

2013 Whooping Crane Trip

March 5, 2013

by Tom Morris and Peggy Romfh

Seven Cradle of Texas Master Naturalists took a Whooping Crane tour on Tuesday, March 5, 2013. The six from the King Ranch tour were joined by another to make seven: Angelika Fuller, Jerry Krampota, Tom Morris, Pam Peltier, Pete and Peggy Romfh, and Dick Schaffhausen.

However, our "Skimmer" boat trip out of Rockport was canceled the day before the scheduled trip due to forecasted high winds. Luckily, Dick Schaffhausen was in Rockport early and notified us while we were still at the King Ranch. A quick call to the "Wharf Cat" who rescued us two years ago when engine problems canceled our "Skimmer" trip proved successful. The Wharf Cat is large enough so it wasn't grounded by the U.S. Coast Guard due to the projected winds. The only problem (and it was minor) was the Wharf Cat was moored in Port Aransas, not Rockport. Sure enough, the winds came in hard on Tuesday morning - 30+ mph with a little rain. The Wharf Cat's departure time was later - 10:00 am so we had time to have a leisurely breakfast in Rockport before leaving around 7:30 am. Our normal accommodations "Laguna Reef Hotel" in Rockport no longer serves breakfast and that creates a problem when you have a 7:00 am trip scheduled. So we had already changed hotel reservations before the trip to the "Inn at Fulton Harbor". We had no problems making the 20 mile trip to Port Aransas, but you have to allow time to make a ferry crossing. They were running at least three ferries on Tuesday, March 5 due to normal commuting and school bus traffic. We had essentially no wait before loading onto a ferry. We arrived an hour early in Port Aransas so we decided to check out some nearby birding spots. The Turnbull Birding Center was closed for maintenance so we headed to the Paradise Pond nearby. We only saw about 5 species due to the cold high winds. Everything in the bushes was seeking the deepest, calmest spot they could find.

After obtaining our tickets we still had time to kill. There were an awful lot of laughing gulls hanging out on the low rock jetties in the harbor. They were trying to keep out of the wind themselves. Even the pelicans weren't testing their flying skills. So, we did not know what to expect on the trip - would we get to see close-up views of the Whooping Cranes and how many?

We had come from a 93 degree day in Kingsville to a blustery 58 degrees with gusts up to 40 mph. We needed all of our cold weather gear - especially wind breakers! Even a

common loon was staying out of the wind by staying close to our boat in the harbor. When we departed (a little late - 10:30) you could not feel much effect of the choppy water on the boat. It was not "smooth", but not too rough either. The boat was about half full, so there was lots of room also. Most passengers spent time inside, but some of us would venture out to take pictures and search for birds on the water. At the rapid pace of the boat, choppy waters, poor light at the beginning - there was not much use to be outside, anyway. After we got into the bay, I noticed a lot fewer ducks than normal - even they had sought shelter from the open water and wind. When we reached the Aransas Refuge and stopped the boat, conditions outside were OK to venture out and take photos and view the wildlife.

But, not to worry - the winds had not kept the Whooping Cranes out of the marsh. We saw 38 Whooping Cranes with two of them flying right across the bow of the boat "whooping" as they flew by. It was a magical moment!



Whooping Crane Close-up - Peggy Romfh

It was a glorious sight to see - a whooping crane pair taking off from a small coastal island in Aransas Bay, hovering in air 100 feet in front of the Wharf Cat as they tried to gain altitude in the gusty 30 mph winds, their honking calls to each other reverberating across the water. It's not often that we get to see

whooping cranes, but to see 15% of the Aransas/Wood Buffalo flock in one trip was awe inspiring and yet scary as we thought about the future of the species.

Most of the 38 whooping cranes we saw were either male/female pairs with no juveniles or small groups of one to five year olds that have not yet mated. We only saw a few families with a juvenile in tow and none with twins.

Per the Wharf Cat captain, some of the young adults we saw were encroaching on the feeding grounds of other adult pairs - we did not see them getting chased off, but that was surely to come.

