



2014

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Gay M. Gomez

Gomez, G. M. 2014. The history and reintroduction of whooping cranes at White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area, Louisiana. Proceedings of the North American Crane Workshop 12:76-79.

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THE HISTORY AND REINTRODUCTION OF WHOOPING CRANES AT WHITE LAKE WETLANDS CONSERVATION AREA, LOUISIANA

GAY M. GOMEZ,¹ Department of Social Sciences, McNeese State University, Box 92335, Lake Charles, LA 70609, USA

On 16 February 2011, whooping cranes (*Grus americana*) were reintroduced in the wetlands of southwest Louisiana, after an absence of 61 years. This brief communication provides background on the historical presence of whooping cranes in this region, describes the long road to reintroduction, presents observations from the reintroduction's first day, and offers thoughts on its future prospects.

On 15 May 1939, biologist John J. Lynch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service observed 13 whooping cranes in the remote freshwater marsh north of White Lake in Vermilion Parish, Louisiana. He not only confirmed what local residents and trappers had long known (Drewien et al. 2001, Gomez et al. 2005), but he was also viewing a native Louisiana species in its twilight.

According to Robert P. Allen (1952), whooping cranes had once flourished in southwest Louisiana. Migratory cranes wintered on the tallgrass prairies of the Pleistocene Prairie Terrace at the northern edge of the coastal plain, as well as in the adjacent Chenier Plain wetlands, using the region's brackish and saltwater marshes and chenier ridges. Large-scale conversion of the prairies to commercial rice production in the late 19th century, followed by canal construction and the resultant enhanced access to the marshes in the early 20th century, increased the vulnerability of whooping cranes to hunting and disturbance. The last report of the species on the Louisiana prairies dates from 1918, while reports of cranes in the salt and brackish marshes end in the early 1940s. Only in the region of the still relatively isolated freshwater marsh north of White Lake did sightings continue, and area residents and trappers insisted that *la grue blanche* (the white crane) was not only resident year-round, but was also nesting and raising young in the vast *Panicum hemitomon* marsh (Allen 1952, Gomez 1992).

John Lynch's interviews with these local residents and trappers led to the biologist's 1939 flight over the White Lake marsh, during which he observed 13 whooping cranes: 11 adults and 2 juveniles. He described the latter as "young-of-the-year, about one-

third grown" (Lynch 1984:38). Lynch's record of the sighting (Drewien et al. 2001), as well as his interviews with residents and trappers (Gomez et al. 2005), provided the scientific community, including Allen, with primary information on whooping cranes in the White Lake marsh, describing the Louisiana non-migratory population's habitat and behavior and documenting its breeding.

The following year, on 7 August 1940, a hurricane and its accompanying heavy rains flooded the region and scattered the White Lake flock; only 6 of the birds returned. By 1947, a single Louisiana crane remained, and on 11 March 1950 this lone bird, dubbed "Mac," was chased by helicopter, captured, and transported to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, where it died 6 months later (Van Pelt 1950, McNulty 1966, Doughty 1989).

As whooping crane numbers, then precipitously low, rose during the ensuing decades in response to increased protection of the birds and their habitat, including their listing under the federal Endangered Species Act of 1973 (Doughty 1989), the desire to reintroduce whooping cranes into their former Louisiana range surfaced. In 1977, Dr. George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation, and John Allender of the Audubon Park Zoo in New Orleans proposed such a reintroduction into the cranes' historic range (Allender and Archibald 1977). The proposal to reintroduce an endangered species in coastal Louisiana, however, met with skepticism from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), along with strong opposition from the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission (predecessor of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries [LDWF]). The Commission expressed concern for the future of the fur trapping industry, which was booming during the decade of the 1970s with an average yearly value of \$11.84 million, as well as likely interference with waterfowl hunting, also a deeply rooted cultural and economic mainstay (Gomez 1992, 1998, 2001). Without local and federal agency support, the proposal failed to gain acceptance, and the hope of reintroducing whooping cranes in Louisiana languished for more than a decade.

