

Cradle of Texas TMN Whooping Crane Trip

By Tom Morris

Jan 19, 2011

Thirty-two Texas Master Naturalists including spouses made the trip to Rockport, Texas to see an incredible 43 Whooping Cranes on tour day. Incredibly, there were three Whooping Cranes visible in a wet pasture near the Goose Island Big Tree near the State Park.

One surprise of the trip was a cancellation by the M/V Skimmer due to engine problems on the day before the trip. However, they helped us get a replacement boat, "Wharf Cat" which was located at Rockport Harbor and even closer to our hotel, Laguna Reef. Not only was the boat larger and could hold 100 passengers, there had only been 15 reservations booked and they were glad to have us aboard - and there was plenty of room.

It turned out to be a mutually beneficial change in several ways - faster boat and more area covered, but the crowning benefit was a guide named Ray Kirkwood, past president of the Mid-Coast TMN group. He gave us a great briefing on the Whooping Crane status, history, behavior, nesting, survival, and stories of folks who had worked very closely with the whoopers.



Figure 1 - Ray Kirkwood



The red line below (Fig 3) is the route that the Wharf Cat used. From Goggle Earth, the path calculates to be 24 miles one way. We traveled down the Intracoastal Canal to the area of the elevated observation deck in Aransas NWR where we saw a family of three Whooping Cranes from the boat. These same three were also visible the previous day from the observation deck

