



Government agencies and private non-profits working together to restore migratory whooping cranes to eastern North America.

www.bringbackthecranes.org

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Third Group of Endangered Whooping Cranes Completes Ultralight-led Migration, Reaching Winter Home at Florida's Chassahowitzka NWR

Sixteen whooping cranes following three ultralight aircraft reached their winter home today, completing a 1,225-mile migration from Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin to Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge along Florida's central Gulf Coast.

Prior to landing at a special four-acre site at Chassahowitzka, the young cranes made a rare public appearance, flying over a welcoming crowd of supporters at the Crystal River Mall.

"We're pleased that both the cranes and crew arrived safely," said Jim Kraus, project leader at Chassahowitzka NWR. "Our staff and volunteers have worked very hard to get the cranes' pen site ready, and now that they are here we can all breathe a little easier."

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), an international coalition of public and private organizations, is conducting this ultralight-led reintroduction project in an effort to return this highly imperiled species to its historic range in eastern North America.

"Today marks yet another inspiring step toward recovering this most endangered crane," said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's John Christian, who is co-chair of WCEP. "With the contributions of our myriad state, nonprofit and federal partners, I have no doubt that the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership will continue on a path to restoring whooping cranes to the skies and wetlands of eastern North America."

The 16 cranes left Necedah, Wis., on October 16, following ultralight aircraft flown by Operation Migration, Inc., pilots. International Crane Foundation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists will monitor their winter behavior and track them on their anticipated spring migration north in 2004.

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Founding members of WCEP:

◆*International Whooping Crane Recovery Team* ◆*United States Fish & Wildlife Service* ◆*Operation Migration Inc.*
◆*Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources* ◆*USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center* ◆*International Crane Foundation*
◆*National Fish & Wildlife Foundation* ◆*Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin* ◆*USGS National Wildlife Health Center*

These birds are the third generation of whooping cranes to make this unique assisted migration from Wisconsin to Florida. All but one of the 20 cranes from the ultralight-led migration classes of 2001 and 2002 have completed their own unassisted southward migrations, representing another milestone in this historic reintroduction effort.

“Once again this team has performed an amazing feat, and we couldn’t have done it without our many partners and donors,” said Joe Duff, co-founder of Operation Migration and migration team leader. “Today we are 1,225 miles closer to safeguarding the whooping crane from extinction. It’s an exciting time for our crew and for all involved in this project.”

Whooping cranes were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s, and today, only about 300 cranes live in the wild. Aside from the 20 Wisconsin-Florida birds, the only other migrating population of whooping cranes nests at the Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada and winters at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast. A non-migrating flock of approximately 100 birds lives year-round in the central Florida Kissimmee region.

The whooping crane chicks that take part in the reintroduction project are hatched at the U.S. Geological Survey’s Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md., where they are introduced to ultralight aircraft and raised in isolation from humans. To ensure the impressionable cranes remain wild, project biologists and pilots adhere to a strict no-talking rule, broadcast recorded crane calls and wear costumes designed to mask the human form whenever they are around the cranes.

New classes of cranes are brought to Necedah NWR each June to begin a summer of conditioning behind the ultralights to prepare them for their first fall journey. Pilots guide the birds on gradually longer training flights at the refuge throughout the summer until the young cranes are deemed ready to follow the aircraft along the migration route.

“The WCEP team has again shown that the power of partnership is alive and well, and I’m confident that this cooperative effort will eventually lead to recovery for a species that once was nearly extinct,” said Beth Goodman, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources’ Whooping Crane Coordinator and co-chair of WCEP. “The State of Wisconsin is proud to be a part of this unprecedented cooperative effort.”

The seven-state flyway from Wisconsin to Florida is part of the historic range of the whooping crane and this additional migrating population would be a significant step toward the eventual recovery of the species. Many groups can share the credit for the success this reintroduction effort has experienced thus far.

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership is a consortium of non-profit organizations and government agencies. Founding members are the International Crane Foundation, Operation Migration Inc., Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey’s Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and National Wildlife Health Center, International Whooping Crane Recovery Team, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin.

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Many other flyway states, provinces, private individuals and conservation groups have joined forces with and support the partnership by donating resources, funding and personnel. More than 60 percent of the estimated \$1.8 million budget comes from private sources in the form of grants, donations and corporate sponsors.

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For more information on the project and its partners,
visit the WCEP website at <http://www.bringbackthecranes.org>
Downloadable images suitable for print media publication are also available on this site.

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