By the early 1990s, however, attitudes in Louisiana had begun to change (Gomez 1992). The trapping

¹ Present address: P.O. Box 4035, Lake Charles, LA 70606, USA

industry, now in decline, was less an economic force in the state, and waterfowl hunter compliance with regulations had increased (Gomez 1998). Perhaps most importantly, the Endangered Species Act had been modified in 1982 to include Section 10 (j), providing for the reintroduction of “Nonessential Experimental Populations” of endangered species and allowing greater flexibility of land use, since no “critical habitat” designation would be required. With such a provision in place, coastal Louisiana’s waterfowl hunting, fur and alligator trapping, rice farming, cattle ranching, and other traditional practices could continue, despite the presence of reintroduced whooping cranes.

Official consideration of Louisiana as a potential reintroduction site proceeded cautiously during the 1990s and 2000s. Early action in this period included the search for a wintering site for a new experimental population of migratory whooping cranes in the eastern United States, in which 5 Louisiana sites were considered but none was chosen, due to their proximity to the migration route of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population (Cannon 1998); formation at the request of G. Archibald in 2001 of the Louisiana Crane Study Group/Louisiana Crane Working Group to develop a list of contacts in Louisiana and to facilitate research and information gathering necessary for assessing the state’s potential as a reintroduction site; development of a whooping crane breeding program at the Audubon Nature Institute’s Audubon Center for Research on Endangered Species (ACRES) and Species Survival Center in New Orleans; and continued historical research and publication on the White Lake population (Drewien et al. 2001, Gomez et al. 2005). John Lynch’s daughter Mary Lynch Courville aided this historical research by making her father’s notes and letters available; they provided detail on marsh vegetation and on whooping crane habitat use, nesting, and other behavior.

With renewed interest in Louisiana came repeated visits and aerial inspections of the state’s southwestern marshes by Canada-U.S. Whooping Crane Recovery Team (WCRT) leader Tom Stehn, as well as by G. Archibald and additional WCRT members. The WCRT held 2 meetings in Louisiana; the first took place in the New Orleans area (Belle Chasse) at ACRES in January 2001. The second, in Lafayette in February 2007, included field trips to 2 areas under consideration as possible reintroduction sites: White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area (WCA) and Marsh Island State Wildlife Refuge, both owned by the State of Louisiana

and administered by LDWF.

Central Louisiana conservation activist Sara Simmonds’ recruitment of wildlife biologist Dr. Sammy King of Louisiana State University (LSU)’s Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in 2004 proved instrumental in catalyzing research projects requested by the WCRT. This research included King’s documentation of migration routes of sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) wintering in southwest and central Louisiana (King et al. 2010), LSU doctoral candidate Sung-Ryong Kang’s study of whooping crane food availability in the White Lake marsh (directed by King), and LDWF biologist Jeb Linscombe’s study of marsh water levels on the White Lake WCA.

The Louisiana Whooping Crane Partnership, an agency-level organization led by S. King and LDWF’s Phil Bowman, held its inaugural meeting at ACRES in May 2008. After Bowman’s retirement, successor Bob Love enthusiastically championed the idea of returning a native species to the state. In August 2009 LDWF began to develop a plan for a potential whooping crane reintroduction in Louisiana; these efforts gained approval from the WCRT in April 2010 (Zimorski 2011).

As a result of all these activities, combined with ongoing discussion among the WCRT, USGS’s Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, International Crane Foundation, ACRES, USFWS, and LDWF, a formal proposal to reintroduce a non-migratory, nonessential experimental population of whooping cranes in the marshes of the White Lake WCA in southwest Louisiana at last coalesced and was published in the Federal Register in August 2010 (U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service 2010). Thanks to the cooperative work of these groups, and to the persistent and multifaceted efforts of LDWF administrators Bob Love and Buddy Baker; Rockefeller State Wildlife Refuge staff and biologists Tom Hess, Jeb Linscombe, Carrie Salyers, and Sara Zimorski; LSU researchers S. King, S. Kang, and Tandi Perkins; and the White Lake WCA crew headed by manager K. Wayne Sweeney and foreman Roger Cormier, the proposal gained traction in Louisiana and moved toward fruition.

Public hearings in Gueydan (near White Lake WCA) and Baton Rouge in September 2010 gleaned public comment on the reintroduction proposal and draft environmental assessment; most comments were strongly supportive of returning native whooping

cranes to the state's coastal wetlands. Comments that expressed concern focused primarily on habitat quality, and these were researched and satisfactorily addressed by LDWF and USFWS. In February 2011 the Final Rule establishing the Nonessential Experimental Population of Endangered Whooping Cranes in Southwestern Louisiana, written by Bill Brooks and Deborah Fuller of USFWS (Region 4), was published in the Federal Register (U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service 2011). The Final Rule includes additional details on many of these mileposts on the long road to reintroduction.

