

# Whooping Crane

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## ABOUT THE STUDY

*Grus americana* is a native migratory bird species within the Nearctic region. The historical breeding range extends throughout the central United States and Canada and also used to include parts of north central Mexico. Few wild populations occur today. One population breeds within the Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada and overwinters along the Gulf Coast in the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge of Texas. A second, minute population spends the summer in Idaho, Wyoming and Montana, and migrates to their wintering grounds in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico. A third introduced, non-migratory population resides in the Kissimmee Prairie, Florida.

## HABITAT

Whooping crane habitat, especially for nesting, consists of open areas close to large amounts of water and vegetation. The open area is especially important to visually detect possible predators. These habitat types not only provide protection for predators but also provide a variety of food opportunities. During migration, whooping cranes seek similar habitats in wetlands, submerged sandbars and agricultural fields. In the winter, wet habitats are also sought out in the form of brackish bays and coastal marshes. *Grus americana* prefers marshes with a typical pH range of 7.6 to 8.3.

## PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Adult whooping cranes are large, long-legged birds with long necks that measure 130 to 160 cm in length, and feature a wingspan of 200 to 230 cm. They are primarily white in color. Their primary wing feathers and long legs are black, while their toes are grayish-rose in color. The crown, lores, and malar areas are bare skin that varies in color from bright red to black. The bare skin is covered in short, black bristles that are the densest around the edges of bare skin. They feature yellow eyes and a bill that is pinkish at the base, but mostly gray or olive in color. Both sexes resemble each other; however, the male whooping crane weighs more. Adult males and adult females weigh an average of 7.3 kg and 6.4 kg respectively.

Young whooping crane chicks are cinnamon or brown in color along the back and a dull gray or brown on the underbelly. Juvenile whooping cranes have feather-covered heads and white plumage which is blotched cinnamon or brown. The area of the crown which becomes bare skin has short feathers.

## REPRODUCTION

Whooping cranes are monogamous and form pairs around two or three years old. A pair bond develops through a variety of courtship behaviors including unison walks, unison calls, and courtship dances. Courtship usually begins with dancing, which starts with bowing, hopping, and wing flapping by one, and then both individuals. Each crane repeatedly leaps into the air on stiff legs, which continues until both individuals leap a few times in sync with each other. During the courtship dance the male may also jump over the female as she bows her head toward her body. Calling in unison is also important in pair maintenance and involves a duet between the female and male. The male has a lower call and positions the head straight up and behind vertical while the female is completely vertical or forward of vertical. Once one of the individuals begins the call the other joins in.

Whooping cranes reproduce once a year from late April to May. Males and females participate in building a flat, ground nest usually on a mound of vegetation surrounded by water. In periods of drought, nesting sites can become no longer suitable for use. Typically two eggs are laid and the incubation period is 30 to 35 days. The sex ratio is nearly equal between the number of males and females hatched. The abandonment or loss of a nest is rare but breeding pairs can re-nest if either occurs within the first fifteen days of incubation. Fledging occurs between 80 to 100 days but the young remain with their parents until they reach independence at 9 months of age. Parents continue to feed and care for the fledgling's. Sexual maturity is reached between 4 and 5 years old.

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