The marshy islands looked in better shape this year than over the last couple of years of drought, and there were small ponds with water in them dotted throughout the landscape.

"The whooping cranes were a beautiful sight to see. As they travel north to summer nesting grounds, we will miss them again until next year brings them back to Texas." Peggy Romfh

Speaking of magical moments, listen to Roy Bedicheck who wrote Karankaway Country, Doubleday, 1950. *"I had looked many times upon these marshes and found them lacking. They are vast and flat and green, rimmed with a curving coastline on one side and hedged about with low, brush-covered dunes on the other..... These marshes are so extensive that they literally swallow up features which elsewhere might be striking, or reduce them to the incidental or the trivial. Even the great blue heron and the American egret {Great Egret}, two of this coast's largest waders, shrink into insignificance, while individuals of lesser species dwindle down to mere dots..... On a sunny morning of early spring (1949) I accompanied C.A. (Bud) Keefer, then Manager of the Refuge, on one of his crane-census trips over the lower end of the Blackjack Peninsula in a jeep. The moment my eye fell on a family of three whooping cranes looming up in magnified outline (due to the peculiar atmospheric conditions of the moment), I realized that I had found what was missing. Here was the figure that gives authenticity to the marsh. Here is a double completion, for bird and marsh emphasize and enliven each other."*

They counted 18 Whooping Cranes that day and that represented half of the world's population!

Due to the lack of fresh water in the coastal bend this year, the blue crab population is low, and they (USFWS) are setting out grain feeders at various locations for the whooping cranes. The last three cranes we saw were near one of these feeders. Last year, they were estimating nearly 300 Whooping Cranes in Texas. With a poor breeding summer (2012) in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada along with some

losses due to predators in Canada, and about normal losses in migration (towers, power lines, etc) the population of the only free migrating flock is down this year. We witnessed fewer juveniles as further proof of the poor production year. Of the 47 cranes, only 5 were first year juveniles. Several pairs of whooping cranes had no juveniles and there were several groups of young cranes who hung out together.

Adult whooping cranes need about 200 acres on the wintering ground and will defend their area against trespassers. We witnessed that two years ago as the male of one pair flew aggressively at an approaching pair and they decided to change course. Two years ago, there were four pair of Whooping Cranes with two juveniles (rare) showing how productive the Canadian territory can be in years with good food and low predation. This year there were no sets of twins seen.

Getting back to the Wharf Cat tour, we saw plenty of Great Blue Herons along the Intracoastal Canal - more than usual for some reason. Maybe they found some shelter from the wind along the banks of the canal that they couldn't find elsewhere. The wind was fairly constant all day at 20 mph from the north with gusts averaging 30 mph. It was overcast most of the trip, but around 1 pm the sky cleared and was sunny the rest of the day. There were two coyotes seeking food in broad daylight on a thin strip of land on the gulf side of the canal.

After the boat trip, some of us stopped off to see the big oak tree (Big Tree) on the Lamar Peninsula near Goose Island State Park. It had warmed up to 68 degrees so the afternoon was very pleasant. Not only did we see the tree (which has undergone major rehabilitation to reinforce branches with cables plus a lot of trimming), but we saw 6 more whooping cranes. Then a few miles down the road on highway 35 three more for a whopping 47 endangered Whooping Cranes seen on one day. That is nearly 20 percent of the estimated 254 +/- Whooping Cranes' population in coastal Texas this year.

Even though this has been our third Whooping Crane trip as a Cradle of Texas TMN group, there were pleasant surprises and one of the best trips we have taken.

