RETURN OF THE EXILE: WHOOPING CRANE *GRUS AMERICANA*

By Bill Whan

Every spring a prodigious number of storks come to visit these plains; they are at least six feet high, and more than seven feet from tip to tip of wings. I have never seen them come to feed but that they were not surrounded by sentinels who watch around them to prevent the approach of enemies. Sometime before their departure they assemble in great flocks,and the day being fixed they all rise, turning slowly, and preserving always the same order, they describe long spirals until they are out of sight. – Hector St.-Jean de Crèvecoeur, French Consul to America (1787, *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain addressées à W. S. Ecuyer.* III:394).

The above words are included in an account of a trip down the Ohio River in April, 1787, regarding the plains along the Scioto River some miles north of its entry into the Ohio. This passage was translated into English in *Ohio in 1788: A description of the soil, productions, etc. of that portion of the United States situated between Pennsylvania, the rivers Ohio and Scioto and Lake Erie.* (Columbus, Ohio, 1888: pp. 63-4). Crèvecoeur's words are not of course those of an ornithologist, but as a European his use of the term "stork" analogizes with the overall appearance of the familiar white stork of western Europe—absent here of course, but resembling the Whooping Crane more than anything else in North America. The skittish behavior of the "storks" matches that reported by observers of flocks of whoopers in the old days.

Records of Ohio birds from centuries ago can be obscure. Avian taxonomy was then in a comparatively primitive state, and scientific ornithologists were very few, with most descriptions and reports left to others. Specimens were collected, but efforts toward their preservation were not always effective; think of how few of Audubon's thousands of skins and mounts still exist. Until the late nineteenth century there were very few institutions able to house them in a permanent way, and with time most specimens deteriorated enough that they were eventually discarded. Many of Kirtland's specimens from the mid-nineteenth century, for example (at least those that didn't go to the few American museums like the Philadelphia Academy or museums overseas – the Swedish national museum has quite a few) were destroyed by vermin in Cleveland.

These conditions don't matter as much for birds that remain relatively common today. Specimens collected in later years suffice to verify them, and they can be refound today in the wild. But species that are now extinct, or extirpated from Ohio, the inadequacies of specimen preservation in the past are critical obstacles to our knowledge of them.

Collecting bird specimens was a popular hobby in the old days among educated enthusiasts, particularly rural physicians who traveled a lot in the outdoors and had expertise in anatomy and dissection. Very few of their collections have been preserved, even in part. Even when collectors carefully protected them, their heirs usually had no great interest in ornithology. Few bothered to pass bird specimens along to museums, and most were eventually thrown away, or given to schools, where they later met the same fate. (Egg collections, popular in the late nineteenth century, were more often saved, probably because they were relatively compact and more immune to infestations; they also had market value.) To make matters worse, most specimens were not preserved as scientific study skins, but rather as mounts, which appealed to many collectors because they more closely resembled living birds and more prominently displayed their taxidermic skills.

Mounts, however, were real dust-catchers and space-eaters, more exposed to vermin, and too easily became separated from paper records that indicated data like place and date of collection. To better preserve both the specimens and precious space, during the twentieth century many museums made a practice of de-mounting ("relaxing") skins which were accompanied with data, adding them to the drawers of study skins. Mounts today may still be seen in museums, but more often in educational displays in places like nature centers; most are old ones very likely to lack any attached data at all. Many come from old Carnegie Library collections of the late nineteenth century, which usually were accompanied only by species names.

Oliver Davie of Columbus, the most prominent American taxidermist of his day, had advice for preparators which often went unheeded: "In preparing specimens for scientific purposes it is not worth while to make a collection of mounted birds, although they may be very desirable for ornamental purposes. To the student of ornithology it takes too much time which may more profitably be devoted to field work, and again, mounted birds take up too much room and are not so easily handled and examined as skins." (Davie, 1882:92).

