

Whooping Crane sightings in the Prairie Provinces, 1979-85

by Brian W. Johns¹

Abstract

Observations of migrating Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*) in Prairie Canada are documented for 1979-85. There were 107 confirmed sightings of Whooping Cranes, of which 73% were made in the fall. In spring, crane sightings occurred between mid-April and mid-May. Fall migration extended from late August to mid-November.

Introduction

Each spring and fall the entire Wood Buffalo National Park - Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Texas, population of endangered Whooping Cranes migrates across the Canadian Prairies between the wintering grounds in Texas and the nesting grounds in the Northwest Territories. Whooping Cranes have been recorded in Prairie Canada since at least 1748 (Allen 1952:55). Until Kuyt (1982) reported a pair breeding in Alberta, the last known nesting in the Prairies was in 1922 (Allen 1952). With the exception of the Alberta pair and two summering singles, all sightings of Whooping Cranes on the Prairies are of migrants. In this report I update observations of migratory Whooping Cranes in Prairie Canada.

Methods

Between 1945 and 1976, the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History was the repository for sighting reports of migrating Whooping Cranes. Since 1977 this task has been assumed by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) (Stephen 1979). The CWS currently operates a Whooping Crane Hot Line (306-975-5595) to receive reports of the migrating cranes (Johns 1986a). Volunteers usually report their observations directly to the CWS or to local offices of provincial wildlife agencies, museums and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which forward them to the CWS.

As sightings are received they are classified (USFWS 1986) as confirmed, probable or unconfirmed.

Confirmed sightings are observations made by provincial or federal biologists or conservation officers or by other known qualified observers (such as trained ornithologists or birders with experience in identification of Whooping Cranes).

Probable sightings lack such confirmation; however, details seem to identify the birds as Whooping Cranes — the location of sighting is within the normal migration corridor and the site is appropriate for Whooping Cranes, the date of sighting is within the period of migration, there is an accurate physical description, the number of birds is reasonable, the behaviour of the birds is consistent with

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that of Whooping Cranes and there is a high probability that the observer will provide a reliable report.

Unconfirmed sightings are those for which details meet some, but not all, of the factors listed for a probable sighting.

Attempts to confirm sightings are made either by CWS or by soliciting help from local conservation officers. All records are stored in a computer database at the Prairie Migratory Bird Research Centre in Saskatoon.

Results and discussion

Since the last published list of Whooping Crane sightings in the Prairie Provinces (Stephen 1979) there have been 107 confirmed sightings (Manitoba 1, Saskatchewan 105 and Alberta 1) (Table 1), 130 probable sightings and 107 unconfirmed reports. Of the confirmed sightings, 25 occurred in the spring (Fig. 1), 2 were of summering birds and the remaining 80 were fall migrants (Fig. 2).

During 1979-85, the earliest spring migratory sighting in any year occurred 14 April 1981 and the latest, 20 May 1983 (Fig. 3). The spring migration period was thus 37 days. Seventy-six percent of the cranes were seen in April.

The fall migration period extended over 85 days (Fig. 4). The earliest fall sighting in any year was 27 August 1981 and the latest, 19 November 1983. The majority of the cranes (97%) were sighted during the 48 days from 10 September to 27 October. Family groups were observed between 18 September and 27 October. Three birds seen 6-19 November 1983 may also have been a family group.

