

A photograph of two whooping cranes running across a field of dry, brown vegetation. Both birds have their wings fully extended, showing the dark feathers on the upper wings. They are moving from left to right. The background is a clear, pale blue sky with some faint clouds and power lines visible in the distance.

Ruffled

WHEN A TEENAGE BOY BRAZENLY SHOT TWO **ENDANGERED WHOOPING CRANES** OUTSIDE BEAUMONT, HIS ACT UNLEASHED WIDESPREAD ANGER AND RESULTED IN A QUICK ARREST—AND REVEALED JUST HOW DIFFICULT IT CAN BE TO SAVE A SPECIES. **by Sonia Smith**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN CARRASQUILLO



Feathers



In

late June 2014, at a government wildlife refuge in Maryland, a whooping crane chick emerged from his shell. He was a damp little thing, covered in cinnamon-colored fluff, and he weighed a respectable 137 grams, about as much as a baseball or a full-grown hamster. Because he was the thirty-third (and last) crane to hatch at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center that season, the biologists

there called him Thirty-Three. ¶ The chick spent his first day outside of his shell resting in a heated Plexiglas box lined with gray carpet. The chirps and calls of an adult whooping crane were piped inside, and, for comfort, he could nuzzle up against a whooping crane puppet head on the floor. This would be his surrogate parent. His real parents lived some 1,190 miles away at the International Crane Foundation, in Baraboo, Wisconsin. As an egg, he'd been flown in a heated portable incubator to Baltimore-Washington International Airport. ¶ Crane chicks grow quickly, up to an inch a day, so late-in-the-season chicks are treasured like youngest children. "You find joy in how small and cute those last chicks are, when the other birds have grown and he's sleeping under his heat lamp like a little baked potato," said Barb Clauss,

a biological technician who has been rearing whooping crane chicks at the center's 13,000-acre campus for the past nineteen years.

About 48 hours after hatching, Thirty-Three wasn't eating or drinking enough on his own, and the decision was made to tube-feed him for a few days. He was soon well enough to start mingling with other chicks. But he proved a "little bit too pecky" with other members of his cohort, so he had to take a breather. "The only way you know the temperament of a whooping crane chick is when you put it with another whooping crane. You could think a bird is the sweetest little thing, but when you put it with another bird, the personality comes out," Clauss explained.

When he was two and a half months old, he was moved to a larger, grass-bottomed outdoor enclosure next to another crane, a small, feisty female called Five. Five and Thirty-Three squabbled through the fence, briefly sparring with their bills before he was moved to a different pen. Eventually, both chicks were sociable enough to go on outdoor walks with other birds, led by a bi-



OPENING SPREAD AND OPPOSITE PAGE: Whooping cranes in and around a rice field, near Nome. RIGHT: Texas game warden Mike Boone. BELOW: Trey Frederick, in a photograph posted to his Facebook page last year.

ologist draped in a white hooded costume, worn to obscure the human form and thereby discourage the chicks from imprinting on a person.

The captive breeding program at Patuxent—now in its fiftieth year—is just one piece of an elaborate and painstaking strategy that has brought whooping cranes back from the brink of extinction, from 30 birds in 1938 to more than 630 cranes today, making it one of conservation's great success stories. A quarter of those reside in captivity, while the majority of the others, an estimated 329 birds, make up the lone remaining wild flock, which winters in Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, on the Texas coast, and summers in Wood Buffalo National Park, in northern Alberta.

Because a single catastrophe—whether from a late-season hurricane or a chemical spill or a contagious disease—could decimate the Aransas flock, biologists are trying to create other wild populations. In 2011 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved a project to reintroduce the birds to coastal Louisiana, where nonmigratory wild cranes had lived until 1950. As part of that effort, when Thirty-Three and Five were about six months old, in December 2014, they were carefully loaded into wax-coated cardboard crates and flown to Jennings on a private jet. From there the birds traveled by truck and then by boat deep into the marsh at the White Lake Wetlands Conservation Area, southwest of Lafayette. They were released into a large circular pen topped with netting, where they would recover from their stressful journey and acclimate to their new surroundings along with twelve other young cranes, the fifth cohort of birds to be released in as many years.

