

Eye on Nature

TEXAS
PARKS &
WILDLIFE

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Getting Texans Involved

Impact and present status of two prairie chicken species

By Stephanie Shelton

Lesser

The Texas Panhandle is home to the lesser prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*), a species associated with sandy soils that support shinnery oak (*Quercus havardii*) and sandsage (*Artemisia filifolia*). There are two disconnected populations found in the northeastern and southwestern panhandle bordered by Oklahoma and New Mexico, respectively. Including Colorado and Kansas, it is estimated that 10,000 to 20,000 lesser prairie chickens remain in all five states. Within Texas, approximately 3,000 birds remain in the wild and populations are stable to slightly declining. Most of these birds occur in the northeastern counties of Hemphill, Wheeler and Lipscomb. This shows a dramatic decrease in the once abundant Texas population, reputed to be in the millions.

The biggest factor in the decline of this species is from habitat loss. Previous use of defoliating herbicides and burning to increase grazing and farming opportunities greatly reduced shinnery oak and sandsage habitats. Approximately 3,000 acres of former cropland has been converted to non-native grass monocultures through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These altered grasslands are uninviting as a habitat for the lesser prairie chicken. Other factors impacting this species include habitat fragmentation, predation by native and non-



native species, and changes in brooding and nesting cover vegetation.

Attwater's

The Attwater's prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido attwateri*), an endangered subspecies of the greater prairie chicken, is a grouse of the Gulf Coast Prairies. Once potentially numbering in the millions with habitat along the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast, it is now on the brink of extinction. Extirpated from Louisiana in 1919, fewer than 50 free-ranging birds remain in Texas as of 2005. Captive breeding programs are underway at Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, Texas A&M University, the Houston Zoo, the San Antonio Zoo, Sea World of Texas, Caldwell Zoo and the Abilene Zoo. The intent of these programs is to release these birds into the wild and to maintain genetic diversity of an already limited gene pool.

There are many natural and manmade factors negatively impacting this species. Native predators such as coyotes, opossum, raccoons, skunks and a few snake species prey on nests, eggs and chicks. Non-native species such as feral hogs, cats, dogs and red imported fire ants also negatively impact prairie chicken populations. In the

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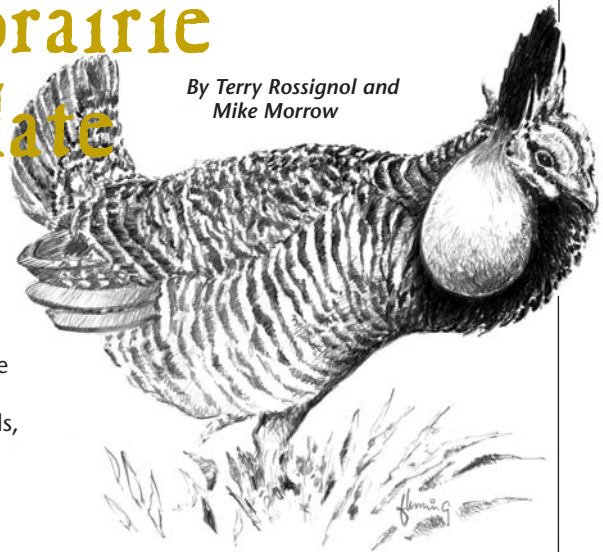
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Attwater's prairie chicken update

By Terry Rossignol and Mike Morrow



The Attwater's prairie-chicken (APC) (*Tympanuchus cupido attwateri*) is endemic to the Gulf Coast prairies of Texas and Louisiana. Historically, APC populations may have approached one million on some six million acres of prairie habitat. By 1937, populations had declined to an estimated 8,700 individuals, and have continued to decline. As of spring 2005, fewer than 50 remained in free-ranging populations at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge (APC NWR) and The Nature Conservancy's Texas City Prairie Preserve (TCPP).

Over time, loss and fragmentation of its coastal prairie ecosystem due to agricultural conversion, urban and industrial expansion, overgrazing, and invasion of prairies by woody species have been the primary factors driving APC declines. In the last 15-20 years, adverse weather, reduced genetic variability, parasites, disease and red imported fire ants (*Solenopsis wagneri*) have all likely contributed to the APC's downward spiral toward extinction. Although the APC Recovery Plan is currently in revision, to date conservation efforts aimed at reversing this extinction spiral have been centered on four major thrusts: habitat management/restoration, captive breeding, population supplementation and research. Research provides answers needed to accomplish the other three thrusts, and will be discussed under those headings.

