

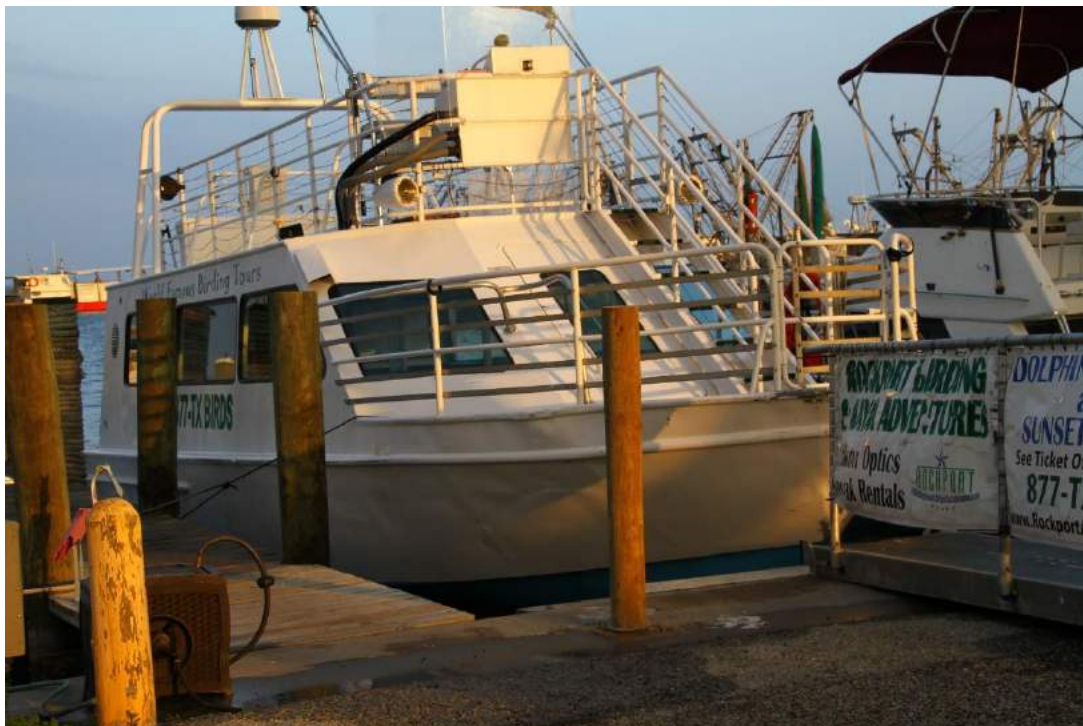
Whooping Crane Trip Report – Feb 14, 2017

Tom Morris

Thirty-One persevering Cradle of Texas Master Naturalists including some spouses and friends embarked out of Fulton Harbor aboard THE SKIMMER piloted by Captain Tommy Moore on Monday, February 14 (Valentine's Day) despite some drastic weather that delayed the trip 2 hours. Captain Tommy called around 6 am to delay the trip to at least 8:30 based on weather reports. Things were calm in Rockport until about 7:30 AM and nearly everyone was in the lobby-breakfast area of the INN AT FULTON HARBOR or in the parking lot awaiting further news. The rain was very heavy, but it was over a little after 8 am. However, the winds were above 35 mph and there was lightning over the bay when we were supposed to be boarding. So after another delay we got the go ahead at 9 am and we were underway by 9:15 AM. This same weather front caused tornadoes in San Antonio, Van Vleck, Sugarland and the Houston area later that day and lots of rain.



Photo by Pete and Peggy Romfh



THE SKIMMER

Photo by Tom Morris

Thirty-one folks showed up and there were no no-shows! That is amazing even on clear days. It shows what a hardy group of Master Naturalists we have in the Cradle of Texas Chapter. We had a great time the evening before at the Latitude 28 02 restaurant where all who were spending the night in the Rockport area (26) showed up for a fabulous meal and a very good waiter who took care of the whole group. Afterwards, we had time to review the fine artwork and crafts in their gallery. Even though we were delayed boarding we had a good time having coffee at THE INN AT FULTON HARBOR who welcomed all even if they had not spent the night in their hotel. They did get a tip for their generous hospitality. The room was soon at capacity by 8:30 when another group joined us who had spent the night in the Inn.



