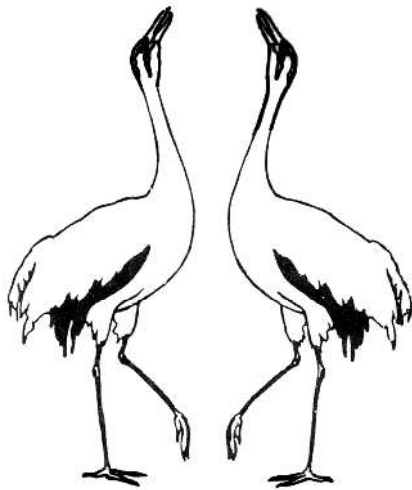




THE UNISON CALL

- Newsletter of the North American Crane Working Group -

Vol. 32, No. 2

President's Report

Happy fall, everyone!

I hope you are all doing well amidst a lot of changes this year. I'm sending everyone my best and I hope to see you all in the coming year, if not sooner. I wanted to share a few exciting updates from the North American Crane Working Group.

First off, I would like to extend my gratitude to the editors of the Proceedings of the 16th North American Crane Workshop, Drs. Jane Austin, Barry Hartup, and Megan Brown, who did an excellent job pulling together the articles, notes, and abstracts about the work you have all been doing for cranes in North America. The Proceedings were published earlier this year and are now available as PDFs on our website (nacwg.org). You can order a hard copy of the Proceedings on our website as well. It's exciting to see such a variety of research published in the Proceedings, so thank you to everyone who contributed as an author, reviewer, or editor.

I'm also excited to share that we have set a date for our next North American Crane Workshop! Please mark your calendars to meet in Rockport, Texas during December 7-10th, 2026. As always, we plan to have a welcome reception on Monday December 7th, followed by two days of presentations and a day for field trips to see Whooping Cranes at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Gulf Coast. The North American Crane Working Group hasn't met in Rockport since 1978, so it will be a treat to return to the area 48 years later! I hope to see you all there! In the meantime, if you would like to help the local host committee, scientific committee, or awards committee prepare for the upcoming workshop, please reach out.

As always, the Board of Directors welcomes your input on the North American Crane Working Group. If there is something we can do to better connect or serve you, or if there is something you would like to see at our next workshop, please let us know.

Take care,

Hillary Thompson

President, North American Crane Working Group

International Crane Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin

htompson@savingcranes.org

They say, “better late than never!” A delayed welcome to Kevin McAbee

Kevin McAbee became the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Whooping Crane Coordinator in June of 2023. In this role he partners with local, state, federal, tribal, and international partners to conserve one of our nation's most iconic species through implementation of many diverse recovery actions such as habitat protection, water management, scientific research, community outreach, and reintroductions. He also coordinates with USFWS environmental review staff to ensure that impacts to Whooping Cranes are avoided, minimized, and mitigated, while also ensuring that project development goals are maintained.

Prior to this position, he managed native species recovery in the desert southwest for 15 years, most recently as Associate Director of the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program. Kevin's vision for endangered species recovery focuses on fostering partnerships with diverse stakeholders across political boundaries to implement projects that are mutually beneficial. He believes that partnership is critical to successful conservation because various perspectives and expertise enact stronger projects with more community buy-in. Kevin is part of the USFWS’s Southwest Regional Office but lives and works in his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina. He holds an MS in Natural Resources from the University of Georgia’s Warnell School of Forest Resources and a BS in Ecology from NC State University.

Announcements

Save the date!

We are excited to announce that the 17th North American Crane Workshop will be held on 7-10 December 2026 in Rockport, Texas!

Things will kick off with a mixer on Monday, December 7th, followed by two days of presentations at the Rockport Conference Center (106 S Austin St.) and conclude with a field trip on Thursday, December 10th.

Additional details to follow.

Proceedings now available

The Proceedings of the Sixteenth North American Crane Workshop are [here](#)!

