

Alberta – a nice place to nest

By Kerri Savage



One of the rarest and tallest birds in North America, the whooping crane, has a special place in Alberta. Wood Buffalo National Park, which spans the border between Alberta and the Northwest Territories, is the only known nesting location for these majestic birds in all of North America.

Standing at 1.5 m tall, with a wingspan of 2.4 m, these endangered birds have been slowly increasing in numbers due to conservation efforts started in the late 1930s. The whooping crane is endangered mainly due to loss of habitat. In the 1940s, there was an estimated world population of only 16 whooping cranes. Current estimates put the world population near 485, with the Wood Buffalo wild migratory flock of whooping cranes totalling 237 birds.

The creation of Wood Buffalo National Park in 1922 has helped prevent the extinction of the whooping crane. Wood Buffalo National Park and vicinity is the only place where wild Whooping Cranes nest in North America. Their preferred breeding habitat is muskeg and they need to nest on the ground, preferably above and near marshes. Because of the remoteness of the 500 km² area and hunting and access restrictions, the population seems sufficiently protected. It is illegal to disturb whooping cranes or their nests in Alberta.

Named for its whooping call, the cranes arrive in Alberta in late April to breed and then make the 4000 km flight south to Texas in September for the winter. Whooping cranes migrate in groups of only two to seven birds. Gliding on wind currents, they can stay in flight for 10 hours, covering up to 750 km. The flock occupies nearly 90 km² along the Texas coast designated as the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge formed in 1937. They endure challenges during migration such as loss of wetlands, collisions with powerlines and the occasional accidental shooting being mistaken for legally hunted sandhill cranes.

Whooping cranes perform an intricate mating dance where they ruffle their feathers and leap into the air all in an attempt to seduce a partner. Once coupled, they usually mate for life and can live into their mid-twenties. Though the female lays one to three eggs, it is not unusual for only one chick to survive per season.

Surplus eggs from Wood Buffalo are hatched and reared in captivity. Since 1993, the Calgary Zoo has been involved in breeding whooping cranes in captivity producing offspring for the captive breeding flock and for releases into the wild. The Canadian Wildlife Service also confirmed that this summer, the Calgary Zoo will supply eggs for hatching and introduction into the smaller eastern flock that migrates from Wisconsin to Florida.

If you spot a whooping crane, please report the sighting to the Canadian Wildlife Service's 24-hour hotline at 306-975-5595. Please record where you saw them, when, how many and take note of the size of the birds.