

**TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE:** Liz Smith, Ph.D.

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

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**Google Voice** [00:00:00] This call is now being recorded.

**David Todd** [00:00:03] This is David.

**Liz Smith** [00:00:05] Hi, David it's Liz.

**David Todd** [00:00:07] Liz, you're so kind to call. Thank you very much.

**Liz Smith** [00:00:11] Oh, you're welcome. I, I was sitting here. I've just been, my time clock inside my head is not working today. So I just kind of go off from one thing to the next. And I say, okay, I'm ready. Okay. I'm not ready. It's not three, it's four.

**David Todd** [00:00:30] Well, at least we're on the same day, you know, I think a lot of people are, are just muddying, you know, days and weekends, months. And it is an elusive, slippery thing. So thank you for the time and your interest and help here.

**David Todd** [00:00:49] So I'd like to give a little sort of preface of what we're trying to do and then see if, if, if this appeals to you and particularly the part about recording it. So if you could just bear with me. I wanted to explain what we have in mind and you tell me what you think.

**David Todd** [00:01:09] So the thought is that, with your approval, we would plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. And you would have all the equal rights to use the recording as well.

**David Todd** [00:01:39] So that's the thought and wanted to make sure that that would be OK with you.

**Liz Smith** [00:01:46] Yeah, it's fine. And certainly you'll be editing and making it all sound like it's a flowing thought.

**David Todd** [00:01:53] Hopefully. It'll, you sound like Wolfman Jack or some famous radio broadcaster.

**David Todd** [00:02:02] All right. So, let me just lay out the whole lot when we're involved here. It is June 10th, 2020. And my name is David Todd. We are conducting an interview with Dr. Liz Smith. She is director of the North America program for the International Crane Foundation, and earlier worked as a research scientist for the Center for Coastal Studies at

Texas A&M University. She is based in Rockport. I am in Austin. And this interview is being done by telephone.

**David Todd** [00:02:45] And today our hope is to focus a bit on discussing her many efforts to protect the whooping crane and particularly her work to provide fresh water for the whooping cranes through some innovative programs.

**David Todd** [00:03:00] But enough of a preamble. Wanted to get in and ask you some questions and see what you think.

**Liz Smith** [00:03:08] Surely.

**David Todd** [00:03:10] Okay, so where we usually start these interviews is to ask you to tell us a little bit about your background and where your interests and wildlife and conservation first might have become.

**Liz Smith** [00:03:24] Well, I am a native Texan. I was born in El Paso and lived there until I was probably in the first, second grade, spent a lot of time outside with my father, who was an outdoorsman and an artist, and knew a lot of really neat people that knew plants and animals. And I learned so much from just being in the back seat of the Jeep, going up the Franklin Mountains and seeing the plant associations change as elevation increased. And I thought it was magical. Then a couple of years in New Mexico and southwest New Mexico, which was amazing as well.

**Liz Smith** [00:04:06] And then my parents decided that we were moving to Corpus Christi, Texas, on the coast. And I just couldn't believe I wouldn't be able to be in my Southwest mountains and canyons. But the first time I saw the water and the beach and the Gulf, I thought I'd been brought into a treasure chest. It was just amazing exploring everything and learning all these things.

**Liz Smith** [00:04:34] So I did kind of go back and forth between whether I wanted to go into art or in science as a career and kind of bounced around a little bit at the beginning of my early college days and finally settled on, on biology and worked on kangaroo rats for my master's thesis and then on to A&M - College Station for Ph.D. in Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences working on coastal marshes. I went right back to my alma mater, got a job as a research scientist at the Center for Coastal Studies. And there I worked for 17 years developing projects in habitat assessment and conservation planning. So that's, that brought me to International Crane Foundation, where I was doing the same thing but this time specifically for whooping crane habitat.

**David Todd** [00:05:37] Well, it sounds like a wonderful preparation for the work that she's been doing with the crane. And maybe for those of us who aren't nearly as familiar with the bird as you are, could you describe the general life history and its, its recent decline and then recovery?

