

Whooping

Texas wildlife refuge does its part to help endangered cranes who call the South home for the winter



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MIKE SLOAT PHOTO S

An adult whooping crane (above) snatches a blue crab. Adult whoopers (top, left) sport red head patches and black feather crescents. Whooping cranes fly with their long necks extended. A pig-like javelina (left) snuffles along the ground looking for greenery, rhizomes and fungi.

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Whooping crane profile

- 4 to 5 feet tall
- Red crown on adult's head
- Neck long, extended straight forward in flight
- Beak long and pointed
- Legs long and dark, extended beyond the tail in flight
- Wingspan about 7 to 7½ feet
- Shrill, bugle-like trumpeting (kerloo ker-lee-oo) if threatened
- Territorial family groups, usually of two or three (four, if twin chicks)

Recommended reads

- "Whooping Cranes: The Road to Survival," produced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is an excellent guide for distinguishing between different shore birds. The free pamphlet is available at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge or can be obtained by writing the refuge at P.O. Box 1306, Austwell, Texas 77950 or e-mailing r2rw_ar@fws.gov.
- "Birder's Guide to Rockport-Fulton," available from the Rockport-Fulton Area Chamber of Commerce. Call the Chamber at 1-800-826-6441, e-mail birders@1rockport.org, or visit www.rockport-fulton.org.
- "Aransas: A Naturalist's Guide" by Wayne H. McAllister and Martha K. McAllister. The list price for the paperback is \$19.95, but you can find a used one online for under \$5. The 392-page book provides a comprehensive guide to the mainland portion of the refuge. A companion guide by the same authors, "Matagorda Island: A Naturalist's Guide," covers the Matagorda Unit.

Wood Buffalo National Park. The crane families began their 2,600-mile migratory route to Texas in mid-October. Thus far, 32 chicks have been spotted at Aransas. The migration is a big whooping deal for the wildlife refuge and nearby towns. Port Aransas, located on the northern tip of Mustang Island, will celebrate cranes and other birds this year through its ninth annual festival Feb. 25-27. "Port A," as the locals call it, lies about 30 minutes



by car from Corpus Christi, three hours from San Antonio or the Rio Grande Valley, and about four hours from Houston or Austin. Free ferries, which operate around the clock, will transport you to and from the island. This year's Port A festival features narrated boat tours to see the cranes, as well as other birds and dolphins. The tentative schedule includes photography workshops, speakers and an international children's art exhibit. Guided tours of the ARK, or Animal Rehabilitation Keep, will put you up close to a variety of birds, sea turtles and assorted other critters being treated in hopes of returning them to the wild. For more information, e-mail info@portaransas.org or call 1-800-45-COAST.

Whether you attend the festival or not, you won't want to miss the whooping cranes if you're in the area. You'll most likely see whoopers in tidal flats and marshy areas where they'll find plenty of crabs, clams, frogs, crayfish, minnows, insects, and the like. If you're traveling by car, you may even spot a few in the grain or cotton fields near the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Don't count

on seeing them up close, though. They've got great eyesight and they don't like company.

Take a good pair of binoculars with you or, better yet, a spotting scope. If you go to the refuge, register at the Wildlife Interpretation Center and get pointers about where the best viewing spots are. You may be directed to an observation tower or even a guided tour. Your best bet, though, is to take a boat tour from either Port A or Rockport. If you don't have a spotting scope of your own, make sure the boat provides some for public use.

If whoopers and other birds don't turn you on, consider visiting the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge for other purposes. In this vast 115,000-acre complex, a portion of which is open to the public, the variety of plant and wildlife species is nothing short of amazing.

My favorite critter on the refuge was the javelina (havuh-LEE-nah), also known as a collared peccary (Javelina? No thanks, I've already got one). These little pig-like animals travel in groups and may even cross the road in front of your car. They weigh about 60 pounds and happily snuffle along the top of the

ground in search of greenery, rhizomes, fungi and other delectables. Although they resemble domestic hogs or wild boars, scientists now believe they are more closely related to the hippopotamus. The best field mark is the tail. Javelinas have one, but it's short and held close to the body. You probably won't see it. See the tail and you're seeing a wild boar or feral hog.

If you're not interested in birds, wildlife or plants, think fish. With all the bays, jetties, public piers, beaches, bulkheads and deep waters in the area, you can fish to your heart's content. What you catch, of course, will depend on the season and just a little luck.

For those who don't care about any of this, there's still plenty more to do in Port A and the Rockport-Fulton area.

Quaint little shops abound, restaurants serve up every type of food imaginable, and relaxed living is the name of the game. The Texas Treasure Casino Boat offers gambling, if that's your pleasure. Whatever your income and lifestyle, you'll find food to match your budget and accommodations that range from luxury condos to tent camping on the beach.

All in all, it's easy to see why residents of the northern states flock to the Texas gulf coast this time of year. Try it. You may even become a regular Winter Texan.

And don't forget the cranes. There's no better time than now to whoop it up.

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Fortunately, the efforts paid off, and whooping cranes are now making a comeback. The North American population of captive and wild birds has reached about 430, and some 200 now winter at the Aransas Wildlife Refuge. A record number of 41 chicks, including five pairs of twins, hatched this year in Canada's