By this point, they had almost reached their full adult height of five feet, and their wings measured more than seven feet when outstretched. Their fluffy down had long been replaced by mottled tan-and-white feathers, which were growing whiter by the day, though their heads had yet to develop the signature crimson cap. Thirty-Three and Five spent their first days in their new surroundings alternately noshing on pellets of crane food—made of grain and fish meal—and staring into the water in front of them, periodically dipping their slender beaks down and pulling up small fish and crustaceans.

They were now the charges of three Louisiana biologists, who, a couple of days after they arrived at White Lake, cornered them and slipped wide colored bands onto their legs above the ankle joint, along with solar-powered satellite and cellphone transmitters. Thirty-Three rebounded from this indignity quickly and the next day was one of the first birds to approach biologist Sara Zimorski, of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Department, when she entered the pen in her costume to hand out treats. Meanwhile, curious adult cranes began showing up at the marsh, eyeing the new arrivals suspiciously through the netting.

After three weeks, the biologists opened the pen. Letting the birds out, said Zimorski, “is a little bit nerve-racking, because you're giving up control. But it's ultimately the goal that we're working toward. The whole point of this is to get them here to Louisiana and release them.” Now those products of the most meticulous conservation work known to man were free to roam around the Louisiana wilds, just as their ancestors had.

Who knows what goes on in the mind of a crane? What made a group of four birds—including Five and Thirty-Three—suddenly alight and start flying west on April 21, 2015? Whatever prompted this travel, by the next afternoon they were flying just north of Lake Calcasieu at 44 miles per hour, according to transmitter data. They



crossed over the Sabine River into Texas, flying over Nederland and skirting Beaumont to the south. The foursome did not stop until they reached far west Jefferson County, where the chemical plants of Beaumont give way to rice fields and turf farms. This was not the first time cranes from the Louisiana project had wandered into Texas; in previous years, some had spent months on the shores of Lake Lewisville, near Dallas.

Thirty-Three and his companions landed in a crawfish pond next to a trailer park in Hamshire, less than a mile from Interstate 10. They spent the next eight months in a thirty-mile radius southwest of Beaumont. They foraged for whatever they could catch, gulping down small animals like frogs, mice, and crawfish and grazing on marsh plants and fallen acorns. Eventually, in early June,

they settled down on some fields south of Nome, at a farm where a family by the name of Broussard has been growing rice for three generations (adding crawfish to the mix in 1988).

“They showed up in June, before we planted the first crop of rice,” Gene Broussard told me. “I’ve got a book in my truck I can identify birds with, and I thought they were | CONTINUED ON PAGE 132



STOP AND REFILL YOUR TANK



Just a few minutes off the highway in Bastrop, Texas, you'll enjoy serene quiet time that's surprisingly close. The Lost Pines Region surrounds dozens of miles of Texas' own Colorado River, where you can fish, paddle, float and otherwise drift away.

Discover the Best Detour in Texas
at www.visitlostpines.com

RUFFLED FEATHERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 97

whooping cranes, but I wasn't sure, so I sent a picture to the game warden. I watched them for a long time. They kind of started calling this spot home; they would move three or four miles out and then they'd be back." The four birds stayed together until one of them, who'd always been something of an outcast, peeled off and headed back to Louisiana in December. Zimorski and her colleagues monitored the data from their trackers and several times flew over in a Cessna to see them.

Beaumont is no stranger to migrants from Louisiana's Cajun prairie; everywhere you turn there's a Blanchard or a Thibodeaux or a Landry. But these leggy, graceful recent arrivals garnered special attention, particularly from local birders. Harlan Stewart, a retired hospital pathologist who serves as the treasurer of the Golden Triangle Audubon Society, described the birds' presence as an "open secret" among the group's members. That meant that they wouldn't include the birds in reported birding lists, such as e-Bird, in the "now forlorn hope," he wrote in an email, "that limited public awareness might in some measure protect them from the attention of individuals with harmful intent." On Christmas Day, Stewart had a chance to take some close-up photos of the birds. In several of them, he captured Thirty-Three in the middle of a dance, seemingly suspended two feet off the ground with his wings outstretched.