Figure 1
Locations of confirmed Whooping Crane sightings, spring 1979-85

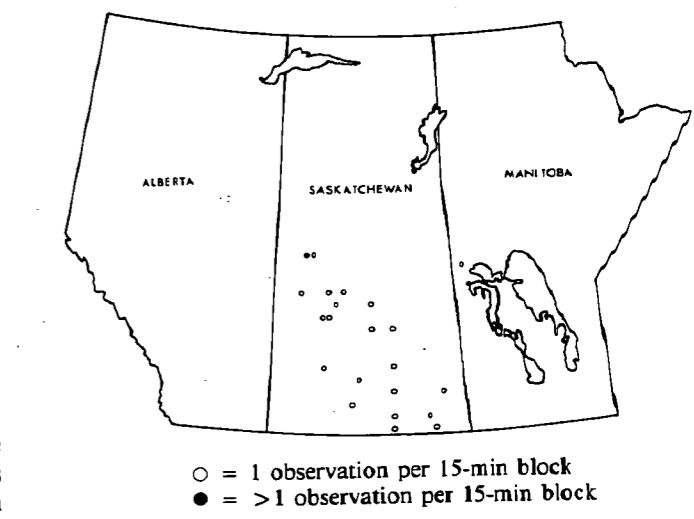


Figure 2
Locations of confirmed Whooping Crane sightings, fall 1979-85

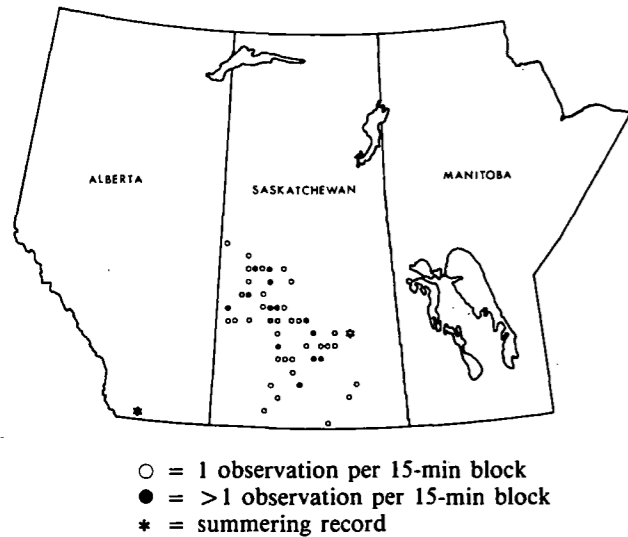


Figure 3
Numbers of Whooping Cranes seen on each day during spring migration through the Prairies, 1979-85

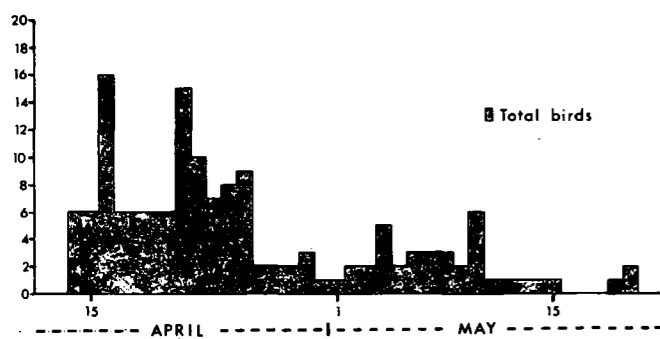
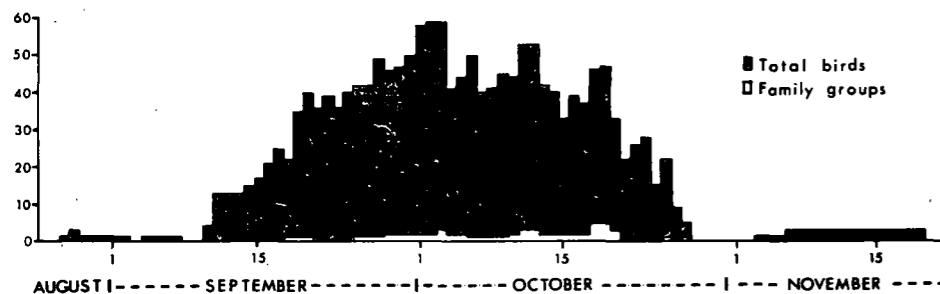


Figure 4
Numbers of Whooping Cranes seen on each day during fall migration through the Prairies, 1979-85



In the past, Whooping Crane sightings were gathered primarily as part of a monitoring program. Recently this has been expanded to include identification and evaluation of specific roost sites and feeding areas (Johns 1986b). With increased information on the habitat requirements of the cranes, it should be possible to protect and enhance the habitat they use during migration. This would benefit the Whooping Crane and, incidentally, other species associated with wetlands.

