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Gerhardt: Whooping cranes create two whopper anecdotes

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Of all the birds I've worked around, few fascinated me more – or got me in more trouble – than the whooping crane.

At one time back in the 1980S, there was a small "insurance flock" that passed through Colorado on its way between Gray's Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho and Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico.

The cranes were from eggs snatched from nests of the main flock in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories and smuggled into the nests of the greater sandhills at Gray's Lake.

The sandhills hatched the bigger bird, didn't think twice about adopting a pure white bird that was a full foot taller than their parents when full-grown, and a fair-sized flock of whoopers did pretty well for a number of years.

Problem was, the males and females never nested in the same areas and no chicks were ever hatched.

But while they were trying, they would stop off at Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge in the San Luis Valley to rest. And being 5 feet tall and pure white, they stood out like a sheet among the slate-gray sand-hill cranes that still populate the area.

On one assignment, my wife and I went to the valley to photograph the cranes as they rose off Monte at daybreak to head to the nearby grain fields.

They looked like prehistoric origami kites in takeoff, sort of wobbling and bobbling to gain their wings and equilibrium before rising in perfect formation against the pink-streaked darkness of the early morning.

The story I was working on was about a power line that ran right across the southern edge of the watercourse on the refuge.

Since whoopers are a highly endangered species, you'd think they'd be careful. There are fewer than 350 whooping cranes in existence, fewer than there are giant pandas.

But no. About once a year, one of the great white pterodactyl-looking birds would whack a wing on either the power line or the guy wires holding the poles, and that would be that for the bird.

So my wife (who is a professional photographer) waited patiently in the shivering cold of a spring morning until the birds started to rise and she fired frame after frame of the waves of sandhills, geese and ducks also rising off the ponds and maneuvering around the lines (that no longer exist).

With the sun streaking up in the east over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, she perfectly captured the silhouetted birds launching into the air.

After the morning flights, we decided to drive around the south side of the refuge and see if we could get a good shot of a whooper out in the field among the sandhills.

A couple of miles to the east, we saw three whoopers in an alfalfa field among the sandhills, and as luck would have it, there was a small man-made lake right in the corner by the road.

Our plan was to let her out behind the berm closest to the road, sneak over into the bowl, walk around until she was equal with a floodgate mechanism, then creep up over the top.

My job was to wait until she was in place, then drive slowly down the road in hopes of diverting the birds' attention from her.

And . . . it worked.

She got some magnificent shots of those great white birds as they high-stepped around the field among their gray cousins.

It was a long shot for our equipment (a 300 mm telephoto), but I knew they would be just fine.

We started down the road to turn around while I was telling her I wished we could have gotten closer, and as I pulled into a tractor lane between fields to turn around, she said, "How about shooting this one?"

And there, about 20 feet inside the fence next to us, was a large, white bird.

Using the vehicle as a blind, we shot him until we ran out of film – and it never did fly.

Closest I've ever been to one of those great birds.

Then there was the time I was down at Monte with a Rocky Mountain News photographer.

I don't remember what the story was, but I do remember the chewing-out I got.

During the course of our activities we found a whooper among sandhills in a field on the refuge proper by the west boundary road. It was only 30 or 40 yards from a line of weeds growing about 50 feet in from the parking area.

However, between the parking area and the weeds was a very visible sign stating the area beyond the sign was not to be crossed.

I do believe that this photographer, a woman of incredible talent, didn't see the sign in her haste to get her equipment ready on the run, and like all news photographers, getting up close and personal was dominant in her mind.

Before I could say anything, she shot past and made it to the line of weeds where she became lost to the real world as she focused, set shutter speeds and so forth, intent on getting the world's most beautiful photo of a whooper.

Problem with most photographers in that era before they had digital readouts and could immediately tell if they got the shot, they fired and fired and fired away, knowing if you bracket it long enough, something was going to turn out gorgeous.

As she did, I stood with my elbow resting on the warning sign, as though hiding it would make a difference.

Then I saw it! The thing I dreaded most. The refuge truck blowing dust from all wheels as it sped toward us.

Oh, Lord, let her sneak back by my side of the sign before I got it – and I knew I'd get it, the old, "Of all people . . ." chewing– out.

In honesty, I kept watching the bird and it didn't show any signs of stress. In fact, it was pecking away at the ground heading closer and closer to her.

Anyway, she didn't get back, and I got blasted.

And, yeah, she did get some of the most gorgeous pictures of a whooper in the wild – but man, did I pay for it.

Whooping crane

- Scientific name: *Grus americana*
- Description: The tallest birds in North America at 5 feet, they have a wingspan of 7.5 feet. It's mostly legs and neck because they only weigh 10 to 15 pounds. Easily seen from a distance because of their snowy–white plumage with red and black markings on their heads and jet–black wingtips.
- Voice: A whooping yelp when arguing or displaying dominance.
- Diet: Omnivorous feeders, they dine on many types of aquatic life such as crabs, crayfish, frogs, larval and nymphs, but also will eat birds, small mammals, grains and berries.
- Breeding: Extremely colorful courtship rituals consisting of leaping high

during dances, calling, flapping of wings, head bows, picking up twigs and throwing them into the air. Mate for life – unless they don't produce young and then may seek a "divorce."

- Nests: Built on small islands among the bulrushes and cattails in shallow waters. Width is about a yard.
- Eggs: Usually two eggs, but rarely do both chicks survive.
- Incubation: 30 days.
- Total population: 336, including 58 in Florida nonmigratory flock; 64 in Wisconsin to Florida migratory flock.
- Life span: Fifty years or more.
- Migration distance: From nesting in Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada to wintering at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast is 2,700 miles – twice annually.
- Flight speed: About 30 mph, but riding the thermals with a good tail wind might double that speed. Averaging 400 miles a day, they make the migration in two to three weeks counting layovers.
- Best place to spot: The Platte River between Kearney and Grand Island, Neb., during spring layover. Sources: Journey North; Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust; Inter- National Whooping Crane Recovery Team.

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