Habitat management/restoration

Currently, APC habitat management is focused on the 10,528-acre APC NWR, the 2,395-acre TCPP, and private grasslands within the APC's historic range. Work on private lands has primarily been conducted on areas in close proximity to the refuge, and in Refugio and Goliad counties. Private lands work has been conducted through the Coastal Prairie Conservation Initiative (CPCI), a partnership involving private landowners, local soil and water conservation districts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Sam Houston Resource Conservation and Development Board, the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy of Texas and the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative. Integral to the CPCI has been incorporation of Safe Harbor Agreements into

management plans where desired by landowners. Safe Harbor Agreements promote voluntary management for listed species on private property while giving assurances to landowners that no additional future regulatory restrictions will be imposed if listed species increase in numbers as a result of management activities. To date, more than 76,000 acres have been enrolled under Safe Harbor agreements for APC management, with cost-share assistance provided on approximately 60,000 acres.

Captive Breeding

Currently, seven institutions are collectively holding roughly 200 adults. Production in 2005 has netted one of the largest numbers of chicks to be released since the program started — 135. Management of reticuloendotheliosis virus (REV), a retrovirus, remains a major problem for APCs in the captive setting. Research on several fronts has or is being conducted to address the REV issue. Texas A&M University continues to study the etiology and testing protocol for this disease. Researchers there are also developing a vaccine that hopefully will provide immunity against REV as well as remedial treatment for individuals that have already contracted the virus. Research coordinated by the Fort Worth Zoo is also underway to refine the diet for APC breeders and chicks.

Population Supplementation

Since 1995, a total of 753 captive-reared APCs have been released at the two remaining wild populations. Most of these birds have been fitted with radio transmitters to facilitate evaluation of post-release

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[Impact and present status Continued]

early 1990s, harsh weather brought about the loss of eggs and chicks, greatly reducing recruitment potential. Habitat loss and fragmentation caused by urbanization, developing infrastructure, and the modification of Gulf Coast Prairie communities for use as pastureland and intensive cropland reduces the accessibility of display sites, as well as areas for good nesting and brooding cover. Captive populations are experiencing their own pressures from inbreeding, poor nutrition, parasites and diseases such as the reticuloendotheliosis virus (REV).

Both prairie chicken species are listed as species of concern in the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) for the state of Texas and are a high priority for future conservation efforts. For more information visit the CWCS website: www.tpwd.state.tx.us/business/grants/wildlife/cwcs/

You can assist with the recovery of the Attwater's Prairie Chicken through a donation to the Adopt-a-Prairie Chicken fund. Call (800) 792-1112 for details

Stephanie Shelton is a Wildlife Planner working out of Austin. At this time, she is assisting with the development of the Texas CWCS.

New tools to protect the Whooping Crane

By Lee Ann Linam

When 217 endangered whooping cranes arrived on the Texas coast last fall, biologists, birders and conservationists around the world celebrated. For the first time in more than a century the last remaining wild flock of whooping cranes had surpassed the 200 bird mark. It was yet another chapter in a remarkable comeback story.

However, the good news was tempered with some bad. The count could have been even higher, because on the morning of Nov. 6, 2004, sandhill crane hunters in Kansas shot two whooping cranes. Although the birds were not killed immediately, they died in veterinary care after being captured. This event, following on the heels of the shooting of a whooping crane in Ellis County, Texas, in 2003, has prompted state wildlife agencies to explore new ways to increase awareness and identification skills in both the hunting community and the general public.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has taken the lead in producing new materials designed to help protect whooping cranes and other similar nongame birds during their migration and wintering period. TPWD produced a video news release last fall showing footage of whooping cranes and other look-alike species. Artwork

depicting geese, cranes and other similar species was published in the annual *Texas Waterfowl Digest*, and copies of a poster with the artwork were sent to locations that sell hunting licenses. While aimed at hunters, these tools also can help birders and others make correct identification of whooping cranes. Finally, this summer TPWD completed production of a DVD also entitled "Be Sure Before You Shoot" that will allow hunter education instructors to show clips of various species to their students. The students will hopefully gain an appreciation of the care that should be taken when they are deciding whether to "Shoot" or "Don't Shoot."