They are available as downloadable files from the North American Crane Working Group website (www.nacwg.org). Hardcopies of the complete proceedings can also be purchased if preferred.

Regional Reports

Record breaking year for Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park Whooping Crane nesting grounds

Nicolas Comerford, Ecologist, Wood Buffalo National Park

Parks Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service continue to monitor Whooping Crane nest and fledgling numbers in Wood Buffalo National Park and surrounding areas. Above-average snowfall in 2025 sparked optimism among Whooping Crane ecologists hoping to see improved conditions following drought and below-average reproductive productivity in 2024. Winter snowfall serves as a crucial input to the water balance in the extensive wetland complexes where Whooping Cranes nest, promoting favourable nesting habitat by increasing water levels. This optimism was well placed as 2025 broke records for total number of nests and total number of fledglings counted!

The spring survey recorded a total of 115 nests, breaking the previous record of 102 nests counted in 2021, while the summer survey yielded a total count of 66 fledglings, surpassing the previous record of 61 fledglings recorded in 2022. These numbers call for celebration, as this marked only the second time this count has exceeded 100 nests. Twins continued to be a rare occurrence, with only one set counted, although the total fledgling count is impressive, with 57% of the nests successfully fledging chicks, surpassing the 30-year average of 47%.

With a higher number of Whooping Cranes across the landscape, the nesting range is expanding to accommodate the territorial home ranges these birds occupy during the nesting season. This year, the range has expanded northward toward new wetland complexes, while new nesting locations are being selected within the established range. Wood Buffalo National Park is excited to see this growth. While the expansion of Whooping Cranes into new unprotected areas presents some challenges, it ultimately reflects the success of ongoing Whooping Crane recovery efforts.



Alert pair of Whooping Cranes with their tawny fledgling in Wood Buffalo National Park in northern Canada.



A nesting Whooping Crane observed from above in Wood Buffalo National Park.



Pair of Whooping Cranes foraging in wetland marked by wildfire. In 2023, over 900,000 hectares (more than 3400 square miles) or about 20% of the park burned during an extreme fire season.