**Liz Smith** [00:05:59] Certainly. So the weeping crane is one of 15 species of cranes around the world, and they, 11 of those 16 are threatened with extinction or decline. And there's only two species in the Western Hemisphere: the sandhill crane, which is the most abundant crane in the world, and the whooping crane, which is the rarest. So they both are, require wetlands for all or part of their lifecycle. And whooping cranes actually occurred in several areas across

North America, migrating great distances from their breeding grounds to the wintering grounds.

**Liz Smith** [00:06:41] But habitat conversion, as people moved west, occurred in the Great Plains areas and most of the wetlands were drained and native prairies were converted to farmland. The care also was the hunting of, of cranes for food. They're large birds, five feet tall and 7 1/2 foot wingspan, and they weigh up to 17 pounds, which is quite, quite a meal. So they declined from both of those reasons. And actually, only about 15 were left in the wild in 1941.

**Liz Smith** [00:07:27] So there was a lot of work done on them. And they finally found their breeding grounds up in Wood Buffalo National Park. And then they migrate down the Great Plains area to one place in Texas, which is the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge now. And that's where they did most of the studying of them. And they have slowly and steadily recovered from that low of fifteen to about 500 today. And they largely do that on their own by, you know, having successfully reproducing and raising probably one chick every couple of years. And so they're, they're fine with that, but they need a lot of habitat. And so that's where we come in, is ensuring that they have enough habitat to recover fully.

**David Todd** [00:08:28] So how did you, you know, as you first came on with the International Crane Foundation, decide what sort of niche you might fill, what kind of work you might perform, to try to help the cranes.

**Liz Smith** [00:08:46] So we'd already been doing a lot of work with conservation planning, with our partners at the university, and those are the same people that I began working with for the Crane Foundation. And there was a, there was a lot of planning efforts that necessitated using geographic information systems and different layers. And so we've really focused on a multi-partnership approach to develop a conservation plan that utilized where the cranes occur, what kind of habitat they used. And then looking at where that habitat occurred and how much was protected, and then how much there was unprotected, that we could we could try to put into some kind of a conservation acquisition or a conservation easement with the private landowner. And, so that, that resulted in a report that kind of indicated that there wasn't as much habitat as they needed in the immediate area, which is about 125,000 acres of salt marsh and like 300,000 acres of adjacent prairie. So it was a good start. And then there's been two more studies like that with enhanced data. And so we use that. We all use that to identify priority areas for conservation.

**Liz Smith** [00:10:15] The other thing is, is that we need to have that habitat be really high quality in the way that marshes along the coast remain very productive is a mixing of freshwater from the rivers with saltwater from the Gulf. And so I've worked also on environmental flows, efforts of the, with the state as a expert science, scientist. And we tried to identify how much water would we needed to have a productive, healthy bay and have that make it into rules for water users. So that that kind of puts together the protected habitat and make it high quality as well.

**David Todd** [00:11:03] Well, maybe we could take those two pieces of your efforts in turn. It must be difficult to find and protect habitat for, for these birds since so much land in Texas is privately owned. Could you talk a little bit about how you've tried to work with that situation with private landowners.

**Liz Smith** [00:11:30] So that is something that is unique for Texas that, you know, 95% of the land is privately owned. But the good thing about that is that these, the coast is inhabited, was

originally inhabited of course by Native Americans and who basically shared the land with, with the other animals. And then as time progressed, there were Spanish land grants that were accessed for ranching. And then again, European immigrants that came in and married into those families and they created these huge ranches along the coast. And we call these "heritage ranches" today. And so they really want to try to keep that together. And so each generation is, is, you know, taught a land ethic and their responsibility to maintain that land, both for maintaining an economy that also, you know, appreciating wildlife. So it, the stage is set to where we're working with these landowners that they already recognize, you know, that that they are responsible for that. And, and it's part of their, you know, their history. So when we talk about conservation, oftentimes it isn't for sale, but it's more of how can we keep unplanned development from being an option. And so these conservation easements become a really great tool to to protect that land. And they still are able to maintain it and to profit from their ranching, and oil and gas, and hunting interests. So it, it really is quite often a pleasant interaction.

