



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

[www.bringbackthecranes.org](http://www.bringbackthecranes.org)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **“Class of 2004” Endangered Whooping Cranes Arrive in Wisconsin**

Twelve juvenile whooping cranes from the ultralight-guided 2004 fall migration have returned to southern and central Wisconsin wetlands, completing their first unassisted spring migration. The birds returned after spending 103 days at their winter home on Florida's Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.

A tracking team from the International Crane Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service monitored the cranes as they entered their home state in the early evening hours of April 4. Eleven cranes had traveled together since leaving Chassahowitzka NWR on March 25. After flying through Georgia and veering as far east as South Carolina, the cranes corrected their course, stopping in Indiana before reaching Wisconsin.

A twelfth juvenile whooping crane that did not depart with the rest of the flock migrated northward with cranes from previous hatch years and arrived in Wisconsin on or about April 6.

“The return of the whooping cranes is a new rite of spring that we can all look forward to,” said Signe Holtz, director of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources’ Bureau of Endangered Resources. “Having them back in our skies is thrilling. We’re seeing them begin to spread out from their fledging grounds at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge and use habitat in other areas of the state, giving more and more people a chance at seeing them each year.”

The hatch year 2004 whooping cranes were guided southward last fall by ultralight aircraft from their fledging grounds at the Necedah NWR to their winter habitat at the Chassahowitzka NWR on the central-west coast of Florida. The fall journey lasted 64 days, of which only 21 days were spent actually “migrating.” The remaining 43 days were spent on the ground waiting for weather to improve.

The 2004 fall flight marked the fourth successful ultralight-led migration for the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), an international coalition of public and private groups that is organizing the effort to reintroduce this highly imperiled species in eastern North America and a portion of its historic range. There are now 45 migrating whooping cranes in the wild east of the Mississippi River.

#### **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*

A thirteenth hatch year 2004 crane, identified by project biologists as 18-04, remains at his wintering location in Florida. Project biologists removed this young bird from the ultralight-imprinted group after several of his primary feathers became infected and fell out during last summer's training period. Instead, once the flight feathers regenerated this young crane was released with several older whooping cranes at the reintroduction site. Crane 18-04 arrived in central Florida on January 3 after successfully following several different whooping cranes for more than 1,200 miles.

WCEP expects to use this "supplemental release" reintroduction method in the coming years to complement the known success of the ultralight-led migrations. Using the two methods together gives project managers flexibility in leveraging all whooping crane chicks made available to the reintroduction project.

WCEP asks anyone who encounters a whooping crane in the wild to please give them the respect and distance they need. Do not approach birds on foot within 600 feet; try to remain in your vehicle; do not approach in a vehicle within 600 feet or, if on a public road, within 300 feet. Also, please remain concealed and do not speak loudly enough that the birds can hear you. Finally, do not trespass on private property in an attempt to view whooping cranes.

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, and use recorded adult crane calls to communicate with the young birds. Additionally, researchers 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.

Graduated classes of whoopers spend much of their time during the summer on or near the Necedah and Horicon national wildlife refuges, both of which are in central Wisconsin. They also use state and private lands. 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.

Project staff from the International Crane Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service track and monitor southbound cranes in an effort to learn as much as possible about their unassisted journeys and the habitat choices they make along the way. ICF and FWS biologists actively track the cranes as they make their way north, and continue to monitor the birds, along with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources biologists, while the whooping cranes are in their summer locations.

Whooping cranes were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s. Today, there are only about 300 birds in the wild. Aside from the 45 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 70 birds lives year-round in the central Florida Kissimmee region.

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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. They are distinctive animals, standing 5 feet tall, with white bodies, black wing tips and red crowns on their heads.

Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership founding members include the International Crane Foundation, Operation Migration Inc., Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and National Wildlife Health Center, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, and the International Whooping Crane Recovery Team.

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

As the majority of support for this project comes from private sources, individual contributions are always welcome. Tax-exempt donations may be sent to any of the private non-profit organizations in the partnership. For more information on the project, its partners and how you can help, visit the WCEP website at <http://www.bringbackthecranes.org>.

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