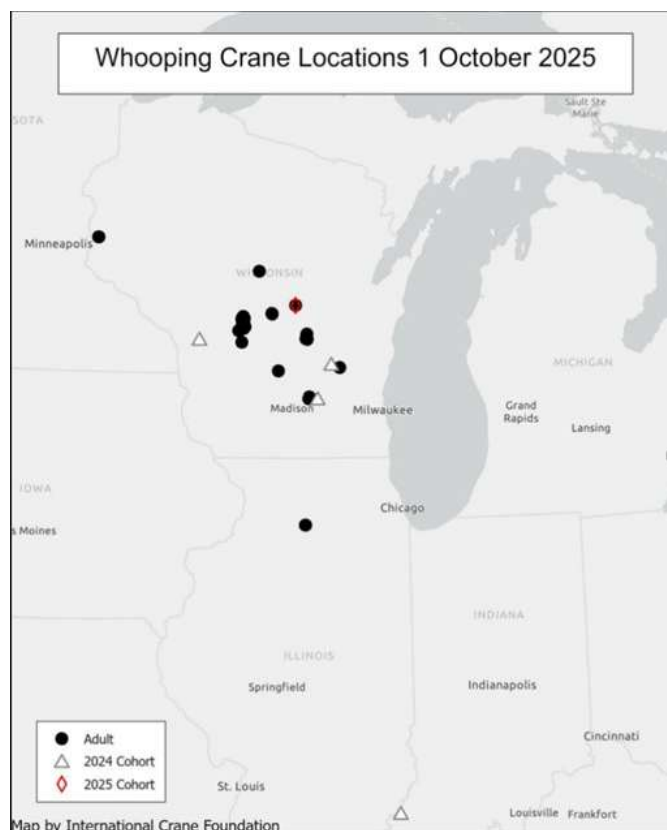
Regional Reports *continued*

Update on the Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes

Nicki Gordon, Whooping Crane Biologist, International Crane Foundation

Current Population Size and Status

As of 1 October 2025, estimated population size is 64 (36 females, 25 males, 3 unknown). Sixteen of these 65 individuals are wild-hatched and the rest are captive-reared. To the best of our knowledge, there are at least 50 birds in Wisconsin, 1 in Indiana, and 2 in Illinois. The remaining birds' locations have not been confirmed in the last month. Their last known locations (in the past month) are on the map below. Most Whooping Cranes spent the summer in Wisconsin. Since the update in April, there have been 5 confirmed mortalities. One mortality was confirmed predation, 2 suspected predation, 1 likely due to a leg injury while molting, and 1 unknown cause.



2025 Nesting Season

There were 16 pairs and 22 nests (16 first nests, 6 renests). Five nests hatched and produced 6 chicks, 1 of which is still alive as of 1 October. One nest was predated by a coyote, 1 likely flooded, 2 were abandoned for unknown reasons, 5 sat full term but did not hatch, and eggs were collected from 8 nests as a part of forced renesting due to black fly disturbance. In total we collected 24 eggs to be raised in human care for release, 15 from forced renesting and 9 from partial clutch collection. This year's nests were located in Juneau, Green Lake, Sauk and Portage Counties, Wisconsin.

Regional Reports *continued*

2025 Wild-hatched Cohort

W1-25 hatched to parents W1-19 and 1-17 in Portage County, Wisconsin in May 2025. W1-25 fledged in July and is still alive as of 1 October with parents in Portage County, Wisconsin.



W1-25 on 13 June 2025, in Portage County, Wisconsin. Photo by Eleanor Laack.

Louisiana Whooping Crane Update

Eva Szyszkoski, Biologist, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Reproduction – The 2025 nesting season wrapped up by/on 27 June with a total of 38 nests by 21 pairs in 7 parishes (Acadia, Allen, Avoyelles, Calcasieu, Cameron, Jefferson Davis, and Vermilion) in central and southwestern Louisiana. This included 21 first, 11 second, 4 third and 2 fourth nesting attempts.

A minimum of 65 eggs were produced in 2025. Thirty-six eggs were confirmed fertile, of which 19 died prior to hatch (7 early dead, 4 mid-dead, 8 late dead) and 17 successfully hatched; 14 in the wild and 3 in captivity. The remaining 29 eggs were either collected intact and confirmed non-viable, disappeared, or were broken at the nest.

Of the 14 chicks that hatched in the wild, 5 (to 5 pairs) ultimately survived to fledge, with youngest known fledge occurring by 77 days old. Four of the five pairs to successfully fledge a chick in 2025 had previously fledged at least one in the past.

Regional Reports *continued*

Significant movement – After two years with no substantial use of locations in Texas, a newly formed pair moved to the Limestone/Robertson county area in late May, where they remain. The male of the pair has spent significant time at this location in the past but hadn't been here since 2022.

Update on Florida transplants – Out of the 6 cranes that have been transferred to Louisiana from the Florida nonmigratory population, 3 were alive through April 2025. Unfortunately, 27-year-old female LF1-98 (relocated in February 2019) disappeared in May and is presumed dead.

- 25-year-old male LF1-00 (relocated in March 2025) spent some time at deer feeders near the White Lake WCA but eventually began hanging out with wild-hatched female LW1-24 and they have remained in more appropriate habitats since then.
- 10-year-old female LFW12-15 (relocated in February 2019) remains paired with male L5-18 in Cameron Parish.

Mortalities – Mortalities from April through September included one adult male and one adult female in Louisiana, both of which were members of breeding pairs.

Current Population Size - As of 30 September 2025, the Louisiana non-migratory population consisted of a maximum of 77 individuals (36 males, 33 females, 8 unknown). Estimated distribution included: 72 in Louisiana, 2 in Texas and 3 of unknown status.