The residual effects of all these practices has had a great effect on our records of Ohio birds extirpated, extinct, or much reduced in numbers today. Take the Common Raven, for example, which 200 years ago was said to far outnumber the crow in Ohio. Edgar Allan Poe was hardly the only custodian of a stuffed raven, but today there remains no documented raven specimen from Ohio, except for a few bones discovered in middens hundreds of years old. Documented raven specimens have been cited by recognized authorities, including recently Trautman, but they have all disappeared or been lost in museum mishaps. Peterjohn accepts the raven to the Ohio list based on no old sightings or existing speci-

mens, and does not cite the archaeological evidence, relying instead mostly on sightings accepted by the OBRC as part of apparent recent range expansions.

The Passenger Pigeon, once present in Ohio in uncounted millions, remains now in only a few specimens with data, even though there are plenty of unlabeled mounts and study skins. The Trumpeter Swan has a place on the Ohio list based only on a specimen collected over a hundred years ago, which apparently disappeared soon thereafter; one can easily imagine the fate of a stuffed version of this, North America's heaviest bird, once in the hands of the collector's heirs. The Ohio State Museum has seven Carolina Parakeet skins, none with Ohio data; Trautman includes it in his Ohio list based only on archaeological material. Only a single specimen of the Eskimo Curlew from Ohio remains. Peterjohn (2001:) seems unaware of it, citing only another specimen no longer extant in support of his decision to include it in the Ohio list, nor does he offer specimen evidence for the Carolina Parakeet in the wild in Ohio. What written Ohio documentation for any of these species, except for recent reports of ravens, exists that would satisfy today's records committee if it will not accept the Whooping Crane?

Ironically, Trautman in his 1968 checklist, based solely upon "species represented by at least one preserved specimen in some accredited museum," accepts the Common Raven (1962:316) based upon an old Paulding County specimen at the time preserved in the Fort Wayne and Allen County Historical Museum in Indiana. That specimen was later destroyed in a fire. Another specimen, cited by Wheaton (1882) and earlier by Langdon (1880) has not been located in the modern era. Presumably Trautman would have removed the raven from his Ohio checklist upon receipt of this news of its destruction, but apparently he did not hear of the loss of the specimen.

What about another interesting species from our past, the oft-reported Whooping Crane? The only remarks Peterjohn has published about it appear in 1987, when he and the Ohio records committee dismiss it from the list thus: "Although several historical accounts have attributed this species to Ohio, there are no confirmed specimens or sightings from the state. While Whooping Crane formerly had a larger range and conceivably could have occurred in Ohio, there is insufficient evidence to include it in the state list." (Peterjohn et al. 1987:30).

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Up until the 1960s the Whooping Crane was universally recognized by acknowledged authorities as among Ohio's birds. Trautman & Trautman's 1968 list seems to have been the first to deny it a place, based presumably on the lack of a known specimen or parts thereof deposited in an accredited institution. This despite M. B. Trautman's stated conviction in at least four publications that whoopers must have occurred regularly in Ohio in the past. It was omitted from the first published Ohio records committee checklist (Peterjohn et al. 1987) and subsequent ones, presumably on the same grounds, as well as on the lack of acceptable written documentation of an occurrence.

Nineteenth-century bird records are especially unlikely to be documented by photographs or extensive field descriptions, but rather by specimens. Then, and even today, specimens are very seldom accompanied by detailed descriptions of the bird's appearance in the field, and cameras and field optics were in a comparatively primitive state. Specimens (accompanied by standard tag data) are often the only – or at least the best available – evidence we possess as to the local occurrence of species extirpated long ago. In such cases even the testimony of reputable informants, published in reputable venues, takes second place, especially since it almost never includes careful descriptions, or even photographs of the mounted specimens. Understandably, collectors believed their specimens would speak for themselves, and except in the case of holotypes, regarded detailed descriptions as unnecessary. For example, Ohio's first record of Swainson's Warbler, and the first of only two documented by specimens, in 1947 contained only this unsatisfactory field description: "…scarcely 20 feet away, where the distinctive characters of Swainson's Warbler were plainly visible." (Green 1947). Why, one might ask, laboriously describe what anyone can easily verify in collections? Well, what if the specimens later disappear?

