

CAN THE WHOOPING CRANE BE SAVED ?

By FRED A DAVIES

In the autumn of 1952 two wounded birds were flown to the Aransas Wildlife Refuge in Texas, U.S.A. Both were whooping cranes (*Grus americana*) and were suffering from shotgun wounds. Both subsequently died despite the best efforts of ornithologists.

That was one more black page in the history of the big cranes, now reduced to a pitiful remnant of the great flocks which in past years "made the whole night musical as they passed overhead on their migration".

The estimated population is now about thirty, based on counts made at the only known wintering ground, the Texas Refuge. A few scattered birds probably winter elsewhere but reports are difficult to evaluate as investigation often proves swans or pelicans have been mistaken for whoopers.

In 1945 the desperate bid to save the whooping crane was started, the United States and Canada formulating plans for one of the most extensive bird hunts ever attempted in North America.

Press and radio were called upon for widespread publicity so that all available information might be accumulated. At the Aransas Refuge every possible protection was afforded the birds, but the present breeding grounds are unknown and it is on the long flight north and during the nesting period that these cranes are at the mercy of every shotgun vandal.

During the spring and summer of 1946 wide air sweeps over the Canadian north-west brought no sight of the birds. Yet they must have nested, because when they returned to Texas three young ones, easily distinguished by their rusty-brown heads, were with the others.

Robert Allen, ornithologist of the National Audubon Society, spent months in Texas studying the birds from inside a dummy cow, but, though not ordinarily nervous about cattle, they shrewdly classified the cow-blind as a pseudo animal and sheered away from close contact.

Allen followed the cranes north by plane in 1947 but was unable to trace them to their nesting area. Again in 1948 wide-spread sweeps across the northland resulted in failure.

Since then numerous reports of the whoopers have come in

from northern Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the North-West Territories, but no proof has yet been obtained as to where they nest. Efforts to that end are continuing.

Last autumn only twenty-two cranes reported back on the winter range. The two wounded birds were captured, one in southern Saskatchewan (after being pursued for two miles by a farmer and his family) and the other in south Kansas.

Mr. Richard E. Griffiths, Chief, Section of Habitat Improvement Branch of Wildlife Refuges, Washington, writes: "It is rather an odd coincidence that telegraphic reports of both these whooping cranes having been found suffering from gunshot wounds should reach us on the same day, and it is most unfortunate that all efforts failed to save the lives of these birds."

Mr. Griffiths adds, however: "In checking over previous records, it is noted that the present population figure is identical with the one reported for 1939. In 1941 only fifteen whooping cranes were reported as having been on the winter range, and from then until the fall of 1946 the highest population count according to our field records was twenty-one cranes. Thus, while the present count is none too encouraging, past records indicate that we should continue to hope for increases another year and redouble our efforts to give the birds maximum protection at all times, especially along the long and hazardous migration route."

Whooping cranes rank among the largest of North American birds. They stand up to 4 feet in height and are pure white with sharp contrast of black wing tips and legs and red crown.

The sonorous trumpeting is doubtless due to the great length of the windpipe which, as in some swans, enters a hollow in the breastbone and winds in complicated convolutions before emerging through the same opening by which it enters.

These birds indulge in spectacular mating dances and the Canadian naturalist, Ernest Thompson Seton, told of watching them frequently as two or more capered and bounded into the air, or bowed with widely spread wings, to their own orchestral accompaniment.

Despite their great size, they delight in flight, whooping joyously as they soar, then descending in long spirals or plunging dives.

Formerly these birds nested as far south as central Illinois but, though they are extremely wary, their size and whiteness rendered them vulnerable to man. Moreover, as civilization pressed forward, survivors were driven farther and

farther north in search of suitable solitude, with the inevitable difficulty of finding new nesting areas, and as their numbers decreased the chances of successful propagation, of course, lessened.

That is the question now : has the whooping crane reached the point of no return ? We can only wait and hope that the earnest effort at preservation will succeed. The next few years will tell.