**Liz Smith** [00:13:34] And I think that that makes it easier for us to both understand where they're coming from and, and them understanding the needs we have for maintaining this beautiful coast.

**David Todd** [00:13:50] You don't need to answer with names, but it would be interesting if you could give us an example of negotiations with some family that was, was responsible one of these heritage ranches and how you might find a middle path that would preserve the cranes, but also allow the family to continue, as you said, with oil and gas, cattle work, hunting, and so on.

**Liz Smith** [00:14:19] So, sure, there's a beautiful place within the current range of the whooping crane that is very vast and undeveloped and it's a kind of a coastal recreational area for these families and the neat thing about it is that the cranes established there in the mid '70s and have continued to increase their numbers. The landowners were of similar mind that they wanted to be able to protect that. And they entered into conservation easements with actually three different organizations. That money was raised for that. And then the neat thing is, is that they also had low-lying land adjacent to it, the, the, the low coastal prairies. And so they put those into a conservation easement as well. And so as sea level rises, the coastal marshes now will become submerged, turn into sea grasses and which is great. And then the low coastal prairie will become the marsh. And so we have the plan for now and a plan for the future because there was enough of that land in, you know, in these large parcels that we were able to, to make that work. And I think that that serves as a model for anywhere along the Texas coast.

**David Todd** [00:16:01] So I think earlier you said the you for two challenges with habitat, and one is just the sheer acreage. But then there's also the question of how you can make sure that it's adequate quality. Can you talk a little bit about what that means to you?

**Liz Smith** [00:16:22] So, you know, the, for the whooping crane, they're such a large bird and they spend probably 65% of their time feeding and they really need high-quality, nutritious food. And in a estuarine system in the bay, blue crabs under the right conditions should be plentiful. And so they provide a really rich resource for the cranes and with proteins and, you know, high, high fat content and availability. And so, but they are, blue crabs are affected by salinity in the water, which is the salts in in the bays. And they, they increase during droughts. And they're, the crabs move into other areas and they're not in the shallows where the cranes can get to them. And then also, they need some water, drinking water, and they really are

pretty adaptable. They can have, they can drink up to half strength of sea water, but they do prefer sweet water. And so they go inland to small wetlands and ponds and excavated tanks, etc., to drink water every day during a drought. So the location of these watering holes are best if they are a very short distance from the, from the coastal marshes. So we're part of a group that works in a program called Waters for Wildlife. And we have many partners with that. San Antonio Bay Partnership has taken it on after the refuge started it.

**Liz Smith** [00:18:10] And Friends of Aransas have funded wells, as well. And so we get our funding from a diversity of, of sources, but particularly with the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program. And so we're able to go in and actually either drill a well next to an existing wetland or pond and put a solar panel up, or we put in a solar panel in place of a windmill, which, although quite picturesque, the salt air really takes a toll on, on how it operates. So we, we do go in and look for the best places, for the locations of these and get landowner permission. And then there's a lot of cooperation with our drillers that come in to drill the wells and set them up. And then we monitor the, the ponds after that to see if crane use is increased, you know, who's coming to the pond. They're very territorial in the marsh, defending their, their territory. But at the ponds, they are typically very passive and just come to drink and they're even starting to feed in these ponds when they're shallow wetlands, which is the way that we do it now. So it's really key for these birds to have that resource during droughts.

**David Todd** [00:19:43] I think you, you mentioned earlier another sort of water-related issue, and that's climate change and sea level rise.

**David Todd** [00:19:53] What sort of impact have you seen so far from rising sea levels? And what do you expect in the sort of impact, do you think that might have on the birds?