The Inn at Fulton Harbor

Photo by Tom Morris

A list of the Whooping Crane Trip attendees:

Tom and Ethel Morris
Donna Graham
Dick and Donna
Schaffhausen
Jean Britt and Jim Scott
Herb and Jo Myers
Pete and Peggy Romfh
Melba Beken

Suzie Safley
David Plunkett
Connie and Ken Stolte
Larry and Vicky Kirby
Sheree Muzny
Kathy Lee Davis
Laurel and Rich Tillman
Jim and Brenda Martin

Joyce Franklin
Dorman Michaelson
Anne Bettinger
George Bettinger
Phil Huxford
Steve Hoddy
Chris Kneupper

The captain had a helper named **Rebecca** that served coffee and tea, and helped passengers. And everyone got Hersey's Candy Kisses since it was Valentine's Day.



Dick Schaffhausen

Photos by Tom Morris



Everyone had room in the cabin. Just before departure.

Photo by Tom Morris



Captain Tommy Moore

Photo by Tom Morris

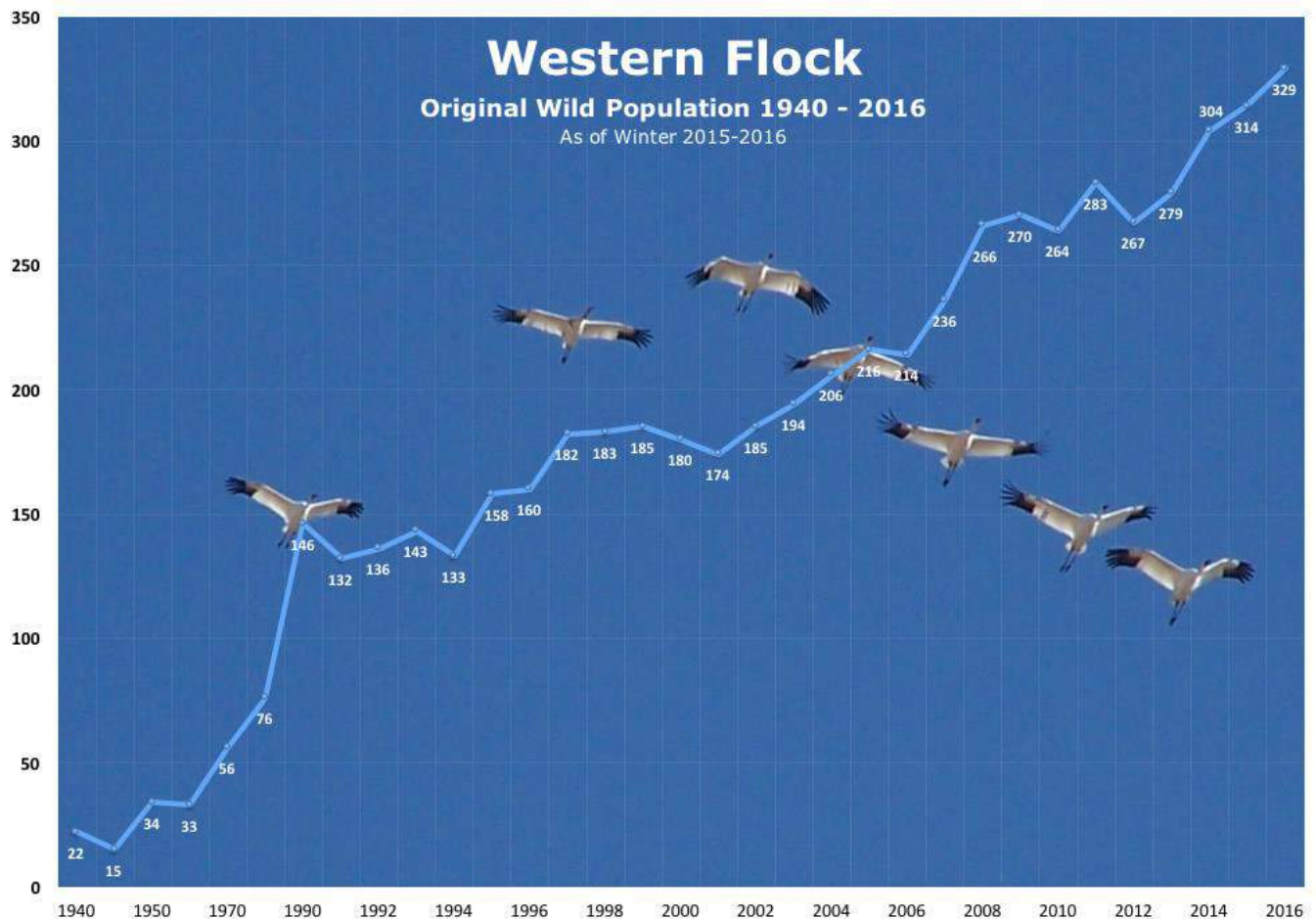
Captain Tommy Moore went over the rules before departure. Notice how the palm tree branches looked normal. An hour before, the branches were leaning near horizontal during the storm. We caught just the southern tip of the front and it was moving at 45 miles per hour, so the captain was pretty sure it would clear up in time for a morning departure. It was a balmy 72 degrees F at 7 am, but at departure it was in the 50's.