Mississippi Sandhill Crane Update

Emma Fike and Genyss Duncan, American Conservation Wildlife Support Members “Interns”
Scott Hereford, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Retired, Gulfport, MS

Nesting 2025 – There were 44 pairs that nested and 56 known total nests with 12 renests. There were no ground nest searches outside of Refuge lands. The territory of 1411 and 333 was confirmed as G14C “WSW Beasley”. 1411 began nesting in 2018 but the nest with his mate 333 since 2022 was found this year, bravo.

A nest with 3 eggs was discovered in O02S Sawdust Savanna and believed from a trio: male 1001, female YWK, and an unbanded female. This was the second 3-egg clutch from a trio, the first in 2017. The first nests ever in management compartments G03M and O11M were documented. O11M savanna was restored in late 2023 with a fire-funded mulching operation. G03M is open pine flatwoods habitat. A successful prescribed burn was conducted in G02E East Coke Savanna with pair WYY and 2108 nesting inside; a chick hatched 10 days later. The last nest was discovered in July; it was unsuccessful. There were at least 3 new behavioral pairs: 2309♂ / unbanded♀, 2314♂ / 2207♀, and unbanded♂ / 1905♀.

Seventeen chicks hatched and 7-8 chicks fledged. These include two sets of twins. The pair 1909♂ / 1320♀ successfully fledged their first young.

Regional Reports *continued*

Captures/Banding – There were no chicks nor fledglings banded during this reporting period.

Mortalities – Three after-hatch-year cranes were confirmed dead: RCY, a HY23 wild-hatched subadult; Crane 1101 "Toast", a HY11 ASSC-reared female; and 2011 "Perseus", a HY20 ASSC-reared female. Crane 436, a HY04 ASSC-reared male, and longtime member of the MDOT pair, disappeared and was removed from the population totals. There were likely 2-4 others missing.

Population Size – The population was just above 180, including 8 of the 9 captive-reared cranes released last November.

Over-summering of Migratory Whooping Cranes on their Wintering Grounds



A pair of Whooping Cranes flying.

Migration is common across many different bird species. However, migration also poses many risks and can be energetically taxing. Over-summering on the wintering grounds is utilized in some populations to skip migration. Researchers from the International Crane Foundation's Texas and Wisconsin teams partnered to compile all known information on over-summering on the wintering grounds in the two current migratory populations of Whooping Cranes: the Aransas Wood Buffalo Population and the Eastern Migratory Population. This research included compiling information from published research, unpublished reports and field observations, transmitter data, trail cameras, and observations from International Crane Foundation staff, volunteers, and partners.

Regional Reports *continued*



Whooping Crane Migration Range Map

Over-summering in the Eastern Migratory Population has been well documented due to the known history of most individuals and high percentage of the population with active tracking devices. The researchers included information on nine birds aged one to six years that spent time on the wintering grounds during the summer season. The possible cause of over-summering on the wintering grounds was attributed to unfamiliarity with the migratory route or breeding grounds, effects of translocation, injury, or the death of mate. Of note, many of these over-summering individuals did migrate north before returning to over-summer on the wintering grounds.

In the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population (AWBP), historical records show that over-summering on the wintering grounds has occurred for over a century. Four instances were recorded between 1891 and 1941, when the total population was declining rapidly. Since then, one to four birds have been reported over-summering on the wintering grounds in 23 different years. Some of these cases were linked to injury, illness, or the injury/illness of a mate. However, for most occurrences of over-summering in the AWBP there was no clear indication of the cause of skipping migration. Additionally, over-summering in the AWBP was shown to occur across various age classes.

Regional Reports *continued*

The researchers also shared evidence of over-summering AWBP individuals undergoing a flightless molt during their summer in Texas. The process of molting of flight feathers is not very well documented or understood in the AWBP, primarily due to the remoteness of the breeding grounds, where the approximately 6-week flightless molt typically takes place.



