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Young Whooping Cranes Will Learn Migration Route from their Elders

Eight Whooping Crane chicks, hatched and raised by costumed biologists at the International Crane Foundation (ICF) in Baraboo, Wis., arrived Tuesday at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Dodge County, Wis. The cranes are part of the Direct Autumn Release (DAR) project conducted by the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), an international coalition of public and private organizations that is reintroducing this highly imperiled species in eastern North America, part of its historic range.

The Whooping Crane chicks, ranging in age from 10-14 weeks old, spent six weeks at the Necedah NWR in Juneau County, Wis., being acclimated to wetland habitat and wild cranes, before arriving at Horicon NWR. While the birds are housed on the refuges, they remain under the watchful eye and supervision of costumed biologists from ICF. In mid-late October the cranes will be released on Horicon NWR in the company of older cranes. The young DAR Whooping Cranes learn the migration route south by following these older birds.

(Editor's note: High-res. photos of the crane chicks are available on request.)

In addition to the eight DAR birds, 10 Whooping Crane chicks are currently being conditioned to follow ultralight aircraft by WCEP project partner Operation Migration at the White River Marsh State Wildlife Area in Green Lake and Marquette Counties, Wis.

For the past 10 years the DAR and ultralight-led Whooping Cranes have been released on the Necedah NWR. Many of these cranes have reached breeding age and have hatched chicks on the refuge. To date, three wild-hatched Whooping Crane chicks have fledged and successfully migrated in this population. This level of nest success is, however, not yet enough to sustain the population. As part of WCEP's experimentation with improving reproduction in this flock, new locations have been chosen for releasing birds in 2011. These sites are based on what biologists have learned about cranes released at Necedah NWR and their habitat and nesting requirements.

Most of the Whooping Cranes released in previous years spend the summer in central Wisconsin, where they use areas on or near Necedah NWR, as well as other public and private lands. In the spring and fall, project staff from ICF and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources track and monitor the released cranes in an effort to learn as much as possible about their unassisted journeys and the habitat choices they make both along the way and on their summering and wintering grounds.

Founded in 1973, ICF is a 501 c3 organization that works worldwide to conserve cranes and the wetland and grassland ecosystems on which they depend. ICF is dedicated to providing experience, knowledge, and inspiration to involve people in resolving threats to these ecosystems. To learn more about our global conservation efforts, visit: www.savingcranes.org.

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