
NATURAL HISTORY

RETURN OF THE GOLDEN BIRD: THE LAST BREEDING GROUND OF THE WHOOPING CRANE ON THE PRAIRIES

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When I was a boy, the biggest thrill of traveling the long road to Regina was to visit the Saskatchewan Natural History Museum. I was deeply impressed by the spectacular wildlife dioramas and could strongly relate to the scenery, particularly those with broad expanses of marshes populated by exquisitely-mounted specimens of waterfowl, shorebirds, and cranes. I was especially thrilled by the spectacle of the pair of whooping cranes standing on their nest with two eggs and could practically smell the rich alkali aroma of the big sloughs I knew so well at home. As a memento, I avidly collected all the postcards of the dioramas, and when I got home enrolled in the Omaha School of Taxidermy, like many young prairie hunter-naturalists, and took up mounting and drawing birds, dreaming that I might some day become a museum artist and taxidermist. Never could I have imagined how deeply the diorama of the whooping cranes would touch my life; the scene literally formed the backdrop of my life, as it represented Shallow Lake, in the R.M. of Progress pasture, 9 km southeast of Luseland (see Fig. 1, inside front cover, top).

It was the scene of my first illegal act. Armed with a 20-gauge shotgun, alone at the tender age of about twelve, I shot a sandhill crane, long before they were

legal to hunt. I can recall the moment like it was yesterday. My dad had stashed me in a buckbrush patch along the pasture fence-line on the north side of Shallow Lake, while he and the men 'pitted in' with decoys in the adjacent field. At dawn, as the thrilling cacophony of geese filled the air, and guns were blazing, I found myself in the flight path of cranes flying low over the pasture, uttering their evocative calls. In my excitement, I shot one and it fell just inside the fence, within the no-hunting zone. Immediately I became scared, worried that my dad had seen my action from afar, so after waiting for the hunt to end, I walked casually by the crumpled grey form, lying in the alkali dust, keeping a nervous eye out for the game warden who was a friend of my dad. I kept my misdeed to myself until now, just like my grandfather, who had committed a more serious violation 40 years earlier, not far away.

They were whooping cranes, he confided a few years before he died, indicating that he had photographs to prove it. I'd seen many of his photographs from pioneering days, posing with his hunting partners with strings of game birds strung on his model T Ford. They showed a mixed bag of waterfowl, including tundra swans, and 'chickens' or sharp-tailed grouse, but he never



Figure 2. Two whooping cranes shot at Buffalo Coulee, 1922, photographed at Loverna, Saskatchewan.

revealed the whooping cranes. I recall only that he had said that he and his friend had mistaken the birds as they flew at dawn out of Buffalo Coulee, silhouetted against the sun, and that a local farmer had been very angry about the killing of the cranes, which had nested there every year.

The incriminating evidence lay at the bottom of his box of photographs until he died in 1971, at which time I was at the University of Saskatchewan studying biology. I found two photographs, partially double-exposed, showing two adult cranes, held up by their necks by a man and boy. My family didn't recognize them but the little girls holding the wing tips of the cranes were my aunts and the daughter of my grandfather's friend, Joe Perry, with whom he had once been in business in Loverna (Fig. 2). Fortunately, Mr. Perry was still alive and I wrote to him in Ladner, BC, asking whether he recalled the incident. He returned a kind letter about his life-long friendship with

my grandfather, recalling the halcyon days of the old west, when they hunted in the vicinity of Loverna. Regarding the whooping cranes, he wrote:

"It was early and quite dark and we were pitted for geese, when up against the horizon loomed three big birds. So we killed two dead and number three went away in the dark also hit - we couldn't find it. We really didn't know they were so scarce - took them with us to Kerrobert and were informed by Hanbidge, who said the game department might want to hang us for the crime. We gave one away and the people told us, they cooked the bird for four hours, then it was so tough they fed it to the dog. They had raised one young one which was a golden color the first year, but it never came back the following spring. That balances up with the old Indian legend about the Golden Bird that never returned."

Hanbidge, I learned, was the lawyer and judge in the town of Kerrobert, who

later became the Lieutenant Governor of the province. My grandfather had 'stumped' for him in support of a marketing cooperative that was to become the Canadian Wheat Board. I assumed that the scene of the crime was Kerrobert, and published one of the photographs along with Mr. Perry's comments in the *Blue Jay* in 1972, entitled laconically, "A 1921 photo of Whooping Crane".¹ The photograph was widely published by various conservation organizations at a time when the environmental movement was taking off, and the whooping crane was the poster species of our past misdeeds. I felt some guilt about besmirching my grandfather's and Mr. Perry's reputation but believed the revelation could serve a conservation purpose. I hadn't heard Mr. Perry's Indian legend about the Golden Bird that never returned, though it sounded ominous.

