

A WOLF KILLS A JUVENILE WHOOPING CRANE

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Movements of pairs and family groups of Whooping Cranes are monitored by the Canadian Wildlife Service on the cranes' breeding range in Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP). With the exception of removal of surplus eggs and the color banding of flightless young, all work is done from light aircraft.^{1 2}

On 11 August 1979, the authors made an aerial survey to locate all family groups containing juvenile whoopers, in preparation for the banding planned for the following day. Seven of nine families (each with a single chick) still known to be intact on 29 July were located. One of the other two families lost its chick between 29 July and 11 August but the other family may have been overlooked as a pair of adults arrived in Texas at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) with an unbanded chick.

Family 5/79 generally moved northeast after the young chick became strong enough to travel. After 16 June (Figure 1), the family moved a considerable distance to the southwest into an area bordering Preamble Creek, a small tributary of Sass River. The move to an area of somewhat more stable water conditions may have been in response to the rapid drying of feeding ponds or it may have been traditional as we have frequently seen a family group in the area in late summer.

On 11 August, family 5/79 was located about 600 m south of a large shallow lake. The three birds had been in this general area since 3 July. Our banding operation, planned for 12

August had to be postponed due to an accident which totally demolished the helicopter. Another machine was available on 13 August and the banding was carried out that day.

Families 2/79, 8/79, 17/79 and 9/79 in the Klewi River as well as Sass River families 7/79 and 6/79 were located without difficulty and the single young in each family banded. We were unable to find family 5/79 but we did see a pair of Whooping Cranes in the area (Figure 1). By backtracking this pair and some searching the area we located a large number of crane tracks and the track of a large mammal in a shallow lake to the west. On a point in the lake we spotted a pile of white feathers. The helicopter was landed nearby and the feathers proved to be those of a juvenile Whooping Crane. The mammal tracks were made by a single adult wolf. Backtracking revealed that the wolf had crossed the open woods (consisting of White Spruce and Black Spruce) bordering the lake. At the edge of the lake it would have seen the whoopers. At that point the wolf had dashed to the centre of the pond (as borne out by tracks) and had caught the flightless crane near the east side (Figure 2). The crane was carried to the shore and eaten. Blood spots in the moss were still wet, an indication that the killing had taken place recently. All that remained were feathers, a few fragments of bone and a small portion of a mandible. Head, neck, body, wing and legs had all been eaten. Even the soft feather pulp containing blood vessels had been consumed. Examination of the wolf's track away from

