Aerial Search for Whooping Cranes along the Northeastern Mexican Coast

*David R. Blankenship**

On December 27, 28, and 30, 1972, an aerial search for missing Whooping Cranes was conducted along the northeastern Mexican coast from the Rio Grande southward approximately 160 miles to just beyond the Rio Soto la Marina.

Regular Whooping Crane census flights by Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife personnel had indicated 46 adult and 5 immature cranes wintering on the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and nearby St. Joseph and Matagorda Islands and Lamar Peninsula by mid-December, 1972. Since 59 Whooping Cranes are believed to have begun the return trip to Canada last spring, 13 adult or "white" birds were unaccounted for. An annual loss of 3 to 5 birds is not unusual but the 51 total left eight to ten birds unexpectedly and disturbingly missing.

Unconfirmed reports of Whooping Crane sightings south of their usual wintering area, and the fact that several whoopers have disappeared from the Aransas Refuge area for varying periods during recent winters, spurred hopes that the missing birds might have set up winter quarters farther south. Bureau personnel made thorough but unsuccessful aerial searches of coastal areas from Port Lavaca to the mouth of the Rio Grande near Brownsville.

It was decided that I should extend the search southward along the Mexican coast and a total of 13¾ hours of flying time were expended on December 27, 28, and 30. Approximately 12 hours were spent in actual low altitude coverage. Observations were made from altitudes of 250 to 350 feet and at speeds of 95 to 120 mph depending on the complexity of the ground being covered. Observers in addition to the pilot, Robert Roberts of Brownsville, were Glen Adams of Weslaco on December 27 and 28, and Wayne Schifflett of the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge on December 30. Area covered was from the Rio Grande southward along the coast for approximately 160 miles or just beyond the mouth of the Rio Soto la Marina.

Beginning just south of the Rio Grande and extending southward for approximately 35 miles is an area from ten to twenty miles wide which seems to be the most promising as Whooping Crane habitat. This area is a dense network of bays, sloughs, and lakes ranging in salinity from sea water to strictly fresh ponds farther inland. This area was covered very carefully at lower speeds, with east and west traverses at approximate ¾ mile intervals.

Extending to the south is the Laguna Madre of Mexico which reaches to the Rio Soto la Marina. The northern ten miles or so of this bay are filled with numerous small islands, some of which appeared to hold some possibilities as whooper habitat. Separating the Laguna Madre from the open Gulf is a series of long slender peninsulas and barrier islands. The bay side of these are indented and laced with numerous inlets and lagoons which appear to be suitable for whoopers' use. Many of the islands in the Laguna and the inland shore of the bay are characterized by steep clay cliffs several feet in height which drop to a narrow muddy beach. Most of these areas seem to hold little resemblance to known areas of Whooping Crane use

Approximately 75 miles south of the border are two large fresh water lakes just inland from the Laguna. The north lake and the north and west shores of the south lake have good marshy areas.

At the Rio Soto la Marina red mangrove begins to cover islands and below this area there are few bays, lagoons, and marshes until the Tampico area is reached some 100 miles to the south.

In all areas, large numbers of White Pelicans complicated observations. At some distance White Pelicans in flight are difficult to distinguish from Whooping Cranes particularly when rough air conditions preclude the use of binoculars.

As intriguing report was given by Mr. Kagy, owner of the flying service we were operating out of in Brownsville. He stated that on December 21, 1972, while flying at low altitude owing to high winds he saw a Whooping Crane standing on the Gulf beach approximately 80 miles south of Brownsville. He also stated that some twelve years ago he saw a Whooping Crane which had been shot in this same general area

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and which was eaten by the Mexican fisherman who had killed it. Mr. Kagy stated that he was familiar with the White Pelican and Wood Ibis and that the birds he saw from the air and close at hand were both large white cranes.

