

Wisconsin Conservation Congress Migratory Committee Meeting Minutes



ORDER OF BUSINESS	July 28, 2012	9:00 AM	Holiday Inn Wausau-Rothschild
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I. ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

A. CALL TO ORDER

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER BY	Chairman Richard Koerner at 9:05
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B. ROLL CALL

ATTENDEES	Richard Koerner, John Edelblute, Mitchell Fisher, Jerry Merryfield, Rick Koenig, Art Malin, Alan Harrison, Tim Morgan, Alan Suchla, Ray Heidel, Paul Gettelman, Noel Dolde, Ron Earnest, Richard Becker, Jeff Scott, Al Shook, Kent Van Horn-DNR, James Christopoulos-DNR, and DNR Warden Ben Herzfelt who sat in for DNR Warden Todd Schaller who was unable to attend
EXCUSED	Herb Theisen, Todd Cook, Troy Klessinger, Jeanna Mielcarek
UNEXCUSED	
GUESTS	Jorden McKellips – DNR Warden Intern from Central Wisconsin

C. AGENDA APPROVAL/REPAIR

DISCUSSION	No amendments to the agenda
ACTION	Motion to approve agenda by Al Shook, second by Paul Gentleman, Motion carried

D. REVIEW COMMITTEE MISSION STATEMENT

DISCUSSION	<p>Migratory Study Committee Mission Statement</p> <p><i>The mission of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress Migratory Committee is to represent the Stake Holders of Wisconsin by working with the Natural Resources Board and the Department of Natural Resources to effectively manage Wisconsin's local ducks and geese, as well as migrating ducks, geese, swans, and other migratory birds for present and future generations to enjoy.</i></p>
ACTION	None

E. PUBLIC COMMENTS

DISCUSSION	None
ACTION	

II. INFORMATION & ACTION ITEMS

A. CHAIRMAN COMMENTS

DICK KOERNER

DISCUSSION	Chairman's remarks	
ACTION	Koerner commented on about the changes to the committee membership, the committee had lost some personal for various reasons and that there were some new members. Al Shook offered some explanation that it was the executive council that decided to reduce the size of some committees and that it was the council's recommendation to try to include a member from each district. The Migratory committee lost some people from key areas of the State – Green Bay, Burnett/Polk Counties and Milwaukee (Lake Michigan hunters) most notably.	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

A. DEPARTMENT UPDATES – POSSIBLE FUTURE CHANGES TO THE HORICON ZONE

KENT VAN HORN

DISCUSSION	<p>Van Horn briefed the committee on possible changes to the Horicon zone that may include: reducing the size of the zone, eliminating the carcass tags and providing a simple punch card, and adopting the phone reporting system.</p> <p>Motion by Jerry Merryfield to begin working on the changes to Horicon immediately if not sooner but Van Horn said that there was no need to act on these proposals now. This was a preliminary discussion and official rule change proposals would occur through our new process over the next 2-3 years.</p>	
ACTION	None	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

III.

B. DEPARTMENT UPDATES - WATERFOWL HABITAT AND POPULATION STATUS

KENT VAN HORN

DISCUSSION	<p>Kent Van Horn explained to new committee members the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and how the USFWS works with the Flyway states as to how our season will be set, he talked about the 4 flyways.</p> <p>Continental conditions and waterfowl habitat were great last year and it produced a lot of ducks. This year lots of ducks returned to about average conditions that produced more ducks this spring. Mallards are up in WI 5%, 8% over the Long Term Average (LTA).</p> <p>See Attachment Slide - Mallard Survey Results</p> <p>New total duck count record number at 48.6 million. Pintails are up, canvasback up, 1 per day, just missed out on 2 per day, scaup (blue bills) up 4 per day with their breeding population up 21%, redheads are up as well, last 6 years have been the best as the far as the continued increase and the highest it has ever been every year for the past 6 years.</p> <p>Discussion from the committee on how the survey worker differentiates redheads and canvas back, "it's done by Aerial surveys and ground observation," Van Horn said.</p> <p>WI breeding is about average. Difficult time surveying ducks in Wisconsin this year. DNR does only one survey, however, the birds come back and breed at different times. This year's early spring made it difficult. Kent picks the best time to survey mallards, our bread and butter duck.</p> <p>Wood ducks doing well, woodies, mallards, blue wing and green wing teal make up the majority of our bag.</p> <p>See Attachment Slide - Spring Survey North America</p>	
ACTION		
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