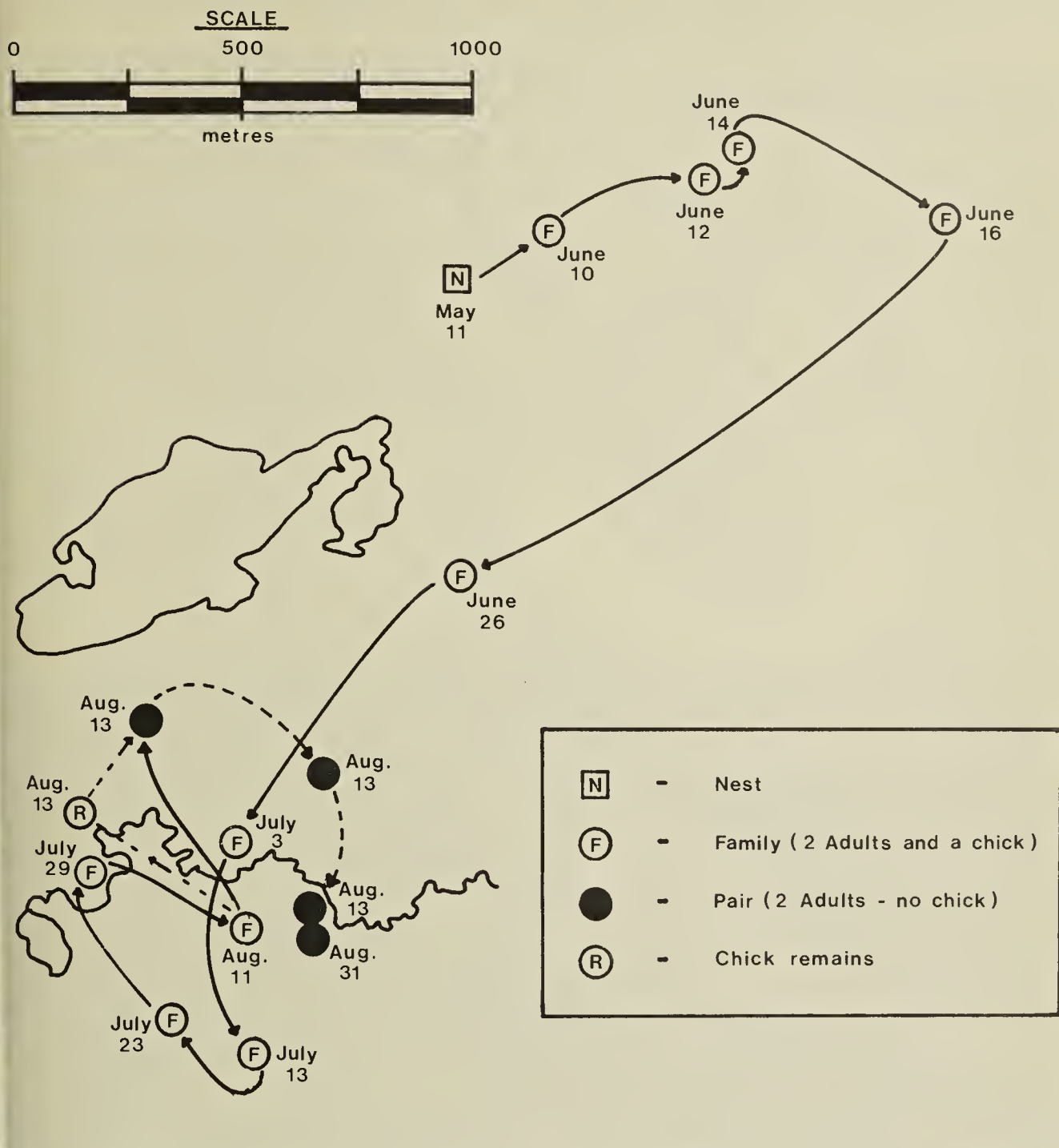


Figure 1. Movements of family 5/79, 11 May to 31 August.

The site of the kill did not show signs of food, feathers or other remains and it is likely that the young crane was eaten on the spot rather than carried away. The average live weight of six juvenile Whooping Cranes banded on 13 August was 4.4 kg (9.7 lb.).

Of the six young whoopers banded in 1979, only the juvenile from family 7/79 failed to arrive at ANWR. This family occupied the breeding territory adjoining that of family 5/79 and the young bird was banded 2.2 km due north of where

the other chick was killed. It is possible that chick 7/79 met a fate similar to that of chick 5/79.

A preliminary analysis of wolf food habits on Bison range in WBNP indicates that small mammals and waterfowl are an important part of wolf summer diets.⁴ The only migratory bird remains (unidentified ducks) recovered from wolf droppings were collected in July, August and October.⁴ There is no previous information on the incidence of predation on Whooping Cranes in the nesting area.