Figure 2 - Wharf Cat

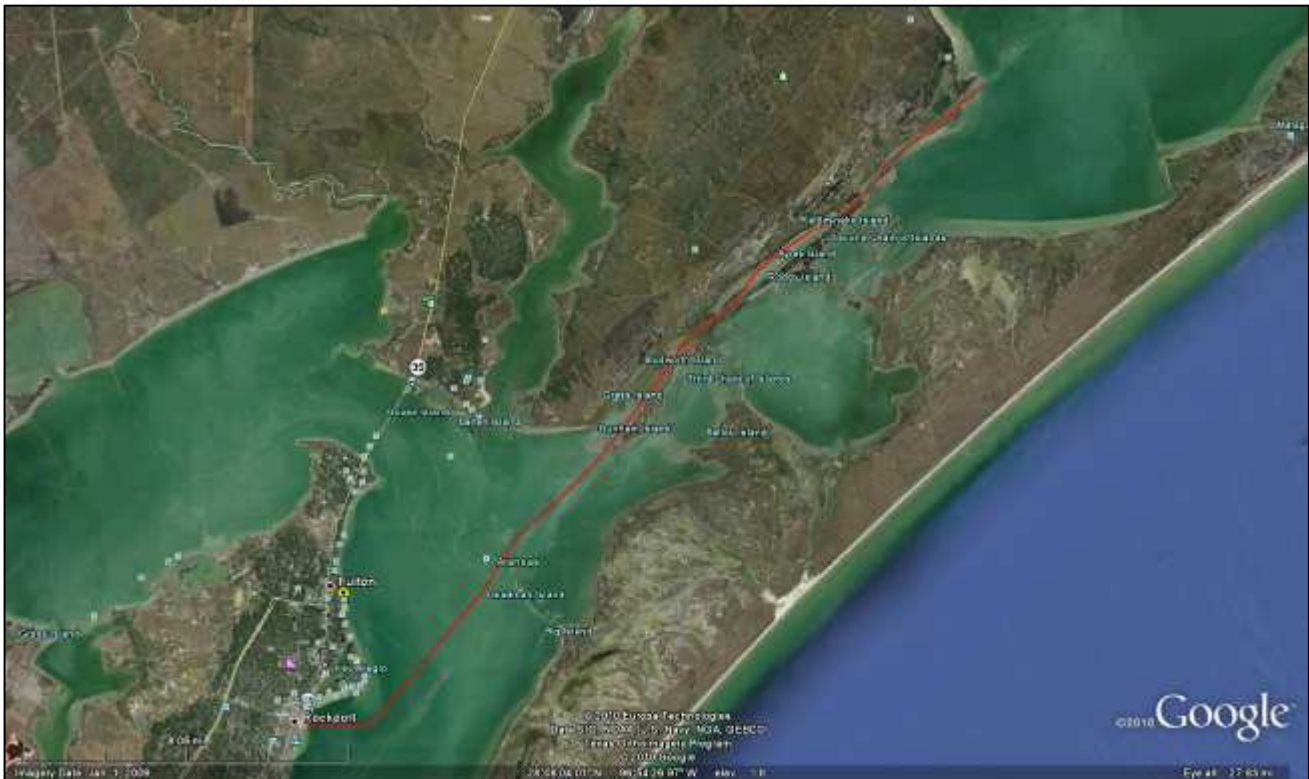


Figure 3 - Trip Path, 48 miles RT

Each whooping crane family needs about 300 acres each winter and will fiercely defend their territory. We actually observed a casual trespass, by two whoopers, and they were met by whoops and calls from the three residents and the resident male took to flight to intercept them. Without a protest, the trespassers wisely changed course and the male settled down about 100 yards from his family and slowly worked his way back foraging as he walked.

The whooping cranes use the Lamar Peninsula, Blackjack Peninsula, Mustang Island, and San Jose Island as their main territory each winter. There are about 70 family groups and with only a little over 21,000 acres of good habitat; the whooping cranes are running out of space. Efforts are underway to obtain adequate habitat, but there is not much left as you would expect. Texas has already lost about 90% of its coastal wetlands. The whooper's main food is blue crab and good wetland habitat with salinities of 5-15 ppt is crucial. In the 2008-2009 season, over 38 whoopers died on the wintering grounds which is highly unusual. This was due to the severe drought at the time and lack of fresh water which caused a crash in blue crab population and consequently, wintering whooping cranes.

There are about 600 whooping cranes in the world at present with the Texas/Canada group composing about half of the total. There are two smaller groups of whoopers in Florida at wintertime and only one of those groups migrate. This migrating group is assisted in migration by use of Ultralight aircraft. Not all of these whoopers follow or need the Ultralight. Once they have made the journey, they can make the trip on their own. Adults which have made the trip in the past will lead their young also with the aid of the Ultralight aircraft.

This Eastern Coast group summers in Wisconsin and travel through 10 states to reach Florida. They numbered about 107 as of Dec 16, 2010. This program was started in 1999 and USFWS introduced chicks raised in captivity to enhance the group. Now some of the adults are mating and laying eggs in the wild to give even more hope for success of this group.

Tragically, this year (Jan 7) three of these whoopers were shot and killed in Georgia by person(s) unknown.

There is a smaller group (25) which does not migrate in Florida and are located near Kissimmee, FL.



Figure 4 - Whoopers in Flight

The female whooping crane usually lays two eggs, several days apart and the first chick has a major advantage over the younger hatchling. If food conditions are good, the survival of the second chick improves. This year, five pairs of "twins" were raised at Wood Buffalo National Park and made the journey to Aransas! The previous year (2009-2010) produced no twins. There were 46 chicks that survived the nesting phase and started the migration. Forty-five of the 46 were already at Aransas in December. Their migration journey is over 2500 miles and typically over 60-80 percent of fatalities occur during migration.

The chicks are born around June and only have about 4.5 months before they begin their first migration starting around October. We observed the USFWS observation plane touring the area making a survey for the first time this year. They were only able to observe for four hours and only 2/3 of the territory. Two hundred and eleven were counted, and they estimate 273 based on the previous survey in December.



Figure 5 - Survey Plane

The bulk (about 2/3) is on the mainland and about a third is on the islands—Matagorda and San Jose.

Matagorda Island is a joint-management effort between Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. San Jose is private property and owned by the Bass family. Both islands have hunting during the winter while the whoopers are here. The U.S. government purchased most of the Aransas area in 1937 not for the whooping cranes, but for waterfowl (ducks) habitat. The original purchase was 47,000+ acres and is now over 70,000 acres (only 30% prime crane habitat).



