

An aerial census of the Aransas NWR and surrounding areas made 29 March, 2001 estimated the number of whooping cranes currently at Aransas at 161 adults + 7 young = 168. It is estimated that between 3 and 6 cranes have started the migration.

Recap of cranes observed: (168)

Refuge	Lamar	San Jose	Matagordaa	Welder	Total
47 + 2	4	34 + 2	55 + 3	21+0	161+ 7 = 168

a The 58 whooping cranes on Matagorda Island is an all-time high, surpassing the previous high of 57 documented in the 1998-99 winter. Some confusion on the Matagorda count concerning duplication of a trio was not fully resolved.

Remarks: Skies were mostly clear, although low clouds and limited visibility were present while over the refuge. Sunshine at the end of the day when Matagorda was being flown created difficulties with some transects pointed directly into the sun.

The distribution of cranes was similar to last week when 168 cranes were also observed. This week, one more crane was present on the refuge and one less on Welder compared to last week. The numbers on Matagorda and San Jose Islands remained the same.

I am uncertain about the number of cranes that may have started the migration, estimated between 3 and 6. One whooping crane has been confirmed on the Platte River in Nebraska. I believe that three whooping cranes that may have wintered in West Texas have also started the migration. The Middle Sundown Bay pair of cranes were not on their territory and thus may have migrated. All other territorial cranes were located on today's flight.

I also have uncertainties about the number of cranes that have died this winter (between 5 and 7). Two juveniles have died. Adults that died were adult R-GwG, and one carcass from an unknown bird found on the edge of Sundown Bay. On today's flight, one adult from the Rattlesnake Island family group was not located and is presumed dead. This adult was first reported missing on March 27 by Whooping Crane Tour Boat Naturalist Ray Little. The summer nesting territory of the unbanded Rattlesnake Island pair is not known. In addition to the five known losses, two other cranes may have died. A single has been in the South Sundown Island territory for the last several flights and one of the adults presumably has died. On

today's flight, a single was seen in an area on Welder Flats where a pair has been most of the winter. However, on the basis of one observation, I cannot yet conclude that this represents a mortality.

Estimated Numbers Scenario for the Aransas/Wood Buffalo flock;

168 observed on today's flight

6 in migration

6 died at Aransas

180 Peak Population 2000-2001 Winter

The tides were higher this week (2.8 mlt) than last (1.2 mlt), having come up about 1 E feet. All the tidal flats on San Jose were covered with water. No crane use of the bays was observed, a sharp contrast from last week with 40 cranes in the bays. However, some cranes were in the smooth cordgrass bay edges. Could they be foraging on minnows? The blue crab population is still believed to be at a low level, with the monthly sampling having started today. Dr. Wayne McAlister, Education Specialist on Matagorda Island, recently observed a pair of cranes eating either the flowers/fruits or the leaf tips from saltwort (*Batis maritima*), a very common saltmarsh plant. It can't be a very nutritious food for the cranes. Several cranes on today's flight were observed in saltwort habitat. With rain received the past two days, no use of fresh water was observed on today's flight. No cranes were on prescribed burns.

Some territorial cranes were close together, apparently tolerating the presence of neighbors. This trend is sometimes observed prior to migration. The Big Tree and St. Charles Bay pairs were relatively close together on Lamar. The Middle Pond pair was on the vacant Middle Sundown Bay territory, and then flew joining three subadults on their own territory. The Middle Pond female is now with an unbanded bird, earlier this winter having been paired with YbY-YbY. It is not known if the bands fell off her mate and the pair is still together, but this is possible. Adult female crane RWR-YbY was on her North Pump Canal territory, with a third crane in the vicinity. This pair for several winters has frequently tolerated the presence of a third crane. The single flew to the edge of the North Sundown Bay territory landing close to the territorial pair. The pair immediately displayed and the single started walking away. A pair was located northeast of Fulghum's, as well as a pair on Dewberry Island. A pair and a single were on the north end of the crane range on Matagorda.