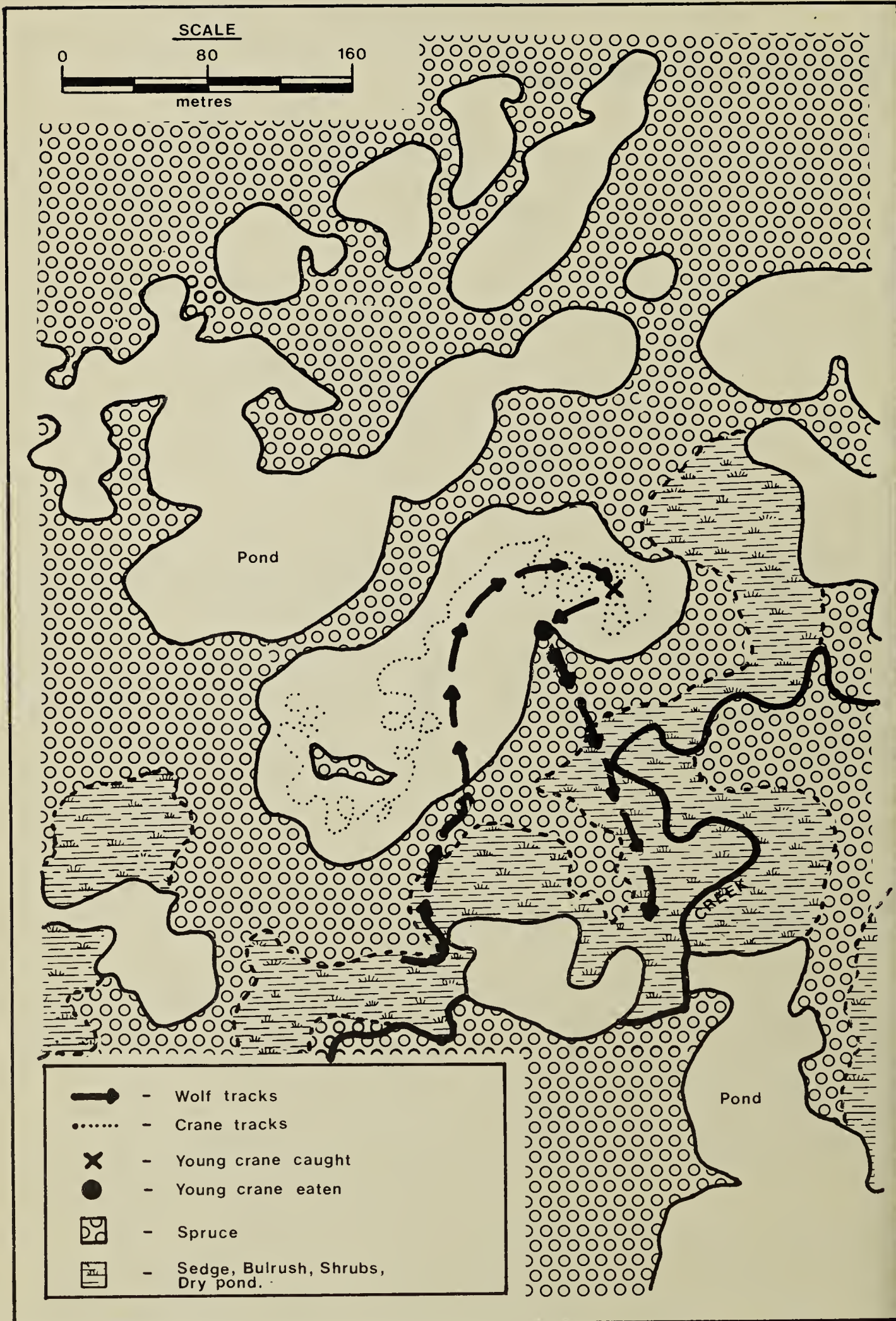


Figure 2. Movements of wolf before and after killing Whooping Crane.

