



Whooping Cranes past and present

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Abstract

The Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*), endemic to North America, is the rarest of all crane species. It is believed that in the early 1800s, the Whooping Crane was widespread in North America, though it was never very abundant. Whooping Crane numbers decreased precipitously as westward migration of Euro-American settlers converted prairie to cropland and the birds were hunted. By the early 1940s the total population was as low as 21 individuals; the migratory Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population, from which all extant Whooping Cranes are descended, dwindled to 16 in 1941. The threat of extinction was very real. These dire circumstances excited the interest of ornithologists and conservationists in the United States and Canada, and much has been accomplished since to conserve the species. To describe the historical and ongoing conservation activities for Whooping Cranes, we distinguish two eras of Whooping Crane Conservation: before 1950 and after 1950. The first era was characterized by publicizing the plight of the Whooping Crane and halting hunting and habitat destruction. The second era, continuing to the present, has been characterized by development of information about cranes through scientific study, conservation efforts of governmental and

nongovernmental organizations, protection of the species under the Endangered Species Act in the United States and the Species at Risk Act in Canada, habitat protection, and reintroduction of new populations of Whooping Cranes. Publication of the monograph, *The Whooping Crane* by Robert Porter Allen, in 1952 stimulated much of the work of the second era, and still stands as the definitive work on the biology of Whooping Cranes. The remnant Aransas Wood Buffalo Population, which is crucial to species recovery, has grown to over 430 birds as of winter 2016–17. Four reintroduced populations were started in the second era; two are currently active efforts (the Eastern Migratory population and the Louisiana Nonmigratory Population), although neither population is selfsustaining. This volume gathers together the current scientific information about Whooping Cranes and the experiences of various reintroduction and management operations, to provide a baseline from which a third era of Whooping Crane conservation may be launched.

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