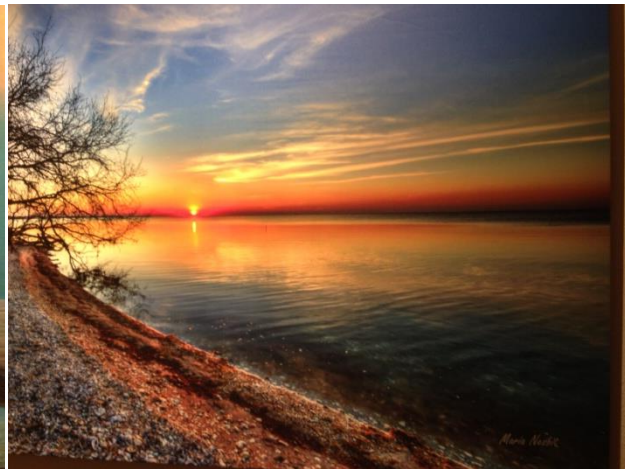


Whooping Crane Trip Report – Feb 20, 2019

Tom Morris

Thirty Cradle of Texas Master Naturalists including some spouses and friends made the trip to Rockport in spite of dubious weather reports. Luckily the fair weather reports were correct and before we boarded clear skies were seen approaching. By the time we reached the Intracoastal Canal, we had full sun and the wind had calmed down somewhat. The temperature was a chilly 52 Deg. F at the beginning, but reached 65 by the time we returned to Rockport.

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 (23) were rewarded with good food and fellowship. The restaurant as most buildings near the water in Rockport had received heavy damage from hurricane Harvey, but you could not see any trace of it. The restaurant had lots of great paintings and photographs on the walls from local artists.



A list of the 2019 Whooping Crane Trip attendees:

Tom and Ethel Morris
John and Nancy Boettiger
Lisa Myers
Regina Tippet
Bill and Becky Huff
Kathy Lee Davis
Sheree Muzny
Roger and Neeta Allen

Pam Peltier
David Plunkett
Krissy Plunkett
Kim Richardson
Phil Huxford
Rose Wagner
Rainbo Johnson
Mary Holler

Cindy Goodrum
Mary Schwartz
Janice Sims
Bill Ahlstrom &
Monica Berry
Don McCullough
Archie and Ruth Ann Pratt
Chuck and Judy Stone

Birds seen on Feb, 20 2019

- 1 Blue-winged Teal
- 2 Northern Shoveler
- 3 Gadwall
- 4 American Wigeon
- 5 Northern Pintail
- 6 Green-winged Teal
- 7 Redhead
- 8 **Lesser Scaup ~ 1500**
- 9 Bufflehead
- 10 Common Loon
- 11 Pied-billed Grebe
- 12 American White Pelican
- 13 Brown Pelican
- 14 Neotropic Cormorant
- 15 Double-crested Cormorant
- 16 Anhinga
- 17 Great Blue Heron
- 18 Great Egret
- 19 Snowy Egret
- 20 Little Blue Heron
- 21 Tricolored Heron
- 22 Reddish Egret
- 23 Black-crowned Night-Heron
- 24 White Ibis

- 25 Roseate Spoonbill
- 26 Black Vulture
- 27 Turkey Vulture
- 28 Osprey
- 29 Northern Harrier
- 30 Red-tailed Hawk
- 31 Crested Caracara
- 32 American Kestrel
- 33 American Coot
- 34 Sandhill Crane
- 35 **Whooping Crane ~29**
- 36 American Oystercatcher
- 37 Long-billed Curlew
- 38 Spotted Sandpiper
- 39 Greater Yellowlegs
- 40 Willet
- 41 Sanderling
- 42 Ruddy Turnstone
- 43 Short-billed/Long-billed Dowitchers
- 44 Black-necked Stilt
- 45 Laughing Gull
- 46 Ring-billed Gull
- 47 Herring Gull
- 48 Caspian Tern

