



Whooping Cranes: Texas & Central Flyway

Mission

The International Crane Foundation works worldwide to conserve cranes and the ecosystems, watersheds, and flyways on which they depend. Through the charisma of cranes, the International Crane Foundation brings people together around the world to find new pathways to sustain water, land, and livelihoods.

History

International Crane Foundation co-founders George Archibald and Ronald Sauey met in 1971 at Cornell University where they studied ornithology and shared a passion for cranes and conservation. Together, they envisioned an organization that would combine research, applied science and international collaboration. In 1973, their dream became a reality, and the International Crane Foundation was founded in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

For more than four decades, the International Crane Foundation has gathered unique collaborators and led effective community-based conservation programs, research projects, and innovative captive breeding and reintroduction efforts. Today, staff work with a network of hundreds of specialists in more than 60 countries on five continents, including major regional programs in Africa, Asia, and North America. The International Crane Foundation's main campus is still in Wisconsin. In addition, the foundation has a regional base in China and offices in South Africa, Zambia, Uganda, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Texas.



Photo by Dave and Liz Smith

The Texas office focuses its work on the Whooping Crane. It is one of the rarest and most endangered bird species in North America and is the rarest of the world's 15 crane species with only 849 left on the

planet. Beautiful, graceful, and enchanting, Whooping Cranes are also an iconic bird of Texas, with the world's last naturally breeding flock using the coastal marshes of Texas as their only winter home. The International Crane Foundation is engaged in water and land protection activities, research, and outreach in Texas to secure the long-term survival of Whooping Cranes, birds that depend on healthy coastal marshes sustained by fresh water delivered from the Guadalupe-San Antonio River Basin.

The Aransas-Wood Buffalo Whooping Cranes

Whooping Cranes breed at Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park and migrate more than 3,000 miles to winter on the coastal wetlands in and around the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. This population has slowly recovered from the brink of extinction from fewer than 20 birds in 1941 to over 500 birds today.

Whooping Cranes that winter near Aransas are vital to the coastal economy and municipalities of Texas, generating several million dollars in revenue each year from tourists who travel to see these charismatic birds. The same freshwater inflows and wetlands that are critical to the Whooping Cranes' survival also sustain a wealth of economic activity along the Texas coast, including commercial and sport fisheries, shellfisheries, and recreation.

Whooping Cranes, Blue Crabs, and Healthy Texas Marshes

Whooping Crane families defend winter territories between 200 to 500 acres in size, and each territory is located along one-half to one mile of bay shoreline. These large territories support blue crabs, the cranes' primary food source in winter. However, when insufficient fresh water reaches the coast, due to drought or overuse of the rivers' waters upstream, salinity levels rise and blue crabs become scarce. Without blue crabs to eat and fresh water to drink, cranes weaken and can die or fail to produce chicks the following spring in Canada. In the winter of 2008/2009, the unrestricted use of upstream waters during a drought period led to the catastrophic death of 23 Whooping Cranes -- nearly 10 percent of the population.



Harris J, Mirande C, editors. In Preparation. Crane Conservation Strategy. International Crane Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Other threats to Whooping Crane habitat in Texas include real estate development along the coast, oil spills, and replacement of coastal marsh with mangroves due to climate change. Unless a more sustainable approach to water and coastal land management is undertaken, the Aransas-Wood Buffalo flock could decline and the species become extinct.

Ambassadors for Complex Ecosystem Sustainability

The Whooping Crane is a flagship for the sustainability of critical river basins in the central Texas coast and helps represent a new way of thinking about sustainable water management in Texas and throughout the country. The International Crane Foundation's strong collaboration with local, state, and national partners demonstrates how these new approaches can benefit the diverse human and wildlife users of Texas's complex coastal ecosystems for generations to come.

The International Crane Foundation has played a unique and critical role in Whooping Crane conservation in coastal Texas. Recognizing the importance for action in Texas, the International Crane Foundation initiated its Texas Program in 2011 with the hire of esteemed Sr. Whooping Crane Scientist Dr. Elizabeth "Liz" Smith. For seven years, Dr. Smith worked on her own, helping to coordinate the actions of a multitude of partners working in support of Whooping Cranes conservation, carrying out critical research to answer questions about Whooping Cranes and their habitat needs, and inspiring landowners and coastal communities in Texas to take action in support of Whooping Cranes. Recognizing that a greater level of investment was needed to increase our desired impact in Texas, near the end of 2017 we added three additional staff positions and began a strategic planning process that provides measurable objectives and outcomes for the next three- and five-year periods.



