

# A MODERN NESTING RECORD FOR WHOOPING CRANES IN ALBERTA

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The former breeding range of the Whooping Crane extended in a long, narrow band from Illinois in the southeast to the east-central portion of Alberta. The last U. S. nest was found in Iowa in 1894 and the last Canadian breeding record was the 1922 nest at Muddy Lake, Saskatchewan. Prior to this, the last Alberta Whooping Crane nest was found in 1914 near Wainwright.<sup>1</sup>

Porter<sup>1</sup> lists two Northwest Territories' nests, located in the area between Salt River and Fort Resolution and dating back to 1864. It was about 40 km west of a line connecting these two communities where the last remaining Whooping Crane breeding area was discovered in 1954.<sup>2</sup>

From 1954 to 1965 up to six breeding pairs were accounted for annually in the Sass River area, the only portion of the breeding range regularly surveyed.<sup>3</sup> From 1966 to the present, the total number of known breeding pairs has increased because of more intensive aerial surveying because additional pairs were discovered in areas other than near Sass River and because of a slow increase in the breeding population.<sup>4</sup>

The wild whooper flock migrating from the N.W.T. to Texas has increased from 21 birds in 1954 to about 70 birds at present. This is due, in part, to (1) satisfactory environmental conditions of summer and winter ranges, (2) rigid protection of the cranes throughout their migration pathway, and (3) management techniques which have resulted in greater survival of young in

the wild during years when eggs were collected from N.W.T. nests than in non-collecting years.<sup>4</sup>

The last of 17 Whooping Crane nests found in 1977 was discovered on May 9, during an aerial search over potential nesting habitat 30 km south of the Sass River area. Up to that time I had never seen whoopers there before, but the marshes appear suitable and are checked several times each spring.

Scrutiny of our maps showed that the nest was about five km south of the 60th parallel. It marks the first time in 63 years that, at least to my knowledge, Whooping Cranes have nested in Alberta.

The nest contained two eggs, one of which was removed on May 20, 1977 along with single eggs from 15 other nests. The remaining egg in nest No. 17 hatched on or about June 3, the last egg to hatch in the north in 1977.

The second egg was flown to Idaho, where it was placed in the nest of a Greater Sandhill Crane on May 21, and hatched on June 2, the last whooper egg to hatch at Gray's Lake in 1977 (R. Drewien, pers. comm.). This young fledged successfully and migrated with its foster-parents to New Mexico.

Taking into consideration a 29-day incubation period (Kuyt, unpubl. data), the eggs would have been laid about May 4-5. The nest was 130 cm across and 20 cm thick on May 20. Nest material was chiefly the dead stalks of bulrush (*Scirpus* sp.) on a base of *Scirpus* rootstocks with adhering mud. The depth of the pond at one meter



Whooping cranes at Lucky Lake, Saskatchewan

Gary W. Ser

distance from the nest was 24 cm.

As with most Whooping Crane nests, this one was located in a rather shallow marsh with bulrush and sedge (*Carex* sp.) the dominant plants. The marsh was surrounded by trees, chief of which were black spruce (*Picea mariana*), white spruce (*P. glauca*), tamarack (*Larix laricina*), white birch (*Betula papyrifera*) and trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*). Several shrubs dotted the nest marsh, particularly in shallow parts, and a few willows (*Salix* sp.) and dwarf birch (*Betula glandulosa*) grew near the nest.

Although the Alberta nest found in 1977 is about 25 km south of the nearest nest along Sass River, the location is well within Wood Buffalo National Park and the new nesting pair should benefit from the same protection afforded by the Park as

