

EASTER WEEKEND WITH WHOOPING CRANES

JACK L. PICKERING, Box 244, Milestone, SK, S0G 3L0. E-mail: jcpick@sasktel.net
Pencil drawings by the author.

Good Friday, April 18, 2003

At 1:00 p.m., I received a phone call from a friend, Neil Sherman, who reported he had seen two adult Whooping Cranes seven miles south of Milestone on Sec 3-11-19-W2. With my camera and sketch pad in hand, I drove out to the east side of the section. I parked behind several tall willows in the west ditch in order to be less

noticeable. The day was rather unsettled, cloudy with sunny intervals; a typical spring day with a chorus of frogs. An 80-acre summerfallow field ran along the east side of the section. I spotted the Whooping Cranes in a low area in the adjoining stubble field. The two cranes were with a flock of an estimated 5000 Sandhill Cranes, scattered over a large area. There was a body of water



Figure 1. Sandhill and Whooping cranes feeding in a stubble field

on the summerfallow field from the spring runoff (Figure 1). The Whooping Cranes were continually feeding in the stubble field, looking up occasionally, appearing to be hungry after a lengthy flight. Some of the Sandhills were flying up a few feet, then dropping to the ground, chasing one another. The Whoopers remained in the low area of the field, paying little attention, and still feeding. I used 7 x 50 binoculars to view and sketch the cranes and some of the Sandhills. After 4 1/2 hours I returned home for the night.

Saturday, April 19, 2003

The weather was bright and sunny as I arrived back at the location at 7:00 a.m.,

and I parked behind the same willows. The two Whoopers were feeding along the edge of the stubble field, approximately 400 yards from where I was parked. The Sandhills were widely dispersed over a large area, in fact, some of the birds were feeding on voluntary plants, which were in a summerfallow field on Section 10 to the north. A few Sandhills, in pairs, were spreading their wings, springing in the air and calling.

I turned my attention to the two beautiful white birds in the morning sunlight. Their plumage was a brilliant white, with the contrasting shadows of the undersides of their neck and bodies. A steady breeze from



Figure 2. Whooping Cranes west of Lang, Saskatchewan

the southeast caused the feathers to lift and flutter—an inspiring sight, and a great opportunity to sketch a scene, putting the town of Lang in the background (Figure 2). Sometimes they sat down in the stubble field and fed on the grain in an arc as far as their long necks would reach. Then they moved a few feet and continued to feed in the same manner. They remained feeding until 10:50 a.m., then stood up and called, spread their wings and flew west, just above the stubble field to the low area where I had observed them on Friday. Using my binoculars, I could see water in that area, suggesting that they were getting a drink

after the morning feeding.

When I returned after lunch, the birds had moved farther southwest to the middle of the section and were about 100 yards apart, resting. Each was standing on one leg, and both had their heads tucked under their wings. Even the Sandhills were relaxed, as if enjoying the lovely, quiet afternoon. That prompted me to relax and have a short siesta in my car. The Whoopers became active about 3:15 in the afternoon, flying very low, landing in the centre of the southeast quarter of the section. The road had a lot of shrubs—rose bushes, willows,



Figure 3. Whooping Cranes stretching their necks before taking flight

red osier dogwood—in the west ditch, so I drove south and parked behind the largest bush. The Whoopers were to the west, feeding among the scattered Sandhills. When I got home at dusk, I phoned Bob Turner of White City and Paul Geraghty of Avonlea, both of whom had worked with me at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum and we remain good friends.

Sunday, April 20, 2003

I drove back at 7:00 a.m. and spent the morning taking photographs and sketching, then went home to wait for Bob. He arrived at 2:00 p.m., and we drove to the west side of the location. Paul soon joined us and we viewed the Whoopers which were near the centre of Section 3. Shortly after 3:00 p.m., the cranes flew very low eastward and settled on the edge of the stubble field. We then drove to the east side of the section. The cranes were unconcerned with us and fed steadily along the ridge dividing the stubble and summerfallow fields. We watched them feed until dusk.

Monday, April 21, 2003

The weather again was warm and sunny, and I arrived at the site at 7:05 a.m., spotted the Whoopers in the southeast corner of the section, feeding and drinking in the low areas. The birds seemed rather nervous as I watched from about 1/2 mile away. They finally flew toward the centre of the section, dropping down amongst the Sandhills. The wind was brisk from the southeast and I had a feeling conditions were ideal for them to leave. They walked around, spreading and flexing their wings.

At 11:25, the Whoopers flew northeast, landing close together roughly 250 yards from my vantage point. They seemed very alert, facing into the wind, lowering and raising their heads for several minutes. Their last movement before taking flight was stretching their necks skyward (Figure 3). At 11:35, I heard them call twice and with a short running start, they lifted into the wind. The first circle they made was approximately 1/4 mile in diameter. I followed their upward flight with binoculars and in 17 minutes they had completely disappeared!

The centrefold (p. 96-97) is a sketch from memory of their spiral flight, from right to left. The first circle was fairly flat. Many ellipses followed with each one becoming smaller. I have drawn only a few of them to show the Whoopers in various positions. It's surprising how close they flew to each other, at times almost touching one another's wings. Everytime they turned into the wind, the midday sun illuminated the whiteness of their plumage. When they reached a high altitude, they disappeared from sight, only to appear again when the sunlight caught them as they made their turn out of the wind. In my last view of them, they were just one tiny white dot, and then they were gone. The Sandhills remained, but when I returned at 1:15 p.m., they too had taken flight.

That Easter weekend was one I shall treasure for the rest of my life, and I felt very privileged to have spent it with those rare and beautiful birds.



There is pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is rapture in the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar:
I love not man the less, but nature more.

- Lord Byron