Figure 6 - Family Group - Immature in Middle

An amazing story about whoopers was the one about "Tex". Tex was born in San Antonio in 1967, but had problems and was hand raised and thus imprinted on humans. Whooper chicks hand raised think they are humans.

However, Tex was a female and there was a strong need to have all females possible laying eggs. At the time there were only 109 whooping cranes in the world. They had gotten as low as 16 in 1941!

Annenberg Lerner relates the story as follows:

In 1975, Tex came to a new home at ICF (International Crane Foundation) in Wisconsin. ICF's Dr. George Archibald had an idea. His hope was that he would try to develop a pair bond with Tex. To do this, he would perform the spring courtship dancing with her. If successful, this would induce her to lay eggs that would be fertilized by artificial insemination.

Dr. Archibald moved in with Tex for several months in 1976 and established a firm pair bond with her. Dr. Archibald regularly danced with Tex, and Tex thought she was his girlfriend. He followed Tex's lead in the wing-flapping cha-cha of crane courtship. The next spring, she laid the first egg of her life, at age 10. But the egg was infertile.

They tried again the next spring and produced a fertile egg, but the chick died just before hatching. In 1979 Tex's egg was soft-shelled and broke.

Finally, on May 3, 1982, Tex laid a fertile egg! ^[1]

The egg hatched on June 1 and was called "Gee Whiz" partly in honor of Dr. George Gee of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.

[1] Annenberg Lerner. "Whooping Crane: Dancing with the Cranes." Journey North Accessed 28 Jan. 2011. <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/crane/Archibald.html>



Figure 7 - George and Tex, source: ICF

Some of you may remember this story and that Dr. Archibald appeared on the Johnny Carson show in June, 1982. Just before the show began, George learned that in his absence, Tex had been put in a cage for protection, but a raccoon penetrated the cage and killed Tex during the night. Her chick Gee Whiz at age 20 in 2002 had fathered twelve chicks and was a grandfather of many captive cranes. Some of his offspring are part of the wild Florida flock.

Many things have been learned about captive breeding and rearing of cranes. If cranes saw and heard humans, they were imprinted. So a discipline was established with handlers covering themselves with white sheets and one hand would have wooden beaks and red paint similar to the head of an adult crane. No talking was allowed in the presence of the cranes and they did well when introduced to wild cranes. The program of having sandhill cranes raise whooping crane chicks never panned out. The adult chicks thought they were sandhills and would not breed with other whooping cranes. The eggs even get imprinted before hatching! So, for the Wisconsin group that have UltraLight aircraft leading them on migration, the eggs get exposed to the sound of the ultralights.

Getting back to Aransas and our great outing, we saw feral hogs close to the shoreline and as we got closer started heading out toward two groups of whooping cranes. Wondering if we were going to experience a conflict, the hogs seemed to keep their distance - but the male whoopers were keeping their eye on the hogs anyway.

We also saw two coyotes near the shoreline and Ray Kirkwood told us that the cranes usually didn't have to worry about coyotes. One peck from their beak would cause severe pain or injury and coyotes give the cranes respect. Most years there are no casualties of cranes on the wintering grounds.

We saw over 50 species of birds from the Wharf Cat and the number of duck species was staggering. Approximately 10,000 ducks were seen with most of them lesser scaup and redheads. Numerous gadwals, northern pintail, and buffleheads were seen. We also saw lots of birds of prey - a peregrine falcon, several ospreys, white-tailed hawk, red-tailed hawk, and crested caracara.

Due to a recent prescribed 'control' burn on the Aransas NWR (Blackjack Peninsula) we saw more whooping cranes and sandhill cranes than usual. About half were mainly at the burn side of the margin that we could see from the boat. The survey plane counted 82 cranes along the burn margin.