- 49 Royal Tern
- 50 Forster's Tern
- 51 Marsh Wren
- 52 Savannah Sparrow
- 53 Red-winged Blackbird
- 54 Great-tailed Grackle

Birds Seen in Rockport

- 55 Hooded Merganser
- 56 Red-breasted Merganser
- 57 Rock Pigeon
- 58 European Starling
- 59 Common Grackle
- 60 Eurasian Collared Dove
- 61 Mourning Dove
- 62 Mockingbird
- 63 Blue Jay
- 64 American Crow
- 65 House Sparrow



The Inn at Fulton Harbor

Photo by Tom Morris



The SKIMMER at Fulton Harbor

- Tom Morris



Chilly Beginning at the docks



Captain Tommy Moore

Photo by Tom Morris

Captain Tommy Moore went over the rules before departure. 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. The captain had a Plexiglas windshield and we stood directly behind it and him or otherwise we would be downstairs

On the way Captain Tommy gave a good summary of the whooping crane population and the dramatic increase. In Dec 2018 the survey resulted in a 17% increase for a total of 505 in the Aransas (or Western) group. There is an Eastern group wintering in Louisiana that numbers around a 100. The 17% increase in the Aransas flock is 85 new cranes in one year! The last time we were here the estimate was about 330 for the year 2016 in the Western group. So there have been over 175 new cranes in the past three years! I have to admit I was not aware of this kind of success in the recent years.

The scientists say they are about half way to their goal of 1000 in the Western group. They feel that a 1000 flock would be a sustainable population as long as they had suitable habitat preserved.

This is the only migrating flock from the traditional nesting grounds (Wood Buffalo NP in Canada) which was not discovered until 1952.

The Whooping Crane is still one of the most endangered species in the world, but certainly making a dramatic comeback. Why isn't this covered by major news outlets?



Janice Sims and Mary Holler



Neeta and Roger Allen



Kim Richardson, Bill Ahlstrom, Ethel Morris



Rainbo Johnson, Nancy Boettiger, Pam Peltier, Sheree Muzny, Cindy Goodrum



Pam Peltier, Cindy Goodrum



Rainbo Johnson



Left: Pam, Rainbo, Bill, Krissy

Right: Mary, Kim, Rose



Whooping Crane Family Feeding

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

Our first family group of Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*), not long after we entered the Intracoastal Canal. A family group of two adults and a juvenile were feeding in the grasses and later moved to a small pond. The juvenile is in the center. It is about 8 months old and will not be fully white until about 1.5 years old. It will not mate until it is about 2-3 years old. It will leave the parents by the next migration and hang out with other non-breeding cranes.

The whooping cranes favorite food in the wintering grounds is blue crab.



Juvenile

Photo by Tom Morris



Banded Adult Whooping Crane

Photo by Tom Morris

This adult is well banded. Some are banded when they are at Wood Buffalo National Park before they can fly. This practice is declining in lieu of netting and only about 10 per year are banded.



The Same Whooper Discharging Water

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

A good site for more info is: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Whooping_Crane/lifehistory from Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

“The only remaining naturally occurring Whooping Crane population spends the winter on the Gulf Coast, primarily in Texas's Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, and breeds in Canada's Northwest Territories and Alberta, mainly in Wood Buffalo National Park. Surrounded by the headwaters of four rivers, the Canadian breeding grounds lie on poorly drained soil interspersed with shallow wetlands.

The Whooping Cranes nest in potholes dominated by bulrushes and containing other aquatic plants such as cattails, sedge, and muskgrass. These wetlands are divided by narrow ridges that support white and black spruce, tamarack, willows, dwarf birch, Labrador tea, and bearberry.

