve with full authority as ICF's CEO and President until the Board completes its search and a new CEO and President is selected later this year.

The Board, along with ICF's very talented and committed staff, are excited about the year ahead and ICF's future as a worldwide leader in the conservation of cranes and the environments in which they live. While the challenges are many, together we are making a difference. Thanks to each and every one of you for all you do for the cranes.

Joe Branch, Chair of the Board of Directors

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The ICF Bugle is the quarterly newsletter for members of the International Crane Foundation. ICF was founded in 1973 by Ronald Sauey, Ph.D (1948 - 1987) and George Archibald, Ph.D.

Editor: Betsy Didrickson

Bugle comments or questions? Please write Betsy at [Bugle@savingcranes.org](mailto:Bugle@savingcranes.org) or P.O. Box 447, Baraboo, WI 53913

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# Community-based Conservation a Lifeline for African Cranes

By Osiman Mabachi, Community Projects Coordinator, ICF/EWT Partnership for African Cranes



*Peaceful co-existence of cranes and people in Uganda. Photo by Jim Harris*

**T**he distribution of sizeable populations of the Wattled and Grey Crowned Cranes in Africa coincides with communal lands with no specific regulations for the protection of the elegant birds. Future viability of these populations largely depends on successful engagement of primary users of wetlands and grasslands that the cranes also depend on for breeding and feeding. The African Crane Conservation Program of the ICF/EWT Partnership is working with environmental organizations in Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe to promote community-based conservation in areas with cranes.

These initiatives are designed to integrate two goals often considered mutually exclusive – conservation and development. The start of a new decade is an opportunity for crane conservation practitioners and stakeholders not only to reflect on their achievements to date, but to ponder possible scenarios regarding the status of African cranes over the next decade. Because the last review of the population status for African cranes revealed alarming declines in both the Grey Crowned and Wattled Crane over the past three decades, we need to reflect on how the most promising solution at this time, community-based conservation, can contribute to stabilizing

crane populations and maintaining the viability of crane habitats.

To understand the community-based conservation work now underway in Africa, it is worthwhile to highlight what prompted the inception of these projects. The Kipsaina Crane Conservation Project began in the early 1990s in response to adverse impacts of human settlements and agriculture on wetlands that supported thousands of Grey Crowned Cranes in the western districts of Kenya. In Uganda, where an 80% decline in the Grey Crowned Crane population since the 1970s has been reported, efforts to save the cranes through community engagement have been ongoing since the late 1990s.

In Zimbabwe's Driefontein Grasslands, an area that contains over 80% of the country's total population of the Wattled Crane, community-based crane conservation was instituted as an immediate response to threats to cranes and their habitats posed by the government land reform program. This reform had resulted in dramatic land use changes as commercial cattle ranches were converted to subsistence farmlands in 2000. Successive projects in these countries have been designed to reduce wetland disturbance and fragmentation by addressing the expressed needs of the local



*Jimmy Muheebwa has involved local students near one of his project sites in a Crane Monitoring and Conservation Club in Uganda. Photo by Jim Harris*

communities and mitigating direct and indirect threats to cranes.

A key success of the community-based crane conservation program has been the establishment of groups comprising individuals mandated by fellow community members to lead in integrating crane conservation and community development. These local institutions range from fully-fledged and registered community-based organizations like the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group in Kenya to various groups called Site Support Groups that play a key role mobilizing other community members in Zimbabwe and Uganda.

One common attribute among these institutions is that they act as entry points that enable conservation agencies to mainstream crane and wetland conservation in the day-to-day lives of local communities. They also help the communities identify shared social, economic and environmental challenges which in turn help define common goals and agendas for action. The ICF/EWT Partnership and its in-country partners continue to facilitate capacity building activities to enable communities not only to improve their livelihoods but also play their part in monitoring cranes and wetlands in their localities.

Subsistence and semi-commercial farming in wetlands is a source of livelihood for thousands of people residing in crane areas. Unfortunately, wetland cultivation is one of the causes for the reduced availability and viability of crane habitats in Africa. To address this predicament, alternative livelihood options are being promoted to reduce the communities' overdependence on wetlands. This approach should lead to less encroachment into wetlands.

In Masaka, Kabale and Bushenyi districts of Uganda, community groups are engaged in small stock production and horticulture as



*Wattled Cranes foraging in Driefontein, Zimbabwe. Photo by Togarasei Fakarayi*

alternatives to food production and income generating enterprises that are not wetland-friendly. In Zimbabwe, two communal gardening projects involving 100 households were established with a view to securing marshes and grasslands used by Wattled and Grey Crowned Crane. In Kipsaina, the community is raising indigenous and exotic tree seedlings for rehabilitating the Saiwa Swamp, a breeding site for 15 Grey Crowned Crane pairs, as well as to generate income. These initial activities have built trust with communities and

paved the way for more intensive conservation activities. The scope for expanding and building on the successes so far is limitless.

This year will see the intensification of community-based crane monitoring as local volunteers from Driefontein and Kipsaina will be trained and encouraged to build a network of crane monitors, a system that is proving to be successful in Bushenyi, Kabale and Masaka. This innovative way of generating community interest is serving to dispel the misconception that monitoring can only be meaningful if done by scientists.

Though these projects provide hope for cranes as a new decade begins, several hurdles need to be

overcome. To guide effective conservation, we need to update the population status and distribution of cranes in the three countries. To have significant impact, we need to scale up our efforts. Plans are at an advanced stage to expand the geographical focus of the community-based conservation program through new projects in Rwanda and South Africa. The good news is we have already learned how to court communities at the inception stage of community-based projects – and we continue to gain insights every year on how to sustain active participation. Special acknowledgment goes to our partners in Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe – the Kipsaina Crane and Wetland Conservation Group, Nature Uganda and BirdLife Zimbabwe.



*Bob Dohmen (Africa Program sponsor), Kerry Morrison (Manager-African Crane Conservation Program), Jimmy Muheebwa (Uganda Crane Project Officer) and poultry farmer inspecting eggs produced under a project supported by the ICF/EWT Partnership. Photo by Jim Harris*