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Stehn says,
 "Whenever we get northerners,
 people call up wanting to
 know what I'm doing to pro-
 tect the whoopers. I'm tempted
 to tell them I've knitted the
 birds some sweaters."

fifteen miles inland and then truck it to a disposal site."

To keep the dredgings in the bay and save money, Mitchell needed permission from not only the Corps of Engineers but also the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Texas General Land Office, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The breakthrough came when Templet and whooping crane expert Tom Stehn, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist at the Aransas refuge, hit upon the notion of creating whooping crane habitat out of the waste. The idea was so farfetched that some proponents of the project doubted they could get permission. "Most people said you couldn't get a permit like the one we did, but the way we did it was the difference. We made the government agencies a part of the planning process," Templet said. He and other Mitchell officials wooed the agencies by asking them how the company could accomplish its drilling objective and also help the environment. When Stehn mentioned the erosion problem at the refuge, creating additional crane habitat seemed a perfect solution.

The agencies not only acquiesced, they gave the project their blessing, for whooping cranes have taken on an almost revered status along the Texas coast. "Whenever we get cold northerners and when freezes are expected, people call up wanting to know what I'm doing to protect the whoopers from the storm," says Stehn. "I'm tempted one of these days to tell folks I've knitted the birds some sweaters."

In the end, Mitchell spent much less than the disposal might have cost—\$750,000 instead of several million—but the company put in considerable extra effort to do things right. It hired estuary biologists to design an ideal ecosystem and consulted Stehn and other whooping crane experts each step of the way. The project was almost an overnight success,

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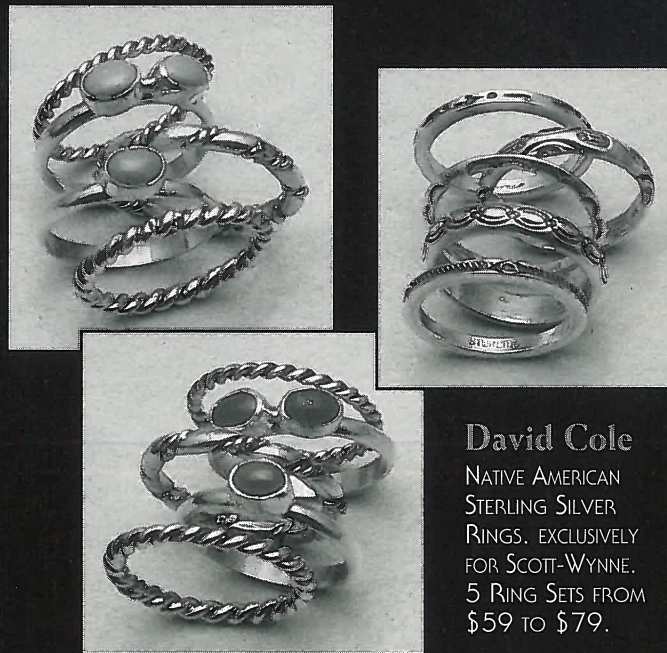
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Homing Instinct

by Jane Grandolfo

How a Texas oil company took a mountain of coastal muck and created a cozy abode for whooping cranes.

FOR CENTURIES, WHOOPING CRANES HAVE COME to the foggy wetlands of South Texas to wait out winter, drawn by the mild weather and the salty ponds teeming with blue crabs, sea grass, and razor clams. And for the past fifty years, hundreds of thousands

of oil- and chemical-laden barges have glided through those same marshes, the wake of the boats lapping away at the fertile shore and silently removing three feet a year of whooper habitat from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, near Corpus Christi. Now, because of an unusual alliance between business and environmental interests, the endangered birds—which once dwindled to a migratory flock of fourteen—have more room to stretch their wings.

In 1991 Mitchell Energy and Development, a Houston-based independent natural gas and oil producer owned by multimillionaire George Mitchell, built a 15-acre island, using material dredged from Mesquite Bay, and created a lush habitat for the world's only wild-breeding flock of whooping cranes. The project has been so successful that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has followed suit, building two of its own 23-acre whooper islands several miles from the Mitchell site. And Mitchell Energy now has embarked on phase two of its project: dredging more bay bottom to create an 8.8-acre whooper island adjoining the first one.

Mitchell officials first conceived of the refuge not as a handout to an endangered species but as a cost-effective solution to a sticky problem. Mitchell needed to dig a canal through Mesquite Bay, in the wildlife refuge, to gain access to several natural gas wells. But the company couldn't get the necessary permits unless it found a way to dispose of the 45 acres of bay-bot-

tom muck it planned to dredge up in the process.

Most companies take their dredgings—a slushy mixture of soil, shells, and sand—to an authorized disposal site on high ground. But in this case, the nearest disposal site was about thirteen miles away by water. The cheapest way to deal with the sludge was to leave it in the bay.

"We weren't talking about a little bit of dirt here. We were talking about sixty-five thousand cubic yards," said David Templet, the manager of environmental engineering for Mitchell. "We were going to have to spend up to three million dollars to put it on a barge and haul it thirteen to



Bird Islands: One finished (top center), one under construction (adjoining on left).

company chose instead to use the state-of-the-art interlocking concrete mats.

"They were really committed," said Belaire. "I'm not sure that if I had been in their shoes I would have gone the extra step." Mitchell officials say they knew the work would pay off, but they are especially pleased with one unexpected development.