Why all the concern over the killing of three birds? While some may argue that any needless loss of an individual is regrettable, for a rare long-lived species that matures slowly and produces few young, the loss of three adults is especially significant. And in the end, our conservation goal is a success story in which hunters and birders and average citizens do their part to conserve habitat, sustain harvest of game species and conserve all species for current and future generations.

Lee Ann Linam is Texas Nature Tracker Biologist working out of Wimberley.



PHOTO COURTESY OF USFWS

"Be Sure Before You Shoot" video/DVD now available

Copies of TPWD's new 17-minute hunter education video showing geese, cranes and other similar species in flight is now available from the department's Wildlife Science, Research and Diversity Branch. Send checks for \$10 (including shipping and handling) payable to TPWD Nongame Fund to:

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
3000 So. IH-35, Suite 100
Austin, TX 78704

Please indicate your preference for VHS or DVD format

Report Sightings of Whooping Cranes

You can help to protect whooping cranes during migration. Whoopers pass through Texas from mid-October to mid-December in a corridor that stretches from the eastern panhandle to the DFW metroplex, through the Austin area and down to the mid-coast. Observers should note the number of cranes, their behavior, the habitat and location and any identifying features, such as leg bands or juvenile coloration. Observations can be reported to (800) 792-1112 x4644 or mark.klym@tpwd.state.tx.us.

Lesser prairie-chicken management and conservation

By Heather Whitlaw

Lesser prairie-chickens (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) are members of the prairie grouse family, and they inhabit portions of the short and mixed-grass prairies of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado and Kansas. The habitat needs of lesser prairie-chickens are specialized, and they require specific seasonal habitats during different parts of the year, all within a contiguous area of approximately 25,000 acres. This requirement for large and continuous areas of primarily native grassland has, in part, resulted in a noticeable decline in lesser prairie chicken distributions and numbers across a large part of their range. In response to a 1995 petition to list the Lesser Prairie-Chicken as a threatened species, the five states (CO, KS, NM, OK and TX) where the bird lives created the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Interstate Working Group (LPCIWG). In 1999 this group developed a Conservation Assessment that summarized what was known at the time about LPC ecology and habitat requirements, in addition to developing strategies for delivering conservation; however, this assessment did not include objectives for needed habitat that were measurable. With the advent of several new conservation opportunities in the past 12-18 months, the LPCIWG accepted the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) offer of a full-time employee (Heather Whitlaw) to serve as the Interstate LPCH Program Coordinator for the next two years to develop those objectives; these objectives will be outlined in an Interstate LPC Plan (or Conservation Initiative) and within individual state-level initiatives.

There are two disjunct LPC populations in Texas; one is found in the Northeastern Panhandle and the other is in the Southwestern Panhandle. TPWD surveys of select LPC population subgroups indicate that since the late 1990s populations are likely stable or slightly declining. TPWD surveys LPCs in the spring when the birds are congregated on the breeding display grounds (also known as leks or booming grounds). Spring (mid-March through mid-May) is the best time to hear and see LPCs, and reports from the public about their observations are always welcome and appreciated.

Lesser prairie chicken populations in Texas and across their entire five-state range are impacted by habitat changes on the landscape. Threats to their sustained viability and recovery include direct habitat loss through conversion of native range and grasslands to other land uses, fragmentation of available remaining habitats, loss of habitat through changes in vegetation cover (lack of fire on the landscape, impacts of long-term cattle grazing, brush invasion) and overall loss of useable space. Many of the conservation practices and initiatives currently in place or under consideration are targeted toward addressing these threats.

Federally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is considering and evaluating LPCs as a potential threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). TPWD and the other four state wildlife agencies (CO, NM, OK and KS) with primary responsibility for LPC management and conservation, in addition to many other partners including Playa Lakes Joint Venture, North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP), USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), USDA Farm Services Agency (FSA), and private landowners continue to work toward LPC conservation and recovery through delivery of habitat management practices, research and coordination of incentive programs.

Habitat work on the ground with landowners and other conservation partners is one of the primary areas of LPC management and recovery efforts. For example, a group of landowners in the northeast Texas panhandle are exploring the idea of developing a Prescribed Burning Association in order to return fire to the landscape and improve habitat for many grassland-dependent species (including LPCs). On the other side of the Texas panhandle, a group of landowners are considering developing a Wildlife Management Association focused on management and conservation of unique sandhills habitats (which support populations of LPCs and many other species of management importance and concern). TPWD, NRCS and USFWS have several programs in place to assist landowners (cost share, incentives, technical assistance) with habitat improvements on private lands. Contact



Heather Whitlaw or your local TPWD biologist for more information (see www.tpwd.state.tx.us/landwater/land/wildlife_management/).

