

Proposed Reclassification of the Whooping Crane from Endangered to Threatened

Questions and Answers

Q: What is a whooping crane?

A: The whooping crane occurs only in North America and is North America's tallest bird, with males approaching 1.5 m (5 ft) when standing erect. The whooping crane adult plumage is snowy white except for black primaries, black or grayish alula (specialized feathers attached to the upper leading end of the wing), sparse black bristly feathers on the carmine crown and malar region (side of the head from the bill to the angle of the jaw), and a dark gray-black wedge-shaped patch on the nape. The common name "whooping crane" probably originated from the loud, single-note vocalization given repeatedly by the birds when they are alarmed. Whooping cranes are a long-lived species; current estimates suggest a maximum longevity in the wild of at least 30 years.

Q: What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposing for the whooping crane?

A: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to reclassify the whooping crane from endangered to threatened (downlist) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The proposed reclassification is based on our evaluation of the best available scientific and commercial information, which indicates that the species' status has improved such that it is not currently in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Whooping crane populations are stable and increasing, adequate protections are in place to support recovery, and the species now meets the definition of threatened under the ESA. We also propose a rule under section 4(d) of the ESA that provides for the conservation of the whooping crane. This rule also serves as our 5-year status review for this species.

Q: What did the Service consider in reaching its decision to propose downlisting the whooping crane from endangered to threatened?

A: The ESA requires the Service to determine whether fish, wildlife or plants are endangered or threatened because of any five factors:

1. The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range;
2. Over-utilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes;
3. Disease or predation;
4. The inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or
5. Other natural or man-made factors affecting its continued existence.

The ESA defines an endangered species as a species that is "in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range," and a threatened species as one that is "likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range."

The Service is proposing that the whooping crane is not currently at risk of extinction, and therefore, would not meet the definition of endangered, but it is still affected by current and ongoing stressors to the extent that the species meets the definition of a threatened species under the ESA.

Human population growth and associated anthropogenic development has historically impacted whooping cranes through hunting and specimen collection and habitat alteration and destruction, including land conversion, altered fire regimes and woody plant encroachment, decreased freshwater riverine inflows, collisions with structures and chemical spills.

Climate change is also causing a variety of changes to the ecosystems that whooping cranes depend upon throughout their life cycle. It drives numerous stressors that negatively impact the resources and conditions needed by whooping cranes, thereby impacting the species' demographic factors (e.g., nest success, juvenile survival, adult and subadult survival) and population viability. These climatic stressors include warming temperatures, precipitation changes, and sea level rise which may exacerbate other stressors caused by human development activities.

These human development stressors negatively impact the resources needed by whooping cranes that also impact the species' demographic factors and resulting viability. Land conversion due to agriculture and development negatively affects whooping cranes through habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation, which directly reduces the availability and quality of all habitats necessary to whooping cranes, including prairie wetlands, grasslands, and coastal salt marshes.

Q: Have the criteria in the 2007 Whooping Crane Recovery Plan been met?

A: The reclassification criteria in the [2007 Whooping Crane Recovery Plan](#) have been partially met. Recovery plans provide a roadmap for us and our partners on methods of enhancing conservation and minimizing threats to listed species, as well as measurable criteria against which to evaluate progress towards recovery and assess the species' likely future condition, however, they are not regulatory documents. A decision to revise the status of a species, or to delist a species is ultimately based on an analysis of the best scientific and commercial data available to determine whether a species is no longer an endangered species or a threatened species, regardless of whether that information differs from the recovery plan.

Q: Will the whooping crane still be protected if it is reclassified to threatened?

A: Yes. The whooping crane will continue to receive protections under the ESA. These are identified in the Service's proposed 4(d) rule. In addition, the requirement for federal agencies to consult with the Service where their actions may harm the whooping crane or its critical habitat will continue unchanged.

Additionally, the whooping crane is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which prohibits the take (including killing, capturing, selling, trading and transport) of protected migratory bird species.

Q: What is the 4(d) rule that is being proposed for the whooping crane and why is this being proposed?

A: When a species is listed as threatened under the ESA, section 4(d) allows for the issuance of regulations that are necessary and advisable for the conservation of the species. The 4(d) rule being proposed for the whooping crane would, among other things, prohibit all intentional take of the whooping crane. Take as defined under the ESA means "to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct."