**Liz Smith** [00:20:07] So in our models, it's been determined that we're actually going to lose marsh, coastal marshes, as sea levels rise, until we start to gain it. So there's areas along the bay where you have just a little bluff. The sea level has to rise above that before it floods the next shelf, so to speak. So we can't afford to lose any more wetlands from development, things like that. But we also necessarily understand that the cranes are going to have to expand their range. And so we're working with our partners on looking at where that suitable habitat is up the coast, across through Matagorda Bay, going through the areas from there to Galveston of where habitat can be preserved and, you know, for the coming decades if and when these birds need it. The other thing about climate change is that we understand that we may have more infrequent rainfall, but it could be heavier, causing flooding. And we also would have longer droughts. So working with, you know, with the state, and working with the river authorities and trying to find a common balance that ensures that we still have enough freshwater getting to the bays, that these blue crabs can still be productive and the system is healthy for the cranes is really important.

**David Todd** [00:21:55] Well, I think you can get some of your creative ideas to get groundwater resources for these ponds, for the whooping cranes. Are there some examples you can give of trying to secure surface water flows for the bays and for the cranes, in turn.

**Liz Smith** [00:22:18] Yes. You know, because the weeping crane is endangered, there's reasons to ensure that we're not impacting their recovery and impacting their wintering range along the coast. And so, you know, there's been a lot of contentious situations in the past and it just was really, you know, uncomfortable for all to try to figure out how this could, could be resolved.

**Liz Smith** [00:22:47] But now there's a lot more cooperation and collaboration that we want to, you know, both understand that we need the economy and the economy needs water. But we also need to maintain this, this healthy system and that it is our, our responsibility to do so. And so there's a lot of really innovative work going on right now where some of the river authorities is trying to develop Habitat Conservation Plan that includes whooping cranes to ensure that that that what they need is is documented and finding innovative ways to make sure that that that water heads to the bay. So it's in its early stages, but very promising. And it's really neat to see things turn around like that.

**David Todd** [00:23:44] Oh, I think another aspect of water that affects cranes is erosion from wakes on the Intracoastal Canal. Is that a significant pattern, and if so, what do you try to do in that respect?

**Liz Smith** [00:24:05] Well the Intracoastal Waterway bisects some really key areas. It was, it was actually excavated through marshes in order to ensure that the waterway remained open. But that did have a detrimental effect on both the fact that we lost the wetlands, but also that we fragmented that continuous wetland into two pieces. And so just even natural wave action can cause erosion. We continue to lose marshes. There have been areas along the Intracoastal within the wintering range where these, these bundled, articulated mats have been put to protect the marsh. However, as sea level rises, they are, you know, are being over-washed and there's been some erosion start to happen again. So there's planning on what can occur there.

**Liz Smith** [00:25:02] One of our bigger issues is, is barges being pushed up against that, that concrete mat in order to wait out a storm or let another barge pass. And it, it damages that, that mat and then erosion can occur really quickly into the marsh. So there's been some efforts to place more mooring buoys outside the wintering range. There's been some that have been put inside the winter range, but not at the marshes where most of them are. So, you know, just a lot of, a lot of people getting together, trying to figure out the best way to deal with the problem.

**David Todd** [00:25:51] Oh, well, and speaking of erosion and wakes, I guess one of the biggest impacts in recent years has been Hurricane Harvey and I was curious if you could talk about how you would try to mitigate some of those natural hazards of life on the coast.

**Liz Smith** [00:26:14] Yes, Hurricane Harvey was extremely interesting from a scientific perspective. However, it was very devastating on the human community. We were hit really hard in the Rockport area and even inland to two Woodsboro and Refugio. And so we turned our attention necessarily to how we could recover and help each other through those first several weeks. We lost our office in the storm and once we were able to return, we were able to salvage probably about a 10-by-10 tarp of things. But it certainly was a relief that we were, you know, everybody was OK. And so then as we finally were able to get out into the marsh, as we left this just devastation, the marsh looked amazing. It was like it was scrubbed clean. It was everything was bright green because the storm surge had covered that marsh with 12 feet of water. And so essentially, there wasn't a lot of wave action to tear the marsh apart. It actually just covered it. And the, so the marsh was in really good shape.

