

# Whooping cranes make comeback with increased success in breeding

By Kimberley Roddy  
Reporter

Last year was the most successful year for breeding of endangered whooping cranes since the early 1940s, when conservation efforts by Americans and Canadians began, a Texas A&M professor said.

Dr. Doug Slack, professor of wildlife and fisheries science, attributed the successful breeding to the clearing of fields with fires and to the large amounts of rain last spring.

There are now about 110 whooping cranes in the world, an increase from an estimated 95 birds the previous year and an all-time low of 21 birds in 1941.

Clearing uplands by brush burning attracts the birds because it provides open areas so the 5-foot cranes can watch for predators such as wolves, bears and coyotes, Slack said.

Fires also increase the availability of acorns, which fall from burned trees, and insects, which serve as food for the awkward-looking birds, he said.

The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, off the south Texas coast of Port Aransas, was cleared with controlled fires and attracted cranes within a day or two, Slack said.

"People don't generally under-

stand that you can use something like fire as a wildlife-management tool," Slack said. "It's been used extensively, but rarely do you get to use it for helping out an endangered species."

The large amount of rain in Canada last spring also helped the crane's survival and successful re-

cranes leave Texas in the first few weeks of April and fly over Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakota and Montana, and arrive in Canada in early June. In groups of two or three, they annually fly the same path back to Texas in late October.

Howard Hunt, an A&M graduate

in unknown territory and can be easily preyed upon.

The mating process is another cause of scarcity of this species. Whooping cranes, which live about 25 to 30 years, have one mate for life. The female lays two eggs and only the first chick to hatch survives. The other is born dead.

The increasing number of birds last winter show whooping cranes stepping up the ecological ladder with increased reproduction rather than down toward extinction, he said.

Crane families tend to live together, yet spread out across the refuge, maintaining large territories for themselves. These territories can be very noisy because the birds screech a loud whooping sound when they are disrupted.

Whooping cranes, which have been around for about half a million years, play a small role in ecology as marshland predators, Slack said.

"Cranes are a natural part of the environment and there needs to be a place for them," he said. "I think we are obligated to keep all different kinds of life forms on the planet."

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— Dr. Doug Slack, wildlife and fisheries professor

production, he said. Marsh environments, where the birds build huge nests and graze in the waters, protect them from predators that avoid venturing into waters.

Whooping cranes are very susceptible to predation, Slack said. This is the main reason why the species, one of the world's rarest, is endangered. Adult cranes can fly away when approached, but chicks are virtually helpless, he said.

The birds usually find a mate in Texas during the spring and fly 2,600 miles to Canada in the summer for breeding, he said. The

student of wildlife science, said most whooping cranes in the United States winter along a 20-mile stretch of marshland on the peninsula of the 55,000-acre Aransas refuge.

Many are killed by predators on their migratory journey between Texas and Canada, Slack said. Usually lasting a few weeks, the migration begins when the birds circle overhead for a few hours so they can travel together. Then they fly most of the day, land in wet fields for the night and take off in the morning. When they sleep overnight, they stay

## Drug dogs sniff out ton of marijuana

FALFURRIAS (AP) — Border Patrol agents seized almost a ton of marijuana hidden in a truckload of iced-down cabbage early Thursday after four drug-sniffing dogs alerted their trainers, officials said.

The dogs had been on duty just a week when they helped agents with the largest single seizure since the pilot program began, said Silvestre Reyes, chief of the McAllen sector of the Border Patrol.

Reyes said the 1,637 pounds of marijuana was valued at \$1.3 million and puts the McAllen sector's seizures for six months at \$74 million — more than the past four years combined.

Heavy drug activity in the region helped Reyes' sector obtain the four Belgium Melnois dogs, he said. After they complete field training in the McAllen sector, two will be assigned to the Laredo sector and a pair will remain with Reyes' agents.

They are the only dogs on duty with the patrol nationwide in such a manner, Reyes said.

Since joining the patrol last Thursday, Reyes said the dogs have helped in another 15 seizures of marijuana weighing 2,019 pounds worth \$1.6 million.

The 18-month-old dogs spent the past three months in training in San Antonio before being sent to help at the sector's three checkpoints in Falfurrias, Sarita and north of Rio Grande City, Reyes said.

## Jury finds drug dealer guilty of slaying narcotics agent

BROWNSVILLE (AP) — Jurors found a Mexico City man guilty of first-degree murder Thursday in the slaying of a federal narcotics agent who was gunned down in a New Year's Eve drug bust.

Felipe Molina Uribe faces up to life in prison for the death of William Ramos, 30, a special agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration, court officials said.