The 4(d) rule also includes exceptions to the prohibitions. Those exceptions include:

- Take via international shipment of eggs and live birds provided it is incidental to otherwise lawful activities that are conducted once all legally required permits such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) permits and U.S. Department of Agriculture Health Certificates have been obtained.
- Take resulting from collision with vertical, anthropogenic structures will not be prohibited provided the take is incidental and occurs outside the defined whooping crane 95% core migration corridor found within the U.S. portion of the central flyway.
- Take incidental to activities that are conducted during the continuation of routine agricultural practices on cultivated lands that are in row crop, seed-drilled untilled crop, hay, or forage production.
- Incidental take of whooping crane as a result of activities that are associated with beneficial habitat restoration practices.

Q: When was the whooping crane listed as endangered under the ESA?

A: In the United States, the whooping crane was listed as threatened with extinction in 1967 and endangered in 1970 – both listings were “grandfathered” into the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Q: What have the Service and its conservation partners done to protect and recover the whooping crane?

A: The Service enforces the ESA to ensure legal protections are maintained, brings conservation partners to the table, facilitates conservation programs under the ESA and manages National Wildlife Refuge System lands for whooping cranes in key areas. The Service works with partners to create funding opportunities, monitor populations, set recovery goals and raise awareness of the species status and ongoing efforts to protect it. The Service also consults with federal agencies where their actions may harm whooping cranes or impact their critical habitat. Through these consultations, the Service works to reduce the potential harm and mitigate any impacts that cannot be prevented.

In addition, the Service works to ensure consistent application of recovery and conservation programs among federal, state, and private lands. The Service promotes conservation,

restoration, and ecologically sound management of wetland habitats, the ecosystem upon which whooping crane recovery depends, via implementation of the whooping crane recovery plan.

The important role of private citizens in saving the whooping crane also needs to be emphasized. Sportsmen and other conservationists help protect wetlands throughout North America that cranes depend on during migration through their purchases of licenses, tags, and stamps. In winter, a little over one-third of the flock is found on private lands and many migration stopovers occur on private lands as well. Many specific conservation actions to protect the species have been carried out since the species was listed by private citizens, conservation organizations, sportsmen, and governments.

Q: How many whooping cranes are there now?

A: Currently, whooping cranes occur across four populations: one wild naturally occurring migratory population (Aransas Wood Buffalo Population; approximately 505 individuals); one captive population distributed among multiple facilities in the U.S. and Canada (approximately 145 individuals); and two wild reintroduced populations, the eastern migratory population (EMP; approximately 85 individuals) and Louisiana non-migratory population (LNMP; approximately 76 individuals).

Q: Does the proposed rule affect the reintroduced populations?

A. No, this proposed rule does not intend any change to the status of the EMP or the LMNP. The non-essential, experimental populations are treated as threatened by the Service's 10(j) policy.

Q: Where can whooping cranes be found?

A: Historically, the whooping crane's range extended across most of the United States from Utah to New Jersey, as far north as Canada's Arctic coast and south into central Mexico and Florida. Wetlands and marshes, upland habitats, open water, and agriculture fields are all considered important year-round habitats, used for feeding, nesting, and roosting.

Today, the current wild, migratory flock of whooping cranes, the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Population, nests in Wood Buffalo National Park and adjacent areas in Canada and migrates through the Great Plains states of eastern Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, before wintering in coastal marshes near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas.

Q. How can I learn more about these proposed rules, comment on them, or provide additional information about the whooping crane?

A: There will be a 60-day comment period upon the rule's publication in the [Federal Register](#). At that time, you may submit comments or additional information by one of the following methods:

1) Electronically:

Go to the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. In the search box, enter ~~[FWS R4 ES 2019 0018]~~, which is the docket number for this rulemaking. Then, click on the Search button. On the resulting page, in the Search panel on the left side of the screen, under the Document Type heading, click on the Proposed Rules link to locate this document. You may submit a comment by clicking on “Comment Now!”

(2) By hard copy:

Submit by U.S. mail to:

Public Comments Processing. Attn: ~~[FWS R4 ES 2019 0018]~~

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

MS: BPHC; 5275 Leesburg Pike,

Falls Church, VA 22041–3803.

The Service has also scheduled a virtual public meeting and hearing on ~~XX/XX/2021~~ from ~~XX-XX~~ p.m. (CT) via the Zoom online video platform and via teleconference. This virtual public meeting and hearing is intended to give the public an opportunity to learn more about the proposed reclassification of the whooping crane and an opportunity to comment on the proposal. Registration is required and can be done online at: [link](#)

We request that you send comments only by the methods described above. We will post all comments on <http://www.regulations.gov>. Please be aware that any personal information you provide in those comments will be posted.