Whooping Crane Survey Results: Winter 2025–2026
540 Wild Whooping Cranes Estimated (*95% CI = 482.7–608.8) in Primary Survey Area*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated the abundance of whooping cranes in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population for the winter of 2025–2026. Preliminary analyses of the survey indicated 540 whooping cranes (95% CI = 482.7–608.8; CV = 0.062) inhabited the primary survey area (Figure 1). This estimate included at least 57 juveniles (95% CI = 47.0–68.3; CV = 0.093) and 143 adult pairs (95% CI = 126.7–164.2; CV = 0.065). Recruitment of juveniles into the winter flock this winter was 12.0 chicks (95% CI = 10.2–13.9; CV = 0.079) per 100 adults.

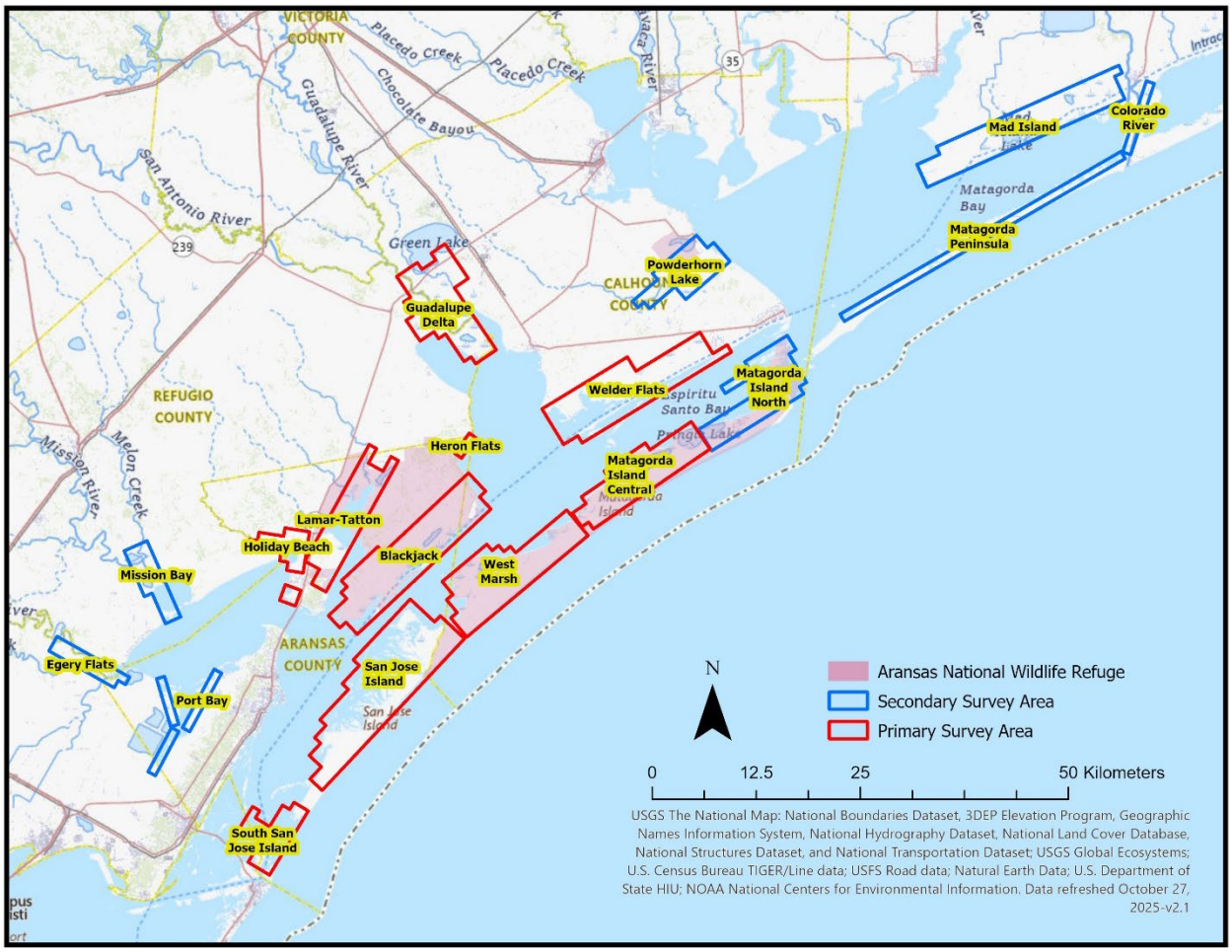

Figure 1. The sampling area used to monitor whooping crane abundance on their wintering grounds along the Texas coast of the Gulf of America, USA.

