

# Operation Egglift

## To Save the Whooping Crane

This wildlife film documents a fascinating real-life adventure: the determined efforts of a group of people in Canada and the United States to save the whooping crane from extinction. A beautiful, mysterious and fiercely independent creature, the whooping crane boasts a lineage that can be traced back to the pre-Ice Age. In the early 1940s, the world population of this species stood at only 21. Bird conservationists feared this minuscule number could be wiped out in a storm or by an oil spill near their winter home at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. The film records the persistent attempts of those committed to saving this rare species. When captive breeding failed, it became clear that more comprehensive knowledge of the whooping cranes' habits was a must. But where was their nesting ground? Every spring their migratory flight north could be traced to northern Alberta, at which



point these large birds mysteriously vanished. Finally, on June 30, 1954, co-operative search efforts that involved hundreds of ordinary citizens paid off. A helicopter pilot spotted several whooping cranes in one of the world's most remote wildlife parks, Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories. Now their breeding

habits could be studied. Then, when it was observed that out of the the two eggs in each nest only one chick would survive, someone hit upon an idea that might increase their numbers. "Operation Egglift," an experiment involving foster-parent sandhill cranes, the "whooper's" plentiful cousins, was a gamble that worked. This film will rivet young viewers with its wildlife scenes of a rare and endangered species, and its clear depiction of some of the methods used by conservationists to study and protect bird species. This is in part, a classroom adaptation of the longer film, *A Great White Bird*.

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Color  
Screening time:  
13 minutes 25 seconds

16 mm: 106C 0186 007  
3/4": 116C 0186 007  
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Beta: 114C 0186 007

**Age groups:** Grades 3 to 6

**Subject areas:**

Sciences and environmental studies  
(wildlife/conservation)

**Some questions for discussion:**

1. Why was it so urgent to find the whooping cranes' nesting ground?
2. What methods were tried to increase the numbers of this species? Which one worked?
3. What questions were asked as "Operation Egglift" was planned and executed? Why were they so careful to select suitable foster parents from the sandhill cranes?
4. Conservationists feared that whooping cranes hatched by the foster-parent sandhills might not retain their own species's characteristics. Give some examples of

habits they thought might change. What in fact was the one habit that did change?

5. Why might it be important to preserve rare and endangered species? What various factors contribute to endangering a species?

**Activities:**

1. Find or draw a picture of the whooping crane. Describe its characteristics and habits.
2. Do further research in your library or see the companion film, *Whooping Crane*, or the longer film, *A Great White Bird*. List your findings on the physiology, eating and nesting habits, migratory patterns and other characteristics of this rare bird. Share your research findings with your class.



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