In 2002, I retraced my grandfather's early history to the ghost village of Loverna and the scene of his crime at Buffalo Coulee (Street Lake on the topographical maps), 22 km straight south of Luseland. After homesteading at Buffalo (near present-day Zealandia), he had invested in an implement dealership with Mr. Perry at Loverna in 1912, anticipating that it would become a boomtown with the new Canadian Northern railway line, but after the Great War his business went bankrupt, and he returned to his homestead in 1918. Numerous photographs, often with the Hotel Vernon as backdrop, attested to his hunting exploits and excessive slaughter, common amongst pioneers, culminating with the whooping crane incident. By this time, he had started over again with an implement dealership in Luseland. Evidently he and Mr. Perry had met to hunt geese at Buffalo Coulee, between the two towns, where they killed the cranes and took them back to Loverna. With the photographs, showing an elevator and water tower in

the background, I was able to place the scene exactly. Judging from the age of my aunts, born in 1918 and 1919, the event took place in 1922, not 1921 as Mr. Perry had thought. Although he implied that they had mistaken the birds when they 'loomed up' against the horizon, and pleaded that they didn't know how scarce they were, I suspect they were more culpable than they let on. Both wings of one of the birds were broken, indicating that the encounter had occurred at close range. Moreover, they were the only photographs in which neither my grandfather nor Mr. Perry posed.

The scene at Loverna unfolded in the same year that the last nests of whooping cranes on the prairies were discovered by the province's first Game Guardian, Neil Gilmour, at Shallow (Baliol) Lake, and by Fred Bradshaw, the Game Commissioner and first curator of the provincial museum, at Kiyui (Eagle) Lake near Kindersley. In his annual report, Gilmour had described at great length his discovery of the whooping crane's nest, and his photographs and descriptions of the extensive marsh habitat were closely studied by R.D. Symons, who created the magnificent diorama that had inspired me as a boy.²

At the time, it was practically a foregone conclusion that whooping cranes were doomed. A.C. Bent considered Gilmour's discovery one of the most important nest finds in North America, devoting an extraordinary two pages to his account in *Life Histories of North American Birds* of 1926, as if it was a eulogy for the species.³ Percy Taverner, in the *Birds of Western Canada*, published in the same year, did not hold out much hope either, stating that "The last chance of preserving this, probably the most spectacular birds of the prairies, depends entirely upon the people of the prairies. All localities cannot be watched by wardens and no game laws

are capable of 100 per cent enforcement. If occasional birds are killed it will matter little to the species that the offender is caught and punished, for the irreparable damage will have been done. Laws can do little for a case like this, but an aroused public opinion is much more efficient."⁴ As R.D. Symons noted, "[Neil] Gilmour spoke in hundreds of rural schools and was indefatigable in spreading the gospel of conservation."² Undoubtedly my grandfather's friend 'Dinny' Hanbidge, who was also an avid hunter, was aware of the rarity of the whooping crane, as Gilmour had probably targeted the Kerrobert area with his message, and had depended on a local family, the Smiths, who had informed the Game Commissioner's office about the cranes.⁵ No doubt my grandfather heard Gilmour's message through Hanbidge and the irate farmer at Buffalo Coulee who had taken a strong interest in protecting the cranes. But the damage had been done, more birds were shot, including ones by the Smiths, and the whooping cranes disappeared from their last breeding ground in western Saskatchewan by the end of the 1920s.⁶

As with the demise of the buffalo, the growing publicity of the plight of the whooping crane may have hastened its extirpation on the prairies, through curiosity and a sense of posterity. There are numerous legends about who killed the last buffalo in the wild, and as the cranes were headed the way of the passenger pigeon, their skins and eggs became highly sought after by collectors.⁷ Like Hornaday's overzealous ambition to collect the last wild buffalo for preservation in the American Museum of Natural History,⁸ Fred Bradshaw collected the eggs and a newly hatched chick at Kiyiu Lake. (Note that the location was misattributed to Muddy Lake and has since been widely perpetuated in the literature). At the same time, Bradshaw

and Gilmour were preaching the gospel of conservation and calling for tough action against poachers. The hypocrisy of Bradshaw's actions would not have been lost on the farm family he had lodged with, unless he did not tell them. Like my grandfather, he kept his act secret, describing the chick's last moments as he tried to photograph it, before collecting it - "to give it immortality in the form of a tag with a number on it", as crane biologist Robert Allen described it.^{7,9} At first, the chick didn't cooperate, "stretching itself flat on the nest in a limp lifeless-looking form. Eventually it manifested a lively concern in its new world and the shutter clicked making a photographic record of Whooper Junior as he appeared on his birthday."⁵ A recent article in Audubon Magazine described that day, May 30, 1922, as the "epitome of how humanity nearly preserved Whooping Cranes to death".⁷

Recently, while flipping through the pages of our local history books, published by the Luseland Historical Society in 1983, I was surprised to come across a reference to the whooping cranes at Shallow Lake. The account was written by Jean Norris, daughter of William Smith, who homesteaded in 1910 along with his brothers near Kerrobert.¹⁰ One of his brothers, Archie, "filed on S.E. 2-35-24-W3 on the south side of Shallow Lake, commonly called Baliol slough, one of the last known nesting sites of the Whooping Crane in Saskatchewan." Her mother recalled two "outstanding" incidents:

"When the H.D. Smith family came to Kerrobert, the boys decided they would like a pet so John, who was a great athlete, and Will undertook the project of catching two young Whooping Cranes by running them down on foot. They tamed the birds and wintered them in the henhouse. In those cramped quarters the birds fought and later one crane died.