The cranes found another dedicated observer in Jeff Thompson, a Beaumont native who owns a custom window-blind company and is an avid duck hunter. During duck season, he would linger in his truck every morning after hunting and marvel at the cranes. "One day they walked out of the field onto the road, and I saw them ten feet from my truck. I thought one of them was going to come and start eating the bugs out of the grill or something," he told me. He reported the sighting—and their band colors—on a state website and was thrilled to get an email back from the biologists. "They knew so much—it was like, oh, I thought these were cool, but now I know everything about them."

Thompson posted to his Facebook page cellphone photos and videos of the birds strutting and flapping their wings. In one video, Thirty-Three is calmly foraging in shallow water, before turning and looking almost directly at the camera. Birders arrived from as far away as Arkansas and Oklahoma, according to Broussard, and lined up their tripods along the caliche road that bisects the farm to watch them.

On January 10, a Sunday, the birds received a steady stream of visitors, among

them Norma Barnes, a 91-year-old Houston Audubon member who has been birding seriously for the past 35 years. Although Barnes suffers from macular degeneration and can no longer manage the trip to Aransas to see the cranes there, that January afternoon she and two fellow birders were able to watch the cranes up close, as the birds were only fifty to a hundred feet from their car. "They were not at all spooked by us," she said. "We used our binoculars to look at their faces and their features that you can't see with the naked eye."

Though Barnes couldn't have known it, that was the last afternoon that Thirty-Three and Five would ever experience. The next morning, a local game warden would find their bloody, lifeless bodies on the side of the road.

Tucked in a hallway at Louisiana State University's Museum of Natural Science, two adult whooping cranes and a tawny chick stand in the midst of *paille fine* grass and reeds, a little world unto itself. A frog dangles from the mouth of one as the other looks out, almost scornfully, across the waterlogged land. When the diorama, one of three highlighting "Louisiana's Past," was unveiled, in March 1959, there were 39 live whooping cranes remaining on the planet—barely more than there were taxidermied museum specimens. The chick in the LSU display, still covered in fluffy plumage and measuring 33 inches tall, had hatched at Audubon Park Zoo, in New Orleans, nearly three years earlier to much anticipation. ("Fans Biting Nails in Vigil Over Whooping Crane Eggs," read a headline in the *News Journal*, of Wilmington, Delaware.) But it would perish 45 days later, felled by a fungal lung infection.

The chick's mother, Josephine, had been one of the last surviving whooping cranes in Louisiana. Captured with an injured wing in 1940, she had spent nearly all of the next 25 years at the Audubon Park Zoo under the care of a superintendent whose "most outstanding zoological skill was his ability to hang onto a whooping crane once he got his hands on it," Faith McNulty wrote in her 1966 book, *The Whooping Crane*. During that time Josephine was the sole breeding female in captivity in the world, laying an impressive 52 eggs. But only 12 chicks hatched and of those just 4 survived to adulthood. None produced offspring of its own, meaning that Josephine's valuable genetic line was lost to history when she died, in 1965. After her death, she too was taxidermied and placed on display at LSU, in the museum's Hall of Birds.

The whooping crane, *Grus americana*, first emerged in the early Pleistocene, roaming the continental along with other megafauna, includ-

ing the saber-toothed tiger and the glyptodon, a large mammal resembling an armadillo but weighing three metric tons. The whooping crane's geographic range, before the last ice age, is thought to have extended from the coast of the Arctic to central Mexico. Its peak population is estimated at some 10,000 birds. Their numbers quickly fell as civilization encroached, largely thanks to habitat loss and hunting, and by the 1870s were thought to have dropped to around 1,400. "As the human population curve goes up, the Whooping Crane curve goes down. This is a bird that cannot compromise or adjust its way of life to ours. Could not by its very nature; could not even if we had allowed it the opportunity, which we did not," wrote Robert Porter Allen, an Audubon research biologist, in an expansive 1952 monograph on the bird.