C. DEPARTMENT UPDATE - GOOSE MANAGEMENT

KENT VAN HORN

UPDATES

DISCUSSION	<p>Sixty percent of 2011 bag were migratory Mississippi Valley Population (MVP) birds, 40% were local breeders Wisconsin population of giant sub-species.</p> <p>Early season harvest is climbing steadily.</p> <p>MVP breeders are down having been about 25% down over the past few years. Different variables are contributing to the low numbers. The spring survey of our larger local population may be down slightly but the early spring hurt survey efforts.</p> <p>However, the harvest has been stable for the 5 year study period that was concluded this past winter.</p> <p>See Attachment Slide - Goose Harvest Trends</p> <p>In brief Kent recommends extend exterior hunt by 7 days, total 92 days plus 15 days for early season. This is the maximum amount allowed by feds.</p>	
	ACTION	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

**D. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: DUCKS -
SEASONDATES BY ZONE, SPLITS AND BAG LIMITS
BY SPECIES**

KENT VAN HORN

DISCUSSION	<p>See Attachment Slide - Federal Duck Season Framework</p> <p>Most of what we harvest in Wisconsin are home-grown ducks, therefore traditionally 1 hen per day.</p> <p>Seventy five percent of Wisconsin's bag is made up of these 4 species of ducks, mallards 40%, wood duck 20%, green wing 10%, blue wings 7%.</p> <p>Comments regarding the Mississippi sub zone, courtesy of Ray Heidel, river rats now think the season should open state wide on the same date.</p> <p>Eighty percent of the ducks harvested in the north zone are bagged by Nov. 1; therefore Kent recommends the north to open at the earliest date possible. Two groups of hunters in the north duck zone asked for a 5 day Monday-Friday split in the duck season in early November in order for the duck season to run through the Sunday after Thanksgiving.</p> <p>Discussion of having a split season in the northern zone ensued. Some for, some think too many days will be lost by colder weather that will push birds out. The last week of October and the first week of November seem to be the best part of the migration.</p> <p>See Attachment Slide - WDNR Proposed Duck Season</p>	
	ACTION	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

**E. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: GOOSE
SEASON, MOURNING DOVE, WOOD COCK DATA AND
OTHER MIGRATORY MANAGEMENT UPDATES**

KENT VAN HORN

DISCUSSION	<p>See Attachment Slide - WDNR Proposed Goose Season</p> <p>Kent reminded the committee that we have the ability to split the goose season. Ninety five percent of the harvest was completed by Dec. 1. But Kent recommends that goose stays open through the duck season, but if someone wanted to close the season for a split so we may hunt geese during Christmas or into January that is possible.</p>
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See Attachment Slide - Morning Dove Report

Kent reported there are 350 million doves continently.
 Van Horn reported on woodcock.

See Attachment Slide - Woodcock Report

Michigan has the highest number of wood cock hunters of all states.
 Committee took a break at 10:30
 Meeting reconvened at 10:46
 Kent discussed potential future changes to Horicon goose zone

See Attachment Slide - Possible Changes to Horicon Zone

Dodge and Fond du Lac counties account for nearly 20% of the statewide Canada goose harvest and has a high number of MVP goose band recoveries, so Horicon is still very important.
 At this point of the discussion, the secretary was ridiculed for having a pretty flower cover on his lap top computer. The secretary explained, to no avail, that it was not his lap top and indeed belonged to his wife.
 Eighty three percent of the goose harvest in the Horicon zone is in Dodge and Found du Lac, which is right next to the marsh.
 The committee reviewed a map of the band recovery of MVP geese, the highest concentration occurred in the Horicon zone.

See Attachment Slide - Top Ten Goose Harvest Counties

One of the options to simplify goose hunting may be to shrink the Horicon zone. The main suggestions are to change the west border to Hwy 73 and the Northern border to Hwy 23. Because of act 21, if we started today, at the earliest it will take until the fall of 2015 to implement the changes.
 Kent briefed the committee on a possible sea duck season. Kent was working on a proposal for a special hunt, however, at the same time a report on sea duck decline was reported. An EIS on special duck seasons (like sea duck seasons) is currently being conducted by feds and a new survey of sea ducks to determine if there is enough of a population to propose a special season is needed.
 Open water question from spring hearings, 12 of the proposed lakes to be added for open water hunting passed locally at the spring vote. One did not, pass the local vote. All 13 lake options passed state wide but Kent will honor the local vote. A rule question will be included as part of spring hearings in 2013 to add the 12 lakes as open water duck hunting lakes.

ACTION	Motion by Jerry Merryfield to urge DNR to begin the process to make changes to Horicon zone, second by Gettelman Motion carried
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE

**F. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
 - WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: EARLY SEASON GOOSE HUNT**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	None
ACTION	Motion by Al Shook, second by Gettelman to accept early season dates and bag as proposed by DNR opening September 1-15, with a daily bag of 5 geese Motion carried
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE

**G. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
 - WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: YOUTH**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

WATERFOWL HUNT

DISCUSSION	None	
ACTION	Motion by Noel Dolde, second by Gettelman to accept youth hunt season as proposed by DNR opening September 15-16 with a daily bag the same as the regular seasons. Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

