



Whooping Crane Reintroductions

Whooping Cranes are large, charismatic birds that serve as powerful ambassadors for the conservation of wetlands and the freshwater resources that sustain our world and ourselves. The Whooping Crane, however, also is one of the rarest and most threatened bird species in North America. Dropping to a low of fewer than 20 individuals in 1941, Whooping Cranes are slowly coming back from the brink of extinction. Today, over 849 Whooping Cranes exist in the entire world. The largest wild, and only self-sustaining, population breeds in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada and winters in and around the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas.



As part of our commitment to saving Whooping Cranes in the wild, the International Crane Foundation serves as a leader in reintroducing Whooping Cranes in the Eastern United States. Three reintroduced populations include a non-migratory flock in Florida of about 14 birds, a non-migratory flock in southern Louisiana, numbering around 70 individuals, and a third, migratory population in the eastern U.S. The eastern migratory population now numbers around 90 birds and has become a thrilling addition to our native Wisconsin landscape. The growth and security of these populations is critical to the recovery of the species and its removal from the Endangered Species list.

Yet more work is needed to ensure the future of these iconic birds. The International Crane Foundation's efforts are focused on the following urgent needs:

- ✎ The rearing and release of Whooping Crane fledglings into wild populations.
- ✎ As the Whooping Crane eastern population grows, the cranes are expanding into new areas and using new habitats for breeding, migration stopovers, and wintering. Further research and monitoring is needed to understand and safeguard the wetland and upland

habitat needs of this population and to understand and address the risks encountered by these cranes on migration.

- ✦ Illegal shootings of Whooping Cranes have emerged as a risk for the reintroduced population. Fifteen Whooping Cranes have died from gunshots in the Eastern Migratory Population since the inception of the project in 2001. The International Crane Foundation is implementing a Whooping Crane Outreach program to help communities understand that these birds are a national treasure and to encourage community efforts to prevent shootings.
- ✦ Community Outreach is a critical need across areas used by Whooping Cranes to reduce shootings, secure and protect habitat and encourage community support for Whooping Crane protection.



Photo by Ted Thousand

Our Impact

The International Crane Foundation's activities and objectives for the Whooping Crane reintroduction projects in eastern North America include captive breeding and rearing of chicks, research and monitoring of reintroduced Whooping Cranes, specialized veterinary care and education and outreach.

Captive Breeding

Through the guidance of the USFWS International Recovery Team we are

breeding and raising Whooping Cranes at the International Crane Foundation Headquarters, along with partners at other captive centers. Captive breeding and rearing of Whooping Cranes is an art and a science. Our aviculturists continue to fine-tune strategies such as careful matchmaking, artificial insemination and assessing genealogy and genetic profiles. We work in close cooperation with other captive breeding centers in North America to maintain genetic diversity, and therefore health, for both the captive flock and the reintroduced populations.

Rearing and Release

The International Crane Foundation provides chicks reared by Whooping Crane pairs at its breeding facility in Baraboo for release into Wisconsin. This method of raising chicks is called parent-rearing, which allows adult captive Whooping Crane pairs to rear chicks to fledgling age. The chicks interact

with their parents as they would in the wild. Our staff works to make sure the chicks are able to forage for natural food items, have access to water for roosting, and have the ability to take short flights in specially designed pens. In early fall, we release the parent-reared Whooping Crane chicks to Wisconsin sites that contain pairs of wild Whooping Cranes. Ideally these pairs then migrate with the chick and act as role models and guides during migration and on the wintering grounds.



The second method of raising Whooping Crane chicks is costume-rearing. These chicks are reared by our avicultural staff, who wear Whooping Crane costumes to prevent the chicks from imprinting on humans. This method allows for a greater number of chicks to be reared at one time. The staff acts as the chicks' parents and provides opportunities for chicks to develop natural behaviors critical to success in the wild such as foraging, proper roosting and development of flight skills. Once the chicks are fully fledged they are sent by plane to Louisiana for release into the non-migratory flock.