Acknowledgements

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References

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Table 1
Confirmed Whooping Crane sightings in the Prairie Provinces, 1979-85

Province and date	Location	Legal land description	Lat.-long.	No. of birds	Record no.	Comments
Manitoba 15 05 79	10 km W of The Pas	SE04-56-27-W1	5345-10115	1	790503	—
Saskatchewan 08 05 79	near Makwa	NW20-58-20-W3	5400-10805	1	790501	—
10 05 79	near North Portal	NE06-02-04-W2	4900-10230	5	790502	—
19 05 79	near Raymore	24-28-19-W2	5115-10430	1	790504	—
24 09 79-12 10 79	Buffer Lake	SW27-39-28-W2	5215-10545	2	790905	—
24 09 79-03 10 79	Meota	NW04-48-17-W3	5300-10815	5	790904	L-red/white/red, R-white*
01-03 10 79	6.5 km E, 13 km N of Viscount	NW31-35-25-W2	5200-10530	9	790906	—
03 10 79	N of Unity	SW36-40-23-W3	5215-10900	3	791001	L-red, R-blue/white/blue; one young confirmed
12-26 10 79	near Osler	01-40-05-W3 02-40-05-W3	5215-10630	3	791002	—
19-26 10 79	6 km SW of Belbutte	SW29-50-13-W3 NW20-50-13-W3 SW29-50-13-W3	5300-10745	3	791003	L-red/white, R-blue/white/blue; one young confirmed
23-25 10 79	6 km S of Borden	NE10-39-09-W3 NW09-39-09-W3 NE08-39-09-W3	5215-10700	2	791004	On North Saskatchewan River
27 10 79	near Meadow Lake	SW32-60-18-W3	5400-10830	5	791005	L-blue/white/blue, R-red; one young confirmed
21 04 80	14.4 km W, 3 km S of Fulda	05-39-24-W2	5215-10515	5	800401	—
22 04 80	5 km SW of Dorintosh	32-61-18-W3	5415-10830	2	800402	—
23 04 80	24 km W of Shellbrook	SE24-50-06-W3	5315-10630	2	800403	—
10-16 09 80	near Spiritwood	NE29-52-12-W3	5330-10745	2	800908	—
11 09 80-25 10 80	Buffer Lake	-39-01-W3	5215-10600	2-8	800901	L-red, R-white; L-white, R-red; 2 birds 11 09 80; 6 birds 26 09 80-09 10 80; 8 birds 16-19 10 80; 4 birds 20 10 80; 2 birds 25 10 80
18 09 80	Midnight Lake	-52-16-W3	5330-10815	3	800903	L-red, R-red; one young confirmed
20-23 09 80	Debden	-52-06-W3	5330-10645	2	800905	L-green, R-yellow; L-red, R-green
21-30 09 80	near Richard	-43-13-W3	5230-10745	3	800906	L-red, R-none; L-none, R-red; eventually 8 birds; 800706**
02 10 80	Francis	-14-14-W2	5000-10345	3	801002	L-red/white, R-blue/white/blue; L-blue/white/blue, R-red/white
11-19 10 80	Radisson Lake	-41-10-W3 -43-09-W3	5230-10715	6	801005	L-none, R-red; L-red, R-red/green; one young confirmed
18 10 80	SE of Asquith	-36-08-W3	5200-10700	4	801011	—
14-21 04 81	near Maymont	NW10-45-11-W3	5230-10730	6	81005	—
16 04 81	Ibsen Lake	04-10-17-W2	4945-10415	7	81003	L-red, R-white



Table 1 (cont'd)
Confirmed Whooping Crane sightings in the Prairie
Provinces, 1979-85