The following count was made of conspicuous species during the search. Counts of waterfowl and the very numerous herons and egrets were found to be impractical while watching for Whooping Cranes among the many White Pelicans. Large rafts of Redhead ducks were observed in the northern Laguna Madre of Mexico and in the lagoons and inlets on the inner side of the barrier islands almost all the way to the Rio Soto la Marina. There appeared to be a good bottom cover of submerged aquatics in these areas. Widgeons and Gadwalls were the other waterfowl species most commonly observed. Few Pintails were seen. No Whooping Cranes were sighted, so the winter 1972-73 count must remain at 51.

Brown Pelican	1
White Pelican	3,450
Roseate Spoonbill	250
White Ibis	35
"dark" Ibis	62
Snow Goose	2,610
Canada Goose	837
White-fronted Goose	90
Sandhill Crane	100

Observation of a White-Faced Storm Petrel off Delaware

On August 26, 1972, thirteen birders observed a White-faced Storm Petrel *(Pelagodroma marina)* between 11:30 a.m. and noon in the Atlantic Ocean, 22 miles east of Rehoboth Beach, Del. (38°45'N, 74°40'W). Observing distances ranged from 25 to 250 feet, generally 30 to 60 feet. H. Morrin photographed it with a 200 mm. lens and 2X extender. Weather and viewing conditions were ideal, and seas were calm with one-foot swells. No unusual weather disturbances preceded the sightings.

This petrel was slightly larger than nearby Wilson's Petrels and was generally gray above and an off-white below. It had a white nape, light gray-brown crown, white forehead, black bill, and whitish face with a dark gray-black eyeline behind the eye. Body from chin to undertail coverts was an off-white. It had long, black legs with black toes and yellow webs.

Upper wing surfaces had dark gray-black primaries and light gray wing coverts with an even lighter gray "bar" along the base of the secondaries. Underwing surfaces had dark gray-black flight feathers, wing tips, and leading edges of the wing coverts — in essence, a wide, dark border around a white center in the inner wing. Back was gray tinged with brown and shading into a gray-white rump that contrasted sharply with a dull black tail. The tail was rather broad and square-cut.

Flight was low, one to two feet above the water, and the bird mostly glided on stiff wings held rigidly out in albatross fashion. Wings appeared long in proportion to its body length. Occasionally it its gliding, it would sway from side to side in pendulum fashion, but more frequently it would go into a kangaroo-like bouncing

flight with its long legs and feet hitting large wave crests and seeming to push the bird off in a leap. Only then were the yellow webs visible. This gliding and hopping flight style was also rather suggestive of a flying fish. As we followed nearly parallel with it for the half hour, the bird apparently attempted to remain at least at midships to us, if not slightly ahead, occasionally flapping its wings to do so. We clocked its flight speed at 8 to 15 knots. Intermittently, it picked off some food from a wave crest. It investigated and picked at some suet scraps we threw out.

The flight, extensive white below, and dark mark through the eye, distinguish this petrel from all other small petrels (see W. B. Alexander, *Birds of the Ocean,* 1954, and G. E. Watson, *Seabirds of the Tropical Atlantic Ocean,* 1966).

Previous northern Atlantic Ocean records were thoroughly surveyed by Buckley and Wurster (*Bull. Brit. Ornithol. Club* 90:35, April, 1970). They document 14 sightings between 1890 and 1967, almost all far out at sea. Their closest sightings to North America were one October record 30 miles north of Cape Cod, Mass., and three August and September records 125 to 150 miles easy of New Jersey. Since then, R. L. Ake and D. L. Johnson sighted two birds at Oregon Inlet, N.C., Oct. 2, 1971, just after a hurricane (*Am. Birds* 26:45, 1972).

Other observers of this Delaware sighting were H. T. and M. E. Armistead, A. E. and C. A. Conway, D. and A. Hallenbeck, A. Mack, H. Morrin, P. Sipple, P. E. Strickland, and R. L. West. — Maurice V. Barnhill III 22 Fairway Rd., Apt. 1B Newark, Del. 19711 and Paul G. DuMont 4114 Fessenden St., NW Washington, D. C. 20016.