**Liz Smith** [00:27:42] What did happen, though, was that as the 12-foot storm surge went over Blackjack Peninsula and Matagorda and San Jose, is that where we had ponds with our wells, everything was, the equipment was destroyed and we even had a camera sitting out at one of the ponds. This was in August, so the cranes weren't here, but we were monitoring other

wildlife there. And we actually were, the camera made it through. And we actually have images of the storm blowing from one direction, the seawater coming in and inundating the land and then, and then coming from the other direction. And then slowly that water drained off.

**Liz Smith** [00:28:30] But what that happened was that the ponds were filled with bay water and so they had salinity. And so we had to really scramble around. And Fish Wildlife Service and the San Antonio Bay Partnership, and International Crane Foundation, we wrote a proposal and received funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Federation to restore those wells as soon as possible before the cranes got there. And it was a really huge effort. And we monitored 19 ponds afterward and ended up with 250,000 images, which I would not do again. But we were able to see that the cranes did come back and they had the water they needed. And it was a really, really amazing winter to accomplish all of that in the aftermath of the storm.

**David Todd** [00:29:31] It sounds like a lot of your work is both doing things, building these ponds, the wells, solar panels and cameras and so on, but it's also doing research and monitoring the work that you've done. Can you talk a little bit about some of your research efforts?

**Liz Smith** [00:29:55] Sure. We know actually what one of the key components of this is, understanding how much habitat these birds need. And there was a lot of effort done on that by the previous U.S. whooping crane coordinator, Tom Stehn, and he and a biologist at the Refuge, Felipe Prieto, wrote a paper about how much habitat each family needs over a long period of time. And so it showed us how these birds actually expanded their range, that even though they fight for that piece of territory, which can be, you know, up to 350 acres for each family, they do tend to expand sequentially, because they are social as well. So looking out ahead at that and trying to explain where we needed to prioritize habitat conservation was really key. The other thing is that, you know, why did these birds, cranes keep their young with them for a year. It's a huge investment. And, and it's amazing to watch them as they teach these, these birds that were born in Canada to come to the coast and learn how to eat blue crabs and find clams and eat wolfberries and, you know, just all of that. And so we've done a lot of work on looking at their behavior and trying to understand, you know, that the importance of that parental care throughout that time.

**Liz Smith** [00:31:38] And so alongside of that, they really need to be left alone and undisturbed. So a lot of our work is geared towards, you know, getting people to understand that these birds are very, very wary and that they can be scared off of their food and fly long distances away from when they should be feeding. And it also puts that young juvenile in peril in case he gets disconnected from his parents. So our research turns into a reach in which we inform people about kind of some guidelines of keeping back away from cranes and reading their behavior. If they're feeding and roosting and preening, they're comfortable with where you are. And if they're walking away or their head is alert and they're staring right at you or they fly away, then you've gotten too close and you've disturbed them. And people really, you know, they, they, they enjoy understanding the behaviors that they're seeing of the cranes and even helps them with other animals, of understanding that, that space that they need.

**David Todd** [00:32:55] So you talked a little bit about the, what you've learned about whooping crane behavior. And I understood that when drought hit this area, the crane started behaving really oddly. And it was a sign that they were stressed. And I was curious if you could talk a little bit of what you knew about that reaction to the drought of 2008-2009.

**Liz Smith** [00:33:27] Yes. They, you know, this understanding of how much time they spend feeding. You know, we realize the importance of of good foraging habitat. There is also, you know, time, energetic budgets that were described for the different food that they were eating and the energy they were getting from that. And that's where that importance of that blue crab was both the the numbers of them, but also their availability. And so when during the drought, when salinities got so high that the crabs were not available to them in the shallow water, they started really searching for other food. They started wandering out of their territories. They were seeing in unusual places, seeking food in the uplands. There wasn't as much freshwater available at that time and the ponds that were there had gone dry. And during the weekly surveys that that whooping crane coordinator did, he was seeing that birds were wandering all around. And then he started noticing that there were juveniles that were missing, maybe one of the parents. And so, all in all, it was attributed that at least 23 cranes died that winter because of the severe conditions.

