



MISSION

BY ILEANA BOARD

MIGRATION

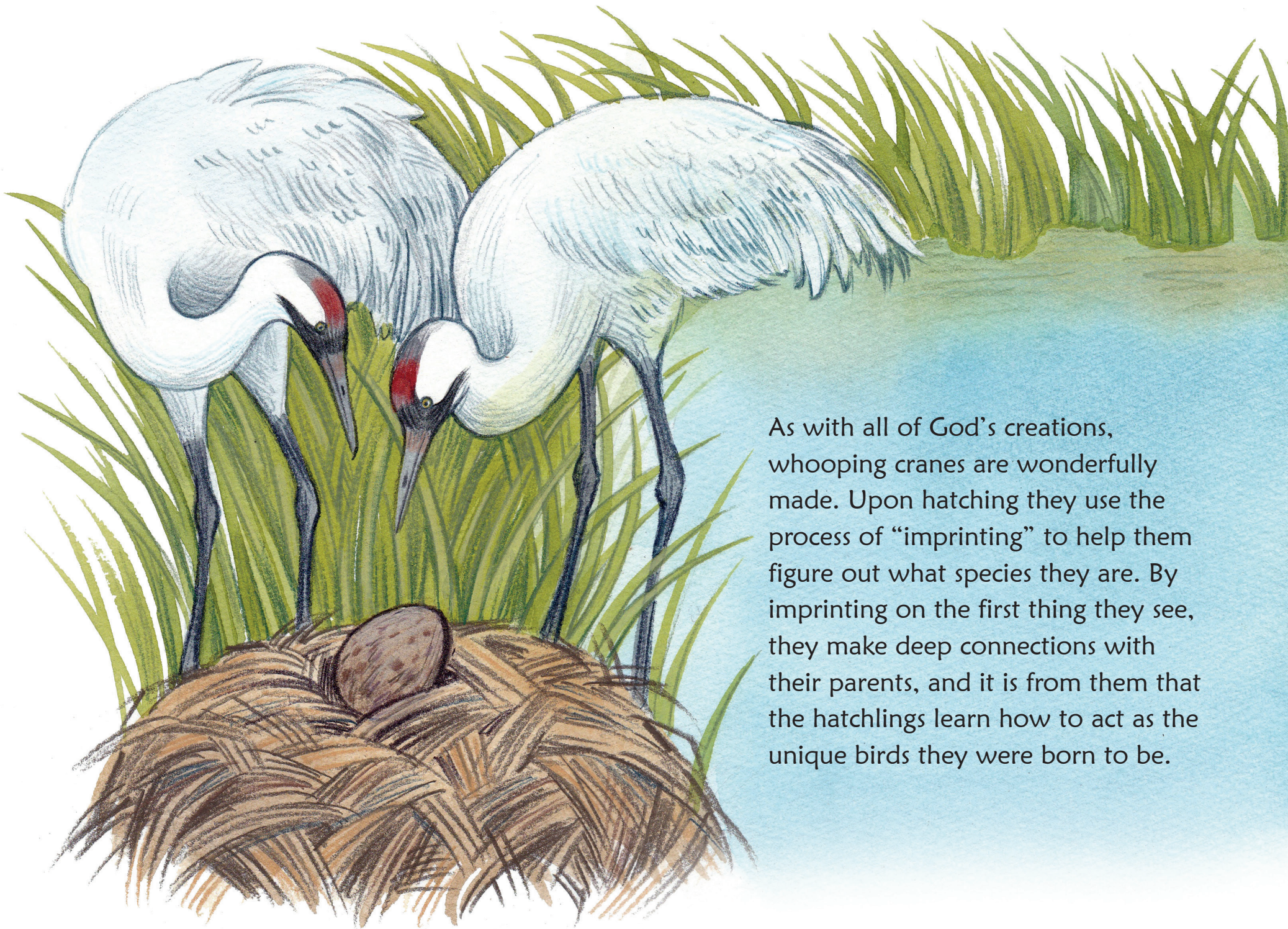


THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

“Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!” The misty stillness of the spring morning is broken by the call. The sun has just barely begun to peek over the horizon, but already the marshes are coming to life, the tall reeds swaying sporadically in spite of the stillness. The reeds are hiding a secret—a unique inhabitant that has not been seen here in over 100 years.

Suddenly, with a *whoosh* followed by the frenzied beating of large wings, a bird takes flight. With a wingspan of 2.28 meters (7.5 feet), its massive body is silhouetted against the orange sky of a new day, an imposing beacon in the Florida landscape.