Only three of us went on the upper deck with the Captain during the quick trip from the harbor to the Intracoastal Canal where the whoopers would be. It was pretty chilly and there was not a lot to see as the storm had pretty well moved the ducks away from the open waters to seek calmer areas.

On the way Captain Tommy gave a good summary of the whooping crane population and the survey methods of the past. He was not enamored with the change a few years ago from counting by aerial survey to ground surveys. The new method depended on a statistical analysis via partial surveys from the ground. As you will read below, they are still doing aerial surveys, but it is only partial aerial surveys.

The whooping crane population has progressed over the years from a low of 15 to a current level around 329 in the Western Flock (Aransas NWR – Wood Buffalo NP). This is the only migrating flock from the traditional nesting grounds which was not discovered until 1952. We saw a little more than 10% of this population on our Feb. 14 tour. This population is very vulnerable to lack of fresh water thus lack of blue crabs on its wintering grounds in Texas.

There is a big political battle between cities, farmers, and industry who want more fresh water from limited supplies and less for the wildlife. USFWS along with conservationists have a big fight on their hands.



Source: USFWS

The following is a USFWS report from Aransas National Wildlife Refuge:

Wintering Whooping Crane Update, December 15, 2016

Wade Harrell, U.S. Whooping Crane Recovery Coordinator

We observed whooping cranes using four units of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge (Blackjack, Matagorda, Tatton and Lamar) and 3 Texas coastal counties (Aransas, Calhoun and Matagorda).

Overall, habitat appeared to be in good condition with adequate freshwater resources. Northern portions of the primary survey area (Welder Flats, Matagorda Island Central) appeared to have much more standing freshwater than southern portions of the primary survey area (Blackjack, Lamar-Tatton), presumably due to higher rainfall totals over the last couple months. Coastal marshes had higher than normal water levels due to high tides in the early part of the survey; however tides fell to normal levels this week.

We observed significant amounts of water hyacinth, an invasive freshwater plant, floating in San Antonio Bay, presumably having been flushed out of the Guadalupe River after the last flood event in November. Rainfall in November and December has provided positive freshwater inflows into local estuaries.

This year we did not have as many large group sizes (>8) of whooping cranes in our primary survey blocks, so it is possible that many of the sub-adult groups we observed in the past few years have successfully paired.

We observed at least one family group that included two juveniles (i.e. commonly referred to as “twins”).