Left: A 9- year old male Whooping Crane photographed by staff in salt-marsh at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on 3 June 2021 without primary feathers, indicating a flightless molt.

Photo by Dr. Liz Smith/International Crane Foundation.

In both migratory populations, the researchers documented individuals that over-summered on the wintering grounds and then went on to migrate normally and breed successfully in later years. There is likely a trade-off to over-summering on the wintering grounds. Breeding age birds that miss a breeding season are missing out on the opportunity to raise young for a whole year, however skipping migration may increase their survival and make them more likely to breed successfully in future years.

Over-summering on the wintering grounds is not a new occurrence for migratory Whooping Cranes. In fact, it has been happening since scientists have been monitoring the species, including in the decades when the total population numbers were quite low. The researchers highlighted that, “If the population continues to grow, over-summering may become more common.” Following publication of this research, two Whooping Cranes spent the summer of 2025 in Texas, which makes it the 5th year in a row of AWBP Whooping Crane over-summering on the wintering grounds.

References:

https://www.nacwg.org/publications/cranes_sandhill_whooping_2025-7.pdf

Macko, P. C., S. M. Schmidt, C. G. Crouch A. N. Barajas, A. M. Ward, H. L. Thompson, M. R. Bradshaw, and E. H. Smith. 2025. Over-summering of migratory whooping cranes on their wintering grounds. *Proceedings of the North American Crane Workshop* 16:81-94.

Story submitted by Daizy Silva, Outreach Biologist, and Matti Bradshaw, Leiden Conservation Whooping Crane Biologist

Regional Reports *continued*

Inland Wintering Whooping Cranes in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population

For over 70 years, scientists and conservationists have come to understand the habitat needs of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population (AWBP) of Whooping Cranes. The last self-sustaining population relies heavily on estuarine habitats of the Texas Mid-coast during the winter, where they eat blue crabs, Carolina Wolfberries, mollusks, and other food items. This habitat blueprint has determined how the conservation community prioritizes land protection and habitat management in the current and expected future wintering range of AWBP Whooping Cranes. However, Whooping Cranes continue to surprise us, and they are increasingly using habitat away from the coast.

Researchers from the International Crane Foundation, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and a volunteer, initiated research to better understand the phenomenon of inland wintering in the AWBP.



*Family of Whooping Cranes in Colorado County foraging in flooded field.
Photo by Katie Fernald, International Crane Foundation.*

First, they summarized how many winters Whooping Cranes utilized two prominent inland wintering sites. In a thirteen-year period starting in the winter of 2011/2012, Whooping Cranes spent five winters near Granger Lake and eleven winters in Colorado and Wharton counties. Both areas are dominated by agriculture, which is a common habitat type used on migration by Whooping Cranes. The surrounding area near Granger Lake is dominated by wheat, cotton, and grain, while Colorado/Wharton counties are dominated by rice agriculture. Next the researchers presented information on the number of individuals using these two inland wintering areas. While use near Granger Lake declined after the first few years of use, in Colorado/Wharton counties the number of Whooping Cranes identified has been steadily increasing. Up to 18 individuals were recorded using this area in the winter of 2023/2024. The researchers documented at least 21 individuals using Colorado/Wharton counties in the winter following publication of their findings.

Regional Reports *continued*

To better understand inland wintering Whooping Cranes, the researchers then compared home ranges and daily movement data on both inland wintering individuals and those in more traditional coastal habitats. The researchers found that home range sizes of Whooping Cranes that utilized inland areas were around three times larger than those using coastal areas exclusively. While other factors were found to influence daily movement, birds that utilized inland areas moved almost twice as much during a given day than their coastal counterparts.

These differences may be explained by several factors related to resource availability and social dynamics with other Whooping Cranes. Food distribution, quantity, or quality may differ between inland wintering areas and coastal areas. Movement rates in inland wintering areas may also differ due to lower crane densities and fewer territorial disputes. However, the researchers noted that all the cranes that utilized inland areas visited the coast at least once during the winter. These inland wintering individuals moved more than coastal birds both while they were in inland areas and when they visited the coast. So, some of the observed differences could be as related to the birds as they are to habitat differences.

