



*The bright white cranes are whoopers; the others are sandhills.*

one egg is smaller or somewhat misshapen, it is chosen and the more promising egg left in the nest. Both eggs from non-reproductive parents are also taken, and one is replaced with an egg from a more successful pair. Each chosen egg is slipped carefully into a thick wool sock and returned to the helicopter where it is transferred to an incubator suitcase heated with hot water bottles. The helicopter flies on to the next nest until the operation is completed. (One year one nest was found with three eggs and two were removed.)

Fourteen eggs were collected in 1975 and flown south in a cabin plane. The cabin pressure was manipulated to approximately 4,500 feet, a compromise between the altitudes at Grays Lake, which range from 750 feet to 6,390. Oxygen was fed to the eggs every five or ten minutes.

At Idaho Falls, Idaho, a US customs official gave the eggs quick entry and the scientists climbed into a small helicopter with the incubating suitcases on their laps. Thirty-five minutes later they landed on a large island in Grays Lake, transferred to shallow-draft air boats and head for the nests. One sandhill egg had been removed from each selected nest before the day the whooper eggs arrived. The second was exchanged for a single whooper egg. An aerial survey the next day showed the nesting sandhills back on the job. Three eggs proved infertile and two were lost to predators. Nine hatched. One of the chicks was killed in a June snowstorm and two disappeared in July. The remaining six survived and five were colour banded. Seven months after hatching at least five had made it to the sandhills' winter quarters near the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. The whoopers, larger than the sandhills, have no trouble defending themselves among other cranes. Two winters ago one



*Nesting cranes usually produce two eggs but only one baby, a fact that underlies the joint US-Canada survival program.*

whooper-sandhill family selected a Texas cattle feeding trough as their main source of food. The whooper kept both other sandhills and the steers away when he wanted to eat.

Drought has made survival difficult in more recent years, making chicks easier prey to coyotes and reducing available food, but the experiment is clearly a success. This winter the Grays Lake flock included nine or ten whoopers. However, to Ernst Kuyt, the man who selects the eggs from Wood Buffalo, the increased survival rate there is the most important result of the experiment. The Grays Lake whoopers are simply a bonus. Since 1975 the original whooping flock at Wood Buffalo National Park (which kept the more promising eggs) has increased by 30 cranes. The flock now has 74 birds.