

# Birding Illinois

## 100 Years Ago: Part 2

### Of Waterfowl and Whooping Cranes

by Sheryl DeVore

**A**utumn in Illinois. The marshes become dry, and all kinds of waterfowl resort to the Illinois River and a lake in central Illinois near Peoria for resting and feeding. The numbers are so great, that if they remained on the lake it would be impossible to travel over it in a canoe without pushing the birds aside with a paddle. This is the scene Pierre Liette encountered in 1702, and wrote about in his memoirs of traversing the waterways of Illinois.

Birders in Illinois today can still see vestiges of this remarkable sight, though no one need worry about pushing birds aside with their paddles. At Lower Swan Lake Access Area in the Mark Twain National Wildlife Refuge, Snow Geese begin arriving in October, their numbers peaking sometimes to 20,000 birds. Birding the Keithsburg Division of the refuge near Quincy in spring can yield looks at many migratory waterfowl, up to 26 species, including Snow Goose, Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal, American Black Duck, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Greater Scaup, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser and Ruddy Duck (pers. comm. Kelly J. McKay, Winter Field Notes Editor for *Meadowlark*).

When birders view this abundance and diversity, it's easy to think that waterfowl are doing just fine in



*Bob Erickson photographed this Whooping Crane 11 November 1998 at Illinois Beach State Park in Lake County. It was the first state record since 1958. Will Illinois birders see more Whooping Cranes in the new millennium?*

the Prairie State. But consider the virtual destruction of the tens of thousands of acres of prairie pot-holes that once attracted waterfowl to breed in Illinois. Then consider what people saw 300 years ago, and the story of dwindling waterfowl numbers becomes clear.

Today, 50 percent of the waterfowl in North America breed in the Midwestern prairie pothole region, and "based on projected warming, more droughts will occur on their breeding grounds," said Dr. Terry Root, Associate Professor in the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "The studies show that as temperatures increase, the 5 million pairs of ducks breeding in this region may dwindle to 2.1 million ducks. Some could even go extinct," she said.

The global mean temperature has been rising based on data from 1860 to the year 2000. From 1950 to 2000 there's been an increase in carbon emissions. Data also show an increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which contributes to global warming.

The ecological consequences of global warming are just now being explored by scientists. Numbers of ducks, geese, and other waterfowl, it seems, are not only decreasing because of habitat loss, but also because of climate change. Seeing huge numbers of waterfowl in Illinois during migration could become a rare occurrence.

**Meadowlark**