The surviving crane became a great pet. One day a cunning coyote sneaked up to the trees, and killed the bird, much to the sorrow of the family.”

and

“The time Will shot a Whooping Crane, and had Mrs. Norman MacDonald mount it. The bird presently is on display in the Museum of Natural History in Regina.”

These second-hand recollections, oral history passed down over 60 years, are not fully in agreement with the original records by Gilmour.⁶ Archie Smith had guided Gilmour, the game guardian, to the nest and provided valuable notes about the small flock that inhabited the marshes from the time he homesteaded there in 1911 until the last of them disappeared in 1929, due to occasional shootings, and ultimately when the big marsh dried out in the Dirty Thirties. Hjertaas chronicled this history along with all known records of breeding cranes on the prairies.⁶

Whatever the proverbial outcome of Joe Perry’s legend about the Golden Bird that never returned, it didn’t come true in my own life, for on Thanksgiving Day 1981 (October 12), it touched down with its parents on a slough right in front of me and my brother as we drove down a country road 6.5 km NNW of Luseland (52° 08’ 20” N, 109° 25’ 45” W). We were out hunting ducks and had just approached the slough from the north where the road curved around it, when we saw the three cranes. Amazed, we pulled up and watched them for a while, the first we had ever seen. As we sat there, a dust cloud appeared on the horizon, indicating a vehicle approaching rapidly. Perplexed, we watched as a truck pulled to a stop on the other side of the slough as if the occupants were preternaturally aware of the cranes. Intrigued, we continued on and as we approached, noticed

antennas protruding from the vehicle, and a couple of biologists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, pre-occupied with observing the cranes, clearly not wishing to be disturbed. We learned later that the young bird was equipped with a radio tag, and that the family had strayed west of their usual migration corridor. The cranes remained until at least October 18, after which the biologists continued tracking them toward their wintering grounds in Texas.¹¹ Except for a single crane that was seen on Grass Lake in about 1957, these were the first cranes that had been seen in the region since they’d been extirpated. By remarkable coincidence, their wayward route had brought them back home to their ancestral breeding grounds, and to us, the descendants of the man who had slain such a family trio long ago. Call it karma, but had we not been raised in a hunter-naturalist family, we would not have been driving down that country road just as the Golden Bird touched down with its parents, followed by the invisible forces of radio waves bringing the wildlife biologists down the same road.

Around the same time that the family trio touched down in its former breeding ground, an ill-fated measure to establish a southern population of whooping cranes was receiving strong publicity and funding. Beginning in 1975, the program involved removal of ‘surplus’ eggs from the Wood Buffalo population and substitution into the nests of sandhill cranes in Idaho. The program lasted 13 years, resulting in the removal of 289 eggs, and the production of a single hybrid in the wild. There was only a slim chance the cross-fostering of whooping crane eggs would work, but the effort was rationalized because the eggs were considered surplus and their removal was calculated to have no impact on the wild population. However, in hindsight, had the removed eggs been placed in the captive

breeding program, the total population would now be much larger, and could have greatly facilitated present programs to re-establish southern populations through migration guidance by ultra-light aircraft. This program does not yet include the cranes' former breeding ground on the Canadian prairies, but it should, as has been long recommended.¹²⁻¹⁴

In evaluating nesting habitat of whooping cranes and the potential for their re-introduction to the prairies, Hjertaas concluded that they nested sparsely wherever large, shallow marshes were found, and that the "report of 12 Whooping Cranes nesting at Shallow Lake in one year suggests that the large marshes of the grassland were excellent breeding habitats, at least until the 1930s drought."⁶ He suggested that a number of factors would need to be evaluated before selecting re-introduction sites, including habitat quality, isolation, hunting pressure, and drought. He proposed that the Quill Lakes–Last Mountain Lake area might be a good candidate, though there were no suitable adjacent sites for expansion. Although the cranes may have been widespread and sparse in their nesting, clearly the last nesting grounds with ideal habitat were situated in the large alkali marshes of west-central Saskatchewan. This habitat is a function of the glacial geomorphology of the region, with its several glacial valleys emanating from the Neutral Hill moraines of eastern Alberta, the last outlier of which is Heart's Hill, the only visible landmark from Shallow Lake. There were and are numerous alkali marshes in the area, probably most of which contained breeding whooping cranes. Being a long-lived species they may have coped with drought by withdrawing to marginal habitat or northern breeding grounds like many duck species do. The present migration patterns of geese and their major concentration in west-

central Saskatchewan between Unity and Kindersley is also a reflection of the glacial features of the region, and primordial habitats and migration corridors of waterbirds. As the whooping crane population continues to grow it will need to re-occupy this traditional nesting ground. As Fred Lahrman concluded long ago, "Saskatchewan people are 'Whooper conscious' and they will back to the limit any program which might give the Whooping Crane a better chance to climb to a higher and safer population level."¹² We are ready for the return of the Golden Bird.

Acknowledgements

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Two young moose at Last Mountain Lake, SK

Lowell Strauss