



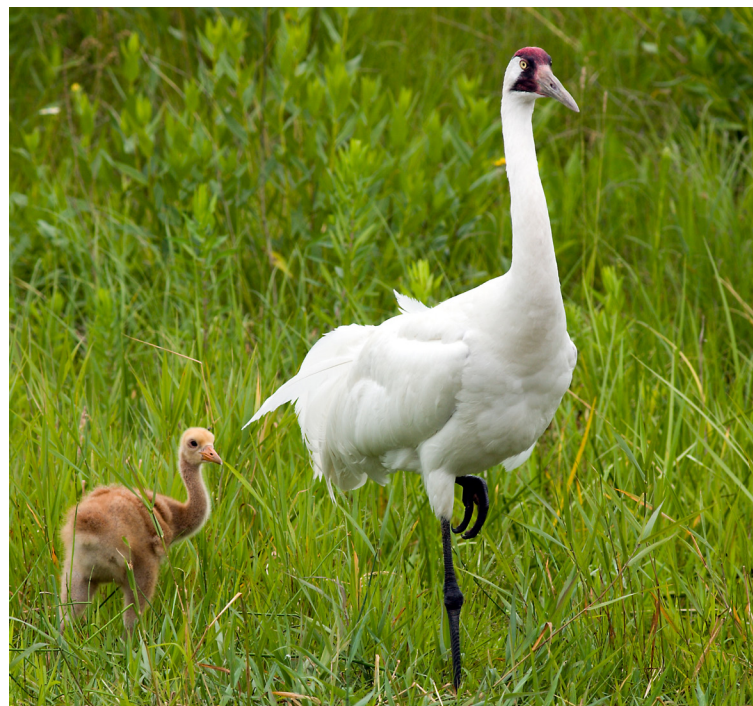
Whooping Cranes & Crawfish Farming

In 2011, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), along with the LSU AgCenter and other partners, began a whooping crane reintroduction program in southwestern Louisiana. The goal of the reintroduction program is to establish a population within the species' historic range, but outside of its current range. Our objective is to establish a population, consisting of at least 120 individuals and 25–30 reproductive pairs, and to sustain those levels for 10 years without further reintroductions.

Achieving our goal would restore an iconic wildlife species that was once more abundant in Louisiana than anywhere else in North America. Reintroduced populations of whooping cranes are designated as nonessential experimental populations (NEP), which provides management flexibility as the species is treated as threatened rather than endangered. As a result of this designation, farm management activities can continue as planned. Intentional killing, harming or harassment of a whooping crane, however, is illegal as they are still protected under both state and federal laws.

LIFE HISTORY

The whooping crane is a large white bird but its size (up to 5 ft tall) and the red patch on its head distinguish it from other white wading birds. The whooping crane is a long-lived species that can live up to 30 years in the wild but has a low reproductive capacity. Whooping cranes begin breeding at 3-4 years of age and lay one to two eggs, which are incubated for about 30 days. They may hatch two chicks but usually only one survives.



Whooping cranes may initiate their first nest anytime from February to April, but may re-nest into June if the first nest fails. They build floating platforms of wetland vegetation; young pairs may build nest platforms without laying eggs the first season. Chicks are flightless for about 90 days and are susceptible to predation by alligators, snakes, turtles, birds and mammals.

Adults are also flightless for about six weeks during a molt of all their flight feathers. They first undergo this molt at 2-3 years of age and then again every two to three years. In Louisiana, molt can begin in mid-April but most will begin in late May with birds being able to fly again by early July. The birds are susceptible to predators at this time and they often become shy and secretive and will not open their wings. Thus far, whooping cranes released in Louisiana have molted in marsh, rice fields and crawfish ponds. Stable water within walking distance is an important habitat component to facilitate escape from predators.

Whooping cranes reintroduced to Louisiana utilize a wide range of habitats including coastal marshes, crawfish ponds and rice fields. They are non-migratory; therefore, they are present on these landscapes throughout the year. Whooping cranes often forage in shallow water and have a varied diet consisting of frogs, snakes, turtles, rodents, crawfish, aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates, tubers, and seeds. They also depend on shallow water environments when nesting and roosting at night for protection from predators. Whooping cranes will flock together in small groups (usually < 10 individuals) when young, but as adults they are territorial. Whooping cranes have never existed in large numbers due to their low reproductive potential, thus they are not likely to exist in great numbers on the Louisiana landscape into the future. Further, their territoriality as adults will limit the number of birds in a single location.

CRAWFISH FARMING & WHOOPING CRANES

Water levels in crawfish ponds during nesting and the post-breeding period can have a major effect on the hatching and fledging of chicks. Pond drawdown could cause nest failure, however, most initial nests should be completed (late April-May) before typical crawfish drawdowns occur. Fledging of chicks can be encouraged by maintaining water in the nest pond or in adjacent fields on the farm for 90 days after hatching (i.e., the flightless period). Chicks are susceptible to predators when walking through dense vegetation or forests and can be killed crossing roads, so if birds move from one pond to another, mortality can increase if these obstacles are present. Adults will forage with the chick(s) on insects, frogs, etc. along the pond edges. Initially, one of the adults will roost on the nest with the chick(s) but eventually as the chick grows larger it will join its parents standing in water to roost at night.

Additionally, survival of molting birds can be greatly enhanced by providing stable water, even in only one field. They are flightless at this time and must walk to new areas if a drawdown occurs.



WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A WHOOPING CRANE NEST OR MOLTING BIRD

First, enjoy the birds! These birds are magnificent creatures that have been part of our natural heritage for thousands of years, and we hope that you will enjoy your role in restoring this beautiful animal.

We also encourage you to contact LDWF (contacts bottom left) so that we may work with you and the LSU AgCenter (Mark Shirley; 337-898-4335) to provide specific information relevant to your situation. We will not divulge the location of a nest or molting birds to the public, nor will we give out your contact information. Also, you may continue with normal farming operations. We do ask, where possible, to minimize disturbance of the nest. If the birds nest in a crawfish pond, they will likely be acclimated to disturbance by normal harvest operations. Walking near the nest may illicit aggressive behavior and could also result in abandonment of the nest. Keeping a 200-yard buffer between people not engaged in farming activities and the nest should minimize nest abandonment.

We realize that maintaining water until early to mid-summer can create water quality issues for crawfish and/or impact farming opportunities. As noted above, farmers are not required to consider the needs of whooping cranes in their farming decisions. However, we believe in most instances that suitable plans with minimal economic impact can be developed. LDWF and the LSU AgCenter would be very interested in developing alternatives with any willing farmer. As stewards of working wetlands, farmers may take pride in following good conservation practices and being part of an industry that benefits this iconic species, as well as numerous others. The farmer who achieves the status of having a family of whooping cranes, will indeed have achieved a milestone of wildlife conservation on their lands.



Chevron is a major corporate sponsor of the whooping crane reintroduction project, with the shared desire to elevate respect for wildlife resources in Louisiana. The mutually agreed upon strategy is that "awareness of the project leads to

appreciation of these magnificent birds, which in turn leads to protection." Their sponsorship has provided for much of the educational outreach and media public awareness campaign, including the printing of this document. We thank them for their social responsibility.

If you have a whooping crane issue or would like more information, please call (337) 536-9400 to speak with Sara Zimorski (ext. 4) or Phillip Vasseur (ext. 5).



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