**Liz Smith** [00:34:55] So, you know, knowing that and understanding that, you know, we don't, we can't afford that for their recovery. That's when a lot of these initiatives were put into place. So it's a, it's tough life out there. I mean, it's, it's, you know, every day trying to find food and trying to raise that juvenile, you know, necessitated a lot of these, these programs to be started.

**David Todd** [00:35:26] Well, so it gives part of what you're trying to do is educate people about what the cranes need. And as I understand it, ICF has been a big partner in the Whooping Crane Festival, as a way to show visitors, show the public, about what cranes involve and require. Can you talk a little bit about the role?

**Liz Smith** [00:35:55] Sure. You know, festivals in and of themselves are really fun. And we, our co-founder George Archibald, actually helped establish the Whooping Crane Festival here on the Texas Coastal Bend, and he has been at every one of them. He has been a speaker that we've had to shut the doors because there's too many people in a room. You know, it's just amazing the interest that people have and and how they keep coming back. I mean, there's repeat festival-goers. Every year we see these people say, "I'm here again", you know, and they come to learn and they come to see the birds. And it's just, it's really buoys your spirit when you're around like-minded people like that, that, that want to help save the cranes. And so it's a really off opportunistic time to, you know, get them involved. We do oftentimes get people that volunteer after festivals and we train them to be citizen-scientists, and they collect data for us. There's always the opportunity for us to meet new people that don't know much about the coast, that learn so much in that four-day period. So we love the Whooping Crane Festival. It's a great time for us to to meet people and to talk about what we do.

**David Todd** [00:37:25] I think you mentioned one of the ways that you do outreach to the public and I guess get something in return is through citizen-science programs. Can you give us some examples of, of what sort of citizen research is useful to you and helpful to the public?

**Liz Smith** [00:37:47] Yeah, we, we actually started out with all of these game cameras at these ponds that we needed volunteers to go through those thousands of pictures and find the ones with whooping cranes and sandhill cranes, and of course, there's all kinds of other activity going on with alligators and coyotes and bobcats being documented. And so many of our early volunteers were trained to go through those camera pictures. And then we also were able to get them out in the field in areas that they normally wouldn't be able to go because they were contributing to the research and monitoring. We've kind of expanded from that in looking at



how the cranes were using different sized ponds. They have deep areas only, or if they were shallow. And so the citizen scientists would go through and document the length of time that they're at, at a pond and what they're doing. And that led us to redesigning how we were creating water for the cranes to a more swale type approach instead of a deep pond. And if the water didn't need to be very deep, just constant enough in order for them to drink, and it also created more habitat for them to feed in. So that was really, came to a really successful fruition.

**Liz Smith** [00:39:12] And then the behavior has been expanded to where there's been research projects in conjunction with Sam Houston State University and their Earthwatch program, where we have people come from all over the world to work for two weeks. And they, they get out there and they videotape crane behavior 20 minutes at a time and do every 15-second intervals of what they're doing. And then they get out in the marsh and they look at salinities in ponds and how much wolfberry there are and crane crab trap transects. So that's really helpful. And now we're actually targeting certain areas that cranes are expanding into, such as Port Aransas, where there has been a pair of cranes come to that, to their preserve three years in a row. And so, of course, that's right during the Whooping Crane Festival as well. But more importantly, you know, it's showing that it's not just that they occur there, but they, they are they're virtually all the time and they're feeding there. We're recording with these citizen scientists' videos of them chasing fish around, pulling up plant tubers and eating them of, you know, consuming, you know, fiddler crabs and, you know, just all of these food items that are important for them and also maintaining the importance of that healthy marsh to, to whooping cranes as they expand. So we we do want to target our work from now on in areas that, that may need to understand that this needs to remain for whooping cranes and not and not be converted to other uses.

**David Todd** [00:41:07] You think you about these proposals for industrial development, channels and so on.

**Liz Smith** [00:41:14] Yes. Yes. And, you know, it's really important that we are that we want to have science-based decisions or recommendations for people to consider. And it also gives the public an opportunity to engage in getting that science, you know, collected and, and analyzed and in the right places. So, you know, that's where we feel that our strongest role is. And we also, you know, realize that, you know, that that they're all, they are alternatives to the planning. So we support that as well.