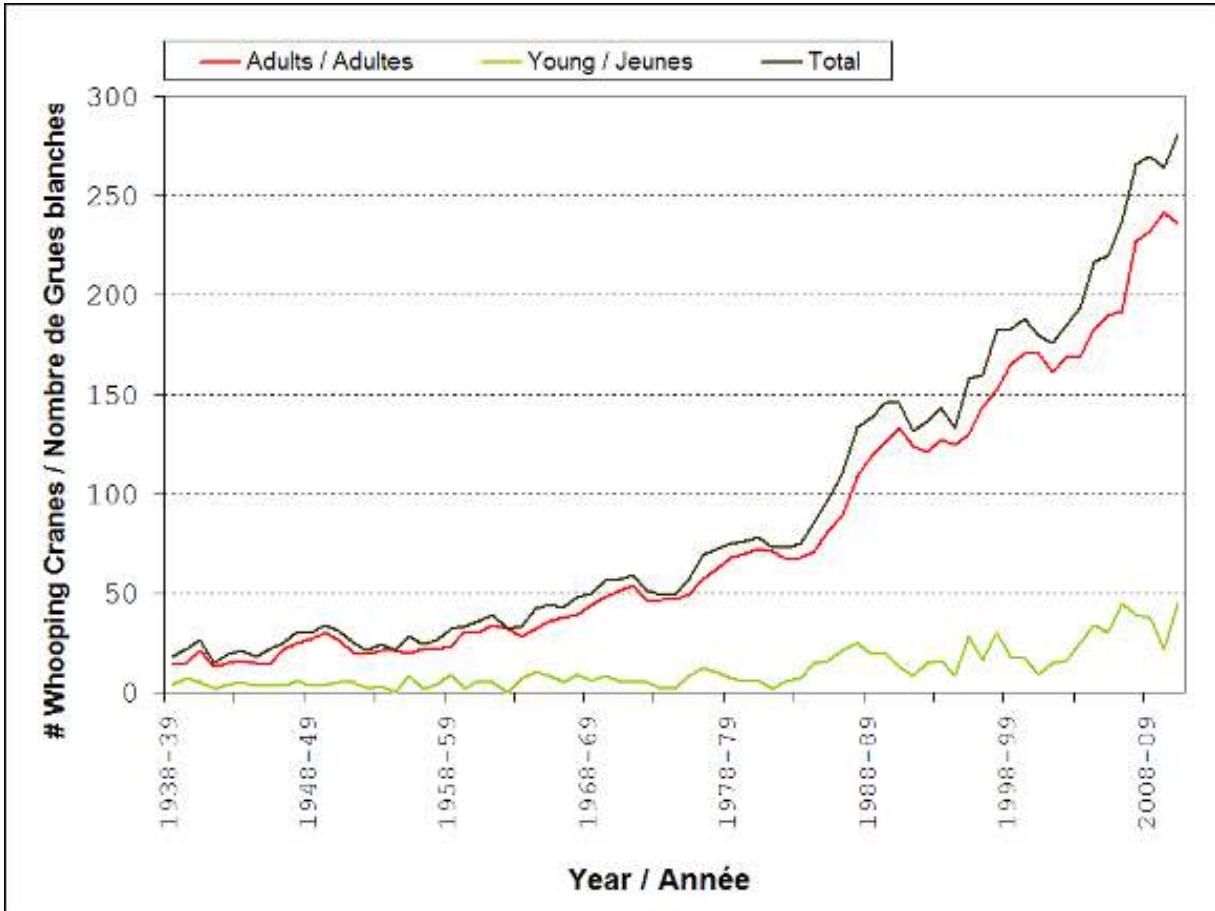
Due to poor flying conditions, most of our secondary areas did not get surveyed, but we did have one survey over the Mad Island and Matagorda Peninsula secondary areas. The Mad Island secondary survey area had one family group and two additional adult whooping cranes detected. A family group of whooping cranes was reported in a rice field near Garwood, Texas on December 8th. This area has had whooping crane use the last several years and is well outside (north) of our survey area.

