



Wood Buffalo National Park Community Information Update

September 2021 Whooping Crane Conservation UPDATE

This summer has been another exciting and engaging one for Wood Buffalo National Park and all partners involved in whooping crane research and monitoring. Even with COVID-19 realities and mitigations across boundaries, conservation collaboration continues unimpeded. Innovation and adaptation have been the story of successful efforts to date.

What the crane spring monitoring looked like

Each year, Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) and Parks Canada staff conduct aerial surveys over the extensive wetlands that the cranes nest in and call home for the summer. These surveys occur at the end of May for the purpose of locating nests and then again in late July to count the number of chicks fledged. COVID 19 prevented surveys from taking place at all in 2020 and in 2021 CWS was still unable to join Parks staff on the survey, but Park staff conducted surveys in both May and August and the results are positive.

Enter citizen science

As Whooping Crane nesting areas expand to regions outside of Wood Buffalo National Park and begin to cover a wider area, new techniques in monitoring are needed. This past summer, CWS, the Calgary Zoo and Parks Canada launched a new crowdsourcing project to test the viability of using satellite photos to find Whooping Crane nesting sites. This was trialed in 2020 and launched on a wider scale pilot in 2021. Working through Zooniverse (the world's largest citizen science platform!) we launched a virtual volunteering project with people from around the world helping detect several new nesting locations that were not previously known to biologists.

By the numbers:

- 2095 citizen scientists
- 59,038 images
- 102 nests identified, including 4 new nests

Crane chick survey flights

Parks Canada was back in the air again this August, searching for chicks and cranes amongst the extensive wetlands of the park. During this time, staff return to observe the nesting sites again and to count the number of chicks that can be seen. During helicopter surveys, at least 50 chicks were seen from the air. But the process of counting chicks amongst the thick wetlands of Wood Buffalo is far from perfect, and actual survival rate may be higher. At this time of year, the chicks are nearing the strength and ability to fly on their own. By the end of August or early September, they will be ready to begin the long flight down to Aransas!

The results:

This Whooping Crane population, the only self-sustaining one in North America, has seen a steady increase in recent years and now has as many as 500 individuals flying from Wood Buffalo to Aransas, Texas every year. 2021 was a terrific summer and marks the first time since conservation actions to conserve Whooping Cranes began that over 100 nests in total were counted, with at least 50% of the crane nests yielding surviving Whooping Crane chicks seen during survey flights. Parks Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service are excited to continue seeing the species recover in the months and years ahead.



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We still need help!

Work on the crowdsourcing of thousands of satellite photos is still underway and help is still needed to continue sifting through these images on Zooniverse. Virtual volunteers can still sign up to take part, so be sure to visit and signup: <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/whcr-cr/whooping-cranes>

Want to learn more about Whooping Cranes? Visit the Wood Buffalo National Park website!
https://www.parksCanada.gc.ca/en/pn-np/nt/woodbuffalo/decouvrir-discover/science_nature/Cranes_Grue