White Lake was once a spot that Whooping Cranes refused to leave

The marsh around White Lake in Vermilion Parish, in the news in recent weeks, was once the home of the last resident Whooping Crane in Louisiana. Dubbed “Lone Crane” by naturalist JOHN LYNCH, the bird lived a solitary existence for two years, until Lynch and others swooped down in helicopters one March day in 1950, birdnapped him, and took him to Aransas Pass, Texas, to live with a flock of whoopers there.

In 1938, there were 11 whooping cranes in the White Lake region, and 13 were counted in 1939. But a huge storm swept through the area in 1940, and when the wind and rain and flooding were finished, only six whoopers remained alive. Two years later the count was down to five, then four in 1943, three in 1944, two in 1945 and 1946, and Lone Crane became the last of them in 1947.

There was another survivor of the Louisiana storm, but she was no longer in the marsh. Her name was Josephine, and a farmer, A.O. LaHaye, found her in his field in Evangeline Parish, 50 miles north of White Lake, in the fall of 1940. One of her wings had been crippled by gunshot and she could not fly. LaHaye did not know he’d found one of the rarest birds in the world. He thought she was one of the more common sandhill cranes. Nonetheless, he nursed the bird back to health and kept her in a pen until HOUSTON C. GASTON, a federal game management agent, happened to see the bird and identified her as a whooping crane. He convinced LaHaye that the bird should be taken to the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans.

Josephine lived by herself at the zoo until 1948, when she was taken to Aransas Pass, where the last known migrating flock of whooping cranes in North America spent the winter in a second helicopter, recording the scene. They created a stir when they swooped into Abbeville, loaded the bird into the back of a car, and headed for Texas. Lynch and Allen took turns driving, and they got to the Aransas Pass refuge just about dawn.

“When our Louisiana crane arrived in Texas, and saw some of his own kind for the first time in two years, he whooped with joy,” Lynch told a reporter. Unfortunately, the saga of Lone Crane had a less joyous ending. It took him a while to get acclimated to his new surroundings. He got in a fight with other birds who did more than ruffle feathers. And then, in September, Lone Crane was found dead — most likely killed by a predator of some sort that had gotten into the enclosure.

Since Lynch and his cronies birdnapped Lone Crane, the world flock of whoopers has grown from a total of 37 to nearly 400, in large part due to a plan Lynch proposed to Canadian and U.S. officials in 1956, and there is some consideration being given to the reintroduction of the birds to the White Lake area.

Much study and work has to be done before that can happen, but there’s a very good chance that it will someday. After all, it was once a spot that whoopers liked so much that they refused to leave.

AROUND AND ABOUT: Farmers cutting rice this month say the crop’s pretty good but the prices aren’t.

(Jim Bradshaw is a columnist for The Advertiser. He can be reached at sbashaw@theadvertiser.com.)