Research and Monitoring of Reintroduced Whooping Cranes

The International Crane Foundation's research aims to understand the successes and challenges of the Whooping Crane reintroduction effort. Research activities focus on three areas. These include understanding the patterns for successful reproduction in the reintroduced population, studying the habitat used by the cranes in breeding and wintering areas and investigating how rearing methods may influence the chick's development of wild behavior. These projects are of great importance to ongoing management of this reintroduced migratory population and other crane reintroduction efforts.

We monitor the eastern population of Whooping Cranes during fall migration, on their wintering grounds, and their return to Wisconsin in the spring. We study their locations and interactions with wild cranes after release. Gathering and assessing this post-release information is critical to gauging the success of the reintroduction, fine-tuning rearing and release methods and understanding the needs of this population for the future.

Specialized Veterinary Care

The International Crane Foundation strives to maintain the health of the breeding adults and reintroduced chicks at the high level needed for optimal performance, through state-of-the-art

preventative health care and emergency response programs. Our Conservation Medicine Department works with specialists at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine to provide high-quality diagnostic and medical care for our breeding cranes and for chicks reared for release. Training of veterinary students and post-graduate residents is integrated into this program to help with development of the next generation of conservation medicine experts. The veterinary team also develops research and clinical investigations to better understand and find solutions to the health problems encountered in crane reintroduction programs.

Education and Outreach

While over 650 Whooping Cranes now live in the wild, as a long-lived species their population grows slowly, meaning any mortality factors, particularly those affecting adult breeding birds, can have a major impact on long-term survival of the species. Two major concerns are illegal shootings and power line collisions.

Shootings were one of the primary historic reasons for the decline of Whooping Cranes and shootings are still listed as a primary threat to Whooping Cranes by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Whooping Crane Recovery Plan. Since 2010, 26 Whooping Cranes have been shot and killed in the United States.

In 2015, we launched a major educational initiative to engage local people throughout the breeding, migration and wintering grounds of Whooping Cranes in preventing shootings of cranes as they move through areas where they have been absent for more than a century. We are empowering citizens to become champions for Whooping Cranes in their communities and to promote protection of the wetlands on which Whooping Cranes, and so many other species depend. Our Whooping Crane Outreach program is a five year, multi-state, multi-agency initiative to provide citizens and hunters with information and tools to prevent shooting deaths of Whooping Cranes.

We also are using our citizen networks to reduce power line collision mortality by working with power companies to mark problem lines and site lines away from high-use areas. Cranes are especially vulnerable to power lines located near important breeding areas, where young cranes are less adept at maneuvering around power lines, and roosting areas, where cranes may fly in and out in darkness or during fog or other inclement weather.

Through outreach to communities where Whooping Cranes are most at risk, we aim to:



✎ Develop community pride in Whooping Cranes by promoting awareness of their endangered species status and encouraging local commitment to share lands and waters with Whooping Cranes. This includes outreach to schools and community civic organizations, social media and marketing campaigns, and wildlife and outdoor festivals.

✎ Eliminate accidental shootings by educating waterfowl hunters throughout the Whooping Crane's range to be aware of the presence of cranes, understand that they are protected species and correctly identify both juvenile and adult Whooping Cranes on the ground and in flight.

✎ Increase negative consequences of shootings by working with USFWS Law Enforcement and U.S. Department of Justice to increase penalties for individuals who shoot Whooping Cranes to deter future vandals.



✎ In addition to this targeted outreach program, more than 23,000 people visit the International Crane Foundation's campus in Baraboo each year, participating in educational programs about Whooping Cranes and the wetlands they depend on as part of their tour of the Foundation. Our campus is open to the public from April 15 through Oct. 31.

We Need Your Support

Beautiful, graceful and enchanting, Whooping Cranes are an iconic bird of North America and serve as powerful ambassadors for broad conservation issues. While one of the most threatened bird species in North America, Whooping Cranes are slowly coming back from the brink of extinction. However, shrinking habitat and threats such as illegal shootings threaten the security of the beautiful birds.

Please join us in our efforts to bring this magnificent species back from the brink of extinction.

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