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### **Noelke & Sons Discover Birdwatching Can Be Fun**

**ROCKPORT, TEX.**- My location is completely out of character for a Shortgrass herder. I'm on a 65 foot boat making a sightseeing trip with a bunch of birdwatchers. The purpose is to study the fanciers of fenner and feather at close range. To accomplish that, I have traveled to one of their foremost gathering grounds down on the gulf of Mexico.

The location isn't the only part that is out of character. My boots and hat are hidden back at the motel. For a disguise, I'm wearing a squashed down English motoring cap and a pair of collapsed sneakers. Also, I still have a set of grandpappy style whiskers and a pair of dark sunglasses to complete my costume.

No one aboard can tell that I am one of the targets of a nationwide crusade to unleash eagles and coyotes upon the sheepmen. For several years, I have wanted to infiltrate their camp. I've had a strong desire to watch the people who had such a fierce hold on our fate. Now I have the chance.

Seven of my eight children are along on the trip. The younger boys have been briefed not to mention the ranch or take imaginary shots at the birds. It'd be just like a country raised kid to pretend to sight in on a whooping crane or a white faced ibis.

Tickets for this trip cost \$5 a head. The brochure said that if whooping cranes weren't sighted, the money would be refunded, so I told my group they would get shoved overboard if they spotted the rare cranes. However, after we were out to sea, I learned that the guaranteed refund was some more hocus pocus that comes along with life. The money, the captain said, would be refunded if HE didn't see a whooping crane.

You know full well he's going to see the cranes. Ship captains might get all lubbered up on land, but they are not going to miss on their home ranges. I sure was disappointed to find out the money was gone for good.

We are traveling through the bays that border the Aransas National Refuge. Whooping cranes fly down here every fall from Canada. In the summer they go back to nest about 400 miles from the Artic Circle.

Only 47 head remain in a free state. Like ranchers, they are an endangered species. Unlike ranchers, a lot of folks are interested in their welfare.

Captain Brown who skippers the sightseeing boat cooperates with the federal people and the Audubon Society to keep check on the whooping cranes. They've watched them so long they know as much about their habits as we do about an old cows manners. We are lucky to have them or whooping cranes would be gone. Only one baby crane was hatched this season, so you can see they need lots of looking after.

Whooping cranes stand over five feet tall. Their wingspread is better than seven feet. They walk in the water like a wild turkey does on land, and feed on everything that other water fowl eat.

The boat can't come close enough today for us to really see the cranes. I can describe them from the picture in the galley. The main par of the body is a beautiful white; mask with a red crown. They are handsome birds, indeed. Birdwatchers are much easier

to observe than birds. The females after full maturity look like any other category of human mothers. Some of them spread out and some of them draw down into a mighty pleasing shape. Lots of them wear long pants. On a big city street, they'd be hard to pick from the crowd.

Male birdwatchers tend to wear bright headgear ranging from tams to caps cold beer and popcorn will coax them close enough for a detailed study. I saw a few that had on loud shirts, but I don't think that's an identifying characteristic.

Their offspring look pretty much the same. Girls and boys both wear long hair and headbands. I wouldn't want to bet I could tell the sexes apart. Bell bottom blue jeans and big shirts tend to cover the relevant features. They are polite kids and don't make any noise at all as long as they have plenty to eat.

All categories carry binoculars and high powered cameras. When they sight a bird they make a "oohing and ahing" call. The female call is much softer than that of the male. His is a courser, gruff sound.

You know, I like riding on a boat, looking at harmless birds that aren't going to bother anyone. For a drylander, being on the Gulf is like riding on the sky. Sunrays reflect in long brilliant streamers across the water. Horizons take on a limitless charm that stills the turmoil of the inner self.

Thrown together on a boat, the lovers of the natural scheme aren't so far apart. I guess a herder is pretty foolish for saying this, but I'm glad the birdwatchers care enough about whooping cranes and such like to try to keep them from passing on. It's sure a shame that we ever had our misunderstanding.

At the time of this writing, I'm undecided whether I could tell a birdwatcher from anyone else. I do have to find out before tomorrow. As important as this project is, I still have a feed run to make at the ranch.

"GULLIBLE" IS A POOR PUN to use in talking about people who insist on over·

feeding gulls that follow tourist excursion boats. Monte Noelke took this picture of a popcorn feeding operation during a recent attempt to spy on the rare whooping crane in the Gulf of Mexico.