On their Texas wintering grounds, Whooping Cranes spend their time on estuarine marshes, shallow bays, and tidal flats, sometimes venturing to nearby farmland. Salt grass, saltwort, smooth cordgrass, glasswort, and sea oxeye dominate the marshes, with Gulf cordgrass on the margins. Farther inland in their range are sandy, gently rolling grasslands with live oak, red bay, and bluestem plants. Migrating birds feed in croplands and roost in shallow, freshwater wetlands.

On the Gulf Coast they feed in brackish bays, marshes, salt flats, and flooded or burned uplands away from human disturbance, eating mostly blue crabs, clams, and other animal foods, along with some plant material such as wolfberry, cranberry, acorns, cordgrass, marsh onions, and prairie lily.

The male and female build the nest together by piling up and trampling vegetation such as bulrushes, sedges, and cattails. The nest measures 2–5 feet across and has a flat surface or a shallow depression for the eggs.

Clutch Size:	1-3 eggs
Incubation Period:	29-31 days
Egg Description:	Light brown or olive with brown splotches

Whooping Cranes are monogamous, forming pairs at the age of 2 or 3 years and mating for life. Courting pairs perform an elaborate, energetic dance display in which they leap, flap their wings, toss their heads, and even fling feathers and grass. Each breeding pair has a territory defended primarily by the male, who may attack intruding Whooping Cranes by running, flapping, hissing, stabbing, or jumping and slashing with his feet. New pairs often establish a territory near their parents.

Whooping Cranes live and travel alone, in pairs, as families, or in small flocks of up to 7 birds, and sometimes flock with Sandhill Cranes. They may ignore or pursue other nearby birds, cattle, and deer. They spend their time on the ground and in shallow water, never perching in trees. They learn migration routes and nesting locations from other cranes (or from researchers in ultralight aircraft, as part of reintroduction efforts). Their strong homing instinct limits their dispersal to new habitat.”

Typically only one dominant chick will survive the nest. Twins (two surviving chicks) are rare. We have seen twins on other trips.



Osprey Carrying a Fish

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

The Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) always carries its catch head-first in order to reduce drag while flying.



Great Blue Heron Roost near Rockport

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

These great blue herons (*Ardea Herodias*) are using a tree in the bay to roost and prepare nests for the upcoming breeding season.



Reddish Egret

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

The reddish egret (*Egretta rufescens*) is an endangered species and is found only in coastal salt marshes along the coastal areas of Mexico, Gulf Coast, Caribbean, and parts of Central America. TP&WD estimate only 1,500 to 2,000 nesting pairs in the United States. Destruction and degradation of the coastal habitat is its greatest threat.



Red-breasted Mergansers

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

Red-breasted Mergansers (*Mergus serrator*) in the bay at Rockport. The winter further north and further south than any other American mergansers. It also prefers salt water more than the other two species of mergansers (common and hooded).



American White Pelicans

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

These American white pelicans (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) winter on the Texas Coast and are beginning to show breeding plumage. The beak bumps will disappear after the breeding season. Their wing spans can exceed nine feet. The whooping crane is seven feet. Their bill can hold 3 gallons of water.

Another sign of Spring – the first blooming Yucca plant Captain Moore had seen along the Intracoastal.