Figure 8 - Blackjack Peninsula and burn margin in background - scaup in foreground



Figure 9 - Hardy Souls

Front: JoAnna, Marlies, Jeanne, Ramah. Rear: Ed, Mary, Jerry, Archie, Leo



Figure 10 - Part of the Group at the End

L-R: Jerry and Peggy Krampota, Jeanne Manry, Glenn and Cherie McBride, Mary Holler, Marlies Greenwood, Ramah and Leo O'Gorman, Yolanda and Gerald Forrest, Archie Pratt, Gardner Campbell, Roy Morgan, Jan Campbell, Tom and Ethel Morris. Photographer - Ruth Ann Pratt

Other attendees: Bill Brown, Susan and Peter Conaty, Phyllis and Kenny Gerdes, JoAnna Harlan, Ed Johnson, Lois Morgan, Kathleen and Reese Murray, Ruth and Torry Tvedt, Pam and Don West.

All in all, a very pleasant trip. Rockport was accommodating as usual, and heard several good reports how the staff at the Laguna Reef Hotel had performed. They made sure everyone knew about the change in the boat, location, and timing and supplied extra maps. The Latitude 20 08 restaurant served great food and we closed the place around 10 pm that night. The day of the boat trip was pleasant, cool, sunny, with calm water. Inside the cabin was noisy, but outside one could hear the speaker system well. The restrooms had lots of space considering it was a boat. One negative is that they did not allow passengers to bring food and drink aboard since they had a concession station on the lower deck.

However, when you get to see 43 whooping cranes, some in flight, territorial disputes, birds of prey, and thousands of ducks plus a great guide such as Ray Kirkwood, the negatives were minor.

Following are some photos taken on the trip.



Early morning in Rockport - Jan 19



Say What? Lois, Archie, Torry



Rockport Harbor, Archie, Roy, Bill



Rockport Harbor and Maritime Museum



Ethel, Cherie, Glenn



Phyllis, Pam



Ruth Ann, Kenny, Roy, Gerald, Pam, Yolanda, Reese and others



Ruth Ann and Archie



Feral Hogs - Everywhere you don't want them!



Ramah and Leo



Blackjack Peninsula



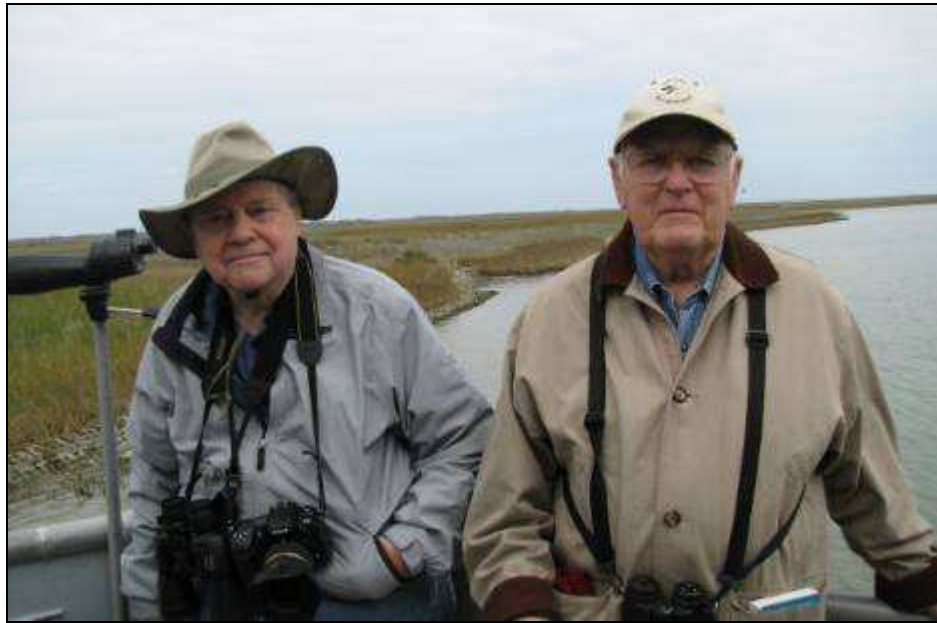
Great Blue Heron



Aransas NWR Observation Deck



Brown Pelican - Gliding



Torry and Gardner



Winter Residents - Rockport Harbor