

## There's a new outcry over whooping cranes

The gravely endangered whooping crane and development interests appear to be on a collision course on the Texas Coast.

An Austin developer who insists he is doing everything possible to protect the species wants to be the first to build a subdivision in an area deemed critical habitat for the sole remaining wild flock.

The dispute centers on 100 acres of the roughly 35-mile-long swath of Texas coastline named critical habitat for the species' survival by the federal government in the 1970s. The development, if allowed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is being touted as a potential precedent setter by both sides and has caught the eye of national environmental organizations.

Those who are adamantly against the project worry that it could open the floodgates for development in the environmentally sensitive habitat. They are pressuring the corps to order a full-scale environmental impact statement on the project.

But developer Bill Ball thinks he's setting an example of how development can be done in the area without harm.

"I don't want to sell lots to people and be the guy who ran off the whooping crane," Ball said. "If anyone brings me any scientific data showing me ... I'm jeopardizing the environment, I'm willing to listen."

Standing as tall as 5 feet and with a wingspan of more than 7 feet, the whooping crane is considered among the most stunning species of birds.

The flock that winters in Texas every year is the last of the wild birds. It makes an annual trek thousands of miles from Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park in Alberta and Northwest Territories to the Texas coast in and around Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

The flock dwindled to as few as 16 birds in the 1940s and the federal government deemed the species "threatened with extinction" in 1967, six years before the Endangered Species Act passed.

Thanks to conservation efforts, it has steadily rebounded. Last year was a record year for the flock, according to Fish and Wildlife. Some 76 chicks hatched in Canada, of which 45 made it to Texas the past winter.

That pushed the flock's population to a record 237. They represent about two-thirds of the whooping cranes that still exist in the wild, although the other flocks were reintroduced through breeding programs.

Despite their growing numbers, the National Audubon Society ranks the whooping crane third among endangered bird species, behind the ivory-billed woodpecker, which may be extinct, and the California condor.

"I was really outraged by the possibility that someone would even take this risk," said Victoria resident Cat Perz, who started a petition drive urging the corps to reject the project.

As of Thursday afternoon, she had collected 607 cyber signatures.

The corps is accepting comments on the project through today. The corps is involved because of a permit needed for the marina development under the Clean Water Act.

But because of the whooping crane and the critical habitat issue, the corps is expected to formally call the Fish and Wildlife Service into the process to determine if the crane would be harmed by the development, which would be forbidden by the Endangered Species Act. The whole process will likely take months.

Ball is a managing partner of Seadrift Ranch Partners. The corporation bought the roughly 6,000-acre ranch near Seadrift last year. Current plans call for developing a 700-acre residential and marina subdivision on the San Antonio Bay. Roughly 100 acres of the property on the southern end of the development are in critical habitat.

This special designation for property is part of the Endangered Species Act, which forbids federal agencies from permitting activities that "result in the destruction or adverse modification of (critical) habitat."

Ball has been in contact with U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologists about the project for more than a year and said he's incorporating all of their suggestions into his design. He's also hired his own biologist and Austin environmental attorney Alan Glen to work on the project.

Ball points out that he's planned the subdivision in such a way that it impacts only 300 square feet of wetlands. He also plans to build freshwater ponds on nearby upland property. Such ponds, biologists say, can be vital sources of drinking water for whooping cranes, especially during droughts when the salt content of water in the nearby wetlands increases to the point where it becomes undrinkable.

Ball also said there never has been a whooping crane sighting on the 100 acres in questions.

Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife whooping crane coordinator, said the statement is "mostly true." While he's never documented the crane on the 100 acres in question, he's seen them on nearby property that is part of the development.

Stehn said it's too early to cast judgment on Ball's proposal, but he said he is worried about the overall impact of coastal development on the whooping crane.

"I'm afraid that development will rob the species of the opportunity to grow," he said. "This is just one. There will be others. We all knew (development) was coming, but it's just exploded."

Kieran Suckling, policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity, a national organization that fights for endangered species, is betting against Ball's proposal.

"It would attract national environmental outrage and pressure," he said. "If he got away with it, then other folks would be clamoring around the country to do the same thing."