"Being new to birding in general and not having a clue to the plight of the Whooper's before I became aware of the trip, I was impressed by their size and gracefulness. We were fortunate to see several Whoopers take off and fly close to the vessel. It was awesome. As a group several wonderful photos were taken of them in flight. I was truly impressed by the group's vast knowledge of the many species of birds and I can only hope to become half as knowledgeable over the years. TMN-COT members are good folks and I am very happy to be associated with them". Dick Schaffhausen

"Overall would consider this as one of my best (I've only done 3) trips. 2011 was good as we had the excellent narrator and a lot of our fellow birders aboard but I believe this trip gave the photographers greater opportunities. I would rate the overall (whooping crane) trip as a success. My biggest concern was seeing the 9 whoopers in the areas off the refuge. I suspect this is normal and has been going on forever, i.e. those juveniles in Brazoria County in 1989, however seeing the birds out of the water makes me wonder if they are searching for food, esp. those at the feeder just off Highway 35. If there is a shortage of blue crabs and the birds are forced to accept alternate food to stay alive, is this endangering their overall chances of survival?" - Jerry Krampota



Bufflehead – Fascinating ‘Rubber Duckies’ on the Coast – Pete Romfh

Picture the little yellow rubber ducks bobbing up and down in your children’s bath and you will know what this small diving duck looks like bobbing in the shallow coastal bays around Aransas NWR. We saw about 100 bufflehead on the recent Whooping Crane trip, often in small flocks.

Bufflehead wink in and out of sight in the water as they make rapid and repeated underwater dives (<30 seconds) looking for invertebrates, crustaceans, and mollusks to eat.

The males have oversized heads of black and white. We were close enough to them so we could also see the iridescent patches of green and purple on their heads and necks. The females were brown with a white cheek patch. In flight, they looked like white and black, squatty fuzz balls with wings moving at 100 mph!

Bufflehead ducks are monogamous, and we usually saw each pair swimming together or close to each other. Since the oldest bufflehead ever found was 18 years old, that makes for a lot of years of shared life!

They will migrate soon and travel to Canada, where they nest in the woodpecker holes, particularly those from Northern Flickers.

"I would say that the other bird species that made the biggest impression in Aransas was the sheer number and behavior of the great blue herons. We have always seen a lot of blue herons there, but to me they were squatted on the ground all over the little islands. I would think they were close to the start of nest building, which I always thought was in trees or high bushes, and I would have liked to stake out and watch their behavior". Peggy Romfh



Great Blue Heron - Peggy Romfh

Birds seen at Port Aransas and Aransas Wildlife Refuge

on March 5 - 44 species

Mottled Duck	White Ibis
Blue-winged Teal	Roseate Spoonbill
Northern Pintail	Turkey Vulture
Green-winged Teal	Osprey
Redhead	Northern Harrier
Lesser Scaup	Red-tailed Hawk
Scoter species	Whooping Crane
Bufflehead	American Oystercatcher
Red-breasted Merganser	Spotted Sandpiper
Common Loon	Greater Yellowlegs
Pied-billed Grebe	Willet
Neotropical Cormorant	Lesser Yellowlegs
Double-crested Cormorant	Short-billed Dowitcher
American White Pelican	Laughing Gull
Brown Pelican	Ring-billed Gull
Great Blue Heron	Herring Gull
Great Egret	Caspian Tern
Snowy Egret	Royal Tern
Little Blue Heron	Crested Caracara
Tricolored Heron	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Reddish Egret	Red-winged Blackbird
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Great-tailed Grackle

Total trip list including King Ranch was 106 species!



Ferry Boat - Port Aransas - Calm before wind change - Tom Morris



Paradise Pond - Dick Schaffhausen, Tom Morris, Pam Peltier, Angelika Fuller - Jerry Krampota



Intracoastal Tug/Barge - anchored on side of canal - Tom Morris



Common Loon - seeking shelter at harbor - Pete Romfh



Wharf Cat - 2011 File Photo - Tom Morris



Dick Schaffhausen, Pam Peltier, Peggy Romfh, Angelika Fuller, Jerry Krampota - Tom Morris



Dick Schaffhausen, Jerry Krampota - Tom Morris



Wharf Cat - Chilly Upper Deck - Jerry Krampota



Whooping Crane - Peggy Romfh

Notice the antenna - GCBO's Felipe Chavez has been involved in banding and radio tagging young Whooping Cranes in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. Maybe his team tagged this one!