While coastal salt marsh was the most common habitat type that we observed whooping cranes using during the survey, we observed whooping cranes using a wide variety of other habitat types as well, including freshwater wetlands, upland prairies and shrub lands, agricultural fields and open-water bay edges.

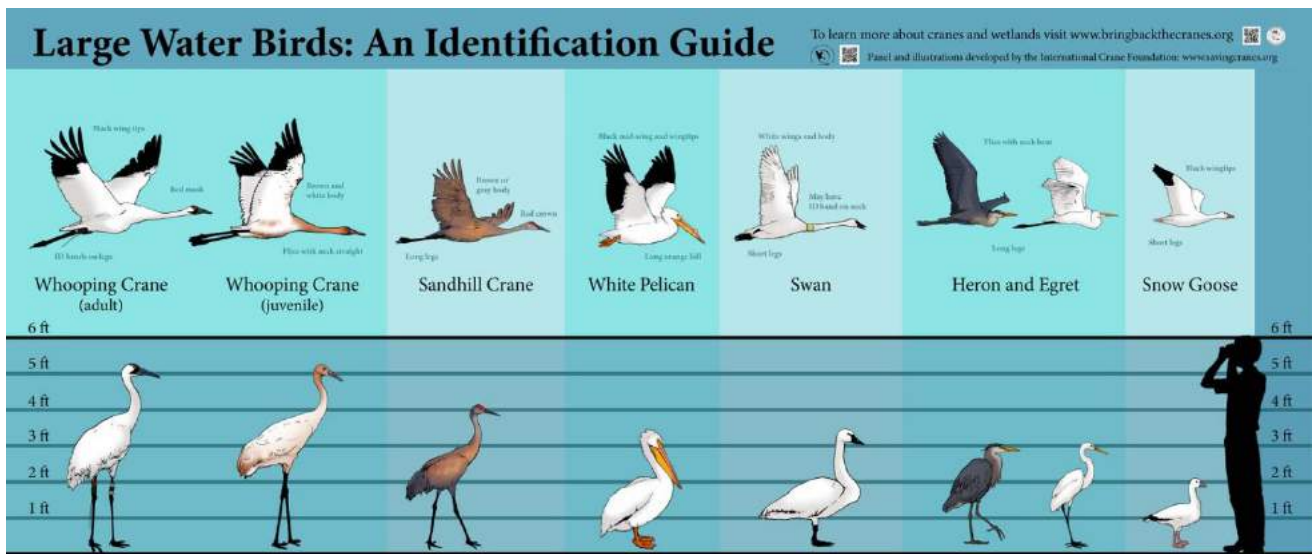


Our first group of Whoopers 6 sub adults – Roseate Spoonbills in background Photo - Tom Morris

The following chart shows some data on the juvenile and total population up to 2011. The trend follows the total population trend with some differences due to predation or lack of and also food supply at Wood Buffalo National Park. No data is presented to differentiate between the two.



Source: Wood Buffalo NP



The following is a list of the wildlife seen by Larry and Vicky Kirby with some input by Tom Morris

Whooping Crane Trip

14-Feb-17

Species	Count
Blue-winged Teal	6
Northern Pintail	3
Redhead	8
Lesser Scaup	3
Bufflehead	25
Common Goldeneye	10
Hooded Merganser	4
Red-breasted Merganser	12
Ruddy Duck	11
Common Loon	5
Pied-billed Grebe	2
Neotropic Cormorant	14
Double-crested Cormorant	23
American White Pelican	75
Brown Pelican	52
Great Blue Heron	74
Great Egret	36
Snowy Egret	17
Little Blue Heron	4
Tricolored Heron	15
Reddish Egret	2
White Ibis	17
Roseate Spoonbill	18
Turkey Vulture	3
Osprey	5
Northern Harrier	2
American Coot	23
Sandhill Crane	2

