
First confirmed sighting of Whooping Cranes in British Columbia

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Abstract: Two Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*) that were observed along the Fraser River between Prince George and McBride in 2003, between June 30 and August 28, represent the first confirmed occurrence in the province.

Key words: British Columbia, extralimital occurrence, Whooping Crane, *Grus americana*

In Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP), the population of Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*) has expanded recently to occupy areas outside of the park. All known nesting in the last 75 years has occurred within Wood Buffalo National Park or within 12 km of its northern boundary (Johns *et al.* 2005). Whooping Cranes are, however, occasionally reported from locations that are outside of their normal summering, migration and wintering areas. Many of these reports are of mistaken identity due to unfamiliarity with the species, distance from the birds, or difficulty in identifying flying birds.

It is not uncommon for Whooping Cranes to summer in southern Saskatchewan and occasionally, in Manitoba and Alberta (CWS files). These areas are all south of the Whooping Crane breeding area in WBNP. The colour-banding of 134 juveniles between 1977 and 1988 provided an opportunity to identify the ages of those cranes summering south of the nesting area. In all cases, the summering birds were subadults that were one or two years of age. Whooping Cranes are usually breeding by age five, but can breed as early as age three. Most of the summering birds were observed as singles, occasionally as

Table 1. Areas of unconfirmed sightings for Whooping Cranes in British Columbia.

Location	Date	Number of birds	Activity	Reference
Fort Nelson	1955 September	6 & 30	--	<i>Birds of B.C.</i> ¹
Alexandria	1962 April 25-26	6	in a prairie	<i>Birds of B.C.</i>
Alkali Lake	1967 March 23-25	1	in a field	<i>Birds of B.C.</i>
Okanagan Lake	1976 August 13	1	flying	<i>Birds of B.C.</i>
Big Lake	1982 September 11	9 & 17	in a clearcut	<i>Birds of B.C.</i>
Nita Lake	1985 September 10	4	flying	<i>Birds of B.C.</i>
Quesnel	1995 August 15	1	flying	CWS files
Prince George	1998 March 15	7	flying	CWS files
Dome Creek	2000 October 29-30	1	flying	CWS files
Cranbrook	2002 early May	1	flying	CWS files
Williams Lake	2005 March 14 or 15	2	in a field	CWS files

¹ Campbell *et al.* 1990

pairs and rarely as three birds. Most of the birds summering south of the breeding area are usually seen in subsequent years in Wood Buffalo National Park, the remainder presumably died as they were never seen again in either summer or winter.

The main Whooping Crane migration corridor in Canada is through central Saskatchewan and northeastern Alberta, about 600 kilometres east of British Columbia (Johns 1992). In a review of all reports of Whooping Cranes on file with the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) (3700 records), there were no confirmed or probable sightings in British Columbia prior to 2003. There have, however been unconfirmed reports of Whooping Cranes in the province (Campbell *et al.* 1990; CWS files). These unconfirmed sightings have been reported from the areas listed in Table 1. In all of these instances, birds thought to be Whooping Cranes were seen once or twice but never stayed long enough to be confirmed and no photographs were obtained.

The first confirmed occurrence of Whooping Cranes in

British Columbia occurred during the summer of 2003, when a pair of cranes summered along the Fraser River between Prince George and McBride (Figure 1). Note that two of the previous unconfirmed sighting locations were from the same localities as in this report.

Sighting locations in 2003

Prince George

On June 30, at 10:30 Pacific Daylight Time, a pair of Whooping Cranes was observed and photographed near Prince George by Victor and Terri Bopp (Figure 2). The location was 30 km north of downtown Prince George, B.C., 300 metres northwest of the junction of Salmon Valley and La Casse Roads. The weather was overcast but there was excellent flat lighting.

Salmon River mouth

On July 06, Mr. Tim Antill observed two Whooping Cranes on a sandbar in the Fraser River, near the mouth of the Salmon River.

Dome Creek

On about August 10, Mr. Rick Zammuto received a second-hand report of big white birds seen in the vicinity of Dome Creek.

McBride

On August 21 or 22, Mr. Doug Trask observed a pair of Whooping Cranes in a hay field adjacent to the Fraser River near McBride. There is some evidence that the cranes may have been seen in an adjacent field as early as August 14. On August 25, he again observed the birds in the same hay field and, at that time, also observed a smaller, darker crane with them, that was initially thought to be a young crane.

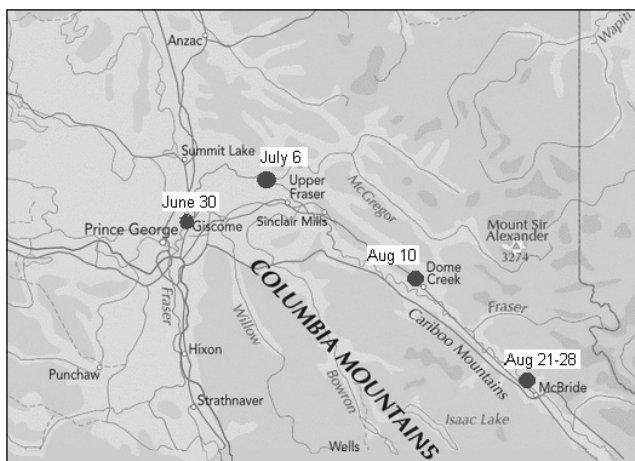


Figure 1. Locations of Whooping Crane sightings along the Fraser River of British Columbia in 2003.



Figure 2. Two Whooping Cranes near Prince George, B.C. on 2003 June 30. Photo by Victor Bopp.

On August 26, the birds were observed and photographed by Elsie, Glen and Jerry Stanley (Figure 3). The Stanleys identified the smaller crane as an adult Sandhill Crane.

On August 26 or 27, the birds were seen flying in the same vicinity by Jan Gibbs.

The birds were last seen on August 28.

Given the number of birds and the time sequence we have concluded that all of these sightings were of the same pair of cranes. Judging by the photos both birds appear to be one-year-old subadults (Figure 2, Figure 3). The heads and necks of both birds appear to be a dirty white colour. This 'dirty' appearance results from the remnants of rusty brown feathers of the juvenile plumage that had yet to moult into the white neck and head of an adult. In addition, the red patch on the head and black moustache stripe are not as distinct as in a mature bird, indicating that these birds were in their second summer.

Since the birds were subadults, it is likely that they would have returned to their natal area in WBNP as they reached breeding age (Johns *et al.* 2005).

The winter 2007/08 population of Whooping Cranes from WBNP stands at 266 birds. The flock is growing at a rate of 4.7% per year. To date all known nests of the cranes from the WBNP flock have been within 55 km of their natal territory (Johns *et al.* 2005). With this in mind it is unlikely that this species will be breeding far from their traditional nesting grounds in WBNP in the near future. As the population grows it is likely that more Whooping Cranes will con-



Figure 3. Two Whooping Cranes near McBride, B.C. on 2003 August 26. Photo by Jerry Stanley.

tinue to summer in locations other than WBNP. It is possible that subadult Whooping Cranes might again summer in B.C. at some time in the future.

Acknowledgments

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