One may well be skeptical, especially in cases of first state records, of field identifications made by anyone. Still, what are we to make of records, such as those of the Whooping Crane or Trumpeter Swan or Common Raven or Carolina Parakeet, for which specimens – attested to by reputable persons in reputable publications to have been collected and retained – cannot be found 125 years later? It was the same authority, W. F. Henninger (1902), who reported in the *Wilson Bulletin* Ohio specimens of both the swan and the crane, including Ohio's only one of the former and one of several for the latter. Surely this sort of evidence, even though these specimens cannot be found, is superior to never having had a specimen at all, especially for a bird like the crane, with such obvious and unique characteristics in the hand. Mengel, in his well-regarded monograph on the birds of Kentucky, stated on its first page that he regarded a record as reliably recorded "when a specimen from the state has at some time been examined in the hand of someone capable, in my opinion, of

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accurately identifying it" (Mengel 1965:1).

An adult Whooping Crane in flight might be mistaken for a White Pelican, a Snow Goose, or a Sandhill Crane by an inexperienced observer or under difficult viewing circumstances; after all, cranes regularly migrate at altitudes from 1000 to 6000 feet, and often at night. But it seems highly unlikely that any of the reputable authors and observers reported as collectors, or others who later examined them, could have misidentified a Whooping Crane in the hand. Further, it seems incredible that published misdentifications could have been occurred again and again in the case of a species of such unique appearance. I will argue that this species should finally, after all these years, be admitted to Ohio's official list.

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Kirtland, Wheaton, Jones, and Dawson, Ohio's pre-eminent nineteenth-century ornithologists, regarded the Sandhill Crane and the Whooping Crane alike as rare migrants, with roughly similar numbers of records and specimens. Others, reporting from earlier eras, may have regarded the whooper as more abundant. After 1850, whoopers' numbers seemingly dropped far more rapidly than those of sandhills, and eventually their close brush with extinction (by the 1930s, estimates of their numbers were as low as 14) endowed them with an aura of great rarity thereafter. But respected observers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – Lawson, Catesby, Bartram, Wilson, Audubon, Nuttall – had not treated it as a rare bird. The narratives of Wilson, Audubon, and Nuttall describe, later than the first three observers, large flocks and an extensive range. Confusion with the sandhill crane (both Audubon and Wilson, but not Nuttall, had considered it probably the young of the Whooping Crane) may have made whoopers seem more abundant than they actually were, however. Crane expert Paul Johnsgard (1991:65) states, "Probably never very common, the Whooping Crane population numbered perhaps less than 2,000 at the time of European settlement, but its breeding range probably extended broadly across the grasslands and marshes of interior North America", but the old accounts, seem to suggest much larger numbers in the old days. Johnsgard told the author he derived this estimate of 2,000 from R. P. Allen's *The Whooping Crane* (1952). Such a population would have probably made it North America's rarest regularly breeding bird before Europeans arrived. He does not assert this in his major monograph *Cranes of the World* (1983). At any rate, only beginning in the 1860s and '70s – among authorities like Coues, Baird, Ridgway, and Brewster, et al., and long after general confusion of the crane species had ended – was the word "rare" usually applied to it, and attention drawn to its rapidly decreasing numbers and range.