The primary cause of inland wintering in AWBP Whooping Cranes is unknown, but we have an idea of some possible explanations. In the winter of 2011-2012, Texas experienced a historic drought that likely impacted food resources on the coast. This was the first documented use of both inland wintering areas. In addition, both inland wintering areas are found within the AWBP migration corridor, so these cranes may have moved inland to an area they were familiar with from migration.



*Group of nine Whooping Cranes in Colorado County in a harvest rice field.
Photo by Matti Bradshaw, International Crane Foundation.*

Regional Reports *continued*

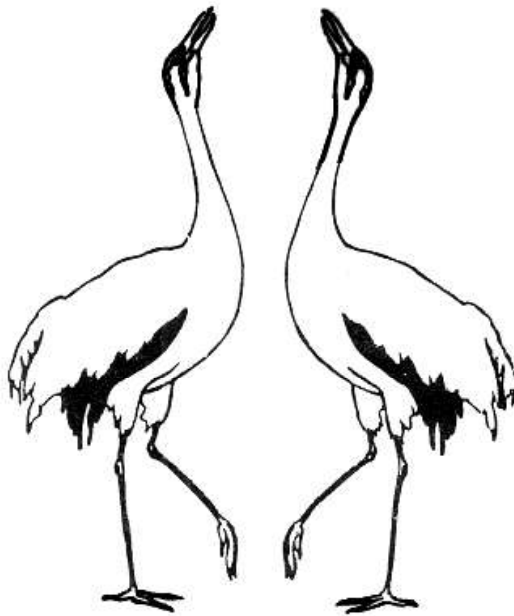
This research highlights a temporary or permanent shift or expansion of the AWBP wintering range, and the researchers pointed out that, “Continued use of inland areas has implications for how we manage, monitor, and plan for this population’s recovery.” There is more work to be done to understand these inland wintering Whooping Cranes, so the team of researchers plans to continue data collection on these inland wintering birds in the coming years.

References:

Bradshaw, M. R., C. G. Crouch, K. M. Fernald, A. J. Caven, D. M. Moore, S. Rehman. 2025. Nocturnal Winter Roost Site Use by Whooping Cranes in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population. Proceedings of the North American Crane Workshop 16:69-80.

<https://ace-eco.org/vol19/iss2/art16/>

Story submitted by Matti Bradshaw, Leiden Conservation Whooping Crane Biologist and Dr. Carter Crouch, Director of Gulf Coast Programs



Retiree spotlight—Thank you for your service!

Cathy Nigg worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for 33 years in the National Wildlife Refuge System at the Driftless Area, Upper Mississippi River, Detroit Lakes, and Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuges. In 2017, she took on the role of Refuge Supervisor for Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, with her work spanning across 27 refuges and wetland management districts. She took an additional role with Whooping Crane conservation in 2021 and provided key leadership to the Service and local, state, and federal partners to conserve the species through the implementation of recovery actions on the Necedah and Horicon National Wildlife Refuges in Wisconsin. Cathy participated in the Whooping Crane National Leadership Team and brought cohesion across the Service programs. With the Service's National Wildlife Refuge staff, she supported work on Whooping Crane habitat protection, water management, reintroductions, and monitoring and science. Throughout her career, Cathy was instrumental in critical wetland management activities and worked to complete several large-scale wetland restoration projects that will benefit future generations. Since her retirement in February 2024, she has enjoyed gardening, hiking, traveling and volunteering.