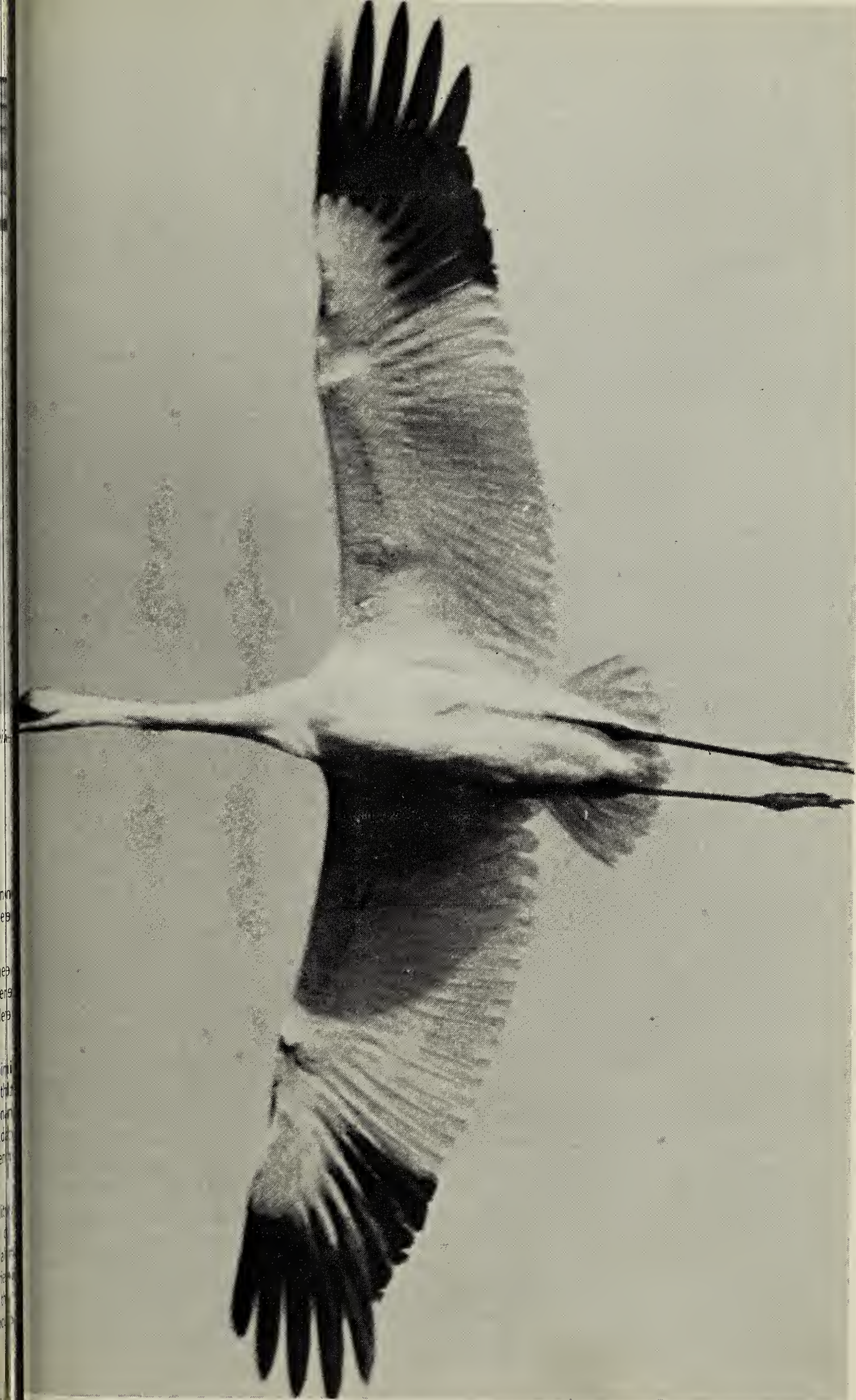
other nesting Whooping Cranes.

<sup>1</sup>ALLEN, R. P. 1952. The Whooping Crane. Nat. Audubon Soc., Res. Rep. #3. New York. 246 pp.

<sup>2</sup>ALLEN, R. P. 1956. The Whooping Crane northern breeding grounds. Supplement to Nat. Audubon Soc. Res. Rep. #3. New York. 60 pp.

<sup>3</sup>NOVAKOWSKI, N. W. 1966. Whooping Crane population dynamics on the nesting grounds, Wood Buffalo National Park, Northwest Territories, Canada. Can. Wildl. Ser. Rep. Ser. No. 1. Queen's Printer, Ottawa. 20 pp.

<sup>4</sup>KUYT, E. 1978. Nest site fidelity, productivity and breeding habitat of Whooping Cranes, Wood Buffalo National Park, Northwest Territories, Canada. In Crane research round the world. Int. Crane Foundation, Baribon, Wisc. in press.



Whooping crane at Ogema, Saskatchewan

Fred W. Lahrman