During winter 2025–2026, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted surveys in late January 2026 using a Quest Kodiak aircraft. The primary survey areas (approximately 190,250 acres; Figure 1) were flown five times during January 21–29, 2026. The secondary survey areas (approximately 80,800 acres; Figure 1) were flown once on January 29, 2026. This survey was a cooperative effort conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System in Region 2, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Migratory Bird Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ecological Services, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service Texas Restoration Program. Additional support for the survey was provided by the Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority.

The long-term growth rate (winter 1938–1939 to winter 2025–2026) in the whooping crane population has averaged 4.24% (*n* = 84; 95% CI = 1.74–6.66%). The population has appeared to remain stable (Table 1; Figure 2) and population growth since winter 2015–2016 averaged 1.28% (*n* = 8, 95% CI = –0.58 to 3.09%). The Canadian Wildlife Service reported at least 66 whooping crane chicks were fledged at Wood-Buffalo National Park in summer 2025. We estimated 57 juveniles (95% CI = 47.0–68.3) in the primary survey area this year.

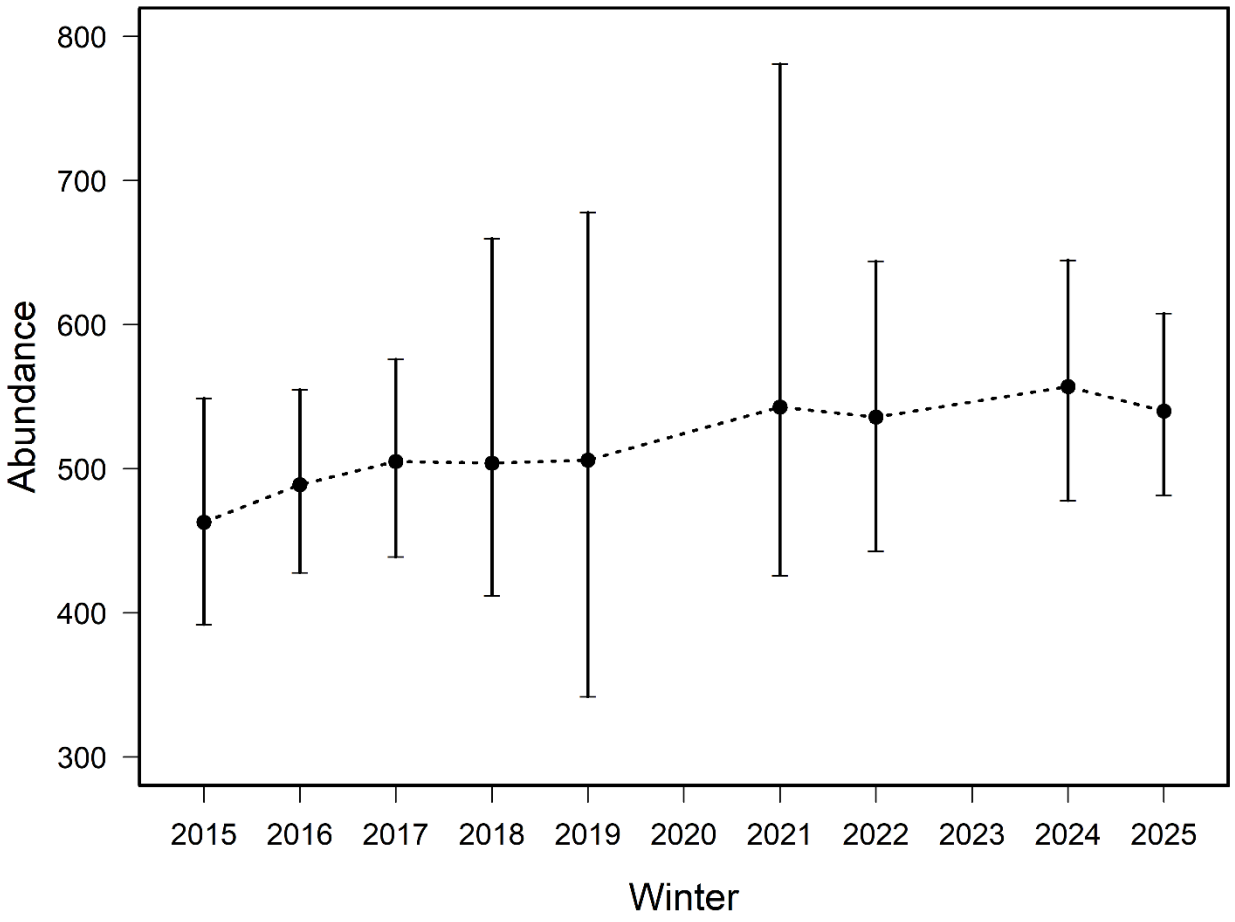

Figure 2. Time-series of whooping crane abundance estimates and 95% confidence intervals for the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population on their wintering grounds (primary sampling frame), winter 2015–2016 through winter 2025–2026.

During the survey period, many whooping cranes were observed outside of the primary survey areas. Table 2 provides our best understanding of whooping cranes outside the primary survey areas during the survey period. We cannot ascertain if all or some of these birds moved in and out of the primary survey area during the survey period. Therefore, some unknown number of birds may be missed while others counted.

The survey protocol contains guidelines for promoting secondary survey areas into the primary survey areas. During winter 2021–2022, we observed enough whooping crane groups in the Heron Flats and the South San Jose Island survey areas to promote them into the primary survey area. These two areas were included as part of the primary survey area beginning in winter 2022–2023. During winter 2024–2025, the observed number of whooping cranes within the Guadalupe Delta survey area met the criteria for inclusion in this winter's surveys. Though whooping crane groups were observed in secondary survey areas this winter, not enough detections were made to meet the criteria to include new secondary survey areas into the primary survey area.

Table 1. Preliminary whooping crane abundance estimates for the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population on their wintering grounds, winter 2015–2016 through winter 2025–2026.