Allen theorized that the wild whooping cranes that inhabited Louisiana until the middle of the past century may have begun to nest where they wintered during the Quaternary glaciation, when their normal, northerly nesting grounds were frozen over. Cajun trappers often referred to seeing *la grue blanche* deep in the marshes near White Lake, but scientists did not confirm the existence of the colony until 1939, when John J. Lynch, a biologist with the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey,

counted thirteen cranes—including two juveniles—during an aerial survey.

The completion of the Intracoastal Waterway from Vermilion River to Grand Lake likely sped the decline of the Louisiana flock, as it opened up parts of the marsh that had previously been mostly inaccessible to humans. In 1940, after a hurricane blew through, only six cranes were counted, and over the next decade, that number dwindled to one. The decision was made to capture that crane, in hopes it would breed in captivity. In March 1950, after a long helicopter chase through the marsh, Lynch caught the bird. Assumed to be male and christened Mac, the crane spent a rocky few days in Aransas, during which he refused food, before he was released back into the wild. Six months later his dead body was found on the shore of a lake. The necropsy did not determine a cause of death but did reveal that Mac had been female.

That the whooper did not slip away and join the great auk and the passenger pigeon in oblivion can be credited to the federal government's decision, in 1937, to purchase 47,261 acres of land on the Blackjack Peninsula, midway between Corpus Christi and Port Lavaca, which President Franklin Delano Roosevelt turned into the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge by executive order.

Whooping cranes are territorial creatures that require a lot of room, take years to reach sexual maturity, and lay only two eggs each time they nest, all of which makes saving them a slow and vexing process. After hitting an all-time low of fifteen or sixteen birds in 1941, the Aransas flock reached one hundred birds for the first time in 1987, and its numbers more than three times as many today. In addition to habitat conservation, captive breeding successes and legal protections have contributed to the rebound since the forties. This work has also helped plenty of less-charismatic species. "There's a lot of other endangered and threatened species who are probably tiny and not so cute and majestic who need the wetland habitat just as much, but you're not going to get the public attention and support for some kind of tiny snail," Zimorski said. "So there's a larger benefit for protecting the cranes."

The first attempt to establish another self-sustaining wild flock began in 1975: whooping crane eggs were placed in the nests of sandhill cranes at a national wildlife refuge in Idaho. Though the population reached a high of 33 birds in 1985, the project was halted four years later because the birds were imprinting on the sandhills and were not pairing with other whooping cranes.

Florida was selected for the second reintro-

OUR PRIDE RUNS DEEP

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY COMMERCE

APPLY NOW

40+
GRADUATE PROGRAMS
INCLUDING DOCTORAL

Earn your graduate degree from a nationally recognized, accredited university. Texas A&M University-Commerce has been classified as Doctoral University-Higher Research Activity (R2) by the Carnegie Classification 2015 Update.

Apply today at:
TAMUC.EDU
7 LOCATIONS + ONLINE

duction site, and some 289 whoopers were released around Kissimmee beginning in 1993. But the birds failed to thrive, and the project was scrapped eleven years later. (Fewer than 10 cranes survive there today.) A third reintroduced flock, the Eastern Migratory Population, has been more successful and now numbers around 100 birds. Using ultralight aircraft, pilots with the nonprofit Operation Migration have taught these reintroduced cranes to migrate between Wisconsin and Florida. But this flock is not yet self-sustaining, as the birds have had trouble reproducing.

Louisiana was thought to have better habitat and less human encroachment than Flor-

ida, and after several years of study, the area around White Lake was selected for the next project. Plans to reintroduce cranes to Louisiana had been floated since the seventies, and the state was also appealing because scientists there had successfully shepherded the brown pelican and the American alligator back from the brink. The first birds arrived in February 2011, when ten chicks—seven females and three males—from Patuxent were delivered to the marsh.

Carrie Salyers, another biologist with the wildlife and fisheries department, greeted the birds with a poster that read, “Welcome Back to Louisiana.” A handful of invited guests

watched in awe as the birds were released into the pen and began making themselves at home. “All present sensed the historic magnitude of the occasion,” wrote Gay Gomez, a McNeese State University professor who has researched the history of the Louisiana cranes.

