

WHOOPING CRANE

Grus americana (Endangered Colorado, Federally)

ADULT WHOOPING CRANES are large white birds with a red patch of skin from the base of the bill to the forehead, black primary wing feathers, a very long neck and long black legs. Juvenile whooping cranes are a reddish-cinnamon color and molt to adult plumage during the winter months. They are the tallest birds in North America, standing nearly 5 feet tall. Whooping cranes have managed to fight off the threat of extinction for 75 years.

Whooping cranes historically nested over a wide area from the upper Midwest northward to the Arctic coast and wintered along the coasts of Texas and Louisiana.

Populations decreased dramatically throughout the 1800s and into the early 1900s, mainly because of the loss of nesting and wintering habitat. Some were also killed for their feathers.

By the early 1940s, reports indicated that the population had dropped to less than 20 birds and extinction appeared imminent. But a stringent management program may have saved the species. The primary, self-sustaining population currently numbers nearly 200 birds, and the birds' nesting area at

Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada and their wintering area at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas are heavily protected. Other programs include the establishment of a non-migratory population in central Florida and a migratory one that winters in Florida and breeds in Wisconsin. Some whooping cranes are maintained in captivity for breeding and reintroduction.

In Colorado, whooping cranes occur in eastern Colorado only very rarely during spring and fall migration. The primary migration pathway between wintering and breeding grounds includes central Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska. When they are seen, they are often found with flocks of sandhill cranes.



Whooping cranes migrate with the more common sandhill cranes (pictured in back).

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