



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

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Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 24, 2006
WCEP 06-01

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A Sure Sign of Spring: Wild Whooping Cranes Return to Wisconsin

Among the signs of springtime these days in central Wisconsin is the arrival of wild whooping cranes on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge and the other public and private lands these majestic birds call their summer homes.

Biologists with the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), which is coordinating an effort to return migrating whooping cranes to eastern North America, announced today that 15 reintroduced whooping cranes had arrived on or near Necedah NWR, and two others were roosting along the Wisconsin River.

Thanks to the efforts of WCEP, an international coalition of public and private groups, there are now 64 endangered whooping cranes in the wild in eastern North America, which was part of their historic range.

The newly arrived whooping cranes represent the migration “classes” of 2001 through 2004, which were guided southward by ultralight aircraft their fledging grounds at Necedah NWR to their winter habitat at Chassahowitzka NWR on the Gulf coast of Florida.

The most recent ultralight-reintroduced cranes, the Class of 2005, remain at their pensite at Chassahowitzka. These birds have begun taking short evening flights in the immediate area of the pen. The 19 birds of the Class of 2005 arrived in Florida on Dec. 13, 2005, after a 64-day migration.

In addition to the 19 chicks that migrated behind ultralights in 2005, biologists from the International Crane Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also released four additional chicks last fall into the company of older birds at Necedah NWR, in the hopes that the chicks would learn the migration route from adult whoopers or sandhill cranes.

WCEP is using this “direct autumn release” technique to complement the known success of the ultralight-led migrations. Chicks for direct autumn release will be reared in the field and released with older birds after fledging, or developing their flight feathers. This method of reintroduction has been extensively tested and proven successful with sandhill cranes.

As of March 24, two of the 2005 direct autumn release birds had embarked on migration and were in Indiana; the other two remain in Florida.

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*

WCEP asks anyone who encounters whooping cranes in the wild to please give them the respect and distance they need. Do not approach birds on foot within 600 feet and try to remain in your vehicle. Do not approach cranes 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.

In 2001, project partner Operation Migration's pilots first led whooping crane chicks conditioned to follow their ultralight surrogates south from Necedah NWR to Chassahowitzka NWR. Each subsequent year, WCEP biologists and pilots have conditioned and guided additional groups of juvenile cranes to Chassahowitzka NWR.

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, and use recorded adult crane calls to communicate with the young birds. Researchers wear costumes designed to mask the human form whenever they are around the cranes.

New classes of cranes are taken 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.

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 migrations and the habitat choices they make along the way. ICF and FWS biologists, along with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources biologists, track the cranes as they make their way north, and continue to monitor the birds while they are in their summer locations.

In the first four years of the project, returning whooping cranes have used wetlands in 35 of 72 Wisconsin counties, primarily within the lower two-thirds of the state along major rivers and wetlands. In addition to the core reintroduction area of Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, the birds' increased use of wetlands along the lower Wisconsin River and in more than 15 state wildlife areas, private wetlands and Horicon NWR demonstrates the value of preserved habitat to the success of this restoration effort.

Whooping cranes were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s. Today, only about 300 birds exist in the wild. Aside from the 64 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 60 birds lives year-round in the central Florida Kissimmee region.

Whooping cranes, named for their loud and penetrating unison calls, live and breed in wetlands, 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 are 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

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National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, and the International Whooping Crane Recovery Team.

Many other 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 budget comes from private sources in the form of grants, donations and corporate sponsors.

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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Educators and students are encouraged to visit Journey North for information and curriculum materials related to the whooping crane project: <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/crane/index.html>

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