Province and date	Location	Legal land description	Lat.-long.	No. of birds	Record no.	Comments
21 04 81	10 km S, 6.5 km W of Dinsmore	SW25-26-12-W3	5100-10730	4	81006	—
06-07 05 81	10 km W, 3 km S of Meadow Lake	S13-59-18-W3	5400-10830	1	81012	—
30 05 81-31 08 81	SE end Little Quill Lake	-33-14-W2	5145-10345	1	81014	Summering
27 08 81-02 09 81	Witchekan Lake	NW22-51-11-W3	5315-10730	1	81020	—
11-21 09 81	Big Sucker Lake	-51-03-W3	5315-10615	2	81027	L-none, R-short red; L-red, R-short red
15 09 81-19 10 81	Seagram Lake	SW12-42-24-W3	5230-10915	2-8	81024	L-none, R-white; 2 birds 15 09 81; 8 birds 16-19 10 81
19 09 81-17 10 81	Kepple Lake	NW06-40-17-W3	5215-10815	4	81040	L-red, R-red; L-red, R-none; L-white, R-red; L-red, R-white
20 09 81	3 km E of Buffer Lake	-39-28-W2	5215-10545	2	81028	—
24 09 81-07 10 81	Witchekan Lake	NE08-51-11-W3	5330-10730	1	81030	1 bird 24 09 81; 2 birds 25 09 81; 1 bird 26 09 81-07 10 81; L-red, R-red; L-green, R-red
25 09 81-12 10 81	Midnight Lake	-52-16-W3	5330-10815	3	81032	L-green, R-red/white; one young confirmed; hit power line
26 09 81	near Birsay	-25-07-W3	5000-10700	1	81031	—
29 09 81	6 km N, 1 km E of Outlook	NW24-30-08-W3	5130-10700	1	81033	—
30 09 81-01 10 81	16 km N of Ogema	-09-22-W2	4930-10445	4	81036	L-blue/white/blue, R-none; L-none, R-red/white; L-red, R-red
10-11 10 81	Seagram Lake	NE36-41-24-W3	5230-10915	2	81042	L-red/white, R-blue/white/blue
10-11 10 81	Reward	W09-42-24-W3	5215-10915	3	81043	L-red/white, R-white; one young confirmed
11-20 10 81	Luseland	-36-24-W3	5200-10915	3	81043	Same group as above
20 10 81	1.5 km S, 0.5 km E of Cabri	SW16-19-18-W3	5030-10715	3	81043	81050; same group as above
20 10 81	Neville	-11-12-W3	4945-10730	3	81043	Same group as above
18-19 10 81	Witchekan Lake	SW07-51-10-W3	5315-10715	3	81049	One young confirmed
22-23 04 82	11 km NE of Spiritwood	SW03-52-10-W3	5315-10715	2	82004	—
22 04 82	12 km NW of Meadow Lake	10-52-10-W3	5400-10830	3	82003	—
10-23 09 82	Pelican Lake	03-61-18-W3	5400-10830	2	82012	L-blue, R-red; 82044, 82056
11-25 09 82	5.5 km S, 1.6 km E of Redfield	NW09-19-01-W3	5030-10600	5	82014	L-red/white, R-brown; L-none, R-white; L-red, R-red; L-none, R-red
14-17 09 82	Midnight Lake	SE04-19-01-W3	5245-10730	2	82015	82018
16 09 82	9 km ENE of Edam	NE30-45-12-W3	5245-10730	4	82016	—
17 09 82-11 10 82	Devil's Lake	08-52-16-W3	5330-10815	6	82068	L-red, R-red; L-red, R-red/white
17 09 82	3 km NW of Radisson	NW22-51-16-W3	5330-10815	4	82045	—
19-22 09 82	Seagram Lake	-41-10-W3	5215-10715	3	82020	82062; L-red/white, R-none; L-blue/white, R-red/white; L-blue/white/blue, R-red/white