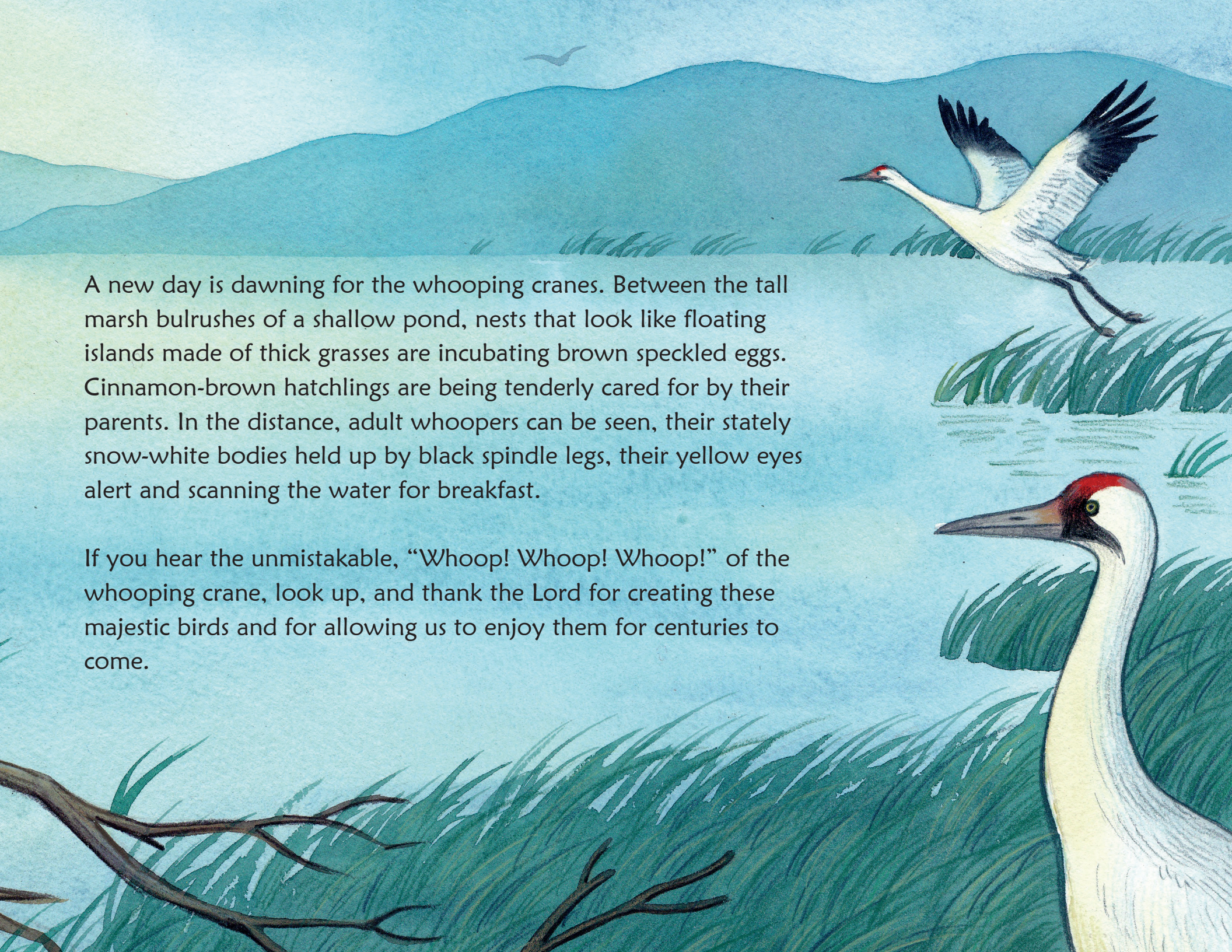
After a few lazy glides over the marsh, it lands. Illuminated in the morning light, its stark white body, offset by a black mustache and a radiant crimson crown, is fully on display. It stands nearly 1.52 meters (5 feet) tall, a living relic of ancient days when prehistoric birds ruled the air. And like those relics, it almost disappeared into fable. This is the remarkable story of the whooping cranes, the birds that refused to go extinct.



As with all of God's creations, whooping cranes are wonderfully made. Upon hatching they use the process of "imprinting" to help them figure out what species they are. By imprinting on the first thing they see, they make deep connections with their parents, and it is from them that the hatchlings learn how to act as the unique birds they were born to be.



In 2001, the birds took flight, and the first ultralight-led whooping crane migration began. The journey took months. The cranes followed their natural instincts, only traveling during the day and in nice weather, and taking time here and there to explore their surroundings. When the birds finally touched down in Florida's Gulf Coast, Operation Migration biologists kept careful track of the birds over the winter. Unfortunately, one bird was killed by a bobcat, but the rest seemed to be thriving in their new wintering grounds. As warmer breezes and thawing ice heralded the coming of spring, the Operation Migration crew patiently waited and watched the skies, looking for the return of the six remaining whooping cranes. Eight days after their departure from Florida, the cohort arrived at the exact location from where they had begun in the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin.

An illustration of a whooping crane in flight over a marsh pond. The crane is shown in profile, flying from right to left. It has a white body, black wings, and a distinctive red patch on its forehead. The background features rolling blue hills under a light blue sky. In the foreground, there are green marsh grasses and a few bare brown branches. The overall style is soft and painterly.

A new day is dawning for the whooping cranes. Between the tall marsh bulrushes of a shallow pond, nests that look like floating islands made of thick grasses are incubating brown speckled eggs. Cinnamon-brown hatchlings are being tenderly cared for by their parents. In the distance, adult whoopers can be seen, their stately snow-white bodies held up by black spindle legs, their yellow eyes alert and scanning the water for breakfast.

If you hear the unmistakable, “Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!” of the whooping crane, look up, and thank the Lord for creating these majestic birds and for allowing us to enjoy them for centuries to come.




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Today, the distinctive call of the whooping crane can be heard across many marshes in the United States, but this was not always the case. These majestic birds were a hair's breadth from extinction until a dedicated group of conservationists, scientists, and daredevil pilots decided to give them a fighting chance at survival. Join the mission as we learn about these delightful cranes and the innovative, groundbreaking, and comical lengths rescuers went to to ensure these amazing specimens of God's handiwork would be around for future generations to enjoy.

■ ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

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