Ramos' 24-year-old widow, Thelma, sobbed and hugged their 22-month-old daughter when the verdict was returned after 4½ hours of deliberations.

U.S. District Judge Filemon Vela said he would sentence Molina next month. Molina, 29, pleaded guilty to two drug charges before the trial began, and jurors also found him guilty of using a firearm in the commission of a violent crime.

The judge said he believed the proper sentence for the first-degree murder conviction was life in prison. Prosecutors said they did not seek the death penalty because "federal statutes are screwed up."

"The verdict speaks for itself," said Ken Miley, agent in charge of the DEA's McAllen office and Ramos' boss.

Defense attorney J.M. Ramirez said an appeal was being considered, although he noted that "the jury has spoken."

"There is no sense in second-guessing the jury verdict," he said. In their closing arguments earlier Thursday, prosecutors said Ramos was killed by a "big-time dope dealer" while trying to keep drugs off the street.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jack Wolfe said, "It was a simple, brutal,

vicious, malicious murder of agent William Ramos."

Molina's court-appointed attorneys said their client was a victim of "a simple conspiracy of silence."

Jurors were being "flim-flammed" by government prosecutors who relied on DEA informants to identify Molina as the triggerman, Ramirez said.

Ramos was shot in the chest as he and DEA informant Roberto Ortiz struggled with Molina over a gun, witnesses testified. The three were in Ramos' car.

Ramos, Ortiz and DEA informant Ernesto Rodriguez had gone to Junior's Supermarket in Las Milpas on New Year's Eve, where they had told Molina they would exchange cash for 300 pounds of marijuana, testimony showed.

## Fatal helicopter crash in Texas being investigated, sheriff says

BEN WHEELER (AP) — Federal authorities Thursday interviewed people who saw a helicopter explode, break in two, crash and kill both occupants.

Van Zandt County Sheriff Travis Shafer said investigators were trying to determine what caused the crash on Wednesday of the helicopter, being flown from Alabama to Fort Worth for maintenance.

The helicopter was owned by the University of South Alabama Medical Center, officials said.

Killed in the crash were Ray Wood, about 45, the pilot, and John Palmer, 35, director of maintenance for SouthFlite USA Program. SouthFlite, which began service last September, serves the northern Gulf Coast area, including parts of Mississippi and Alabama.

Shafer said witnesses were watching the helicopter.

"They said there was an explosion," Shafer said. "It seemed like a small explosion, but it separated the craft in two pieces in the air, and it plummeted to the ground."

"The front half of the helicopter, where the pilot and the other gentleman were, was on fire, and when it hit the ground, there was one small explosion and then a large explosion. It was completely melted down from the heat."

The back half of the helicopter, still intact, fell about 150 to 200 yards from where the front half exploded, the sheriff said.

The crash occurred at about 4:30 p.m. in a meadow about 60 miles east of Dallas in southwest Van Zandt County, near the community of Ben Wheeler, the sheriff said.

Investigators from the FAA and National Transportation Safety Board arrived late Wednesday and early Thursday to interview witnesses and gather debris, trying to determine what caused the crash.

"They said they would wind up today," Shafer said Thursday.

South Alabama spokesman Monica Knight said Wood had 16 years of experience and had the highest rating a helicopter pilot can receive.

## Sorority-sponsored clothing drive called 'overwhelming success'

By Melanie Perkins  
Staff Writer

A clothing drive sponsored by the Texas A&M chapter of Omega Phi Alpha service sorority has been an overwhelming success so far, said Jan Becker, first vice president of the sorority and the coordinator of the drive.

Collection boxes for the drive, which began April 6 and runs through Monday, are located in each of the four Bryan-College Station McDonald's. Free food coupons are being distributed to those who bring clothing items during the promotion, said Katy Edmonds, McDon-

ald's community relations representative.

Becker said radio station KSTR made a promotional tape for the drive and is donating air time through Monday to increase awareness of the drive.

Clothing from the drive will be donated to Twin City Mission Inc., Phoebe's Home and Sheltering Arms, Becker said. Then they will be distributed to the homeless and needy in Brazos Valley.

This is the first time the OPA chapter at A&M has sponsored a clothing drive, Becker said, and it has been so successful that she hopes it will be made an annual event.

Clothes collected from April 6 to Monday filled 50 large garbage bags and 30 grocery sacks — with clothing to spare.

OPA is sponsoring the drive as part of its National President's Project to help the homeless of the United States.

"I'm really pleased — I never dreamed we would have this many people bringing clothes to McDonald's," Becker said. "I think the Bryan-College Station community has really turned this project, which was just the idea of one organization at A&M, into a community-wide event."

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