

Ottawa Proposes a Sandhill Crane Hunt

By Ian Urquhart

In February the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) proposed to introduce a sandhill crane hunt to Alberta. Saskatchewan and Manitoba already have hunting seasons for these migratory birds, as do most of the U.S. states in the Central Flyway. According to the proposed amendments to the Canadian Migratory Birds Regulations, this new hunting opportunity was repeatedly requested by hunters. Some Alberta farmers also wanted the hunt as a way to address crop damage caused by the cranes.

Apart from responding to this political pressure, the CWS's Waterfowl Technical Committee cited the increasing trend in the mid-continent sandhill crane population over the last generation. The latest three-year average of this population is well-above management plan objectives. Based on harvest estimates, the Committee felt that an Alberta hunt only would increase Canada's harvest by less than five percent.

Regardless of this data, AWA urged the federal government not to establish this hunt. Here, the whooping crane, listed as endangered under the Species at Risk Act (SARA) was a very important consideration. The Alberta hunt is intended to take place in wildlife management units that "avoid known Whooping crane migratory routes." (my emphasis) The Committee also based its recommendation on information and hunter education. The proposed amendment with respect to Alberta states:

Whooping crane descriptions are currently published online and in Alberta's guide to hunting regulations. Educating hunters to differ-

ences between Whooping cranes and Snow geese has been done for several years and will be amended to include Sandhill cranes.

It also stated that, if the Aransas/Wood Buffalo migratory population appears in an area open for sandhill crane hunting, "risk will be assessed and measures taken to protect them by altering hunting areas in the future."

AWA believes the CWS should give more importance here to the precautionary principle. Jaydee Hanson invites us to think of the precautionary principle as a collective or societal expression of the Hippocratic principle "first, do no harm." Unlike Hippocrates' medical oath, the precautionary principle applies to more than just human health. It applies to environmental health as well.

With respect to the proposed sandhill crane hunt, AWA believes we need more research to establish, with a very high degree of certainty, that these wildlife management units are well outside of whooping crane migratory routes. While the recovery of the Aransas/Wood Buffalo migratory population is developing into a conservation success story, the whooper's recovery is fragile. If this population appears in an area open to sandhill crane hunting, it is certainly possible that years of recovery progress could end up in the game bags of bird hunters.

But, the CWS seems to believe that species information and hunter education will make it very unlikely that hunters targeting sandhill cranes would shoot a whooping crane by mistake. This assumption is base-



Sandhill cranes? Whooping cranes? With very similar in-flight silhouettes these two species will be difficult to distinguish in the light of early dawn or dusk. PHOTO: © C. OLSON





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less. In the first place, contrary to the quote above, Alberta's 2019 guide to hunting regulations DOES NOT contain a description of whooping cranes. Whooping cranes are not mentioned at all in those regulations. Furthermore, if hunters are being educated about the differences between whooping cranes and snow geese, this education is not coming from Alberta's hunting regulations. Those regulations only provide hunters with a drawing showing the differences between snow geese and swans.

Hunting sandhill cranes should be seen as a recommendation posing an unnecessary and unwarranted risk to the recovery of the Aransas/Wood Buffalo whooping crane population. Precaution should guide government here. It's preferable to err on the side of caution. 