Since then, a total of 75 young birds have been released into the marsh, 36 of which survive to date. Some have been killed by predators—bobcats, coyotes, birds of prey. Others have died from pneumonia or parasitic flatworms. Still others have collided with power lines. And the disappearance of 9 birds is a mystery, as their carcasses were never found. But the single biggest cause of death is shootings. Ten birds have died after having been shot, which represents 27 percent of the flock’s mortality, a fact Zimorski and her colleagues find particularly dispiriting.

On the morning of Monday, January 11, Texas game warden Mike Boone was at his house, packing a bag for a water-survival training class, when his cellphone rang. A landowner from Nome was calling to report a strange interaction he’d had on a road near his house. A teenager driving a tan car had flagged down the landowner and said that he’d just seen someone in a gray car shoot two whooping cranes. Well aware of the birds’ presence in Nome, Boone put on his cowboy hat, jumped in his truck, and headed out. Not five minutes later, as Boone was en route, another local called to say he’d heard the same story from the same teenager, except this time the boy had said the shooter was driving a gray pickup. “The story didn’t make sense from one landowner to the next, so I said, ‘Try to get the license plate, because that’s gonna be our shooter,’” Boone recounted to me recently.

Within thirty minutes of the first call, Boone was on the scene. He recovered one bird from the levee next to the road and another forty feet away, on a gravel pull-off, next to some dark scuff marks. He then called U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special agent Jim Stinebaugh. It just so happened that Stinebaugh, who is based north of The Woodlands, had spent the weekend focused on the protection of whooping cranes. He’d been down on the water near San Jose and Matagorda islands with some other agents and Wade Harrell, the agency’s whooping crane recovery coordinator. While performing surprise compliance checks on waterfowl hunters out in their boats, they were also taking informal surveys about whooping cranes to gauge the level of awareness about the birds among hunters.

“The very next day after we were down in Aransas I got a call from Jim,” Harrell told me. “I could kind of hear from his voice that something was wrong. He said, ‘You’ll never

THE STAGE IS SET FOR LIVE MUSIC AND MORE

Pat Green live at The Cajun Catfish Festival

The streets of downtown Conroe will come alive with three days of continuous live music on three stages October 14-16 as the Conroe Cajun Catfish Festival celebrates its 27th year. Special headline artist for this year is renowned American Texas Country artist, Pat Green.

The fun doesn't stop once the midway is a memory. November 13-21 our 22,000-acre Lake Conroe plays host to The Academy Sports + Outdoors B.A.S.S. Nation Championship presented by Magellan Outdoors.

Order your 24 page Visitors Guide today.

CONROE TEXAS
CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU
1-877-426-6763
PlayInConroe.com

VisitConroe (tx)

TM10-16

guess, but I've got two dead whooping cranes in my truck. Evidently there was a shooting over here just after we were all down the coast doing that detail in Aransas."

While Boone was processing the crime scene, some birders arrived. "A couple of them pulled up and there was only one whooping crane left and they asked me, 'Where are the other two?' And I said, 'Well, we had a little issue with a boy.' It brought tears to their eyes," Boone said. Meanwhile, the third crane spent the next week wandering the fields looking for his friends. "I don't know where that one ended up going, but for a few days it kind of stood around hollering," Broussard, the rice farmer, told me.

Boone took the birds' bodies to a veterinary clinic in Sour Lake, where they were x-rayed, and it was determined that they had been shot with a small-caliber rifle. Later that week, formal necropsies were performed at the Clark Bavin National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Lab, in Ashland, Oregon. Harrell confirmed from the numbers etched into the birds' leg bands that they were from the Louisiana flock. In fact, they were Thirty-Three and Five. "We knew for a while that the three birds were in that area, but we didn't have a reason to believe they were in any danger," Harrell said.

On Tuesday Stinebaugh and Boone were back at the scene, searching for shell casings with a dog and working leads in the area. Within a few hours, they'd identified the likely shooter as Trey Frederick, an eighteen-year-old pipe welder whom another landowner had discovered on his property a couple of weeks earlier, looking for some geese to shoot with his small-caliber rifle.