**H. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: DUCK SEASON
BAG LIMITS**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	None	
ACTION	Motion by Jeff Scott, second by Merryfield to accept bag limit and daily start time as proposed by DNR Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

**I. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: SHOOTING
HOURS**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	None	
ACTION	Motion by Heidel, second by Koerner to accept opening day shooting hours as proposed by DNR Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

**J. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: NORTHERN
ZONE DUCK SEASON**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	Northern Zone spit was a hunter's idea that the Department agreed to bring up as an alternate possibility for further discussion. Dolde is not in favor of split, thinks the season in the northern zone should run for 60 straight days.	
ACTION	Motion by Al Shook, second by Merryfield to Northern zone duck season dates as proposed by DNR, opening September 22 - November 4, November 10 - November 25 12 yes, 3 no, Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

**K. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: SOUTHERN
ZONE DUCK SEASON**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	None	
ACTION	Motion by Al Shook, second by Gettelman to accept Southern zone duck season dates as proposed by DNR, open September 29-October 7, October 13-December 2 Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE	

**L. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: MISSISSIPPI**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

ZONE SEASON

DISCUSSION	None	
ACTION	Motion by Ray Heidel, second by Tim Morgan to accept Mississippi zone duck season dates as proposed by DNR, open September 22-30, October 13-December 2	
	Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE		DEADLINE

M. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

**- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: CANADA
GOOSE EXTERIOR-NORTHERN ZONE**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	Al Harrison wants goose to open with concurrent with duck. His opinion is that goose hunters drive ducks out of the marshes before the duck season can start. Also, there is opportunity to violate, to kill ducks out of season while hunting geese.	
ACTION	Motion by Dolde, second by Koenig to open the northern exterior goose season on September 16 and run straight through until Dec. 16, daily bag limit of 2, as proposed by DNR	
	7 yes, 8 no, motion fails	
	New motion by Al Shook, second by Alan Suchla, open northern exterior goose season on September 16-November 4, November 10-December 21, daily bag limit of 2 per day in order for goose season to split at the same time as the duck season	
	Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE		DEADLINE

N. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

**- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: CANADA
GOOSE EXTERIOR-SOUTHERN ZONE**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION		
ACTION	Motion by Dolde, second by Dick Becker to accept season dates and bag, open September 16-October 7, October 13-December 21 daily bag limit of 2 per day as proposed by DNR	
	Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE		DEADLINE

O. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

**- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: CANADA
GOOSE EXTERIOR-MISSISSIPPI ZONE**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	Some resentment was observed that we will accommodate the river rats to open the Mississippi River zone on the Sept. 22 but push a Sept. 16 goose open in the northern zone.	
ACTION	Motion by Heidel, second by Scott to accept Mississippi River zone opening on September 22-September 30, October 13-January 3rd dates and bag limit of 2 per day as proposed by DNR	
	Motion carried	
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE		DEADLINE

P. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

**- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: HORICON ZONE
2 PERIODS**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	None	
ACTION	Motion by Ernest, second by Shook to accept Horicon zone season dates and bag limits as proposed	

	by DNR, H1 - September 16-October 28, H2 - October 29-December 16, 2 birds per day, 6 tags per hunter
	Motions carried, passes with one quiet nay
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE

**Q. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- WATERFOWL SEASON PROPOSAL: OTHER GEESE**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	None
ACTION	Motion by Al Shook, second by Gettelman to accept season dates and bag as proposed by DNR for light geese (Snow geese, Blue Geese, Ross and Brant) with 1 brant per day and 20 light geese per day with the same dates as those in the Southern, Northern and Horicon zones with the exception of White-fronted geese. The White-fronted goose season begins on September 20 for the exterior (north and south) and on September 26th in the Mississippi River subzone. Motion carried
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE

**R. DISCUSSION AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
- DECEMBER COMMITTEE MEETING**

CHAIRMAN KOERNER

DISCUSSION	Committee discussion centered around a Friday night or Saturday meeting. Because of the moratorium on lodging reimbursement, most agreed that a Saturday morning meeting would be preferred so that members could drive to the meeting and back the same day without staying the night. There were concerns that the meeting would go all day.
ACTION	Motion by Merryfield, second by Harrison to schedule the meeting for Saturday morning December 8th at the Holiday Inn Express at Rothschild-Wausau Motions carried
PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE

IV. MEMBERS MATTERS

DISCUSSION	<p>Kent filled us in on the status of Sandhill Cranes. It's up to the WCC to contact the WI legislature to take action on creating a Sandhill Crane hunt.</p> <p>Ray Heidel on sandhill cranes and protection for the reintroduction of whooping cranes into the eastern half of the United States. Has asked the USFWS for assurance that a whooping crane project not interfere with State's plan to enact a sandhill crane hunt. He has a letter and documents for the USFWS environmental assessment and these documents attached to the minutes.</p> <p>See attached letter and documents from USFWS</p> <p>Kent was asked about a tundra swan hunt. Several questions were approved in the spring hearings, the questions will be taken up at the December meetings.</p> <p>Paul Gettelman wanted to thank Kent and James for all their work on the Horicon zone.</p> <p>Dick Koerner commended Kent Van Horn and James Christopoulos of the DNR for all of their hard work on managing Wisconsin's waterfowl and their assistance to the WCC Migratory Committee. A hearty round of applause followed Koerner's comments.</p>
ACTION	

