

And if that doesn't convince Illinois birders, consider that in the late 1800s, the Whooping Crane was a regular migrant along the Illinois River. At that time, however, the bird had already nearly been extirpated as a breeder in the state. R. Kennicott noted that only a few Whooping Cranes bred in Illinois in the 1850s, and those were confined to the middle and southern parts of the state. In the late 1870s, E.W. Nelson wrote that only a few Whooping Cranes still bred in the state, and these were confined to the few remaining large marshes in central Illinois (Schorger 1964).

Though Whooping Cranes will probably never again breed in Illinois, birders here may have a greater chance to see them in coming years. A Whooping Crane Recovery Team has recommended Wisconsin as the next release site for the establishment of a migratory flock of Whooping Cranes. The birds will be taught to migrate to a wintering area in Florida, and their migratory path will probably take them through Illinois.

The initial decline of the whooping crane population was probably caused by a combination of habitat loss and human disturbance of breeding areas. In addition, humans shot birds for their feathers, and collectors took their eggs. These threats plus the fact that the Whooping Crane has a low reproductive rate resulted in a rapid decline of the species earlier this century. In 1941, only 21 wild Whooping Cranes remained in the wild.

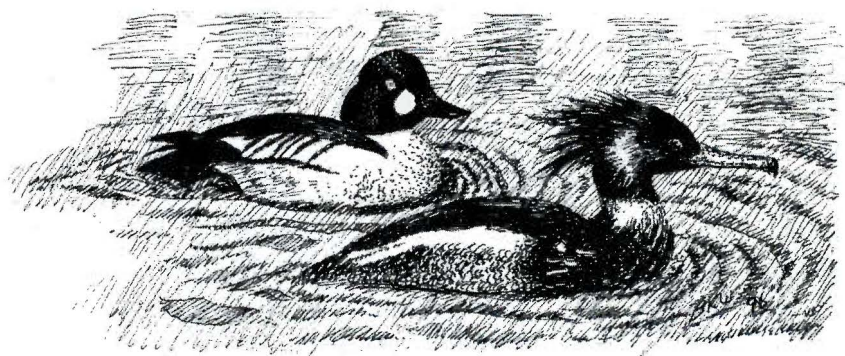
A recovery plan began in 1967, but it has not been easy. Whooping Cranes are sensitive to repeated human disturbance on their breeding grounds, and they face many threats along their migration routes, colliding with power lines and finding fewer places to rest as their stopover marshes get developed. The recovery plan involved using Sandhill Cranes as foster parents for Whooping Cranes. Since Whooping Cranes lay two eggs

but raise only one offspring, scientists took one egg from nests in Wood Buffalo National Park and placed them in the nests of Sandhill Cranes in Idaho.

These foster parents hatched and successfully raised their adopted Whooping Crane chicks. The young Whooping Cranes then migrated with the adult Sandhill Cranes to wintering habitat in New Mexico. Initial

sin to a wildlife refuge in Florida where the birds will winter, and hopefully return in spring to mate.

Perhaps Robert Hughes' sighting of a Whooping Crane flying over Illinois Beach State Park on 10 November 1998 (Hughes 1999), foreshadows the return of the crane at least as a migrant, to Illinois. When Hughes saw the bird, it was the first time it had been reported in Illinois in 40 years.



Common Goldeneye and Red Breasted Merganser drawing by Brian K. Willis.

results were promising, but the program has proved unsuccessful in the long term. Most Whooping Cranes raised by Sandhill Cranes failed to return to the breeding site where they were reared. Moreover, they became imprinted on their foster parents, and were not successful in breeding with their own species.

And as long as Whooping Cranes use only one breeding area and one wintering area, the potential exists that this species will be lost in the wild.

The Whooping Crane conservation program to introduce a second group of breeding birds involves new methods of captive breeding as well as new ways to teach captive-raised cranes to migrate with the use of a "guide-bird" population. In September 2001, the first group of Whooping Cranes will be guided from Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin

Literature Cited

Hughes, Robert. 1999. Meadowlark 8:2, pp.46-47. Whooping crane over Illinois Beach State Park.

Schorger, A.W. 1964. The Wilson Bulletin 76: 4, p. 333. The Trumpeter swan as a breeding bird in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana.

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Authors Note: A pair of banded and radio-tagged Whooping Cranes were reported near Salem, Illinois in Marion County on 11 May 2000. Richard Day of Alma, Illinois photographed the birds. A Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission biologist, Steve Nesbitt identified the birds by the radio transmitters attached to their legs.