In 2019 and beyond, the International Crane Foundation plans to broaden its conservation and outreach efforts for the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population of Whooping Cranes. Only by expanding education and conservation efforts can we secure a future for Whooping Cranes and achieve our long-term goals of increasing awareness and advocacy through education and outreach to Texas communities, protecting cranes from unnecessary mortalities, conserving essential habitat, and managing freshwater inflows to support a recovering population.

Whooping Cranes are large, charismatic birds that serve as powerful ambassadors to cultivate public interest and support for conservation of wildlife and fresh water resources. As the human population continues to expand, competition for fresh water between people and wildlife will also increase. The citizens of Texas need information about their finely balanced coastal ecosystems, so they can help make sustainable decisions about water management for the benefit of cranes, other wildlife, and local communities and economies.

The Texas program recently completed a five-year strategic plan. The strategic plan focuses around working closely with key partners to secure sufficient high quality Whooping Crane habitat in a coastal ecosystem that is under intense development pressure and is impacted by climate changes such as sea level rise and increasingly severe storms and droughts. Main program strategies include:

Landowner and partner engagement -

Starting in 2019 and every year afterwards, 100 percent of identified landowners whose property currently support or will support wintering Whooping Cranes have connected with identified land protection partners.



Community conservation plan development - By 2020, the “Live Oak and Lamar Peninsulas Community Conservation Plan” will be completed and is accessible online to community members.

Hydrologic restoration – By 2020, the “Hydrologic Restoration Selected Site Plan: Live Oak, Lamar, and Blackjack Peninsulas” will be completed and provided to key partners. The International Crane Foundation is working with diverse partners in Texas to secure the appropriate timing, frequency, and duration of freshwater inflows essential to sustain habitat quality for endangered Whooping Cranes, their food items, and economically important fisheries. During the project period of 2018/2019, we will:

- Provide maps and datasets to our partners for selected conservation sites that include hydrologic units and drainage networks and identify potential restoration and enhancement opportunities for upcoming project proposals.
- Monitor climate change impacts to coastal marsh stability, resilience, and recovery, and correlate with Whooping Crane habitat use and expansion patterns.

Environmental Education and Community Outreach

The International Crane Foundation promotes awareness and citizen action for the conservation of Whooping Cranes, water, and wetlands in the Guadalupe-San Antonio basin, Nueces-San Antonio Coastal basin and Lavaca-Lower Colorado basin during a critical six-month period (November-April) while the Whooping Cranes are on their wintering grounds. During the project period of 2018/2019, staff will:

- Lead and collaborate with regional outreach programs in priority communities in the current and projected range to include Whooping Crane protection materials and create new educational materials for public schools, teacher workshops, nature festivals, citizen groups, local decision makers, and community members.
- Conduct education and outreach to communities and sportsmen to reduce human disturbances by providing informational material demarcating areas closed to sportsmen in the Whooping Crane wintering grounds and distributing Large Waterbird ID cards to sportsmen.
- Increase community action by engaging and training citizen scientists to collect valuable habitat and Whooping Crane behavior data at selected sites for use in our habitat conservation strategies.

The International Crane Foundation is leading collaborative efforts to identify and protect critical habitat areas for Whooping Cranes under current and projected sea level conditions. As the population grows, Whooping Cranes will need to expand their habitat even further. During the project period of 2018/2019, we will:

- Communicate with landowners whose lands are adjacent to or include Whooping Crane habitat to provide information about Whooping Cranes and options for habitat conservation.
- Engage economic and environmental leaders and stakeholders in developing economic growth strategies that complement habitat conservation to create a shared vision that integrates the natural environment with the current and future built environments in the Whooping Crane wintering range.
- Prioritize lands and actions to ensure Whooping Crane habitat is protected strategically.
- Work with our land trust partners to quantify the extent of protected areas in coastal Texas by updating and improving the protected areas database through the addition of missing tracts of land and by providing updated maps and datasets to partner proposals for funding conservation efforts in coastal Texas.
- Create a conservation development resource guide for use by agency biologists reviewing permits, local governments revising ordinances and building codes, and environmental consulting firms advising clients on land development.



Biodiversity Target Goals and Indicators

Whooping Crane Population Goal - By 2024, the naturally occurring Whooping Crane population will continue to increase at an average rate of 4 percent per year. By this time, we hope to see 650 or more individual birds and 160 or more breeding pairs on the landscape. We are working toward the long-term recovery goal of 1,000 individuals and 250 breeding pairs.

Habitat Goal -By 2024, we predict we will need 50,000 acres of coastal prairie and marsh to become suitable Whooping Crane habitat with sea level rise and climate change models. These acres constitute 25 percent of a long-term target of 200,000 acres of coastal prairie as a buffer zone for future Whooping Crane wintering habitat.

For More Information Contact:

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