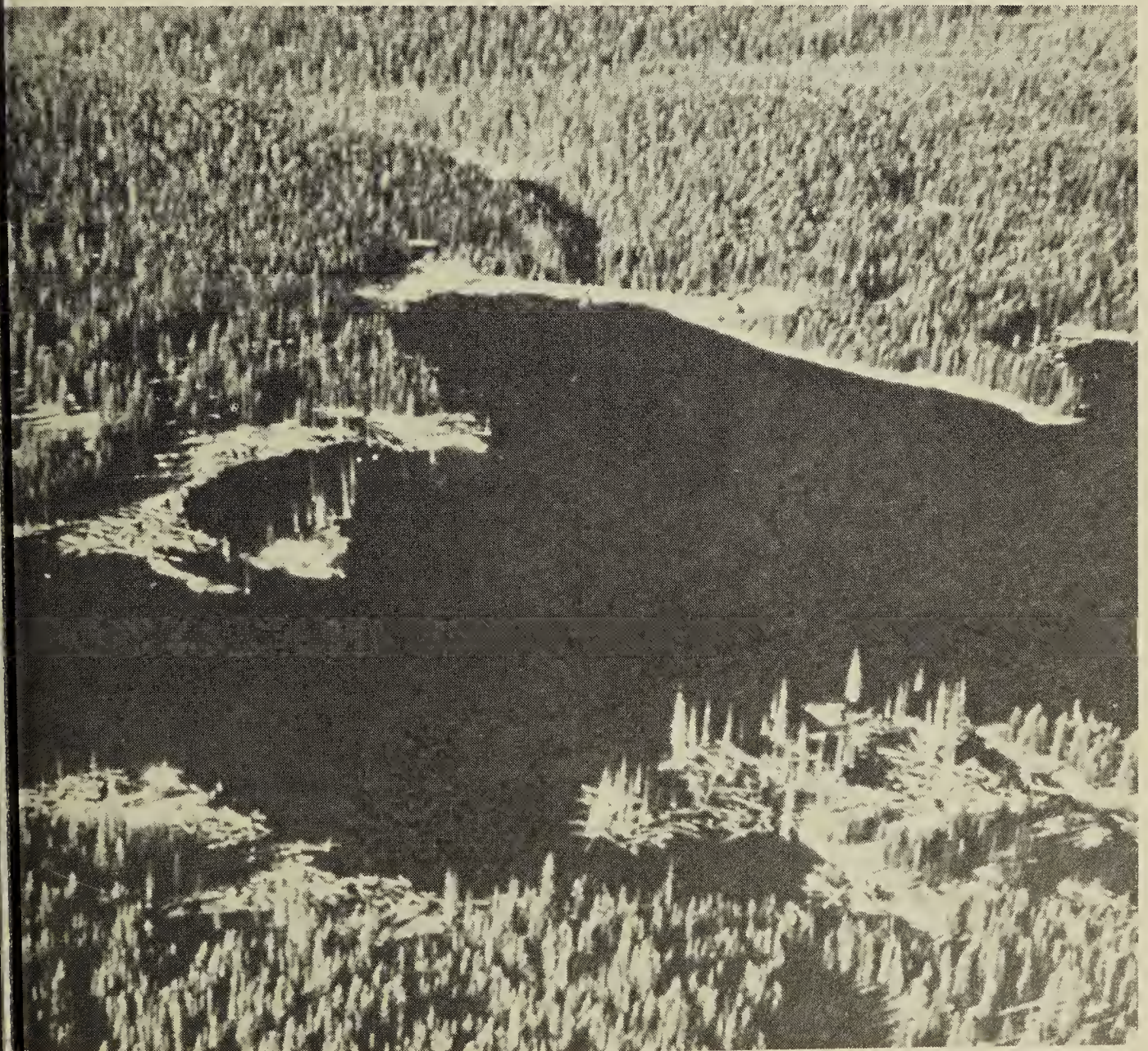
In most years, mortality of whooper chicks in WBNP occurs chiefly before 20 June³ and chicks still alive by the end of July generally arrive on the winter range at ANWR. From 1977-1980, chick mortality has increased in late summer, coinciding with a pronounced drop of pond water levels in the breeding range during those years. To offset the consequences of the drought conditions, crane families have been forced to travel farther afield to find suitable wetland feeding sites and in so doing they have become exposed to terrestrial predators, which in turn, would find the drying areas more accessible than usual.

¹KUYT, E. 1976. Whooping Cranes: the long road back. *Nature Canada* 5(2):2-9.

²KUYT, E. 1979. Banding of juvenile Whooping Cranes and discovery of the summer habitat used by non-breeders. pp. 109-111 in *proc. 1978 Crane Workshop, Rockport, Texas*. Editor J. C. Lewis.

³KUYT, E. 1980. Clutch size, nest success and chick survival of Whooping Cranes, Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada. *Proc. International Crane Symposium, Sapporo, Japan* (in press).

⁴OSENBRUG, S., L. N. CARBYN and D. WEST. 1980. Wood Buffalo National Park wolf-bison studies. *Progress Rep. 1. CWS Report CWS-80-011*, 74 pp.



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