

Hart's Basin Whoopers Are Gone

By Evelyn Horn

The 'green' reservoir stretches across my view from Crane Point... weeds have replaced the water and there's only a puddle left at the base of the dam. And what will it be like next spring when our Sandhill Cranes come from the San Luis Valley looking for a night's rest here at Hart's Basin? The fields below are dry, barren... no cattle. No corn, no oats or barley, so no silage and no waste grains for next spring's foraging birds. No income for the ranchers or farmers or orchardists. Drought is an ugly word.

And in the midst of my sad revelrie, the E-mail floods into my mind. "The last remaining Whooping Crane in the Rocky Mountain Population has been declared a mortality by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, marking the end of the bi-annual migration on and near the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge in the San Luis Valley." Kelli Stone, biologist at the Refuge, went on to state that the 19-year old Whooper left the wintering grounds in New Mexico in early March of 2002 but was not seen in the San Luis Valley and did not appear on its summering grounds at Red Rock Lake in Montana. And so, Tom Stein (Whooping Crane Coordinator, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) has declared the death of 'our' last Whooping Crane.

In 1941 only a few of the world's most endangered cranes existed. This remnant flock's migration route was (and still is) from Aransas NWR along the Gulf Coast to Buffalo Woods National Park in Canada: more than 2000 miles. The precarious situation resulted in attempts to establish a second migratory flock within the Rocky Mountain Sandhill Flock with a migratory route of only about 800 miles: from the nesting grounds in the area of Gray's Lake, Idaho to the wintering grounds at Bosque del Apache NWR. The Canadian biologist gathered Whooping

Crane eggs that were flown from Gray's Lake, Idaho, where Rod Drewein and his biologists placed them in the Sandhills' nests (sounds so simple!). Our birds proved to be good parents on this 'cross-fostering project'. But the Whoopers failed to reproduce and in 1989 no more eggs were allotted to the project. Enter this columnist. We choose to live in the rural area near Delta, Colorado, within half a mile of Fruitgrowers Reservoir, know to the locals as Hart's Basin. The reservoir filled during that winter and in the spring of 1990 the Sandhills and the Whooping Cranes came. And so began my love affair with these beautiful birds.

During spring migrations, more than half of the Sandhill flock of 19,000 to 20,000 rest at the Hart's Basin stop-over as did the majority of the Whooping Cranes. Over the years, the Whooper number dwindled and now these five-foot tall flyers are gone from our flyway, probably for my lifetime. Sad. But in recent years Kent Clegg led Sandhills and Whoopers from his Idaho ranch to the Bosque del Apache wintering grounds, Joe Dull guided Whoopers from Wisconsin to Florida with five to eight Whoopers returning to Wisconsin on their own. There's hope that larger groups of Whoopers will be able to follow this new ultra- light guided Eastern migration route. Florida's non-migrating flock is increasing and captive breeding flocks are growing. From the *Operation Migration* website, there are about 300 Whooping Cranes alive today compared to the 15 birds of 1941. So now, I contemplate a trip to Aransas NWF or to the International Crane Foundation's headquarters in Wisconsin to see my birds, alive, again. And I revel in my good fortune to have known these ancient, magnificent birds.