That afternoon they found Frederick, a young man with curly auburn hair, at his home in La Belle, a tiny community southwest of Beaumont. At five foot three inches, he was barely taller than a whooping crane. He'd been napping after another hunt. A few dead wood ducks sat on his porch, yet to be plucked, and his waders were still draped on the back of a tan Saturn.

When he answered the door, he told the officers that he was glad to see them because "he was upset about what happened to the whooping cranes and thought that he might be able to help solve the case," according to a federal court filing. But he quickly confessed to shooting the two birds with his rifle, though he claimed he hadn't known they were whooping cranes until after "harvesting" them. A search of the car he'd been driving revealed shell casings and a rifle.

Soon, Frederick began spilling the details

of the shooting. At around 9:45 a.m. the day before, he had piloted his grandmother's sedan off the state highway and onto the caliche road outside Nome. His black lab, Rio, sat in the passenger seat beside him. He'd spent the morning hunting geese nearby with a few companions but left in search of other quarry. He pulled up alongside the cranes, who were foraging in the field adjacent to the road, leveled his .17-caliber rifle at them, and fired.

One of them fell over quickly on the levee and stilled, but the other was only wounded. The temptation of the bird flopping on the ground proved too much for Rio to resist, and he bounded out the window. (The third crane somehow escaped harm, perhaps flying away after being spooked by the gunfire.) Frederick rushed to pull Rio off the crane, but not before the dog mauled the bird, leaving its rump drenched in blood. Once Frederick had retrieved his retriever, he returned to the car and sped away.

Frederick turned down an interview request on his attorney's advice, but photographs and posts online offer a glimpse of him. He had grown up around Winnie and La Belle, had a talent for duck calling, and, in his high school yearbook, had earned the distinction of "worst driver." He tried to spend every waking moment

HAVE YOU SEEN DOROTHY?

HaveYouSeenDorothy.org



Affiliated with Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

roaming the wilds of East Texas, whether fishing, shooting deer, or, his favorite, duck hunting. He claims to have killed his first duck as a toddler, pulling the trigger as his dad aimed the gun. On Facebook he lists his favorite quote as "If it flies, it dies!!" and in photos he rarely appears without his recent kills, whether a slender coyote or a bulging black drum or a mound of ducks. As a juvenile, he'd received a few citations for hunting violations but none for anything this grave.

Given his enthusiasm for hunting, people around Beaumont scoffed at the idea that he hadn't known what he was shooting. And soon enough, it emerged that on the Friday prior to

poaching the cranes, Frederick and Rio had gone goose hunting on some public land with a group of people, including a man named Patrick Husband. At one point during their hunt, Frederick had said that he wanted to shoot at a group of sandhill cranes flying overhead. Husband warned him not to, telling him that it was illegal to shoot sandhill cranes at any time of year in Jefferson County (and, in fact, all of Texas east of Interstate 35 and north of U.S. 290). "I didn't want anyone doing anything illegal out there with me, period," Husband said.

Husband told Frederick that there were some whooping cranes in the area, which could be confused with sandhill cranes when

silhouetted in flight, and stressed that whoopers were endangered. Husband was friends with Thompson, the custom window-blind vendor, and showed Frederick the photos that Thompson had posted to his Facebook page of the very cranes Frederick would later kill. "I showed him these pictures of these whooping cranes and said, 'This is the reason why you can't kill those sandhills. There are whooping cranes here and they look a lot alike.' I tried to educate the guy, because that's what you do with youth," Husband told me. "Well, he's a real cocky type of kid, and after I had spoken all this to him, he says, 'I'll shoot them sons of bitches,'" referring to the whooping cranes, an encounter he later described to Stinebaugh in a statement. "That really got me mad. After that I thought to myself, 'This is the last time I'll hunt with this guy.'"

Three days later, the whooping cranes were dead. "I do feel bad for him in a way, because he's real young. Young and stupid. But we've all been young and stupid and we didn't go out shooting endangered species," Husband said.

