



Whooping Cranes

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1975 WHOOPING CRANE PAGEANT

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Man's intervention in the Whooping Crane's world this spring has been significant. But the preliminary results are tinged with nature's characteristic sternness. The life-and-death, cyclic drama of nature has been played out amidst international, national and state efforts to engineer an overall gain for these rare birds.

The final results are not yet in, but the high points of this spring's bio-drama include:

—frantic and finally successful attempts to scatter nine migrating whoopers off a Nebraska marsh boiling with infectious avian cholera;

—the hot-house hatching and the death 15 days later of a fragile whooper chick named "Dawn";

—the tryout of a bold new foster parent concept involving snatching whooper eggs from nests in Canada and slipping them under Sandhill Cranes in Idaho where 9 of 14 of the eggs hatched;

—the natural hatching of 11 of 15 whooper eggs in the wilds of north-west Canada.

Obvious lessons have been learned from these episodes but none more profound than the realization that man, who is chiefly responsible for the precarious nature of the Whooping

Crane's existence in the first place, must continue to intercede on behalf of the whoopers if they are ever to be restored to a healthy population.

The footlights went up early on this season's pageant. Unseasonal snow and freezing rain in April over the Dakotas, Nebraska and down into Kansas blocked or slowed the migration of dozens of waterfowl species north to Canada and beyond. Rafts of ducks, gaggles of geese and flocks of sandhill cranes crowded into every available water surface along the storm's front in southern Nebraska and huddled down for the duration. Within days the stress on the overcrowded ponds and sloughs touched off an outbreak of avian cholera, a deadly disease that in a week spread and killed more than 15,000 of the birds.

Into this biological maelstrom flew nine whoopers enroute to Canada. Only the alertness of Nebraska conservation officials enabled federal and state bureaucrats, farmers and biologists to join forces, obtain the necessary emergency waivers of the Endangered Species Act, and use firecrackers and low flying aircraft to haze the whoopers up and away from the infected marsh where they had settled. Nature intervened forcefully with freezing rain and sleet. Thirty-six hours passed before the birds were finally flushed.

Scientists don't know if the whoopers contracted the disease or not. They are not even certain that Whooping Cranes are susceptible to it. They assume, though, that a whooper contracting the cholera will either die after a few days or become a carrier of the disease. Since the whole flock ultimately showed up intact at their Canadian breeding grounds, obviously none died from the cholera. Whether or not any are carriers remains to be seen.

Dawn's hatching on May 29 and his death 15 days later represents another, albeit disappointing, milestone in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to breed whoopers in captivity. The Service began captive breeding in 1967 at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in the hope of producing enough Whooping Cranes eventually to restock wild flocks. One severe winter hurricane along the Texas Gulf Coast could wipe out the sole existing wild flock in a matter of hours, so the effort must go on. But the road has been a troublesome one. As Dawn's death indicates, nature cannot be readily reproduced in the laboratory. Despite what they have learned from elaborate research in Sandhill Crane breeding, scientists are still encountering environmental, congenital and pathological puzzles in the Whooping Crane breeding program.

Their search for the right way has been as cautious as an infantryman's probe for landmines with a bayonet tip. On five different occasions since 1967, with the help of the Canadian Wildlife Service, biologists have removed a total of 50 eggs from nests in Canada and flown them to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland. There, 41 have been hatched and 19 of the chicks raised to maturity.

This year one pair of the 19 captive reared birds mated, and the female laid three eggs. After the first egg was laid, artificial insemination assisted nature. Two of the three eggs were fertile and from one Dawn was hatched. The first of the second generation of captive whoopers, Dawn gave new hope to scientists managing the Whooping Crane captive breeding program.

A possible congenital deformity that twisted Dawn's lower right leg bone prevented the chick from moving nor



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mally. Scientists tried to help the bird walk by taping its legs, but the bird gradually weakened and finally stopped eating and became dehydrated. On June 14 Dawn died.

Although the loss of the chick is regrettable, scientists at the Center are not pessimistic. They believe the breeding of the Whooping Crane was a major stride forward and expect more eggs and chicks next year. They compare the whooper breeding program to one for the Sandhill Crane, another crane species studied and bred at Patuxent. Prior to 1969 no sandhills had bred and hatched in captivity. Last year, more than four dozen chicks

were produced. Production methods for these birds are now routine. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service believes similar success will ultimately characterize the Whooping Crane breeding program.

May 29 also witnessed the opening act of yet another Whooping Crane cliff-hanger. The foster parent program in Idaho, designed to start up a second wild flock with an entirely different set of winter and summer home areas, adds insurance against natural disasters.

The egg-napping of 14 eggs from Canadian nests went off without a hitch. The eggs arrived and were

placed in their Sandhill Crane foster parents' nests on May 29. Then the vigil began. Scientists from the University of Idaho involved in the project feared interlopers; and, sure enough, two of the 14 whooper eggs disappeared for reasons still not known. Fish and Wildlife Service enforcement officers had been dispatched to patrol the Refuge area during the critical hatching period because of reports of springtime vandalism at and near the Refuge. In addition to the two eggs that disappeared, three others proved infertile.

Nine hatched successfully, though, and initial observations indicate the whooper chicks are adapting well to their new environment. Within the first 24 hours after hatching some of the chicks wandered as far as 100 yards from the nests. Other observations suggesting their adaptation to foster parenthood is working well. One proud father Sandhill Crane was seen to stop at the first hint of danger and emit a shrill note which prompted the chicks to freeze in place immediately. They remained glued to the spot until they heard the all-clear signal. The parent birds have displayed vigorous defensive gestures at any glimmer of trouble. In several instances, parents have run away from the chicks and picked up sticks in their beaks, tossing them into the air away from the chicks in an obvious attempt to divert attention.

As of late June all nine of the Idaho chicks are reported doing exceptionally well. They have been seen foraging for insects, running in the tall grass, and even swimming like bobbing corks behind their foster parents. They have grown rapidly and now stand about a foot tall, with their heads and beaks visible above the prairie grass. Predators are their greatest danger during the next 2 months or so, until they learn to fly. Coyotes or raccoons could attack them from ground level.

Eagles, hawks, or owls could pounce on them from the sky. Quirks of weather and a wide variety of other natural influences could kill them one by one or in a group. High mortality among young whoopers is normal in the wild.

In Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada 15 eggs were left after the egg-napping. Eleven of these have hatched, and the chicks are now reported displaying the same vigorous zest for life as their transplanted brothers and sisters in Idaho.

In summary, then, it has been a good year for the Whooping Crane, so far. The final score will not be tallied until late next fall when the adults and young migrate south. How many of the juveniles will make it is difficult to predict. Those in the naturally wild flock are expected to begin their fall flight south in late September or early October and reach the Texas Gulf Coast in staggered sequence through December. In Idaho, a Fish and Wildlife Service scientist will drive south following the whoopers and their Sandhill Crane parents to keep track of their migration to the Bosque de Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. What perils await these birds are unknown, as theirs will be the first migration of this sort closely monitored by man.



To see the world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower;
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

William Blake