



Whooping Cranes perform elaborate courtship dances which include leaps, bows, head tosses, and wing flapping (as seen here). Photo by: NEBRASKAland Magazine/NGPC.

CONSERVATION HELP

Individuals should report sightings of whooping cranes to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at 308-382-6468. Sightings are most likely to occur in Nebraska during the spring migration from mid- March through the end of April and during fall migration from late October through mid-November.

Whooping cranes should not be approached or disturbed. If cranes become alert or stop foraging you are too close. Remain at least a half mile away and stay in your vehicle. If birds are disturbed and take flight, they may inadvertently collide with power lines or other objects, the leading cause of whooping crane death during migration. Report individuals who harass or disturb whooping cranes.

This pamphlet, "Nebraska's Threatened & Endangered Species: Whooping Crane" is one of a series of pamphlets about Nebraska's rare species. To learn more about Nebraska's rare species, please visit rarespecies.nebraska.gov.

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Cover art by Mark Müller.

NOTE: New data of the occurrence and distribution of this species are being collected constantly and some of the information in the pamphlet may be outdated. The information in this pamphlet should be used for a general understanding of the species and not as the sole source of range location for any report, project, regional or local planning, or for environmental impact assessments. For current information on this species, please contact the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, Wildlife Division.

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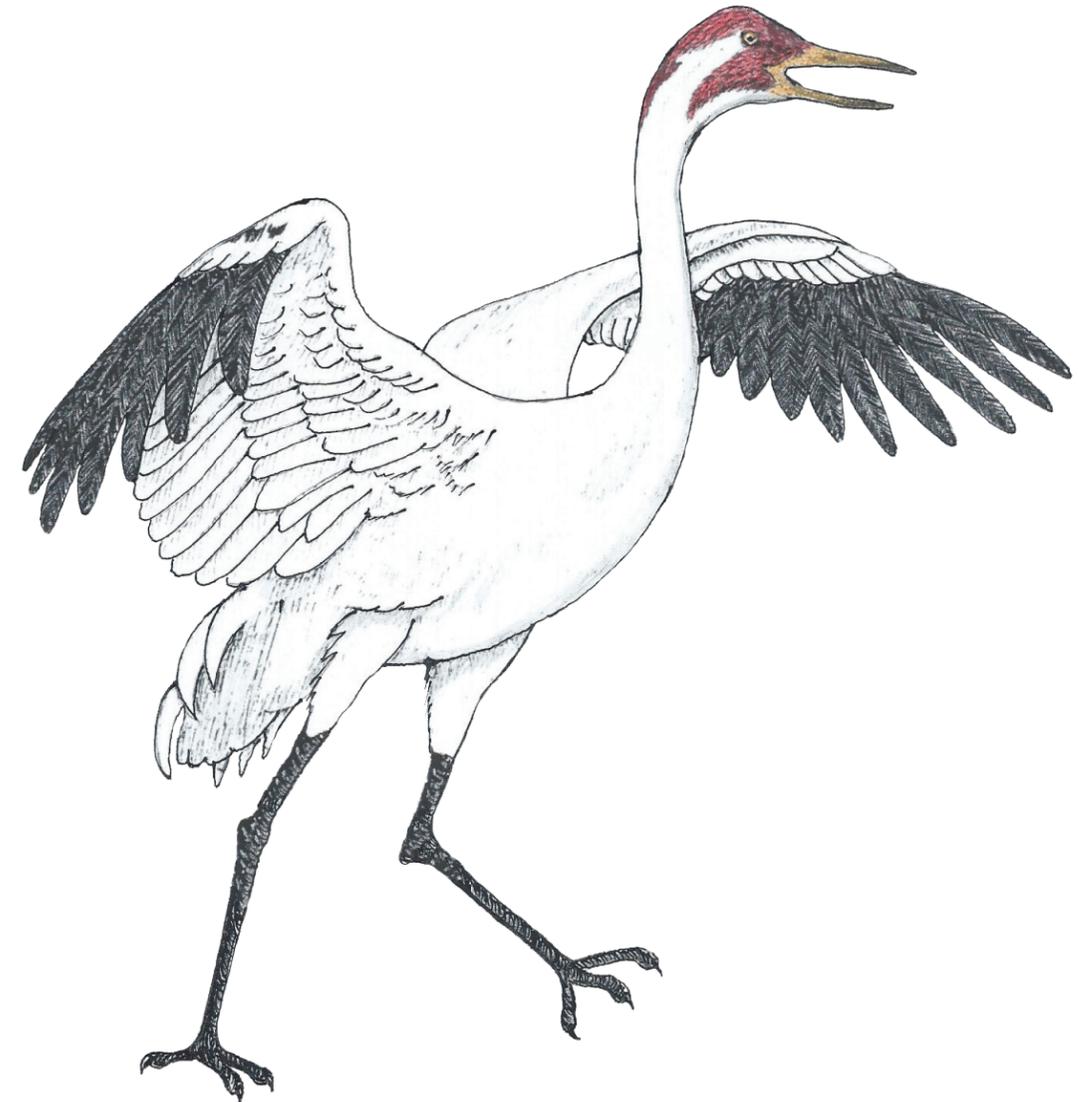
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Whooping Cranes are a large white bird. When in flight, large black tips can be seen on its wings. Photo by: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Nebraska's Threatened & Endangered Species