Survey year[a]	Survey month	Aircraft	Abundance[b]	CV	95% LCL	95% UCL	No. assumed beyond primary survey area[c]
winter 2015–2016	March	Kodiak	463	0.095	392	549	8
winter 2016–2017	March	Kodiak	489	0.116	428	555	6
winter 2017–2018	February	Kodiak	505	0.069	439	576	21
winter 2018–2019	February	Kodiak	504	0.122	412	660	12
winter 2019–2020	January	Kodiak	506	0.168	342	678	29
winter 2021–2022	January	Kodiak	543	0.182	426	781	38
winter 2022–2023	January	Kodiak	536	0.146	443	644	14
winter 2024–2025	January	Kodiak	557	0.137	478	645	68
winter 2025–2026	January	Kodiak	540	0.062	482	608	52

[a] Surveys were not conducted during winter 2020–2021 and winter 2023–2024.

[b] Estimated whooping crane abundance in the primary sampling area using aerial surveys and hierarchical distance sampling. CV = coefficient of variation, LCL = lower confidence limit, and UCL = upper confidence limit.

[c] Provides our best understanding of the number of whooping cranes, at the time of the aerial surveys, that were outside of the primary survey areas. This information was based on data from Texas Whooper Watch, eBird reports, iNaturalist reports, the Whooping Crane Tracking Partnership, and aerial surveys conducted in the secondary survey areas.

Table 2. Whooping cranes documented outside of the primary survey area during January 21–29, 2026.

General area[a]	Data source	Adults	Juveniles	Total	Notes
Alfalfa County, Oklahoma	eBird, iNaturalist	6	2	8	Multiple family groups detected overwintering near Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge.
Mad Island (secondary survey area)	Aerial Survey, eBird	7	0	7	Multiple family groups detected during the survey period.
Matagorda Island North (secondary survey area)	Aerial Survey	4	0	4	Multiple family groups detected during the survey period.
Mission Bay (secondary survey area)	Aerial Survey	2	1	3	One family group detected during the survey period.
Nueces County, Texas (near Leonabelle Turnbull Birding Center)	eBird, iNaturalist	2	0	2	One family group reported during the survey period.
Powderhorn Lake (secondary survey area)	Aerial Survey, Whooping Crane Tracking Partnership	4	0	4	Multiple family groups detected during the survey period.
Wharton and Colorado Counties, Texas	International Crane Foundation, eBird	20	4	24	Multiple family groups reported during the survey period. Groups used flooded agricultural habitat in the two counties throughout the winter.

[a] All the secondary survey areas were flown once on January 29, 2026.

The data and results presented in this report are preliminary and subject to revision. This information is distributed solely for the purpose of providing the most recent information from aerial surveys. This information does not represent and should not be construed to represent any U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determination or policy.

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