V. ADJOURNMENT

MEETING ADJOURNED	12:02 pm
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SUBMITTED BY	Mitchell Fisher
DATE	July 31, 2012

ATTACHMENTS

Mallard Survey Results

Mallard Results



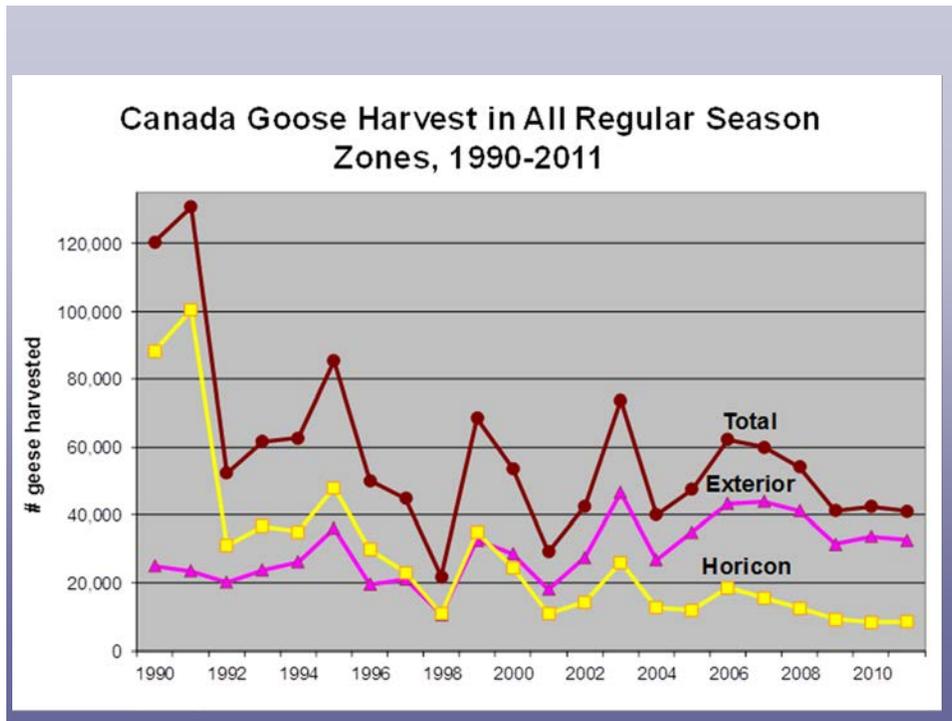
- Wisconsin – 196,950 up 5% from 2011, +8% LTA
- Minnesota – 224,965 down 20% from 2011, At LTA
- Michigan – 439,268 up 96% from 2011, +23% LTA-- but huge confidence interval
- Traditional Survey area – 10.6 million – up 15% from 2011, up 40% LTA, 3rd highest on record
- Preliminary Mid continent mallards- 10.95 million
- Canada Ponds – 3.9 million ponds- down 21% from 2011, up 13% LTA

Spring Survey North America

2012 Overall Duck Story

- WI breeding conditions: south dry, wetter in the north, average duck #'s in May
- Ponds Canada/US survey – 5.5 million, down 32% from 2011, 9% above LTA
- BPOP's (except pintail) are up from 2011 or unchanged.
- Total ducks new record at 48.6 million. Up 7% from 2011, 43% above LTA

Goose Harvest Trends



Federal Duck Season Framework

Proposed Regulatory Alternatives for Duck Hunting, 2012 Season

	MISSISSIPPI FLYWAY		
	RES	MOD	LIB
Beginning Shooting Time	1/2 hour before sunrise	1/2 hour before sunrise	1/2 hour before sunrise
Ending Shooting Time	Sunset	Sunset	Sunset
Opening Date	Sat. nearest Oct. 1	Sat. nearest Sept. 24	Sat. nearest Sept. 24
Closing Date	Sun. nearest Jan. 20	Last Sunday in Jan.	Last Sunday in Jan.
Season Length (in days)	30	45	60
Daily Bag/ Possession Limit	3 6	6 12	6 12
Mallards (Total/Female)	2/1	4/1	4/2
Traditional bag limits for other species under these alternatives			
Pintail	0,1,2 or 3 According to Pintail harvest strategy		
Black Duck	1	1	1
Scaup	(45day/2bird bag,15/1), 60/2, or 60/4 with Scaup harvest strategy		
Canvasback	0, 1, or 2 According to Canvasback harvest strategy		
Redhead	1	2	2
Wood Duck	3	3	3