Whooping Crane	34
American Avocet	1
American Oystercatcher	9
Killdeer	2
Long-billed Curlew	5
Ruddy Turnstone	11
Peep Species	15
Spotted Sandpiper	2
Greater Yellowlegs	2
Bonaparte's Gull	1
Laughing Gull	80
Ring-billed Gull	5
Herring Gull	2
Forster's Tern	6
Royal Tern	1
Eurasian Collared-Dove	1
White-winged Dove	2
Mourning Dove	2
Belted Kingfisher	1
Crested Caracara	6
swallow sp.	6
Red-winged Blackbird	11
Great-tailed Grackle	5
House Sparrow	2
52 Species	683

Peeps = Western or Least
Sandpipers

Also Seen:

1 Feral Hog sow and 2 piglets

1 Coyote

The sky was clearing, but you can see what was left of the storm front.

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh



By the end of the morning, clouds were breaking up and the sun was making a comeback





Kathy Lee Davis, Dormand Michaelson, Jo Meyers, Donna Graham, Vicky Kirby, Chris Kneupper, & Larry Kirby



The bow of the boat – same as above with Connie Stolte

Photos by Tom Morris

We had a very co-operative Juvenile Whooping Crane that allowed great shots like the following from Pete and Peggy Romfh.





Top Deck: L-R Phil Huxford, David Plunkett, Anne Bettinger, Herb Myers

Photo by Tom Morris



Pete and Peggy Romfh

Photo by Jean Britt



Rich Tillman, ?, Larry and Vicky Kirby



Steve Hoddy



Phil Huxford



Captain Tommy Moore and Phil Huxford



Cabin left: Steve Hoddy, Phil Huxford, Connie and Ken Stolte, David Plunkett, Vicky and Larry Kirby



Cabin, right: Pete and Peggy Romfh, Ethel Morris, Jean Britt, Jim Scott, Rich and Laurel Tillman, Jo Myers



Cabin back: Left - Donna Graham, Joyce Franklin, Dorman Michaelson, Melba Beken, Suzie Safely Right- Herb Myers, Jim and Brenda Martin, Kathy Lee Davis, Sheree Muzny, George and Anne Bettinger (not shown – Chris Kneupper and Jo Myers)



Vicky Kirby

Photo by Jean Britt



Sheree Muzny



David Plunkett

Photo by Jean Britt



Brenda Martin

Photo by Jean Britt



Jean Britt and Jim Scott

Photo by Jean Britt



Dick and Donna Schaffhausen

Photo by Jean Britt



George and Anne Bettinger

Photo by Jean Britt



Melba Beken

Photo by Jean Britt



Donna Graham

Photo by Jean Britt



Joyce Franklin and Dorman Michaelson

Photo by Jean Britt



Kathy Lee Davis

Photo by Jean Britt



Jim Scott, Ken Stolte, Ethel Morris

Photo by Jean Britt



Ethel Morris

Photo by Jean Britt



Laurel Tillman

Photo by Jean Britt

And a good time was had by all.....



Rich Tillman, Larry Kirby, Tom Morris

Photo by Jean Britt



Whooper eating Carolina Wolfberry

Photo by Pete and Peggy Romfh

The following are great pictures of other birds seen on the trip by Pete and Peggy Romfh



Brown Pelican



American White Pelican



Great Blue Heron



Great Blue Heron in flight

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh



Great Blue Heron at nesting site showing breeding plumage

Photo by Pete and Peggy Romfh



American Oystercatcher



Osprey with fish

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh



Red-breasted Merganser – male



female



Great Egret

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh



Brown Pelican Taking Off



Brown Pelican Soaring

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh



American Avocet – note powder blue legs



Buffleheads and Lesser Scaup

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh



Great Egret in breeding plumage – note green eye lores



Great Blue Herons on man-made nesting platforms

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh



Common Loon



Coyote

Photos by Pete and Peggy Romfh

And the reason we came....to see Whooping Cranes



Photo by Pete and Peggy Romfh

Thanks!

Pete and Peggy Romfh and Jean Britt for sharing their photos