**David Todd** [00:41:54] So you're fortunate, we're all fortunate that there are people in the public who are really supportive of what you're doing and appreciate the birds and want to learn more about them and help with their restoration. But then there's some folks, and I'm thinking of Mr. Frederick and others who have been you know, apprehended poaching. And I was hoping that you can sort of explain what you learned from that particular poaching case, I guess three, four years ago now.

**Liz Smith** [00:42:29] Right. You know, when we first started talking, I was talking about how habitat loss and hunting were primary causes of the decline of the whooping crane. And those are still our two, you know, primary concerns. We've talked a lot about working to protect as much habitat as we can while we have good planned developments along the coast. We have a, you know, education program that we work with Texas Parks and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife to get information out to waterfowl hunters who are in the wintering range and do come across whooping cranes while they're in their blinds and giving them information that they can learn how to tell the difference between whooping cranes and other birds and,

you know, just etiquette, things like that. There's also in the package that show the consequences of accidentally shooting a whooping crane to try to minimize that impact. And so that that can be done by education and outreach.

**Liz Smith** [00:43:39] There's another factor, though, is for people that do not have a respect for wildlife, that are indiscriminately shooting whatever they see. And that has, that happens. And so in this particular case, which was actually two whooping cranes that were shot in east Texas, they were actually from the reintroduced population that's in southwestern Louisiana, that had come to Texas. And who can blame them for that? So that's OK. But the, the thing was, is that people were just so elated that they had whooping cranes in east Texas that, you know, the birders were coming around and and watching them. They knew where they were. They were really giving us some great information. And because of that, they noticed that there was a particular truck that seemed to be around the area a lot. And so when they saw some, this same individual in a car actually come out of the field with two white birds, they started towards that individual and he dropped the birds and left.

**Liz Smith** [00:44:54] And they were whooping cranes. It was very devastating. But thank goodness those people were there and reported that. And it was a young, young man and just 18. And so he was apprehended and he went to court and was arraigned. And then in the end, he pled guilty. And he was given what we felt was a, you know, a fair sentence. It's hard to understand exactly how to recommend what these cases should get. But he was given probation in lieu of jail time, which allowed the judge to give him five years of probation instead of one year. He lost his license, hunting and fishing license, in all 50 states for those five years. And that really, you know, that really hit home with him because he was a, you know, an outdoor guy. And he ended up violating that probation and went to federal prison.

**Liz Smith** [00:46:00] So we try to use that in that scenario with young people in trying to help them understand the consequences of doing these things. But there, it continues to happen. And we actually have a case right now that we're working with in Louisiana for another young man who, who shot two whooping cranes in Louisiana and ended up trying to hide it, the evidence. And so has been charged with the Lacey Act, and the Endangered Species Act. His trial will come in, be in July.

**Liz Smith** [00:46:40] So our role is getting other conservation organizations together to be at the trials to show support of justice. And also to write letters. We take packets to the district attorneys and to the judges and let them know how important these birds are, both the fact that it costs almost a 100,000 dollars to raise a crane in captivity, to release it in the in the wild, but also that these cranes have rights as well, that they, they deserve to be on this landscape and, and respected.

**Liz Smith** [00:47:20] So it's, it's a bit of a tough situation, but we've had really good success with this approach.

**David Todd** [00:47:32] Will you, I understand that you attended the Trey Fredrick case. And I think I heard that you got a chance to talk to him. Did you get any sense of why he did it or what his reaction was? That he felt guilt, shame or remorse, or whether he was indifferent. It would be interesting to get a little insight into his mentality?