Johnsgard more confidently describes this period - that in which nearly all known Ohio reports occur – in this way: "The last three decades of the nineteenth century were especially disastrous, for during this period not only were they killed by market hunters, but also collectors and taxidermists became aware of the great value of Whooping Crane eggs and skins to museums and other collectors. It has been estimated that as much as 90 percent of the entire population was destroyed during this relatively brief period…nesting in Illinois was eliminated by 1880, and during the next ten years the birds were lost as breeders in Minnesota and North Dakota. During the 1890s the birds were also eliminated from Iowa, which represented the last known breeding record for the United States." (1991:66). During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Whooping Cranes were routinely regarded in Ohio and elsewhere as rare and rapidly growing rarer, with records probably more carefully kept of occurrences during a period in which scientific ornithology had begun to play a larger role. As was the custom of the age, even though mere reports of sightings were sometimes published, most of these records were verified by specimens alone.

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Whooping Crane study skins are large, ungainly objects. In my small experience at least, no other North American species is dimensionally taller or more difficult to store in conventional museum drawers in a satisfactory way. Several hundred sparrow skins take up less room than a single crane skin, and collection objectives have always been far more easily met by accumulating more sparrows than more cranes. Mounts, far more popular 125 years ago than today, are considerably more representative than the clumsy-looking and usually much-folded study skins, but they are more difficult to care for, being even bulkier and far more fragile. These characteristics made them more likely to be among the specimens first discarded through the generations as too bulky, or damaged, or less presentable than most others, even as accumulations of other specimens made space evermore precious. As for crane mounts in private collections, where scientific concerns did not always come first, a collector's heirs might be far more likely to keep a bell-jar with mounts of brightly-colored warblers and finches than a dusty, ungainly ~1.5-meter-tall crane still teetering on the large base necessary to keep it upright.

An alarming proportion of rare nineteenth-century specimens mentioned in the literature cannot be located today. Additionally, any museum curator will attest that, among mounts of such rarities, those

accompanied by tags with standard data are distinctly in the minority. Collections of mounts have diminished with the years, as museum displays have evolved from eye-candy to curated scientific specimens. In view of this, there is little wonder that so many mounted crane specimens, even those whose existence had been published, have become nonetheless difficult or impossible to locate a century and a quarter later. Whooping Crane specimens cited in the literature cannot be relocated, but not because they never existed. Additionally, it seems likely that some of the specimens are still in museum collections, but have been mistakenly stripped of their data.

The 1987 Ohio records committee authors explain that, since conservation ethics have slowed the accumulation of specimens, the Committee would also accept records verified through "new rigorous procedures involving photographs and/or sight records." What fell through the cracks were records involving seemingly perfectly valid specimens that can no longer be located, even if identified by acknowledged authorities and published in reputable venues. Because at one time it was anticipated that mounted specimens would be maintained, accompanied with documentary data, in perpetuity no one thought to document them otherwise beyond announcing their acquisition.

Estimates of the former range and numbers of Whooping Cranes come from the distant past, when bird taxonomy was in an earlier stage, and revered early authorities regarded sandhills as the young of whoopers. This has cast some uncertainty over various early reports, but less so since the mid-nineteenth century. Even in the relatively recent past (Allen 1952), they were discovered still to nest in Louisiana, greatly expanding their imaginable range. Whoopers were widely described as undertaking regular long migrations, with the main flyway along the Mississippi River, fanning out to include coastal states from Delaware to Texas until the decisive depredations of the later nineteenth century. A lesser flyway is said to have originated near Hudson Bay, in part accounting for many records east of the plains. Wilson and Audubon independently mention indubitable migrants in 1810 near Louisville, a hundred miles from Cincinnati, and no Ohio ornithologist until recently appears to have failed to mention, as a matter of experience and common sense, that these birds probably passed through the state during migrations, at least occasionally.

Based on this and other documentation, the Ohio Bird Records Committee has determined that the Whooping Crane deserved inclusion on the official Ohio list.

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[This is an abbreviated version of the documentation which Bill presented to the OBRC in 2009 which resulted in the Whooping Crane's being added to the Ohio Checklist the next spring. He will provide on request the exhaustive annotated bibliography of publications on the occurrences of this species in Ohio which accompanied the submission – Ed.]

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