

Watching Whooping Cranes in Texas

My wife and I recently spent some time on the Texas coast near Rockport. We like to visit places like Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and the Padre Island National Wildlife Refuge.

Aransas NWR is well-known as the wintering grounds of the endangered whooping cranes. The parts of the refuge that are accessible by car represent only a small fraction of the total area, most of the refuge is either shallow bays or marshes, and these are the areas most frequented by the cranes. This is where the blue crabs live, which are the favorite food of the whooping cranes.

Whooping cranes, the tallest bird in North America at 5 feet, were almost wiped out in the early 20th century, mainly due to loss of habitat. The cranes nest and raise their young in spring and summer at Woods-Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada. Then in the fall the cranes and their young begin a 2,500 mile migration to the Texas coast northeast of Rockport. In 1941 there were only 16 birds left! The draining of marshes and playa lakes along the migration route was primarily the reason for the decline in the population, although hunters and loss of habitat on the Texas coast also played a part.

Since the 1940s there has been a tremendous effort on the part of the United States, Canada and several states and their biologists to restore the population so that today the migrating population is approximately 250 birds. There are perhaps another 250 in several non-migrating populations in the United States. This is a huge success in restoring a highly endangered species which also happens to be one of the most spectacular birds in the country.

But 250 birds is still a very small number of individuals to sustain a healthy population. Whenever the entire population of a species lives in a small area, especially if the population is small, any number of events could spell disaster. What if a late-fall hurricane were to hit the Texas coast as the entire population arrived? Or more likely, what if something happens to their food source, either in Canada or Texas?

The main food of the whooping crane at the Aransas refuge is blue crabs, but they also eat shrimp, crawfish and wolfberries. But the population of crabs, shrimp, and other aquatic critters depends on the conditions in the bays, estuaries and marshes along the coast, and in the Aransas area, that in turn depends on the amount of fresh water from the Guadalupe and San Antonio rivers flowing into the bays. Currently there are court actions, appeals, and controversy as to whether the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is allowing too much of the river waters to be used by farmers and cities and too little allowed to flow into the bays, in what are called environmental flows. The lack of fresh water decreased the crab and other aquatic species populations

substantially, stressing the cranes. If this issue is not resolved in favor of the cranes, they could be threatened again.

We knew from past experience that the best way to see whooping cranes is from a tour boat, not from the roads in the refuge. This year we again took a tour and were treated to a great sight. We spotted a single crane feeding in a marsh only about 25 yards from the edge of the Intercoastal Waterway, and the bird allowed us to pull up close to the shore and watch. We watched this bird for probably 20 minutes, taking dozens of pictures.

Then another crane was spotted flying in our direction, just off the surface of the water. As we watched the second crane flew up and lit not 20 yards from the first crane and proceeded to find himself a couple of crabs (our guide believed they were both males). While the second bird seemed to ignore the first, the first bird quit feeding and seemed somehow agitated. Then we were treated to a fantastic display in which the first bird jumped into the air and spread its wings, showing its black primary wing feathers, all similar to a mating display.

In spite of over 70 years of efforts to save the species, it could still be lost to a single natural or man-made event. Once a habitat is lost, it is lost for decades or forever. Once a habitat is conserved, however, its conservation has to be continued by every generation.

Until next time...

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