

Whooping Crane



Photo courtesy of USFWS

Scientific name: *Grus Americana*

Description: Standing nearly five feet tall with a 7.5 foot wingspan, whooping cranes are the tallest birds in North America. Adult whooping cranes are white with a red face and crown and a long pointed bill and black wing tips. Immature whooping cranes are pale brown.

Preferred Habitat: Whooping Cranes breed and nest along shallow lake margins or among rushes and sedges in wetlands. Whooping cranes prefer sites with minimal human disturbance. During their migration through North Dakota, cranes stop on wetlands, river bottoms and agricultural lands. Whooping Cranes winter on estuarine marshes, shallow bays, and tidal salt flats.

Diet: Whooping Cranes commonly feed on crabs, clams, shrimp, snails, frogs, snakes, grasshoppers, larval and nymph forms of flies, beetles, water bugs, birds and small mammals. While migrating through North Dakota, waste grains are an important food source.

Life History: Whooping Cranes are monogamous and pair for life. Each year around April, they return to the previous year's breeding grounds. They lay two eggs, two days apart in late April or early May. The eggs are incubated for 29-34 days. Whooping cranes fledge (fly) between 78-90 days, but are fed by both parents for the first fall and winter. Usually only one chick survives. They migrate south from mid-September to mid-October, often with sandhill cranes. Whooping cranes become sexually mature between 4-6 years and live up to 20 years in the wild.

Reason for Decline: Historical reasons for decline include hunting and specimen collection, human disturbance and conversion of nesting habitat to agricultural uses. These disturbances led to the last record of whooping crane breeding in North Dakota in 1915 and a worldwide population of just 16 individuals by 1941. The population is now slowly recovering, but still faces challenges. Currently, the main threats to whooping cranes are the possibility of a hurricane or contaminate spill destroying their wintering habitat on the Texas coast. Cranes are also susceptible to power line and fence collision, avian tuberculosis, avian cholera and lead poisoning.