Some recent news - McAllen (AP) March 12, 2013

Senior U.S. District Judge Janis Graham Jack ruled Monday in Corpus Christi that the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality was responsible for the deaths of 23 whooping cranes in the winter of 2008-2009, because its management of the rivers that feed San Antonio and Aransas bays caused their salinity to rise. The saltier water hurt blue crab and wolfberry

supply, two of the cranes' primary food sources, as well as the birds' primary freshwater drinking source.

In a 124-page verdict, the judge found the TCEQ officials violated the Endangered Species Act and ordered a conservation plan that would balance the interests of water users with the need to protect the whooping cranes' habitat



Bufflehead (male on left) - Peggy Romfh



Whooping Cranes - Peggy Romfh



Young Adult Whooping Crane Takes Off - Tom Morris



Whooping Crane - Dick Schaffhausen



Peggy Romfh and Dick Schaffhausen - Tom Morris



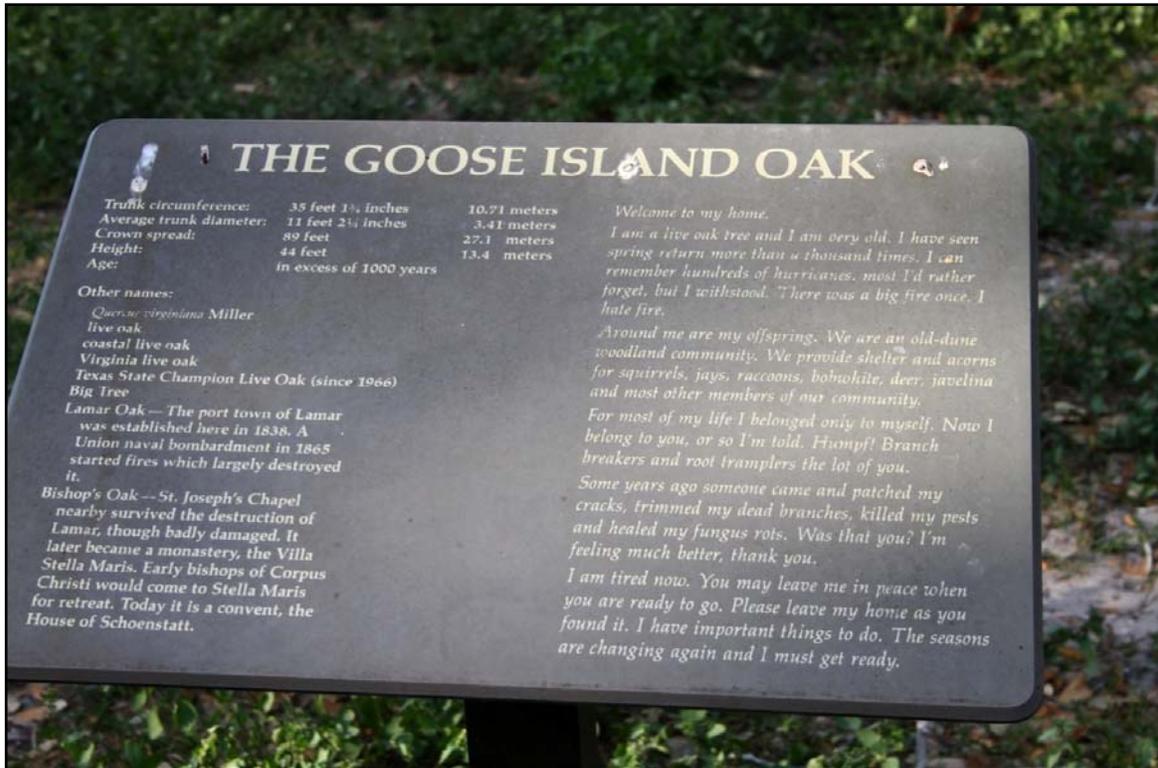
Coyotes on Gulf side of Intracoastal - Tom Morris



Restored Port Aransas Lighthouse - Private - Tom Morris



American White Pelican - Peggy Romfh



Big Tree - Goose Island State Park - Tom Morris



Family Group on Lamar Peninsula near Big Tree - Jerry Krampota



Juvenile at Aransas NWR - Jerry Krampota