Scott Hereford dedicated more than three decades to the conservation of the endangered Mississippi Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis pulla*) at their namesake National Wildlife Refuge near Gautier, Mississippi. As the refuge's long-time wildlife biologist, Scott played a central role in the recovery of the non-migratory subspecies. His work included monitoring the wild population and restoring the wet pine savanna ecosystem upon which the species depends through the regular use of controlled burning and other techniques. Scott's leadership and persistence helped stabilize this critically endangered subspecies. In addition to his crane work, he contributed broadly to the conservation of Gulf Coast ecosystems and mentored many young biologists and conservation professionals.

William "Billy" Brooks completed a 40+ year conservation career in April of 2025. He worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since 1997 and served most recently as recovery biologist within the Florida Ecological Services Field Office. He also served temporarily as the Whooping Crane Recovery Coordinator. Billy worked with a diversity of threatened and endangered species in his career, which was largely centered in Florida, including sea turtles, manatees, right whales, wood storks, beach mice, and salt marsh voles. However, we know him from his tireless work to help recover the Whooping Crane and support reintroduction efforts across the United States.

David A. Brandt had a career of more than three-decades with the U.S. Geological Survey, based at the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in North Dakota. His work has focused on the ecology and conservation of migratory waterbirds, especially cranes. David has been central to advancing our understanding of Whooping Cranes and has likely banded more wild individuals than anyone else. Dave spent significant field time throughout the species' range including the Wood Buffalo National Park breeding grounds, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge wintering grounds, and throughout the migration corridor. Dave also conducted a diversity of applied research on waterfowl including Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and Gadwall (*Mareca strepera*).

Cranes in the News

Click the hyperlinks to learn more!

[Results of the 2025 Midwest Crane Count in Ohio](#)

[Sandhill Cranes Adopt Canada Goose Gosling](#)

[First Confirmed Whooping Crane Dies of HPAI](#)

[Record Number of Whooping Cranes Estimated Wintering on Texas Coast in 2024-2025](#)



A wild-hatched unbanded individual in Vermilion Parish, Louisiana. September 2025.
Excluding the five 2025 wild-hatched chicks, there are currently up to 10 unbanded individuals in the Louisiana Non-migratory Population. Photo by Eva Szyszkoski, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Upcoming Events

[Sandhill Crane Saturday](#)

Where: Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area, Medaryville, Indiana

When: every Saturday evening from 25 October-13 December 2025
(excluding Thanksgiving weekend)

[Great Midwest Crane Fest—Celebrating Community and Conservation](#)

Where: Baraboo, Wisconsin

When: 15 & 16 November 2025

[Whooper Wednesday](#)

Where: Goose Pond FWA, Linton, Indiana

When: every Wednesday morning from 19 November 2025-25 February 2026
(excluding Thanksgiving weekend)
(excluding Christmas and New Years Eve)

[Festival of the Cranes](#)

Where: Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Decatur, Alabama

When: 9-11 January 2026

[Whooping Crane Festival](#)

Where: Port Aransas, Texas

When: 19-22 February 2026

[Marsh Madness Sandhill Crane Festival](#)

Where: Goose Pond FWA, Linton, Indiana

When: 20-21 February 2026

You are invited to join the North American Crane Working Group

Membership is based on a calendar year.

Dues: _____ Student \$10; _____ Active \$20; _____ Sustaining \$30; _____ Other >\$30

Name: _____

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Stephanie Schmidt, International Crane Foundation, E11376 Shady Lane Rd, Baraboo, WI 53913, USA

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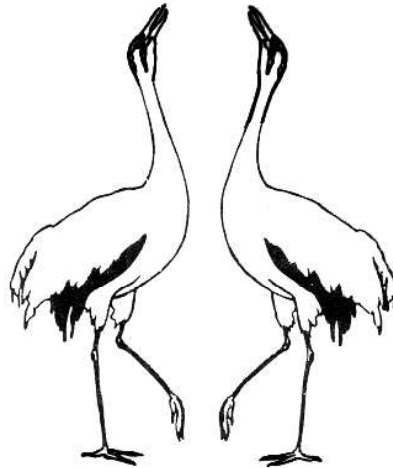
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