Photo by Bill Ahlstrom



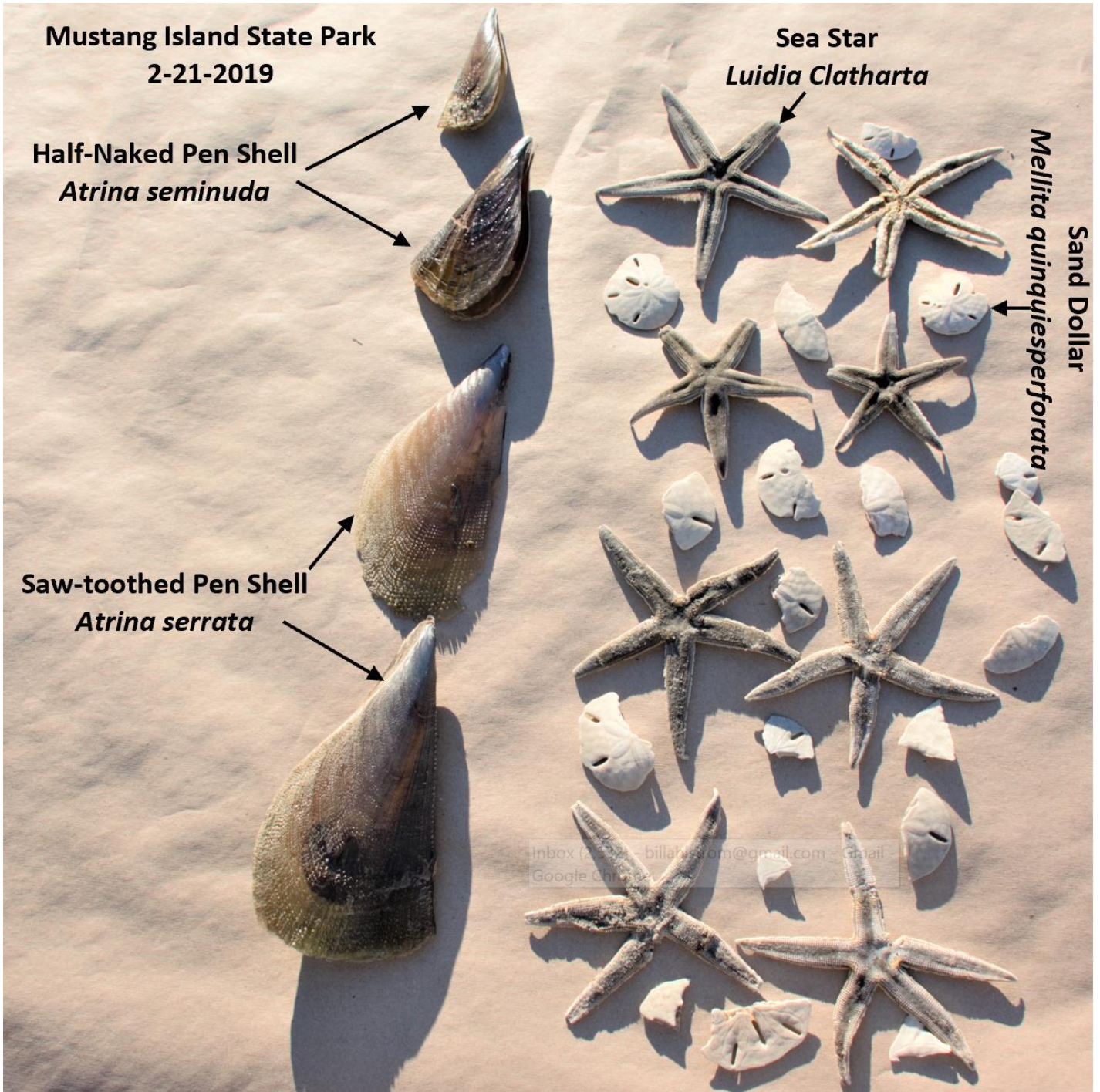
Oyster Boat – Saw several boats actively harvesting

Photo by Tom Morris

Bill and Monica did some beachcombing on Mustang Island and had success!



Photo by Bill Ahlstrom



Mustang Island State Park
2-21-2019

Half-Naked Pen Shell
Atrina seminuda

Saw-toothed Pen Shell
Atrina serrata

Sea Star
Luidia Clatharta

Sand Dollar
Mellita quinquesperforata

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Google Chrome

Photo by Bill Ahlstrom

We will end this report with a photo from a Facebook group (Texas Birding and Butterflies) taken near the same time and place as our trip of a Whooping Crane Successfully crabbing.



Obtained from Rainbo Johnson

Photo by Bill Morris