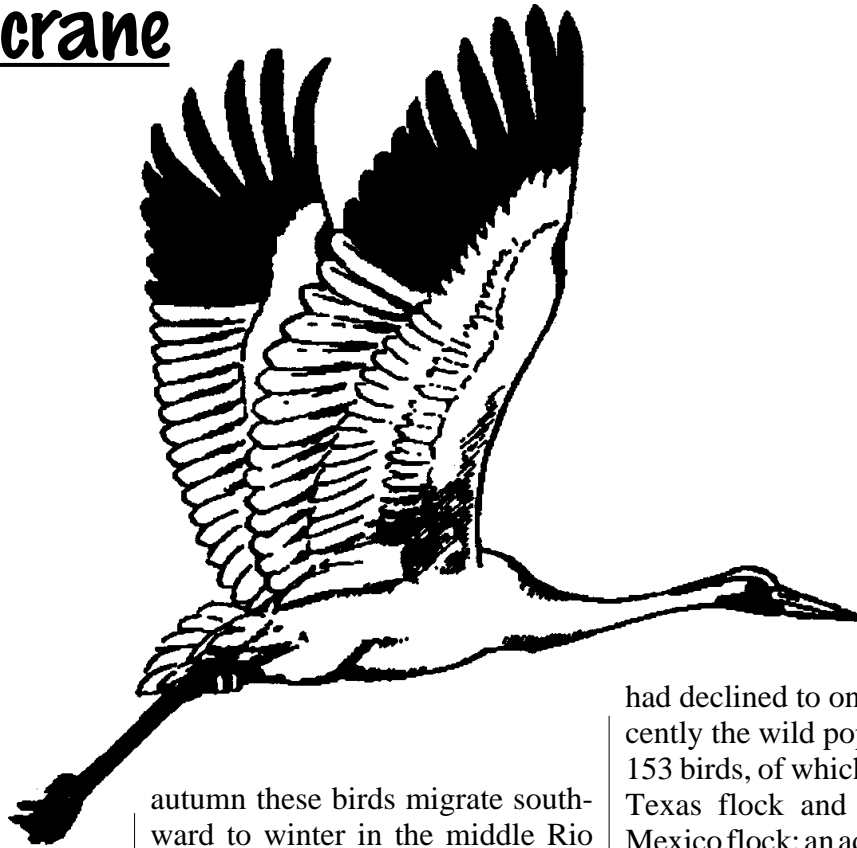




# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Whooping crane *Grus americana*



The whooping crane is a regal bird, with white plumage, black wingtips, long neck and legs, and a red forehead. Adult whooping cranes have yellowish irises and bills, and their legs are black. Immature whooping cranes are similar in color but duller.

Whooping cranes were fairly widespread in North America in historic times, but at present they breed only in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories; from there they migrate through the Great Plains to winter on the Texas coast at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Beginning in 1975 an experimental population was produced at Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Idaho. In

autumn these birds migrate southward to winter in the middle Rio Grande valley of New Mexico, and occasionally in the nearby Uvas Valley in Dona Ana and Luna counties. So far, no Idaho whoopers have paired and bred, but a whooper-sandhill crane pair produced a hybrid chick in 1992.

The cranes forage generally in agricultural fields and valley pastures, particularly where there is waste grain or sprouting crops. Both whooping cranes and sandhill cranes (*G. canadensis*) roost together, typically on sand bars in the Rio Grande. The mated pairs of whoopers may set themselves apart and defend extensive winter territories. Adults pair for life and return to their old wintering and breeding territories in subsequent years.

In 1941 the known population

had declined to only 21 birds. Recently the wild population stood at 153 birds, of which 134 were in the Texas flock and 13 in the New Mexico flock; an additional 43 birds were in captivity. The causes for the decline of this species are varied, but some factors are loss of habitat, killing or disturbance by humans, predation, disease and accidents.

Protection of these magnificent birds and their habitat is essential to their recovery.

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