Whooping Crane *Grus americana*



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Whooping Crane

Grus americana

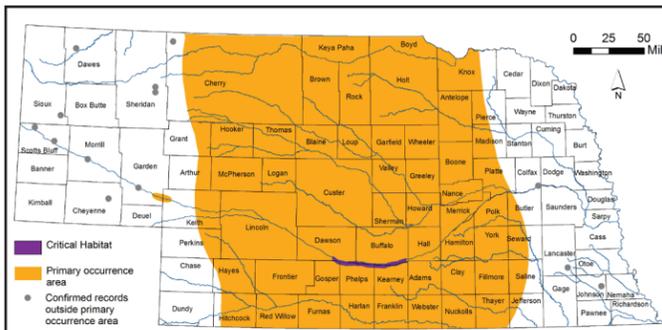


Whooping Cranes are the tallest bird in North America reaching heights of nearly 5 feet. Photo by: NEBRASKAland Magazine/NGPC.

DESCRIPTION

The whooping crane is the tallest bird in North America, and is probably one of the best-known endangered species on the continent. The body feathers are mostly white with black wing tips, which you can only see in flight. The top of the head is covered with an identifying red crown. A distinguishing feature for the whooping crane is their long black legs and yellow bill. Immature whooping cranes are rusty or cinnamon colored during the first fall migration. At around four months of age, white feathers appear on the lower neck and back. Immature birds achieve full adult white plumage late in their second summer.

Male whooping cranes approach 5 feet tall when



Whooping Crane Range Map. Courtesy Nebraska Game & Parks Commission Natural Heritage Program, 2013.

standing upright and can weigh 16 pounds, females also reach 5 feet in height and average 14 pounds. The wingspan of the whooping crane is 87 inches. The whooping crane is the only large white bird, with a wingspan of over 7 feet that flies with neck and legs outstretched.

As with other endangered species, the saga of the whooping cranes' survival is dramatic. The whooping crane is the rarest of the world's 15 species of cranes. It is estimated that less than 600 individuals exist worldwide. More than half of these birds migrate through Nebraska.

RANGE

Historically, the breeding range stretched from Alberta through southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba, northeastern North Dakota, western Minnesota, southern Wisconsin, northern Iowa, and northern Illinois.

Currently, there is only one wild (non-reintroduced) population of whooping cranes. This population of approximately 280 birds winters in southern Texas in and around the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. They migrate along the Central Flyway to their breeding grounds within the Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada.



The black tips of the Whooping Crane's wings is only visible when in flight. Photo by: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.



An adult (left) and immature (right) crane forage for grain in an agricultural field while migrating through Nebraska. Photo by: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

In addition to the wild population, there is also a small captive-raised, non-migratory population in central Florida, and a small re-introduced migratory population which migrates between Wisconsin and Florida.

While migrating through Nebraska, whooping cranes use the central Platte, Loups, and Niobrara rivers and a variety of wetland habitats as important stopover and resting spots during both spring and fall migration.

HABITAT

Whooping cranes prefer shallow braided riverine habitats and wetlands for roosting. Nebraska is one of the only places where a considerable amount of time is spent in rivers. They use agricultural fields, wet meadows, marsh habitats, and shallow rivers for feeding. Whooping cranes typically select sites with wide, open views and those areas that are isolated from human disturbance.

DIET

Whooping cranes are omnivorous, meaning they will eat both plant and animal matter. In Nebraska, along the migration route, cranes eat aquatic plants and animals and waste grain in crop fields.

REPRODUCTION

Whooping cranes typically lay two eggs, which are incubated for 31 to 35 days. Chicks leave the nest about two hours after hatching and are capable of running and swimming. The young remain within about 200 meters of the nest, although they do not return after hatching.

POPULATION STATUS

Historic records of the whooping crane's home range size and population trends suggest that perhaps over 10,000 whooping cranes may have lived across North America. Between 1860 and 1870, the whooping crane population was estimated to be between 500 and 1,400 individuals. By 1942, the whooping cranes nearly became extinct with a migrating population of only 16 birds.

Population declines were caused by shooting and destruction of nesting habitat.

In 1970, the whooping crane was placed on the Federal Endangered Species List. Additionally, it is listed on the Nebraska Endangered Species list. Whooping crane populations are slowly increasing, but today there are still fewer than 600 whooping cranes in existence.

MANAGEMENT & OUTLOOK

Extensive habitat protection and management activities are continuing throughout the whooping cranes range. In Nebraska, efforts continue to be made to restore and protect roosting and foraging habitat along rivers used by whooping cranes during migratory stopovers. Wetland sites are being restored and created. Monitoring and survey efforts are underway to assess threats the birds face during migration and on the breeding and wintering grounds.

Education and outreach efforts help the public understand the importance of protecting this endangered species and the need for continued conservation of the wetland habitats on which they rely.



Whooping Cranes migrate from wintering grounds in southern Texas to breeding grounds in northern Canada. Whooping Cranes stop in Nebraska to rest and regain strength. Photo by: NEBRASKAland Magazine/NGPC.