Between the habitat and nearby Bludworth Island on the refuge, a two-hundred-foot stretch of open water that was once muddy is now clear and still. To everyone's surprise, the whooper habitat has created a barrier from the bay waves that were eroding the edge of Bludworth Island. The still stretch of water now gets the sunlight penetration it needs for vegetation to grow, for small fish to feed and find cover, and for whoopers to peck for shellfish.

The Mitchell island has been such a successful pilot project that several more crane habitats are planned, yet there are no guarantees that the whooper population will swell as a result. The cranes, which mate for life and travel in pairs or families of three, require a minimum of 200 acres of territory per family, says Stehn. An extra 23 acres of new habitat will simply provide a small amount of territory for subadults, young birds that feed on the fringe of an adult bird's territory. "We know there's no assurance that we're going to have ten more birds be-

cause we created fifteen to twenty acres of new habitat," said Mitchell's Temple. "But at least we were able to stem the erosion caused by the barge traffic."

Stehn contends that since whooping cranes have been migrating to the same spot since the Ice Age, the fate of the birds has been inextricably linked to the man-made obstacles thrown into their path, including power lines, ship traffic, and pavement. The flock as a whole is in precarious shape, but when an adult male bird fluffs its feathers, stretches to its full height, and trumpets a warning call, its power and strength are impressive.

"A whooping crane can be a very aggressive, tough bird. Sometimes I think that's the only reason they've managed to survive," Stehn says. "My feeling is if we can just let them have the marsh that they've had for centuries, then they're going to do okay."

On a more somber note, Stehn says he worries that just because the whoopers get so much attention, everyone assumes that they are safe and being watched over. There is little more he can do, he says, than faithfully track their annual migrations to the tidal flats of South Texas each October and fight to keep their habitat intact.

Just in the past eleven years, the number of whoopers has more than doubled. Today about 145 of the birds make the

annual trek from their nesting grounds in northwest Canada to the 55,000-acre Aransas refuge. But 145 is still not many, and wildlife officials are concerned that the one remaining wild flock of whooping cranes could be lost to a hurricane, disease, or a chemical spill—not an impossible scenario given that almost six thousand barges and 14.3 million tons of petrochemicals and other lethal cargo traverse the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge portion of the Intracoastal Waterway yearly.

With the survival of whoopers still hanging in the balance, it is a stirring experience to find oneself close to one of the creatures in the wild. Standing nearly five feet tall, with wings that can span seven and a half feet, the whooping crane is the tallest—and some say the most magnificent—bird in North America. Part of its mystique centers on its loud cry (the whooping sound that gives it its name) and its elaborate courtship rituals, in which the birds leap into the air in a spectacular slow-motion display of wing flapping and head bowing.

Says Stehn: "When I see them, I always feel that they're the ones who belong out here on the marsh and that we, the humans, are the intruders." ♦

Jane Grandolfo is a writer who lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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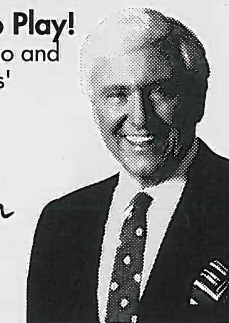
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at least in environmental terms. Nobody expected to see cranes on the Mitchell habitat anytime soon. But three were spotted there in January 1992, even before permanent vegetation had been planted and a food chain established. In the spring of 1993, five more birds appeared. One gray March morning, Charlie Belaire, a Rockport estuarine biologist who helped coordinate planning and whose crews planted Mitchell island, caught a glimpse of an adult and a juvenile whooper feeding along the shore. "When they saw us, they didn't fly away. They just went into the interior of the habitat," he recalled. "Finding them was really exciting."

Belaire and others affirm that the speed with which the whoopers have taken to their new habitat owes a lot to ingenious planning and a keen understanding of the ecosystem. First, the island had to be built while the birds were away, which meant that the workers had only a six-month window of opportunity, from mid-April to mid-October, when the birds live in Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park. It was also critical that the dredged material not settle evenly; a marsh can be productive for whooping cranes only when it has different levels of vegetation, winding bayous, and brush.

With these constraints in mind, biologists and engineers began by building a four-foot-high rectangular levee. Then they began pumping in the mud. It wasn't easy. To create the different elevations, Mitchell engineers moved the dredge pipes daily, sometimes hourly, and stabilized the outside of the levee with interlocking concrete pads. "The hard part was that we were using dirt soup as our building material," said Belaire. "A change in level of two to three inches can drastically alter the dominance of one plant species over another."

The result is a gently undulating island with a combination of submerged and high-marsh vegetation. The higher-elevation plants, including marsh hay cordgrass and Carolina wolfberry, supply the whoopers with good browse, while the algae on the concrete pads furnish food for small fish. In addition, the ponds with aquatic vegetation offer cover for blue crabs and fish.

Today, two years after the planting, the island is almost totally covered with life and blends so well with the natural marshes that casual observers are taken aback. "Even people who don't care about this sort of thing can't believe it," said Belaire. "They gasp. They say it's so lush and complete."

Belaire and other environmentalists praise Mitchell for not taking shortcuts during the habitat construction. The permit, for instance, allowed the company to use inexpensive erosion-control methods, such as rocks and concrete sacks, but the