Table 1 (cont'd)
Confirmed Whooping Crane sightings in the Prairie
Provinces, 1979-85

Province and date	Location	Legal land description	Lat.-long.	No. of birds	Record no.	Comments
19 09 82	Buffer Lake	-39-28-W2	5215-10545	6	82054	L-red, R-short red; L-red, R-white; L-none, R-red/white/red; 82021
22 09 82	18 km NE of Viscount	26-35-26-W2	5200-10530	2	82022	—
27 09 82	13 km W of Tugaske	NE18-22-03-W3	5045-10615	2	82026	—
27 09 82	13 km NE of Glaslyn	15-51-16-W3	5330-10815	3	82025	—
30 09 82	Last Mountain Lake	-27-24-W2	5115-10515	4	82027	At Sailor's Bay
02 10 82	10 km N of Macrorie	-28-08-W3	5115-10700	2	82028	On South Saskatchewan River
05 10 82	16 km SW of Edam	NW10-48-20-W3	5300-10845	2	82030	—
11-15 10 82	Stony Lake	08-52-17-W3	5330-10830	3-6	82032	3 birds 11 10 82; 6 birds 12-14 10 82; 3 birds 15 10 82; one young confirmed; 82033, 82060, 82034
21 10 82	1.5 km NW of Spiritwood	SW03-51-11-W3	5315-10730	3	82037	—
22 04 83	16 km N of Palmer	NW24-12-03-W3	5000-10615	4	83004	—
02-14 05 83	8 km S of Edam	SE07-48-19-W3	5315-10845	1	83006	Dead on 14 05 83
20 05 83	Regina	-17-19-W2	5015-10430	2	83072	—
28 08 83	Witchekan Lake	SE04-51-11-W3	5315-10730	2	83012	—
19 09 83	8 km N, 17 km E of Strongfield	NW26-27-03-W3	5115-10615	3	83016	83014, 83019; one young confirmed
20 09 83	N end Last Mountain Lake	-23-28-W2	5115-10500	1	83018	—
20 09 83	13 km N, 3 km E of Borden	-41-09-W3	5230-10700	2	83020	—
20 09 83	Pelican Lake	-19-01-W3	5030-10600	3	83019	83014, 83016; one young confirmed
20 09 83-12 10 83	NE end Buffer Lake	E13-39-28-W2	5215-10545	4-6	83022	4 birds 17-22 09 83; 6 birds 05-12 10 83; 83017, 83021, 83034, 83038, 83046
27 09 83	3 km N of Gardiner Dam	-27-07-W3	5115-10645	3	83026	On South Saskatchewan River
28-29 09 83	near Richard	SW02-43-12-W3	5230-10730	2	83028	L-red/white/red, R-blue/white
03 10 83	near Pierceland	NE14-63-25-W3	5425-10930	6	83031	—
01-23 10 83	Blaine Lake	-44-08-W3	5245-10700	2-6	83030	L-blue/white/blue, R-red/green; L-red, R-green; L-red, R-none; 4 birds 01 10 83; 2 birds 05 10 83; 4 birds 08 10 83; 6 birds 22-23 10 83; 83033, 83040, 83052, 83056
06 10 83	Midnight Lake	20-52-16-W3	5330-10815	3	83069	—
05-25 10 83	near Govan	NW02-28-22-W2	5115-10500	2	83032	L-red, R-blue/white/blue; 83042, 83043, 83044, 83045; 83058, 83077
06-21 10 83	near Nokomis	SE25-28-22-W2	5115-10500	2	83036	L-green, R-red; L-green, R-yellow, 83037, 83051, 83047;
19 10 83	2 km S, 5 km E of Barnes Lake	SE09-28-22-W2	5115-10515	2	83049	—

Table 1 (cont'd)
Confirmed Whooping Crane sightings in the Prairie
Provinces, 1979-85

