

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES, 1944-1953: WHOOPING CRANE NEST SITES IN WOOD BUFFALO PARK

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The last incontrovertible nest records of the Whooping Crane in southern Saskatchewan were from Kiyiu Lake, north of Netherhill, in 1922 and from Luck Lake in 1929.³ For the next 25 years no one knew where the small number of survivors (15 in 1941), were breeding.³ Extensive searches for the then-unknown nest sites of the Whooping Crane took place in 1945 by Fred Bard of the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History and Robert H. Smith of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&WS), in 1946 by O.S. Pettingill of Carleton College, Minnesota, Robert H. Smith, Arthur S. Hawkins and Lyle Sowls of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Terris Moore of the New England Museum of Natural History, and in 1947 by Lawrence H. Walkinshaw and Walter Tholen of Battle Creek, Michigan, at their own expense, and by Robert P. Allen of the National Audubon Society (NAS) and Bob Smith of USF&WS. On 25 June 1947, the last day of their search, we know now in retrospect that only a heavy rain squall prevented Smith and Allen from finding nesting cranes as they flew parallel to the 60th parallel in the Northwest Territories, over the Klewi and Sass Rivers en route from Great Slave and Buffalo Lakes to Fort Smith. In 1948, Smith and Allen covered the Arctic coast from Point Barrow, Alaska to Bathurst Inlet, concentrating on the deltas of the Mackenzie and Anderson Rivers, and found nothing. Sur-

veys were suspended in 1949, 1950 and 1951. In 1952, Smith found "the strongest clue" yet, two cranes north of Great Slave Lake; yet no cranes were there on a return visit in 1953.² Finally, at 5 p.m. on 30 June 1954, G.M. Wilson radioed from a helicopter over Wood Buffalo Park to William A. Fuller in Fort Smith, then the capital of the Northwest Territories, with news of what was the first Whooping Crane nest to be seen in 25 years.²

Using that perfect instrument, the retrospectoscope, beloved by radiologists and others, it is time to give more credence to the Whooping Crane observations of John C. Nesbitt, a bush pilot and prospector responsible for the discovery of three uranium mines. In October 1983, John C. Nesbitt's son, Archie J. Nesbitt, wrote me from Calgary. "Tragically," he said, the National Audubon Society "did not involve father" in the search for the Whooping Crane. Instead, Archie suggested, the NAS "did not know or could not understand the North ... they wanted to have all the recognition and publicity." Archie enclosed a copy of his bush-pilot father's autobiography, published just before his death in 1979.⁴ The passage of greatest interest follows:

I was flying over the tree tops in the area of the Wood Buffalo Park, north of the Salt River, when I spotted some large white

birds with a lot of red around their beaks, more so on what I presumed to be males. There were twelve: they did not fly but only raised their wings showing a black wing top [=tip]. They had lace-like feathers on their tail which seemed to droop when standing and they were indeed of great height. I immediately called to see Des Boggs that evening, but he could not fathom any such bird in that area. I was to see them on many occasions, in the same area, and also, once north of Fort McMurray, but they did not stay there, and only nested in the Wood Buffalo Park; this I was certain. I once showed them to Gilbert Labine and some of his friends on a tour north. This was 1944 and it would be some time before I would really find out the name of this most beautiful bird. I had mentioned it to several biologists, and they Fig.d I had mistaken them for pelicans. I told them that they were not pelicans and also pelicans had never been seen north [and west] of Pelican Rapids on the Slave River at Fort Smith.

On the previous page of the autobiography Nesbitt told of Desmond Boggs,

a consulting geologist stationed at the Wells [Norman Wells], who had spent over twenty years in South America ... Desmond Boggs was a most professional ornithologist [ornithologist] as well and had sent to Toronto some very rare bird specimens from South America ... He had a dresser drawer in his room with over fifty of these north birds, all skinned, stuffed and tagged as to adult, or juvenile, what was in its crop and where it had been taken. These were all for the museum in Toronto. Few people

ever knew that he had this great knowledge. I was probably the only one.

Only in 1947 did Nesbitt, now a pilot with Eldorado Mining and Exploration, positively identify the large white birds with black wing tips. On 4 August 1947 he wrote to Dr. Gustave A. Swanson of the USF&WS, telling of observations of two (not 12) Whooping Cranes in 1944.¹ Robert Porter Allen's reply of 3 September 1947, after receipt of the forwarded letter (and the same day a memorandum from J. Clark Salyer of the USFWS reported a telephone call from Mr. Beasley Martin with regard to the same sighting), is reproduced in Nesbitt's book. Allen acknowledged receipt of a map "showing the general area where these birds were seen. ... in early July 1944."⁴ Failing to recognize that Nesbitt's July 1944 record was a probable breeding site record, Allen's published reply to Nesbitt shows that in spite of the new information and map he was sticking to his plan to search the Mackenzie and Anderson River deltas in 1948.

On 19 August 1948 Nesbitt sent a radiogram to the NAS, telling of another sighting of Whooping Cranes that day in Alberta, namely the Archer Lake region 30 miles south of Lake Athabasca. Nesbitt's 1944 and 1948 records were listed in R.P. Allen's monograph, *The Whooping Crane*, in 1952. The locality of the 1944 observation was somewhat misrepresented and given in the monograph as the nearest settlement, "Pine Point" [85 km east of Hay River] rather than as the Klewi and Sass Rivers in Wood Buffalo Park,¹ 80 to 100 km to the south of Pine Point.

I did a little investigation. Ross D. James, Associate Curator of Ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum

(ROM), replied to me on 17 November 1983, to say that Desmond Boggs had indeed sent to ROM "a considerable collection of birds from South America, also a considerable number from Alberta and a few from N.W.T. ... a careful observer and recorder." Boggs' brief notes in 1942 and his diaries, 1950-1962, contained no mention of Whooping Cranes. More important, I wrote the NAS in New York and they in turn forwarded my query to Alexander Sprunt IV at their office in Tavernier, Florida, where Robert Porter Allen's files were stored. Sprunt promised to reply after he had an opportunity to look for the Nesbitt correspondence. I preferred not to publish this note without having access to the original letter from Nesbitt to Swanson, and the accompanying map. Several reminders to Sprunt over the intervening years have failed to achieve a response.

It has long been evident that the rain squall on 30 June 1947 delayed location of the nest grounds for seven years. We now know that if John C. Nesbitt's observations and map had received the attention they deserved, the nesting grounds might have been discovered the following year, in 1948.

1. ALLEN, R.P. 1952. The Whooping Crane. Res. Rpt. 3, Nat. Audubon Soc.
2. ——. 1956. A report on the Whooping Crane's Northern breeding grounds. Nat. Audubon Society, New York.
3. HJERTAAS, D. 1994. Summer and breeding records of the Whooping Crane in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 52:99-115.
4. NESBITT, JOHN C. 1979. Keep your nose on the horizon. Floyd W. Hall, Lindsay, Ontario.



Juvenile Long-billed Marsh Wren

W.E. Rensud