



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

www.bringbackthecranes.org

October 16, 2003

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**Rare Bird Reintroduction Project Scores a Hat Trick:
Third Group of Endangered Whooping Cranes Leaves Wisconsin for Ultralight-guided Flight to Florida**

Building on the success of two historic migrations led by Operation Migration Inc., a third generation of endangered whooping cranes began a similar migration today from Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin.

At 7:44 a.m., guided by three ultralight aircraft, 15 juvenile whooping cranes began the first leg of their 1,228-mile journey to their wintering habitat at Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, along Florida's Gulf coast. They flew for 23 miles before reaching their first stopover in southern Juneau County.

Of the fifteen birds that took off from Necedah, nine flew all the way to the stopover behind the ultralights. The remaining six cranes are being tracked by Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership crew members and will be transported to the stopover site.

Pilots believe the 15 birds will more likely follow the ultralight aircraft as a group as the migration progresses.

“We’re fairly confident that now that these birds are away from the familiarity of Necedah refuge, they’ll more consistently follow the ultralight aircraft,” said Operation Migration’s Joe Duff, the lead ultralight pilot.

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), an international coalition of public and private groups, is organizing the effort to reintroduce this highly imperiled species in eastern North America.

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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*

"As we see a new class of whooping cranes off on their first journey south, we are building on two years of success with this unprecedented project," said John Christian of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a founding member of WCEP and the agency that oversees the National Wildlife Refuge System. "We are also anticipating that the first two groups of cranes will make the migration this year unaided by ultralights—signaling further success for this unparalleled reintroduction effort."

The public can follow the progress of the ultralight-led migration, as well as of the cranes from 2001 and 2002 on their solo migration, on the Web at <http://www.operationmigration.org>.

The WCEP success story began in 2001, when eight whooping crane chicks conditioned to follow their ultralight surrogates began their first fall migration south from Necedah NWR. Seven of those whoopers made it to Florida safely, and five successfully completed an unassisted return migration back to central Wisconsin in the spring of 2002. One bird from this "Class of 2001" was lost during the migration after colliding with a power line when it escaped its enclosure during a storm, and two others were lost to bobcat predation during the winter. Both power lines and predation are key threats to whooping cranes in the wild.

In 2002, WCEP biologists and pilots conditioned a second group and guided 17 juvenile cranes to Chassahowitzka NWR. One was lost during the migration when it collided with an ultralight. Sixteen returned to Wisconsin this past spring.

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, Maryland. There, the young cranes 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 transported to Necedah NWR each June to begin a summer of conditioning behind the ultralights to prepare them for their fall migration. Pilots lead 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.

Both graduated classes of whoopers spent much of their time this past summer on or near the Necedah and Horicon national wildlife refuges, both of which are in central Wisconsin. However, after returning to the Necedah area in April, three females, known as cranes 3, 7 and 15 from the Class of 2002, headed west, eventually settling near the Coteau Prairie, in eastern South Dakota. It is not unusual for yearling cranes to wander, especially if they are not associating with any male flockmates, which typically select the future breeding territory.

The three cranes were retrieved on August 17 and 18 by biologists from the International Crane Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in close cooperation with field staff from South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, as well as the landowners on whose property the cranes had taken up residence. Subsequently, crane 7 developed an illness known as capture myopathy, and despite intense rehabilitation therapy, eventually had to be euthanized due to the poor prognosis for a good quality of life.

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Despite this setback the project has enjoyed many successes, and WCEP partners anticipate the 15 remaining cranes from the Class of 2002 will begin their first unaided fall migration in the next few weeks, along with the five veterans of the Class of 2001. Residents in the seven-state, Wisconsin to Florida flyway should keep their eyes toward the sky for the telltale white forms of whooping cranes gliding on the wind.

One of the Class of 2003 cranes conditioned at Necedah this summer will not be starting out with its flockmates on the ultralight-led migration. Crane 3 was diagnosed with a small fracture in her right leg and recently underwent surgery at the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisc., where she remains under observation. WCEP project veterinarians hope to transport this crane separately along the migration and allow her to join the ultralight-led migration in progress after she has healed.

Project staff from the International Crane Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will track and monitor the 2001 and 2002 southbound cranes in an effort to learn as much as possible about their unassisted journeys and the habitat choices they make along the way.

Whooping cranes were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s. Today, there are only about 275 birds 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.

Since whooping cranes are vulnerable to extreme weather, disease and catastrophes such as oil and chemical spills, scientists and conservationists are anxious to establish additional flocks to guard against the impacts such threats might have on the species' future.

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. According to Joe Duff, co-founder of Operation Migration Inc., a WCEP founding member, many groups can share the credit for the success this reintroduction effort has experienced thus far.

"Private landowners, corporations and individuals making tax-deductible donations, and the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership has come together to form a strong and determined alliance for the cranes," Duff said. "With such support, we are giving the species its best chance for recovery."

Reintroduction of any species also requires the support and coordination of numerous state and local government agencies. These species form an important part of each state's natural heritage.



"Wisconsin continues its enthusiastic support for restoring whooping cranes to wetlands--a valued part of North America's rich resource heritage," said Beth Goodman, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Whooping Crane Coordinator. "We're thrilled by the success of these initial years of effort."

Whooping cranes, named for their loud and penetrating unison calls, live and breed in wetland areas, where they feed on crabs, clams, frogs and aquatic plants. A whooping crane is a distinctive animal, standing 5 feet tall, with a white body, black wing tips and a red crest on its head.

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Educators and students are encouraged to visit Journey North for information and curriculum materials related to this whooping crane project: ://www.learner.org/jnorth/fall2003/crane/index.

NOTE TO REPORTERS: Information on how the first day went will be available online at <http://www.bringbackthecranes.org>. Downloadable images suitable for print media publication will also be available.

Daily updates will also be available on the Media Information Line at **904-232-2580 ext. 124**. The voicemail message will be updated by 11 a.m. Eastern (10 a.m. Central) each morning.

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.

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>

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