WDNR Proposed Duck Season

Proposed 2012 Season- Ducks

- **60 Day Season** – 6 ducks, no more than 4 mallards -only 1 may be a hen, 3 wood ducks, 1 black duck, 2 redheads, **4 scaup**, 2 pintail, and 1 canvasback. 5 mergansers, not more than 2 hooded. Coot daily bag of 15. Opening Day shooting hours begin at 9 am.
- **Northern Zone: Sept 22 – Nov 20** *or* utilize late split?
- **Southern Zone: Sept 29 – Oct 7, Oct 13- Dec 2**
- **Mississippi R. Zone: Sept 22 – 30, Oct 13-Dec 2**

Propose WDNR Goose Season

Proposed Season- Geese

Exterior Zone: Extended by 7 days for 92 days total.
Daily Bag of 2.

- **North** - Saturday Sept 16 - Dec 16.
– Split w/duck (if applicable)?
- **South** – Saturday Sept 16 – October 7 and October 13 – December 21.
- **Mississippi River Subzone:** Sept. 22 - Sept. 30 and Oct. 13 – Jan 3
- **OPTION TO SPLIT EXTERIOR ONE OR TWO TIMES**

Horicon Zone: 2 periods. Daily Bag of 2. Six tags per hunter.

- H1- Sept 16 – Oct 28
- H2- Oct 29 – Dec 16

Mourning Dove Report

Mourning Doves

- 810 banded in WI 2011
- WI dove population trends:
 - 2002-2011 = 0.5% increase
- Moderate harvest prescription – 15 bird bag – 70 days.
- 10,000- 15,000 dove hunters in Wisconsin
- 99,400 (+/- 76%) harvested in 2010



Woodcock Report



Woodcock

- Central and Eastern management units – no significant 10 year trend = stable population
- Wisconsin – no significant 10 year trend in SGS
- Wisconsin woodcock hunters – 15,000 (3rd in nation)
- Harvest of 42,000 (3rd in the nation)

Possible Changes to Horicon Zone Goose Season

Permits and Tagging

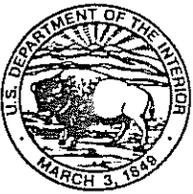
- Retain Horicon permit and tag limit
- Only 3.5%- 6.5% filled 6th tag, restrictive permits limit harvest by limiting hunter #' rather than by tags themselves
- ALIS based punchcard
- Add 1-800 reporting and phase out mail survey

Top Ten Goose Harvest Counties

Top 10 Harvest Counties – all zones

Top 10 counties - Statewide Harvest for 2011
(all zones-regular season)

County	Rank	Estimated Kill	% of Statewide Total
Dodge	1	5,378	13.1%
Brown	2	2,279	5.5%
Fond Du Lac	3	2,205	5.4%
Manitowoc	4	1,910	4.6%
Dane	5	1,578	3.8%
Waukesha	6	1,348	3.3%
Racine	7	1,155	2.8%
Kewaunee	8	1,082	2.6%
Door	9	1,033	2.5%
Sheboygan	10	1,017	2.5%



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Green Bay ES Field Office
1015 Challenger Court
Green Bay, Wisconsin 54311-8331
Telephone 920/465-7440
FAX 920/465-7410

June 26, 2001

Mr. Ray Heidel
Wisconsin Conservation Congress
Migratory Committee
W8043 Hwy ZN
Onalaska, Wisconsin 54650

Dear Mr. Heidel:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) previously contacted you to inform you of our proposal to reintroduce a migratory whooping crane population into historic habitat in the eastern United States, and to request your comments on the proposal. During the 45-day public comment period and a series of public hearings, we received both written and oral comments on a draft environmental assessment (EA) of the reintroduction and a proposed rule to establish a nonessential experimental population (NEP) of whooping cranes in the eastern U.S. Following consideration of the comments, the Service has published the final rule for this action in today's *Federal Register*. The final EA prepared for this project is available now as well. The EA evaluated three alternatives for accomplishing our goal of establishing a migratory whooping crane population in the eastern U.S. and a no-action alternative.

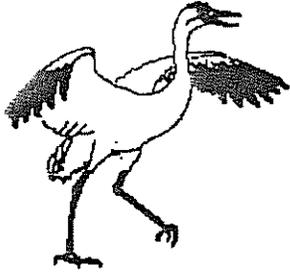
The final rule designates a nonessential experimental population of whooping cranes within a 20-state area in the eastern U.S. We believe the NEP status will adequately protect this whooping crane population, while still allowing the presence of the cranes to be compatible with routine human activities in the proposed reintroduction area.