Province and date	Location	Legal land description	Lat.-long.	No. of birds	Record no.	Comments
19-20 10 83	Sylvander Lake	SE11-53-12-W3	5315-10730	3	83048	One young confirmed
22-23 10 83	10 km W of Blaine Lake	-45-08-W3	5245-10700	7	83055	83054
03-05 11 83	5 km N, 10 km W of Govan	-28-23-W2	5115-10500	1	83059	L-none, R-yellow; 83060, 83061, 83062
06-19 11 83	Stalwart National Wildlife Area	SW11-26-25-W2 -25-24-W2	5115-10515 5100-10515	3	83064	83065, 83072
16 04 84	near Eyebrow Lake	-23-02-W3	5045-10600	3	84039	—
27 04 84-09 05 84	Blaine Lake	11-44-08-W3	5245-10700	1	84003	—
04-07 09 84	1.6 km E of Kandahar	27-32-17-W2	5145-10415	1	84007	Big Quill Lake
22-24 09 84	Witchekan Lake	NE03-52-11-W3	5330-10730	3	84014	84017
23-29 09 84	E end Buffer Lake	-39-28-W3	5215-10545	2	84016	—
25 09 84-16 10 84	6.5 km S, 4 km W of Leask	SW16-46-06-W3	5245-10645	2	84018	L-blue/white/blue? R-red
01-02 10 84	near Pelican Lake	SW04-19-01-W3 03-19-01-W3 05-19-01-W3	5030-10600	2	84019	L-orange, R-blue
04-09 10 84	Axe Lake	-29-23-W2	5130-10500	2	84020	L-none, R-red; 84023
21 09 84-06 10 84	4 km S, 6 km E of Imperial Kutawagan Lake	-27-24-W2 02-30-20-W2	5115-10515 5130-10430	1	84021	84042
09-14 10 84	6.5 km SE of Spiritwood	SE09-50-10-W3	5315-10730	4	84025	L-yellow, R-blue; L-red, R-blue; L-short red, R-yellow; L-blue-white spiral, R-red
12-13 10 84	Arlington Beach	25-26-24-W2	5115-10515	2	84027	L-white, R-red
18 10 84	Skinner's Marsh	NE14-19-12-W2	5030-10330	3	84043	One young confirmed
22-23 04 85	Jumping Lake	E35-44-25-W2	5245-10515	3	85021	—
24-29 04 85	3 km N of Pangman	NE28-08-20-W2	4930-10430	1	85028	—
24-25 04 85	8 km N, 2 km E of Radisson	SW22-41-10-W3	5230-10715	3	85027	—
24-25 04 85	2 km N, 5 km E of Meadow Lake	SW04-60-16-W3	5400-10815	4	85026	L-white, R-none; L-blue or green, R-none; L-white/black/white, R-yellow;
25-26 04 85	5 km NE of Whitewood	-16-02-W2	5015-10215	1	85031	—
29 04 85	11 km N, 3 km W of Watson	-37-19-W2	5200-10430	1	85037	—
04 05 85	Moose Mountain Lake	NE25-11-09-W2	4945-10300	3	85043	—
28 09 85-05 10 85	Radisson Lake	SW06-41-10-W3 SE06-41-10-W3 NE06-41-10-W3 SE29-41-10-W3	5215-10715	3	850906	L-red/white/red, R-blue; L-green, R-yellow; one young confirmed
04 10 85	1.5 km N of Outlook	-29-08-W3	5130-10700	1	851001	—
18-20 10 85	0.5 km E of MacLeod Lake	-51-16-W3	5315-10815	3	851005	One young confirmed
25 10 85	3 km N, 8 km W of Strasbourg	SE01-25-23-W2	5100-10500	7	851013	One young confirmed
Alberta						
04 09 79	Cardston	03-02-24-W4	4900-11300	1	790701	Summering

* Coloured leg bands (L = left leg, R = right leg)

** Additional sight records of the same group of birds
(some probable or unconfirmed and therefore not included
in the table)