More than 2 decades of effort and 3 decades of desire culminated with the arrival of 10 juvenile whooping cranes at the White Lake (Florence) Landing south of Gueydan in Vermilion Parish, Louisiana, at approximately 1530 hours on 16 February 2011. The chicks (7 females and 3 males) had been hatched in late May and early June 2010 at USGS's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center (WRC) near Laurel, Maryland, from eggs laid at 3 captive breeding facilities (Patuxent WRC, Calgary Zoo, and Audubon Species Survival Center) and from an egg laid on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin (Puckett and Whitehead 2011). The costume-reared chicks, each loaded in a wooden crate, had flown from Maryland on a Cessna Caravan single turboprop plane provided by Windway Corporation. After landing at Jennings, Louisiana, just after 1430 hours, the birds were unloaded and driven south to the landing by LDWF staff and administrators. There the White Lake crew, Rockefeller Refuge biologists, and several guests awaited the cranes and their entourage. C. Salyers' sign spoke for us all: it read "Welcome Back to Louisiana."

In silence, the birds' crates were carefully removed from their cargo trailer and carried to a waiting boat, which transported them south along the Florence Canal to the reintroduction site on White Lake WCA, arriving just before 1630 hours. On the sliver of levee between canal and marsh, LDWF staff donned crane costumes (made by a local seamstress who volunteered her talents in support of the project), met for a final whispered meeting, and began the reintroduction. After health checks, each whooping crane was hand-carried to the acclimation pen, which is located in the "refuge" unit of the 28,722-ha (71,000-acre) White Lake WCA. The pen is a large oval enclosure that consists of an outer pen of 0.6 ha (1.5 acres) and an inner, top-netted pen of 21-m radius designed to protect the young cranes from

predators.

From the time the first reintroduced Louisiana whooping crane "touched down" in the inner pen at approximately 1700 hours until the last of the 10 birds' toes met the wet mud of the marsh an hour later, LDWF staff worked carefully and efficiently to transfer the birds to their new, yet ancient, home. All present sensed the historic magnitude of the occasion, and as the sun set over the marsh, our mutual feeling upon seeing 10 whooping cranes drinking, preening, and beginning to explore their surroundings was one of satisfaction, joy, and hope.

Several weeks later, on 14 March 2011, the cranes were released from the inner pen and allowed to fly freely. After observing the Louisiana cranes in early April, George Archibald wrote "I had the feeling that the cranes are in their element, that they have the genetic resources to respond in the proper manner to the elements of that fabulous ecosystem, that they are going to do it and flourish without that much help from humans." (G. Archibald, personal communication). These optimistic words echo the sentiments of the reintroduction's Louisiana supporters.

The experiment, of course, is just beginning, and there is much to be learned. LDWF biologists and their research affiliates will continue this story, hopefully for many years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to LDWF for inviting me to be present at the White Lake WCA for the reintroduction of the whooping cranes, as well as for subsequent opportunities to view them. Special thanks to B. Love, T. Hess, C. Salyers, S. Zimorski, T. Perkins, and S. King for their work, their leadership, and their many courtesies. I am also grateful to R. Doughty, Professor of Geography at the University of Texas at Austin, who in 1990 pointed me toward research on the history of whooping cranes in southwest Louisiana and assessment of attitudes toward their reintroduction. Hearty thanks to G. Archibald for his invitation to use the International Crane Foundation Library, for his many visits to Louisiana, and, most of all, for his unwavering support for returning *la grue blanche* to this part of its historic range. Finally, my thanks extend to all who aided the Louisiana reintroduction effort, especially the Whooping Crane Recovery Team and its leader T. Stehn of USFWS; B. Brooks and D. Fuller of USFWS, Region 4; M. Folk of

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; J. Chandler, J. French, and G. Olsen of Patuxent WRC; B. Dresser and M. Lauber of ACRES; and longtime local supporters M. L. Courville, J. Nixon, and S. Simmonds.

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PROCEEDINGS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN CRANE WORKSHOP 12:76-79

Key words: Louisiana, reintroduction, White Lake, whooping crane.