This designation allows us to proceed now with the reintroduction of captive-raised whooping crane chicks, with the intent to eventually establish a migratory population that would summer and nest in Wisconsin, and winter in west-central Florida. We have enclosed a news release and a question-and-answer fact sheet to provide additional information on whooping crane biology and the reintroduction plan. A copy of the *Federal Register* notice and a copy of the final EA also are enclosed for your information. Additional copies of these materials are available by contacting the Service at the address above or may be downloaded from the World Wide Web at <http://midwest.fws.gov/whoopingcrane>. If you have questions or desire additional information, please contact this office at 920-465-7440.

Sincerely,

Janet M. Smith
Field Supervisor

Enclosures



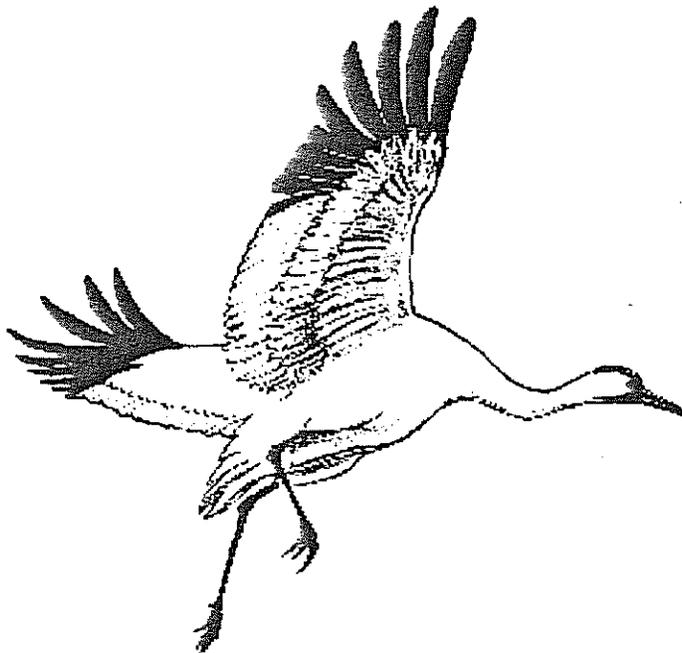
FINAL
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

**PROPOSED REINTRODUCTION OF
A MIGRATORY FLOCK OF WHOOPING CRANES
IN THE EASTERN UNITED STATES**

June 2001



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 3
in cooperation with Regions 2, 4, 5, and 6



However, the greatest impacts resulting from this alternative would probably be the protective measures mandated as a result of section 7 consultation on federal actions, such as Corps of Engineers wetland permit reviews (e.g., permits under section 404 of the Clean Water Act), highway or utility projects, etc. Such restrictions may impede residential development in those areas occupied by whooping cranes.

Alternative 4

No appreciable effects to residential use in either Michigan or Florida are expected as a result of whooping crane reintroduction. No additional restrictions on construction or establishment of residences would be associated with reintroduction efforts. It is possible there may be some increase in local residential dwellings, as a result of an increased desire to live in the region due to the presence of the species. No additional restrictions on construction or establishment of residences would be associated with reintroduction efforts.

4.3.3 Recreational use

Alternative 2 (Preferred Alternative)

Wisconsin Potential Release Areas

Existing recreational values within the project area would remain, and may be enhanced after the reintroduction of whooping cranes. Management plans for the Necedah and Horicon NWRs and Wisconsin WAs may be modified to benefit whooping cranes and allow reasonable public access to the cranes in non-sensitive locations and time intervals.

Currently, in Wisconsin, there is little to no hunting of species which appear similar to whooping cranes and might be shot mistakenly by hunters. Further, most sport hunting activity in central Wisconsin is for upland species (deer and turkey). Interest has been expressed by Wisconsin hunters to have a hunting season for sandhill cranes in Wisconsin. In the event the sandhill crane becomes a game species, it is not likely there would be any additional restrictions imposed as a result of the presence of whooping cranes. Per provisions of the special rule to establish the migratory whooping crane NEP, the Service would not mandate any closure of areas including National Wildlife Refuges, during hunting or conservation order seasons or closure or modification of hunting or conservation order seasons for the purpose of avoiding take of the proposed NEP.

The Service established a conservation order in a final rule published in the December 20, 1999, *Federal Register* (Volume 64, Number 243). The conservation order is aimed at reducing the populations of lesser snow geese (*Anser caerulescens caerulescens*) and Ross' geese (*Anser rossii*) that breed, migrate, and winter in the mid-continent portion of North America, primarily in the Central and Mississippi Flyways. These geese are referred to as mid-continent light geese (MCLG). The Service established the conservation order allowing take of the geese to prevent further habitat degradation by the MCLG population which had reached such a high level that the



Contact: Joan Guilfoyle: 612/713-5311
Joel Trick: 920/465-7416

IN BOLD EXPERIMENT, ULTRALIGHT TO LEAD WHOOPING CRANES FROM WISCONSIN TO FLORIDA

Whooping cranes will migrate across the skies of eastern North America this fall for the first time in more than a century as part of a bold experiment conducted by a partnership of Federal and state wildlife agencies, conservation groups and other private organizations led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Biologists will train a flock of about 10 young whooping cranes, which are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, to follow an ultralight aircraft across seven states from Necedah National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Wisconsin to Chassahowitska NWR in Florida.

