Heart Failure Is Blamed in Death of Whooper

Caused by Hurricane, Old Age, Report

Heart failure — brought on by old age and the stress of Hurricane Betsy — caused the death of Josephine the whooping crane at Audubon Park Zoo last Sept. 14 according to an autopsy performed by The Department of the Interior.

The autopsy and extensive studies were conducted at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md., Audubon Park Supt. William R. Poholmann reported Thursday.

Josephine was 28-years-old and the mother of four of the six whoopers at the zoo, the only existing flock of whooping cranes reared in captivity. She and her brood weathered Hurricane Betsy, but Josephine bruised her wing Monday, Sept. 13, when a helicopter on a clean-up mission landed near her family and caused her to panic. Death came shortly after.

The Audubon Park whooping cranes are the only flock outside the wild population of 44 now wintering at the Arkansas Wildlife Refuge in Texas. Josephine was the pride of conservationists throughout the country for her successful efforts toward propagation of the species in captivity. The conservationists saw Josephine as the answer to the problem of the declining wild whooping crane population.

Josephine was a storm-tossed bird. In 1940 she was one of an estimated 13 cranes native to the Louisiana marshlands. A hurricane scattered the flock and only two survived — Mac, who died within six months, and Josephine, who was between 2 and 3 years old.

She was brought to the Audubon Zoo a little later by a farmer who had shot and crippled her. At the Zoo she was nursed back to health and remained there, except for three years between 1948-51, until her death.

Josephine's first mate was an old bird named Pete. They produced no offspring. When Pete died, he was replaced by Crip, a bird found at the Aransas Wildlife Refuge in 1945.

Josephine and Crip were the parents of George and Georgette, born in 1957; Pepper, born in 1958; and Peewee, born in 1961. Zoo officials hope that these will have offspring, but as an added measure they have imported Rosie from the San Antonio Zoo as a mate for George.