Cooperation and communication among LPC conservation partners (LPCIWG, PLJV, NRCS, FSA, USFWS, NAGP Prairie Grouse Planning Project) in Texas and across the five-state LPC range is well underway in order to develop the Interstate LPCCI and individual state-level LPC initiatives and plans. This partnership is also working to create a popularized LPC management and conservation document, which is targeted at landowners and land managers who want more information on managing their property for LPCs and other grassland-dependent wildlife species. In addition, TPWD and USFWS are developing a Candidate Conservation with Assurances (CCAA) that will provide enrolled landowners with regulatory assurances that their actions to conserve LPCs will not be detrimental should the species become listed under the ESA.

TPWD has begun the process of mapping land use and land cover in areas of the TX Panhandle using "heads-up digitizing" of 2004 aerial images and ground truthing. The purpose of this project is to identify and describe existing occupied LPC habitats, in addition to identifying potential LPC habitats. The data will be used to focus conservation efforts, improve planning for LPC management, and aid TPWD and partners in delivery of landowner cost-share and incentive programs.

In Texas LPCs are an upland game-bird species and until recently hunting regulations allowed for a two-day season with a four bird bag limit in eight counties. During the April 2005 TPWD Commission meetings, the commission approved a new voluntary habitat-based

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[Attwater's update Continued]

survival. This evaluation is essential to refining release methodologies in order to improve post-release survival.

Estimates of first year post-release survival for APC released during 1996-2004 have ranged from 9% to 41% in 1999 and 2004, respectively. Increased survival for birds released in 2004 is thought to be due, at least in part, to prophylactic treatment for chewing lice on APC at the refuge, which resulted in a reduction in breeding season mortality. Heavy louse loads observed on birds at the refuge during 2002-2003 were associated with substantial increases in breeding season mortality. It is hypothesized that better hen condition resulting from louse reduction resulted in an observed increase in average clutch size in 2005.

Currently, extremely poor reproduction from pen-reared hens is the factor most limiting recovery of wild APC populations. Nesting success has been substantially enhanced by installation of predator deterrent fences around most

nests since 2000. However, no surviving chicks produced by released pen-reared hens had been documented prior to 2004. Intensive observations on eight broods at the Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR in 2003 found that no chicks survived past 11 days post-hatch. Several chicks were found dead or dying at night roosts, suggesting that predation was not the sole cause of chick mortality. Research is currently underway to determine the cause(s) for this poor chick survival. During 2003-2005, placement of broods at the APC NWR in 4' x 8' pens for two weeks post-hatch and providing food and water (drip) ad libitum showed promise for "jump-starting" chicks. Seven of 18 (38%) chicks released using this technique in 2004 survived to at least six weeks. In 2005, 82 chicks were released by this method; however, survival to date has been very dismal.

Although results of recovery efforts for this imperiled bird have mimicked a roller-coaster ride for the last decade with many ups and downs, there is hope for the Attwater's. One of the keys is to



PHOTO COURTESY OF USFWS

produce enough birds in the captive setting to greatly increase the number of birds released each year. Advancements in REV and nutrition management in the captive flock will hopefully translate into more wild APCs in the near future so that Texans may once again hear the "booming" sounds of the Attwater's resolute across the Texas coastal prairies.

Terry Rossignol is Manager of the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge in Eagle Lake, Texas. Mike Morrow is Wildlife Biologist at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge.

[Lesser prairie chicken Continued]

permit program for LPC hunting that offers landowners a limited harvest option for those properties with a wildlife management plan geared toward LPCs. Under the new regulation, hunting during the two-day season will occur only on managed properties in the program. There will be a daily bag limit and properties in the program will have a harvest recommendation.

Research is also underway on a variety of LPC-related topics. Texas Tech University is currently evaluating several methodologies to survey and count LPCs using aerial survey techniques. Texas A&M University is conducting research on LPC population responses to selected habitat improvements. Future research will focus on conducting a spatially explicit population viability analysis, and LPC population genetics.

For more information on LPCs or to report observations, please contact Heather Whitlaw at (806) 742-4968 or heather.whitlaw@tpwd.state.tx.us; or contact the TPWD Upland Game Program office in Austin (512) 389-4975.

