

WHOOPING CRANES IN MANITOBA?*

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... Southern Saskatchewan is a regular stop-over for Whooping Cranes during both spring and fall migrations. Upon leaving the North Platte River, Nebraska, (another stop-over area), the cranes head north and fan out once they reach the shortgrass prairie and aspen parkland of southern Saskatchewan. The cranes return through this same area during their 1800-mile trip from Wood Buffalo National Park to Texas. Occasional sightings of Whooping Cranes in southern Manitoba have been attributed to casual stragglers from the rather narrow flyway through southern Saskatchewan.

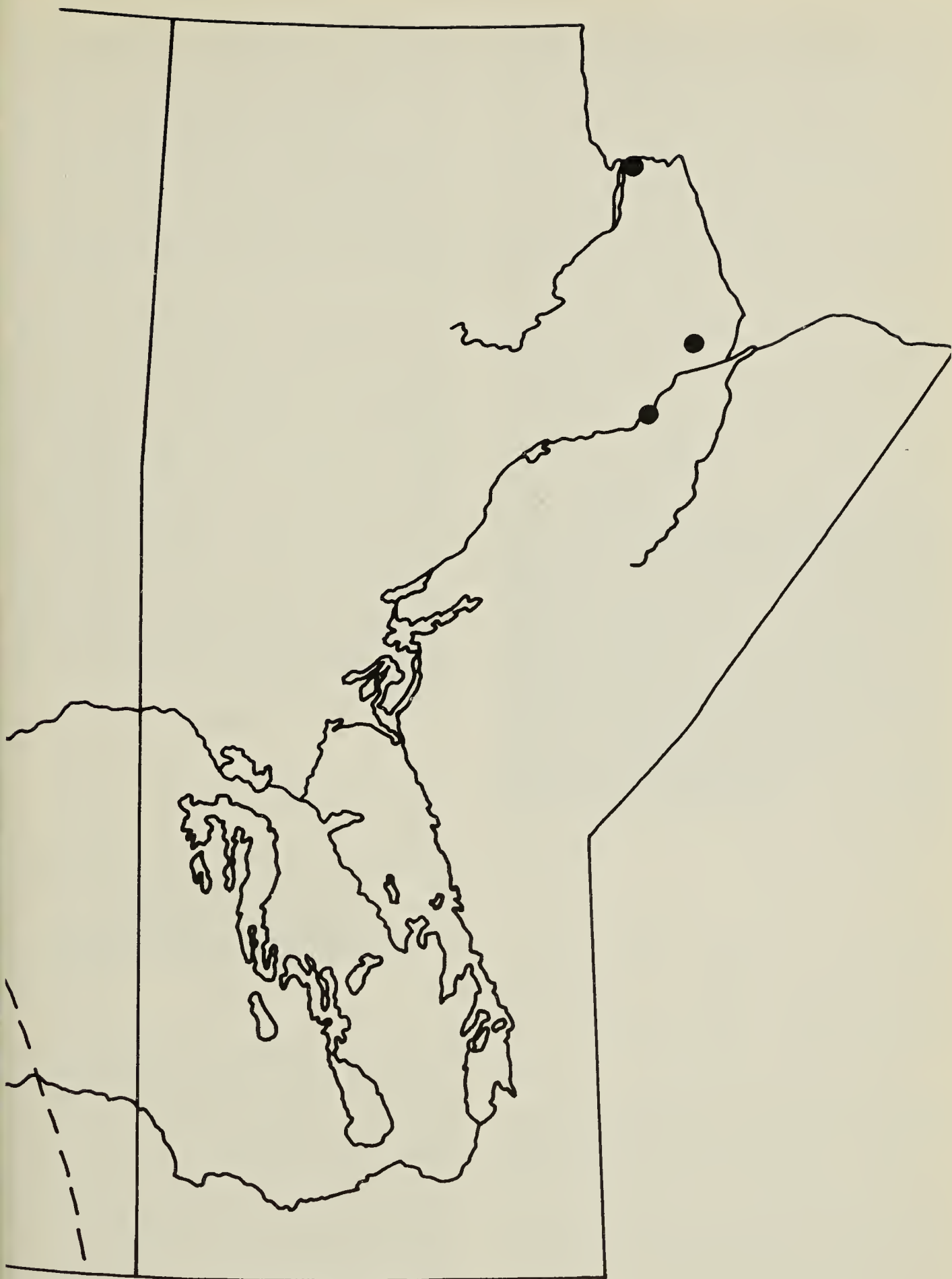
Very few confirmed sightings of Whooping Cranes are available for northern Manitoba. Mrs. Eva Beckett recorded two adults and one immature on 1 October, 1953, near the Churchill townsite. I. H. Smith reported three Whooping Cranes flying over the same town on 6 September 1964. There are three reports of Whooping Cranes in the Northwest Territories adjacent to Manitoba. One was killed near Eskimo Point in 1930 and two at the south end of Nueltin Lake in April, 1947. In the summer of 1948 D. A. Ball sighted two Whooping Cranes at Baker Lake, N.W.T. All of these reports, possibly excepting the last, were definite sightings.