On Southeast Texas Duck Hunters, a Facebook group where Frederick's case enjoyed a spirited discussion, most were quick to condemn him. "Pathetic," one man wrote. Another chimed in: "He knew how special they were. I can only imagine that he did it for pure meanness." Some hunters in the group organized a trip to the courthouse to see him in person at his first hearing, held in late January. "They need to give him the max [restitution] per bird, that way he can think about them two birds every day he works for the next few years," one hunter offered on Facebook before the hearing.

For many, the worst part was that Frederick killed the cranes intentionally. Norma Barnes, the 91-year-old birder who saw the cranes the day before they died, did not mince words: "The attitude of that boy, with his 'If it flies, it dies' mantra—that's such a redneck, dumbass attitude toward life, it's disgusting."

Although Frederick could have been charged with several state crimes—including shooting a migratory bird with a rifle, hunting from a public road, and trespassing—the decision was made to pursue federal charges under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which carried higher penalties. (He was later charged with violating the Endangered Species Act.) I drove down to Beaumont in March for one of Frederick's hearings. He had traded in his usual camo for a black jacket and khakis, over a pair of scuffed tan and orange work boots. His curly hair was flattened on top, giving the impression he'd recently been wearing a hat. In the courtroom he nervously passed a manila | **CONTINUED ON PAGE 146**

RUFFLED FEATHERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 140

folder from hand to hand as he waited for the judge to come in. At the hearing, he pleaded not guilty, to the disappointment of birders who had come out to watch. In May I returned for another hearing. Frederick changed his plea to guilty, admitting to a violation of the Endangered Species Act, as Stinebaugh and Boone looked on in the courtroom. Joe Batte, the assistant U.S. attorney prosecuting the case, had not hammered out a plea deal for a reduced sentence with Frederick, so the punishment he faces—up to a year in jail, a fine of \$50,000, and other possible restitution—will be decided by the judge at his sentencing hearing this fall.

Whooping crane conservationists were especially dismayed by Frederick's wanton act. "The shooter did not just kill two birds. The shooter stole the deep monetary investment of governments and nonprofit organizations in Canada and the United States. The shooter endangered the very existence of this struggling species," Elizabeth Smith, the Texas program director for the International Crane Foundation, wrote in a letter to the judge overseeing the case. To shepherd a crane from hatch to release costs \$85,000, ac-

ording to an estimate from the foundation.

Shooting incidents—most of them brazen acts of poaching rather than accidents during legitimate hunting—have been on the rise in recent years. "We simply cannot guarantee the recovery of this species if poaching continues at the current rate," Smith wrote. In addition to the ten cranes shot and killed in Louisiana, known shooting incidents have claimed fourteen cranes from the Eastern Migratory Population since it was established, in 2001, and twelve from the Aransas population since 1967. Many times the perpetrator is never found. "Somebody has to be made an example of at some point, because there are too many cases that, unfortunately, haven't been solved, so then the message is sort of, 'You can get away with it,'" Zimorski told me.

The range of punishments in other crane shooting cases has varied widely, from a \$1 fine assessed in an Indiana state court in 2009 to \$85,000 in restitution ordered in 2012 by a federal court in South Dakota. A Dallas man who shot a whooping crane near Lake Bardwell in 2003 and then transported the carcass, a violation of the Lacey Act, was sentenced to six months in jail and had his hunting rights in the United States permanently suspended. As I was reporting this story, two yearling cranes released in 2015 were found shot to

death by the side of the road in Acadia Parish. No one has yet been arrested in connection with their deaths, though a \$9,000 reward has been offered.

But one muggy Friday afternoon this April, I had the chance to see a more hopeful side of the project. Zimorski met me at a gas station off Interstate 10 in Jefferson Davis Parish and drove me out to the edge of a crawfish pond. There, for the next couple of hours, we sat in Zimorski's truck and peered through binoculars at a pair of five-year-old whooping cranes some three hundred yards away, who were taking turns sitting on their nest.

I was immediately awed in their presence, inspired by something in their manner and carriage. The whooping crane is a striking bird, and not just because of its height; after all, most would not describe an emu, which can top six feet, as majestic. (Later, when I listened to the tape of this interview with Zimorski, I found that every time the cranes stood up or flapped their wings I would audibly gasp.) The male crane dutifully sat on the nest, standing up from time to time to adjust the eggs underneath him as his mate foraged in the pond, taking deliberate, measured steps, and policing the area nearby as necessary. At one point, an egret strayed too close to the nest and the female crane chased it off. "They often seem



ENTER FOR A CHANCE TO WIN!