Heather Whitlaw is interstate Lesser Prairie Chicken Habitat Coordinator working out of Lubbock.

Texas black-tailed prairie dog monitoring

By Marsha Reimer

Black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) are an icon of the grasslands. These animals were once common in short and mixed grass prairies throughout the western midwest, including Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Dakota, North Dakota and Wyoming, as well as Canada and Mexico. Historically, millions of acres of Texas grassland were covered by black-tailed prairie dog towns. Prairie dog towns in Texas now occupy less than 1% of their historic range.

Prairie dogs are an important part of the ecosystem. Their digging aerates



and promotes soil formation, they clip back brush, maintaining the short grass prairie and they are a keystone species providing food and shelter for as many as 170 different animals. A keystone species is a species that other species depend upon for survival.

Now, through participation in the Texas Black-tailed Prairie Dog Watch, you can help widen our understanding of black-tailed prairie dogs and what is contributing to their decline. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department needs your help to monitor prairie dog towns in your area by observing and collecting data. The data that is collected will help TPWD biologists to monitor population trends and develop more effective conservation and management methods.

For more information contact John Young at john.young@tpwd.state.tx.us or visit our Web Site at: www.tpad.state.tx.us/trackers

Marsha Reimer is Coordinator of the Texas Nature Trackers program out of Austin.

Wildlife Viewing at Gene Howe WMA

By Derrick Holdstock

The Gene Howe Wildlife Management Area (Gene Howe WMA) is located in the Rolling Plains ecoregion in the northeastern Texas Panhandle. It consists of about 5,387 acres of rolling sagebrush sandhills and riparian habitat along the north bank of the Canadian River. About 25 miles to the north in Lipscomb County is the Pat Murphy Unit of the Gene Howe WMA. It consists of 889 acres of reclaimed agricultural land. The goals and objectives of these areas include providing and conserving habitat, serving as a research and demonstration site, providing an educational environment for local schools, and providing hunting, fishing and outdoor recreational opportunities. White-tailed deer, bobwhite quail, mourning doves, Rio Grande wild turkeys, pheasants, feral hogs and a variety of waterfowl can be harvested by permit.

The Gene Howe WMA was acquired in two units. The first unit was purchased from J. C. Studer in 1950 and the second from Furman Williams in 1951. The Murphy Unit was deeded to the state by Mr. W. A. (Pat) Murphy in 1991.

The Gene Howe WMA has historical as well as natural appeal. Before becoming state property, the Studer tract included the Anvil Park Ranch, famous for a professional rodeo from 1918 through 1941. This 24-year stretch is part of the 117-year history of Canadian's 4th of July rodeo which, in 1888, was the world's first organized rodeo and has been an annual event ever since. The Williams tract contains the location of one of the first settlements in the Texas Panhandle. This town was called Hogtown and was a tent city of railroad workers and gamblers when the Topeka, Atkinson and Santa Fe railroads were being constructed in the 1880s. It was named for the boisterous behavior of its inhabitants. Hogtown gave way to the current town of Canadian in 1887 when the railroad bridge across the Canadian River was completed. Evidence of Hogtown still exists. The Gene Howe WMA was named for Gene Howe, a Panhandle rancher and sports writer and a former Texas Parks and Wildlife Commissioner.

The Gene Howe WMA has two distinct ecological zones. About $\frac{1}{3}$ of the area is grassy bottomland with occasional cottonwood trees. Encroaching exotic brush species including Russian olive and saltcedar are also present. The staff at the Gene Howe WMA is actively working to eliminate these two species through chemical and mechanical means funded primarily through grants. Natural sloughs and wet meadows are common, as much of this area used to be in the floodplain of the Canadian River, prior to the creation of Lake Meredith. Several sloughs have been modified with water control structures to hold back water. Waterfowl habitat is then created through moist soil management. A prime example of this is West Bull Slough, which can be viewed at our waterfowl viewing blind and adjacent nature trail. A variety of waterfowl and shorebirds are common, as well as white-tailed deer, coyotes, bobcats, beavers, Rio Grande wild turkeys, roadrunners, bobwhite quail and many songbirds.

