



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

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Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership Celebrates New Additions as Reintroduced Cranes Become Parents

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) is celebrating a milestone in its efforts to reintroduce a wild whooping crane flock in eastern North America. The first two chicks hatched from the reintroduced eastern migratory whooping crane population came into the world on May 5 and 7, respectively.

Their human caretakers -- biologists at the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md. -- are beaming with pride, as are all of the founding members of WCEP, an international coalition of public and private groups.

The two chicks hatched from the eggs of whooping cranes 13 (a male) and 18 (a female) from the ultralight-led crane Class of 2002. The tiny chicks—numbers 2-06 and 3-06—are the second and third birds to hatch this spring at Patuxent, and biologists anticipate that both will join the ultralight-led crane Class of 2006, which will learn the migration route between Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin and Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Florida this fall.

They will join the 64 other endangered whooping cranes in the wild in eastern North America thanks to WCEP's efforts.

“All of us in WCEP—and our many partners and supporters—are thrilled to be able to announce the first reproduction in our reintroduced flock,” said John Christian, co-chair of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership. “This is a moment we have been anticipating since our efforts began six years ago, and it represents a great leap forward in whooping crane recovery.”

“The hatch of these two chicks from eggs produced by reintroduced cranes in the wild at Necedah – cranes hatched in a lab at our center, reared by human caretakers in costume and taught migration by an ultralight aircraft – is really impressive,” said John French, research manager at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. “The whooper pairs at Necedah still have some incubation and parenting skills to develop, but this is significant milestone. The survival, migration and now reproduction of reintroduced cranes gives us great confidence that we are on the right track.”

Although these two chicks are the offspring of wild cranes, they were hatched in captivity at the Patuxent facility. Biologists removed the two eggs from a nest at Necedah NWR after their parents wandered away from the newly laid eggs for a long period of time.

Founding members of WCEP:

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◆*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*

Four other nests with eggs incubated by reintroduced WCEP cranes were lost this spring after the cranes left the nest, leaving their eggs vulnerable to predators such as raccoons. WCEP is additionally pleased this year to have discovered five attempts at reproduction; four nests were incubated at Necedah NWR and one was found at nearby Meadow Valley State Wildlife Area. While it is not unusual for inexperienced crane pairs to leave their nests with eggs, project biologists decided to remove these eggs while the cranes were still away from the nest to give them a better chance of survival.

The newly hatched chicks will remain at Patuxent for the next few months, where they will be reared like eggs from the captive flock--raised in isolation from humans and imprinted on the ultralight aircraft. Then they will be taken along with their flockmates to Necedah NWR in central Wisconsin to begin a summer of conditioning behind the ultralights to prepare them for their fall migration.

At Necedah, Operation Migration pilots will lead the birds on gradually longer training flights throughout the summer until the young cranes are deemed ready to follow the aircraft along the migration route.

Then the young cranes, called colts, follow the ultralight aircraft from Wisconsin to the Gulf Coast of Florida, where they spend the winter. They return north each spring unassisted.

Biologists from the International Crane Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have also begun releasing additional chicks into the company of older birds in the fall at Necedah NWR, in the hopes that the chicks will 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 with sandhill cranes and proven successful. Four whooping cranes were released by this method in the fall of 2005.

WCEP asks anyone who encounters whooping cranes in the wild to please give them the respect and distance they need to remain wild. 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, 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.

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

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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 five 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 Resources, 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 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.

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For more information on the project, its partners and how you can help, visit the WCEP website at <http://www.bringbackthecranes.org>

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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