The Visit Lubbock Sweepstakes includes a two-night stay at the Overton Hotel & Conference Center, four passes to the Buddy Holly Center, a wine tasting at one of Lubbock's award-winning wineries, and a weekend full of the best cuisine the "Hub City" has to offer. **Visit texasmonthly.com/promotions to enter. >>**

VISIT LUBBOCK

THIS IS WEST TEXAS

like they're the big bullies of the bird world. Like they know that they're bigger than everybody else," Zimorski said.

The scene was perfect South Louisiana pastoral, with a yellow crop duster flying over a field and a crawfish boat working its way through the pond. When the project began, the assumption was that cranes would primarily inhabit the marshes around White Lake. But the birds quickly discovered the crawfish ponds and rice fields a bit farther north, and now they spend a significant amount of time in agricultural settings. "Essentially a rice and crawfish field is managed as a shallow wetland. It's a safe place that has tons of

food," Zimorski explained.

It was the second year this particular pair of cranes had nested, and I found myself rooting for them. (I later learned from Zimorski that neither of their nest attempts succeeded this spring.) They were one of five pairs of Louisiana cranes that would nest this year, up from four in 2015. The week had been a historic one for the project, as four days before my visit a biologist observing a different nest in the parish noticed something small and brown moving where an egg had previously been laid. It flopped over, and she realized it was a chick, the first wild whooping crane to hatch in Louisiana since 1939. Two days later,

a hatchling emerged from the nest's second egg. This winter Zimorski expects to release more than twenty young cranes at White Lake and Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge, the largest number to date. "We hope that will continue for the next few years and really help this population grow," she said.

A month later, I found myself in another truck, staring out over a similar landscape, but this time in Jefferson County with Boone, the Texas game warden. I'd met him at Frederick's hearing, and he'd offered to take me out to see where the shooting had taken place. An amiable man with a thick East Texas drawl and salt-and-pepper hair, he'd talked excitedly on the drive to Nome about filming episodes of *Lone Star Law*, a new Animal Planet series about Texas game wardens that premiered in June. (He endeared himself with audiences during the premiere when he rescued a large, uncooperative alligator snapping turtle that had turned up in someone's yard, lugging it with his bare hands into the back of his truck before releasing the ornery reptile, which he nicknamed Wilbur, into a nearby creek.) I was expecting an expert tour of the crime scene, but the day also brought a feathered surprise. As we drove, Boone revealed that when he'd called Broussard earlier that morning to say we were headed to the spot where the shooting had taken place, Broussard mentioned that he had more cranes on his property. Boone had a hard time believing him at first, but then Broussard added that they had trackers on their legs.

When we rolled down that caliche road some thirty minutes later, we were greeted by the sight of three magnificent cranes. They were feeding one field over from where Thirty-Three and Five had been killed. A quick call to Zimorski confirmed their identities: the bird who'd escaped the shooting had flown back to Louisiana and rendezvoused with two other birds—a new female and the male who had initially come to Texas as part of the 2015 foursome. They'd arrived earlier that month.

We pulled up to the levee and stared at them for half an hour as they walked and preened in the field, working their way closer and closer to Boone's truck. This encounter, because it was unanticipated, felt all the more remarkable. The day was overcast, and the trio paid no heed to a red-winged blackbird that was angrily dive-bombing them to protect its nearby nest. Through my binoculars, I was able to see their frosty yellow eyes.

As we were leaving, a man in a gold pickup slowly drove by. He rolled down the window and told Boone, "These are our birds. We're going to watch over them and make sure no one hurts them." 🗺️

Retreat. Relax.
Always a Great Time in Kerrville!

Historic Downtown • Great Shopping • Texas Hill Country Wineries
The Guadalupe River Trail • Museums • Galleries • Theater Arts

KERRVILLE
CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

KerrvilleTexasCVB.com • 800-221-7958