If all goes as planned, the birds will learn the migration route during the trip and return from Florida to Wisconsin on their own next spring, thereby establishing a second migratory whooping crane flock in North America.

Currently 174 whooping cranes migrate annually between wintering areas at Aransas NWR in Texas to nesting areas at Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada. Biologists long have been concerned that this population might be wiped out by a natural event such as a hurricane or a human-caused disaster such as a chemical or oil spill. Reintroducing a second migratory population in the East will provide insurance against such a disaster and move the species closer to recovery.

The experiment will be conducted by the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, a consortium that includes the Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, state agencies, conservation organizations and private citizens. Private donors are contributing more than half of the \$1.3 million needed to complete the project. More than 40 private landowners have offered their property to be used as overnight sites for the migrating birds.

"This bold experiment is a model of how to recover an endangered species," said Interior Secretary Gale Norton. "It combines innovative science, partnerships with local landowners and States, public and private funding, and reduced Federal regulation. It could provide a blueprint for future recovery efforts for other threatened and endangered species."

The whooping crane, named for its loud and penetrating mating call, is one of America's best known and rarest endangered species. Cranes live and breed in extensive wetlands, where they feed upon crabs, clams, frogs, and other aquatic organisms. Whooping cranes stand 5 feet tall and are pure white in color with black wing tips and a red crown.

Biologists believe the species numbered in the thousands in North America at one time but loss of wetland habitat, hunting, and egg and specimen collecting brought about a sharp decline in the species. By 1890, no migratory whooping cranes remained in eastern North America, and by the 1940s the species was on the verge of extinction.

Today, as a result of an ongoing recovery program, 260 whooping cranes exist in the wild. This includes a reintroduced non-migratory flock of approximately 86 birds that lives year round in central Florida.

Biologists will commence the experiment in early July when approximately 10 whooping crane chicks raised at the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center will be transferred to Necedah NWR. The birds will undergo three months of specialized training with ultralights, using the same techniques used successfully last year with a flock of sandhill cranes that were taught to fly the same migration route.

The experimental flock of whooping cranes should depart in mid-October and fly over Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia on their way to Chassahowitzka NWR. Approximately 25 private, State and Federal properties will be used as stopover points for the birds, aircraft and personnel. Daily updates, photographs and other information on the project will be available at www.bringbackthecranes.org.

The experiment is not without risk. Biologists are taking every step possible to ensure success, but some birds may be lost during the migration.

The National Wildlife Refuge System will play a major role in the reintroduction. Necedah NWR and Chassahowitzka NWR will serve as the flock's release area and winter home respectively. Biologists expect refuges in the eastern United States to provide essential stopover habitat for the whooping cranes on their annual flight.

"We are proud that national wildlife refuges are playing such a pivotal role in bringing this magnificent bird back to eastern North America," said Marshall Jones, acting director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "What a fitting tribute it would be for the public to be able to see a second population of wild whoopers migrating through our refuges when we celebrate the National Wildlife Refuge System's 100th anniversary in 2003."

The Service submitted a final rule authorizing the experiment in the *Federal Register* on June 19, 2001. The rule should be published by the end of the week. The agency also announced the availability of a final environmental assessment that analyzes the proposal and responds to both written public comments and those received this spring at a series of public meetings.

The reintroduced flock is being designated a nonessential, experimental population (NEP) under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act in the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. These states are within the known or suspected historic range of whooping cranes. However, it is expected that the birds will stay primarily in the migratory route between Wisconsin and Florida.

The NEP designation ensures that Federal, state, tribal, or private actions that could result in the incidental death of or injury to a whooping crane in the course of otherwise lawful activities will not violate the Endangered Species Act.

As a result of the designation, ongoing activities such as outdoor recreation, agriculture and other land management practices within the 20-state reintroduction area will not be affected by the reintroduction. In addition, the rule specifies that no areas will be closed during hunting seasons and hunting seasons will not be modified to accommodate the experiment.

The intentional killing or harm of any NEP-designated whooping crane, however, would still be a violation of Federal law punishable under the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Because of the huge scope and complexity of the project, a coalition of governmental

Wisconsin DNR will consider placing markers on the obstacles to reduce the probability of collisions.

