

Rare Whooping Crane visits Northeast Montana

The past few weeks have brought many visitors to northeast Montana, namely migrating birds and bird hunters! Medicine Lake Refuge has noted hunters from more than 25 states and provinces in the past two weeks. But residents of Homestead and Froid recently reported a really special visitor: a rare Whooping Crane spent about 3 days in the area, along with thousands of sandhill cranes. The cranes were foraging in local stubble fields, and then roosting in the Medicine Lake Refuge near Homestead. There are less than 300 Whooping Cranes in the world, so this visitor is truly a special one.



Whooping Cranes are magnificent birds, standing nearly five feet tall, with a long, sinuous neck and long legs. Its snow white body feathers are accented by jet-black wing tips and a red and black head with a long, pointed beak. Their wing span measures about 7 ½ feet! The Whooping Crane's call,

from which it derives its name, is described as a shrill bugle-like trumpeting.

More than beauty, the crane symbolizes the current struggle to maintain the vanishing creatures of our world. In the early 1900s, hunting and habitat loss took a toll on whooping cranes, and by 1941 only 16 Whoopers were left! Although very close to extinction, the whooping crane is making a comeback, thanks to conservation efforts during the past few decades.



The Whoopers migrate between their summer breeding grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories, Canada, and their wintering area in Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in southern Texas. Their main migration route is through the central Great Plains, mostly the Dakotas and extreme northeast Montana, and then down through Nebraska and Kansas to Texas. Stopover areas such as ours serve as 'stepping stones' along their 2600-mile migration route, places for the birds to rest and fuel up again.

Often the Whoopers travel with flocks of sandhill cranes, their nearest relative in the bird world.



Whooping Cranes are protected under the Endangered Species Act, and a variety of recovery efforts have been implemented over the years. In 1937, the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was established in Texas to protect the wintering grounds of the remaining Whooping Cranes. In 1967, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began a captive breeding program. Three facilities are now rearing whooping cranes for re-introduction into the wild, and flocks have been introduced into the wild at two sites. Thanks to these and other efforts, Whooping Cranes have survived and their population is slowly increasing.

Anyone sighting a whooping crane should report their observation to the Medicine Lake Refuge (789-2305). Hunters are requested to avoid disturbing whooping cranes and to be alert regarding species identification while hunting, especially when hunting sandhill cranes or tundra swans, as these species look somewhat similar to whooping cranes. To learn more about whooping cranes and efforts to recover their populations, visit <http://endangered.fws.gov>.

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