The remaining $\frac{2}{3}$ of the area are sandhills, dominated by sand sagebrush, bluestem, switchgrass, plum and sumac. Persimmon Creek cuts through Persimmon Pasture and provides a



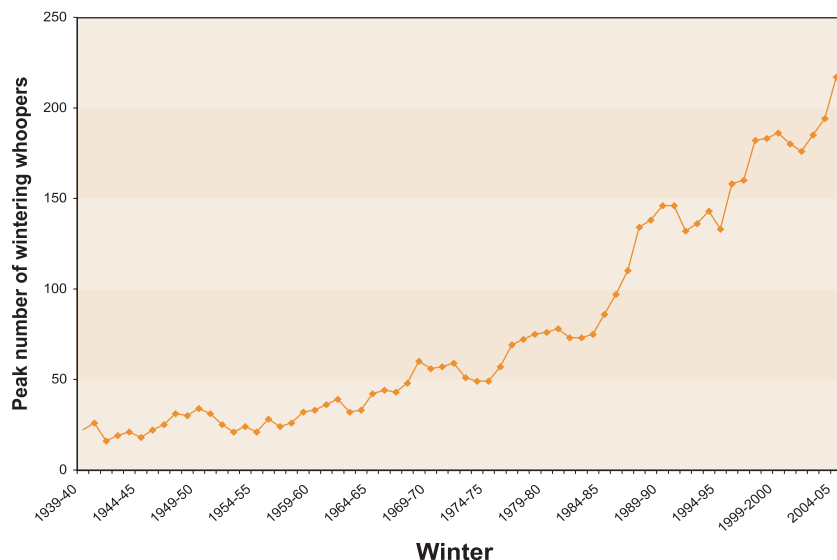
break in the seemingly endless expanse of rolling hills. A walk along Persimmon Creek offers some of the best opportunities to encounter wildlife in the sandhills, as many species including white-tailed deer use this riparian belt as a travel corridor. The historical prairie dog town in Middle Pasture and the newly-introduced town in North Pasture provide opportunities for visitors to observe prairie dogs, burrowing owls, killdeer, hawks and many songbirds that are unique to the Great Plains. The area once contained at least one lesser prairie chicken lek, and chickens are occasionally seen in the sandhills during various parts of the year. Scaled quail and mule deer are occasional visitors.

The Murphy unit, despite its small size, contains four distinctly different habitat types. Most of the area had a history of agriculture and portions of the area were enrolled in CRP contracts before it was acquired by the state. The state re-enrolled these areas into new contracts and has done some mid-contract management practices including reseeding portions with native grasses. This has resulted in a patchwork of native grassland, old world bluestem (CRP), old world bluestem reseeded to native grasses (CRP) and a native riparian corridor along Plum Creek. Common wildlife include white-tailed deer, coyotes, pronghorn antelope, roadrunners, Rio Grande wild turkeys, lesser prairie chickens, bobwhite quail and a wide variety of grassland birds.

The region around the Gene Howe WMA and the Murphy Unit is mostly comprised of big ranches. Many of these ranches provide a variety of hunting, fishing and birdwatching opportunities. For more information on the Gene Howe WMA or the Murphy Unit, contact Derrick Holdstock at (806) 323-8642. Information on outdoor recreation in Hemphill and Lipscomb counties can be attained by calling the Hemphill County Chamber of Commerce at (806) 323-6234.

Derrick Holdstock is Assistant Area Manager at the Gene Howe Wildlife Management Area in Canadian.

Aransas - Wood Buffalo Whooping Crane Flock



[The back porch Continued]

In the 1950s, as biologists held their collective breath, whooping crane numbers wavered in the 20s and low 30s. Despite Allen's best efforts, it was a stroke of luck that finally revealed the nesting grounds. In 1954 a Canadian forest fire fighter noted a pair of white birds in the wetlands of Wood Buffalo National Park on the border of Alberta and Northwest Territories and the mystery was revealed.

By 1960 there were still only 36 whooping cranes alive in the wild, but there was some insurance. The last of the Louisiana birds and a few injured cranes had begun to produce chicks in captivity. These captive populations were enhanced by the collection of one egg from each wild nest, with a hope of one day reintroducing whooping cranes to the wild. Meanwhile, down in Texas, thoughts turned to habitat management ...

In 1970 there were 57 whooping cranes. Slowly, very slowly, this long-lived, slow-growing species was increasing. Although biologists experimented with food plots in the 1960s, by the 1970s land managers began recognizing the importance of natural factors, such as prescribed fire, in habitat management. At the same time, some very unnatural experiments were taking place in the Rocky Mountains. Researchers were placing whooping crane eggs in the nests of wild sandhill cranes, with the hopes that the sandhill crane foster parents would help establish a new migratory population of whooping cranes. The eggs were hatching and the chicks were surviving and migrating, but would it work?

