



National Fire Plan

Homeowners, Birdwatchers Benefit from Prescribed Burns that Protect Whooping Cranes

Whooping cranes at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Texas responded well to the effects of prescribed burning in their wintering habitat. While the fires were conducted primarily to benefit this critically endangered species, they served a dual purpose in reducing the density of a plant called running live oak that can pose a wildfire risk to nearby coastal communities.

Although in winter the cranes maintain a steady diet of blue crab and various clam species, they also use upland sites for fresh water and alternate food sources such as acorns from running live oak. The problem is that this type of oak tends to grow quickly, rendering parts of the refuge preferred by the cranes unusable to them once the oaks reach about 1 meter in height.

Prescribed fire is used here in late winter and early spring because it essentially prunes the top portion of the oak, allowing it to sprout again from its roots. Certain areas on the refuge are burned on a three-year rotation to allow the oaks to mature to the point that they produce acorns as well as to improve coastal savanna habitat. Fifteen burn units totaling 5,199 hectares on the Blackjack Peninsula are managed for whooping cranes. Reducing grass and brush also makes insects, crayfish, and snails more visible to the birds. The bay side of Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge, a coastal barrier island in Calhoun County, also is burned for in winter to benefit whooping cranes. Surveys conducted in 2003 and 2004 show that the birds return area the day after prescribed burns and keep returning to the area. Crane densities also increased in burned areas.

The latest burning season, which began in December 6, 2005 and ended March 31, 2006, totaled 4,390 acres on Aransas refuge and 2,606 acres on Matagorda Island refuge.

Whooping cranes were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s, hunted relentlessly for their elegant plumage. Today, there are nearly 500 birds in the wild.

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