During the summer of 1974 further sightings of Whooping Cranes in northern Manitoba were brought to the author's attention. The following report was exceptionally well documented and indicates the value of observing as many details as possible to facilitate confirmation of sightings.

"On June 22nd, 1974, 2 adult Whooping Cranes were sighted in flight near North Seal Creek, latitude 56° 59', longitude 92° 55' by W. K. Harper, Wildlife Biologist, and I. R. Bukowsky, Resource Technician, Department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management. The cranes were sighted from a helicopter during a resource reconnaissance flight of tributaries that drain in the Lower Nelson River. We feel that this was a positive identification for the following reasons: i) During the reconnaissance flight, two adult Sandhill Cranes with an undetermined number of young were observed in the vicinity of York Factory, less than one hour prior to sighting the Whooping Cranes. This implies size relationship. ii) The Whooping Cranes were observed under excellent weather conditions from an initial distance of approximately 250 yards with the helicopter at an altitude of 200 feet. iii) From this distance the trailing black legs and black bill were observed iv) The Whooping Cranes were larger than the observed Sandhill Cranes, one of which was in flight and observed at approximately the same altitude and distance." Subsequent interviews with the observers convinced the author that this sighting was indeed genuine.

Four Whooping Cranes were observed by D. Beckett on 23 August, 1974, near Gillam, Manitoba. While driving in his car Mr. Beckett observed the four birds flying over the spruce woods at Mile 6 on the road from Gillam to Long Spruce. An avid student of ornithology, Mr. Beckett was quite confident in his identification of the birds. Subsequent questioning convinced the author that this too was an authentic report. A third report in the area was received.

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Locations of three confirmed sightings of Whooping Cranes in northern Manitoba.

Four Whooping Cranes were observed in the vicinity of Boots Creek near Gillam in late June. However, this documentation was lacking in sufficient detail. The map illustrates the locations of these sightings . . .

These recently recorded occurrences give rise to an interesting query in regard to their relation to southern Manitoba sightings. Studies of the breeding population on the Sass River nesting ground in Wood Buffalo

National Park indicate that only a portion of the total population breeds within the area. Other breeding pairs are dispersed in unknown regions outside the park. In addition, it was revealed that at sometime during their northward migration the young birds apparently leave the family group, as they are never found with their parents on the nesting grounds. Consequently every year there are both breeding and yearling birds residing in areas other than the park. The question remains where are they? To the north? The east? Are some breeding or summering in the northern portions of the Prairie Provinces? The nesting habitat has been described as marshy areas interspersed with numerous potholes which are generally shallow and have soft marly bottoms. Surely some regions in northern Manitoba fit this general description.

Nesting Whooping Cranes exhibit both a sensitivity to human disturbance and definite affinities to particular nesting areas. The population of Whooping Cranes nesting in a very small area in the Sass River region and the difficulties encountered in locating them clearly indicate how easily a few birds can be essentially swallowed up in the wilderness and successfully avoid detection. A large portion of northern Manitoba is similarly little-traversed and could quite possibly shelter nesting cranes or summering nonbreeding birds, providing adequate habitat were available.

Fairly regularly there are rumours and reports of Whooping Cranes in southern Manitoba. However, many of these sightings are of somewhat dubious nature. An inspection of reports filed with the Manitoba Department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management revealed the majority of reports were lacking sufficient detail to confirm the sightings as Whooping Cranes. Others were obviously of other species similar in appearance. Reports of 30 Whooping Cranes in a single flock can most likely be attributed to observations of Sandhill Cranes. On the other hand, reports that seem tantalizingly accurate in their details have also been

submitted. It is important that each of these reports be followed up as closely as possible to determine its authenticity.

Excluding the Sandhill Crane, there are three other bird species which, due to their color pattern, might possibly be mistaken as Whooping Cranes. Both the White Pelican and the Snow Goose display striking white and black colorations. The Snow Goose displays an outstretched neck but is considerably smaller and does not have trailing legs. The black of the Pelican is displayed in some of the secondary feathers as well as the primaries. The head hunched on the shoulders and lack of trailing legs further differentiate the large, impressive pelican from the equally striking Whooping Crane. The Whistling Swan is similar in both overall size and possession of a long slender out-stretched neck. However, it too lacks the trailing legs and is all-white in coloration. . .



SASKATCHEWAN CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 1976

The Christmas Bird Count period this year is Saturday, December 18, 1976, to Sunday, January 2, 1977, inclusive. List the number of each bird species seen on Count Day. List dates and number of bird species not seen on Count Day, but seen during Count period. The Count area should be a circle, 15 miles in diameter. For further examples and details see March 1976 *Blue Jay*. Send reports as soon as possible (by January 12, 1977 at latest) to:

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