By 1980 there were 78 whooping cranes wintering in Texas and 20 whoop-

ers migrating from Idaho to New Mexico with sandhill cranes. But, alas, to biologists' humble realizations, a crane is not a crane ... the cross-fostering had left improper imprinting on the whooper chicks, and, as no pair-bonding occurred and mortality levels in the migration path proved high, the introduced population began to decline. Meanwhile, at home in Texas, although our whooper population hit 100 in 1986, all the reproducing wild whoopers were still in "one basket." This added impetus to efforts to protect habitats from shoreline erosion along the Intracoastal Waterway.

With a larger breeding population, the 1990s saw the Texas whooping crane population pass 150. The decade also saw an awakening of local communities to the value of ecotourism, and many coastal communities began to market the presence of the endangered whooping crane as a local attraction. A new reintroduction experiment began as well, with the establishment of a non-migratory population of whooping cranes in Florida. New techniques for rearing whooping cranes without imprinting on humans or sandhill cranes made the reintroductions possible, but researchers still were learning that there is much we have to learn about teaching a whooping crane to survive — techniques that would prove valuable in the next reintroduction effort.

In 2000 there were 180 whooping cranes in Texas, two still in Idaho-New Mexico and 74 in the new Florida population, but the challenge of reintroducing a migratory population still remained. As the battle over water in the Guadalupe River in Texas intensified — water that was the lifeblood of the San Antonio Bay

ecosystem and the blue crabs upon which whoopers depend — biologists were ready to try a new creative approach to the migration dilemma. Enter Father Goose and *Fly Away Home*. Cooperators in the eastern United States began using ultralight aircraft and imprinting on costumed handlers to introduce young whooping cranes to nesting habitat in Wisconsin and teach them to migrate to Florida. Migrations to date have been successful, with 21 chicks scheduled to join the 42 already in this population this fall.

The story of the whooping crane is truly an inspiring success story — from 21 birds in two small populations to nearly 500 birds in three wild and five captive populations. It's a success story that could be attributed to many people, but the irony is that few of us would claim much credit. For we have all been variously apprehensive, humbled, surprised, grateful, and inspired along the path to recovery. Robert Allen, perhaps the most legitimate heir to acclaim, reflects the glory back on the species itself ...

"When you sit crouched in a blind and watch an adult (whooping crane) stride close by you, his head high and proud, his bearing arrogant and imposing, you feel the presence of a strength and of a stubborn will to survive ... For the whooping crane there is no freedom but that of unbounded wilderness, no life except its own. Without meekness, without a sign of humility, it has refused to accept our idea of what the world should be like." *The Whooping Crane*, 1952.



The Back Porch

Bringing back whoopers

by Lee Ann Linam

Whooping cranes have a special place in the story of conservation and a special place in many Texans' hearts. Their fight for recovery is a story with worldwide appeal. It is a story of modern technology and of primal animal behavior. It is a story of artists and of scientists. It is a story of a majestic bird and of ridiculous costumes. It is a story of human compassion and of politics. It is a story of nations and of states. Most significantly, it is a story of hope and of a species that was nearly lost forever.

Whooping cranes have a special place in my family's story as well. In 1973 my father escaped the clutches of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service administrative job in the Atlanta regional office to bring his family west to Texas and the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. For the first time I saw javelinas and enchi-

ladas and whooping cranes. As I explored the oak mottes and mosquito-laden swales on my gray pony, little did I know that my father would spend his last few years shepherding those 49 magnificent birds to the 100 bird mark at the time of his death in 1986. Little did I know that I would find myself 22 years later heralding their success as they surpassed the 200 bird mark. Little did I appreciate, at the age of 12, just how much how many had done to rescue this species and how uncertain anyone was of their ultimate success ...

By the time efforts came to save the whooping crane, North America's tallest bird was nearly gone. When President Franklin Roosevelt set up the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in 1937 there were fewer than 20 birds in the last migratory population that wintered in Texas (and nested in an unknown loca-

tion) and only a dozen or so in a non-migratory population that nested in the marshes of Louisiana.

In the 1940s, the Aransas numbers fell to 15 or 16 birds and the Louisiana population succumbed to a devastating hurricane. There was a desperate need to know more about the conservation needs of the species, and Robert Porter Allen of National Audubon Society began a decade-long devotion to exploring the mysteries of the whooping crane.

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