Wolves are known predators of adult sandhill cranes and would be potential predators of adult whooping cranes, as would coyotes and bald eagles. Red fox, bobcats, owls, and raccoons are potential predators of young cranes. Natural mortality from predators, fluctuating food availability, disease, and wild feeding inexperience will be reduced through predator management, vaccination, gentle release, supplemental feeding for a post-release period, and pre-release conditioning. This conditioning will include teaching the habit of roosting in standing water. Predation by bobcats has been a significant source of mortality in the Kissimmee Prairie, Florida flock, and teaching this roosting behavior to young birds should help to reduce losses to wolves, coyotes, and bobcats. Human-caused mortality will be reduced by information and education efforts directed at landowners and land users, and review and management of human activities in the area.

Recently released whooping cranes will need protection from natural sources of mortality (predators, disease, and inadequate foods) and from human-caused sources of mortality. We will minimize human-caused mortality through a number of measures such as: (a) Placing whooping cranes in an area with low human population density and relatively low development; (b) working with and educating landowners, land managers, developers, and recreationists to develop means for conducting their existing and planned activities in a manner that is compatible with whooping crane recovery; and (c) conferring with developers on proposed actions and providing recommendations that will reduce any likely adverse impacts to the cranes.

e. Special Handling

The Service, State employees, and their agents are authorized to relocate whooping cranes to avoid conflict with human activities; relocate whooping cranes that have moved outside the appropriate release area or the NEP area when removal is necessary or requested; relocate whooping cranes within the NEP area to improve survival and recovery prospects; and aid animals that are sick, injured or otherwise in need of special care. If a whooping crane is determined to be unfit to remain in the wild, it will be returned to captivity. The Service, State employees, and their agents are authorized to salvage dead whooping cranes.

f. Potential Conflicts

Conflicts have resulted in the central and western United States from the hunting of migratory birds in areas utilized by whooping cranes, particularly the hunting of sandhill cranes and snow geese (*Chen caerulescens*), which to novice hunters may appear similar to whooping cranes.

In recent years, only two to three crane mortalities have been documented incidental to hunting activities. Sandhill cranes are not hunted in Wisconsin although a future hunting season is being considered, and snow geese are an uncommon migrant and have not been present in large numbers. Sandhill cranes and snow geese are not hunted in the area of the wintering site in Florida. Accidental shooting of a whooping crane in this experimental population occurring in the course of otherwise lawful hunting activity is exempt from take restrictions under the Act in this special regulation. Applicable Federal penalties under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and/or State penalties, however, may still apply. We will minimize mortality due to accidental shootings by providing educational opportunities and information to hunters to assist them in distinguishing whooping cranes from legal game species. **There will be no federally mandated hunting area or season closures or season modifications, including conservation order seasons, resulting from the establishment of the eastern U.S. whooping crane NEP.**

We established a conservation order in a final rule published in the December 20, 1999, Federal Register (Volume 64, Number 243). The conservation order is aimed at reducing the populations of lesser snow geese (*Anser caerulescens caerulescens*) and Ross' geese (*Anser rossii*) that breed, migrate, and winter in the mid-continent portion of North America, primarily in the Central and Mississippi Flyways. These geese are referred to as mid-continent light geese (MCLG). We established the order allowing take of the geese to prevent further habitat degradation by the MCLG population, which had reached such a high level that the geese were seriously injuring their arctic and subarctic breeding grounds through their feeding actions. We set a management goal to reduce the MCLG by 50 percent by the year 2005. The conservation order can be implemented in the States, or portions of States, contained within the boundaries of the Central and Mississippi Flyways, including Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky,

Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

The bulk of traditional hunting in the primary release area has been for deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), and small game. Conflict with traditional hunting in the release area is not anticipated. Access to some limited areas at release or wintering sites and at ultralight migration stopover points could be temporarily restricted at times when whooping cranes might be particularly vulnerable to human disturbance (i.e., around rearing and training facilities in the spring/summer and conditioning and holding pens in the fall/winter). Any temporary restricted access to areas for these purposes will be of the minimum size and duration necessary for protection of the NEP cranes, and will be closely coordinated with and at the discretion of the respective States. Any such access restrictions will not require Federal closure of hunting areas or seasons.

States within the NEP area maintain their management prerogatives regarding the whooping crane. They are not directed by this rule to take any specific actions to provide any special protective measures, nor are they prevented from imposing restrictions under State law, such as protective designations, and area closures. None of the States within the NEP area have indicated that they would propose hunting restrictions or closures related to game species because of the whooping crane reintroduction.

Overall, the presence of whooping cranes is not expected to result in placement of constraints on hunting of wildlife or to affect economic gain landowners might receive from hunting leases. The potential exists for future hunting seasons to be established for other migratory birds that are not currently hunted in some of the States within the NEP area. The action will not prevent the establishment of future hunting or conservation order seasons approved for other migratory bird species by the Mississippi or Atlantic Flyway Councils.

The principal activities on private property adjacent to the release area are agriculture and recreation. Use of these private properties by whooping cranes will not preclude such uses. The special regulation accompanying this rule authorizes incidental take of the whooping crane in the NEP area when the take is accidental and incidental to an otherwise lawful activity.