**Liz Smith** [00:48:00] Yeah. And, you know, this was my first, first time and myself and our board member Ann Hamilton went to that arraignment and we had had some really good information concerning the case. And so, you know, I mean, it's public records. But, you know,

being able to know what happened and the stories behind it, you know. He was he did come to me. He knew I was from the Crane Foundation. I obviously had a Foundation shirt on. And I also had, you know, materials with me. And he, he asked to talk to me and he sat down and he was just extremely respectful, remorseful. He said, I did it. I didn't mean to. I didn't understand. I felt terrible. I've ruined my life. And, and I want to make amends. And so I, I told him that the first thing he needed to do is go in and you can plead guilty. And that was the first step to this, making amends. And he said, "No, I don't think I want to do that. I think I might be able to beat this." And at that moment, I knew that I was going to be able to make any headway with him. And, you know, we we really want to help young people when they're going down a wrong path. But this wasn't the place for me to be. And so it was, it was pretty hard.

**David Todd** [00:49:38] Yeah. Do you think that he has, has had a change of heart or have you been in touch with him?

**Liz Smith** [00:49:47] No. We, so there was 100 hours of community service that he needed to do. And he, once he violated his probation, that, that ended. He did, he was fined a restitution fine, which was estimated by the Parks and Wildlife to be 25,000 dollars. And he was he was ordered to pay that back. And that comes out of his check each month now.

**David Todd** [00:50:32] It's I guess it's, it's hard to work with some people. But it sounds like from what you've been telling us here, you've had a lot of good partners over the years in state agencies, federal agencies, private landowners, and the general public. As you look back on your years with ICF and then earlier with Texas A&M, can you tell us some sort of insights you might have gained from working on the crane issues and what you might expect in the years to come?

**Liz Smith** [00:51:07] Well, you know, whenever I give a talk and I start out and I'm saying we I always say that. I'm not saying we as in the International Crane Foundation, but we, the conservation community, of which, you know, the state and federal agencies, our NGO partners, our public, you know, our volunteers. All of us are working on this together. And there is this real sense of empowerment when you work with others that you feel like you don't shoulder it all yourself and that you can do what seems impossible. So we have a very strong conservation community along the coast of Texas, and I would imagine other places, too. But this is where I've spent my life. And so it's a, it's, it's good, you know. And we we have lots of meetings, but we also meet in the field where we love to be, and, and working together. It's just a sense of camaraderie that I wouldn't trade for anything. There's always a way. And, you know, there's several different options for, for things to, you know, to be approached. And we all have kind of our our expertise and are able to go, "Hey, I think this would be a good program or a project or a person for you to talk to." And so it's a very, it's very satisfying. I love it. At the same time. I just really enjoy working with early career biologists, social scientists and outreach folks because I see that same passion. And I know that, you know that there's going to be those that follow that will do an even better job of helping to save our, our, our beautiful coast and everything that depends on it, including us.

**David Todd** [00:53:19] Including us. Well, this has been so helpful, thank you for this. Is there anything that you might like to add?

**Liz Smith** [00:53:29] Well, I you know, I just think that, you know, working on some, you know, a species like this that really many felt was doomed for extinction, the whooping crane never felt that way. They are very, very independent, fierce, very straightforward. Eye staring

at you if you get too close. And I just find that they, what they need and what I need are really, really similar, that we really want to be able to live life fully and, and, and and share that. We share that that rarity sometimes. But I, but I also know that there's so much, many people that want to help and make a difference that that is, that just is so humbling. So I enjoy that, too.

**David Todd** [00:54:36] Well, thank you. So I'd nice you to spend some time explaining all this good stuff, and I wish you all the best. We're lucky to have you dow on the coast looking after that Big Bird.

**Liz Smith** [00:54:53] Right. Well, you should join us as soon as they come back down. They'll be here starting in late October, and everyone should be here by December.

**David Todd** [00:55:07] Something to look forward to.

**Liz Smith** [00:55:09] Okay. Thank you.

**David Todd** [00:55:09] Thank you, Liz, you have a good day and thanks again for your time.

**Liz Smith** [00:55:14] Yes. Thank you, David. See you soon.

**David Todd** [00:55:17] You bet. Goodbye.

**Liz Smith** [00:55:19] Bye.