



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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First Chicks of the Ultralight-led "Class of 2006" Arrive at Wisconsin's Necedah National Wildlife Refuge

On the heels of a watershed event -- the June 23 hatch of the first two wild whooping crane chicks of the eastern migratory flock -- the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership celebrated a rite of summer as eight whooping crane chicks arrived on June 26 at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin to begin preparation for their fall migration behind ultralight aircraft.

The chicks, four females and four males, comprise the first group of young whoopers to arrive at Necedah by private aircraft from the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md., where they hatched, imprinted on and learned to follow ultralight aircraft on the ground. Following a vet check that showed all of the birds were healthy, they were shown their new home on the Necedah refuge, which is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Class of 2006 will be the sixth group of juvenile cranes to take part in a project sponsored by the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), a coalition of public and private organizations that is reintroducing endangered whooping cranes in eastern North America, part of their historic range.

Included in this group is one of the first young birds hatched from the reintroduced migratory eastern whooping crane flock. Crane 2-06, a female, hatched in captivity on May 5 at the Patuxent facility, from an egg removed from Necedah NWR after the parents abandoned the nest.

A field team from Operation Migration, Inc., and the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center will spend the summer strengthening the social cohesion of the Class of 2006 and teaching them to fly behind ultralights. Biologists from the International Crane Foundation will join the field team later this summer.

This fall, the team will use ultralights to guide the young cranes on their first southward migration to Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge on Florida's Gulf coast, the cranes' winter home.

During their fall migration and while the reintroduced cranes are in Florida this winter, they will receive veterinary support from Disney's Animal Programs' veterinary services team based at Walt Disney World Resort.

WCEP has signed an in-kind agreement with Walt Disney World to provide routine and emergency veterinary care, diagnostic evaluation and consultation for whooping cranes involved in the WCEP program while they are in Florida and surrounding states.

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*

“For several years, the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund has helped support the financial needs of Operation Migration, so it is only natural to take Disney’s efforts a step farther through this volunteer effort with our professional staff,” said Beth Stevens, Vice President of Disney’s Animal Kingdom and Animal Programs. “It is not only something we believe in, it is something our cast members truly enjoy.”

In addition to the chicks that will migrate behind ultralights, WCEP biologists are rearing additional cranes which will be released this fall into the company of older birds at Necedah in the hopes that the chicks will learn the migration route from adult whoopers. These cranes hatched at the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wis.

WCEP is using this “direct autumn release” technique to complement the known success of the ultralight-led migrations. Chicks for direct autumn release are reared in the field and released with older birds after fledging, or developing their flight feathers.

There are currently 65 whooping cranes in the wild as a result of the first five years of reintroductions into the eastern flock. Project biologists continue to monitor the veteran cranes from the Classes of 2001 through 2005. Many of these cranes are spending the summer on public and private lands in the central Wisconsin area. Three cranes are in the lower peninsula of Michigan.

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 or in a vehicle within 600 feet and try to remain in your vehicle. Do not approach cranes in a vehicle within 300 feet if on a public road. 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 south- and northbound 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 biologists from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, continue to monitor the birds while they are in their summer locations.

In the first five 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 on major rivers and wetlands. In addition to the core reintroduction area at Necedah NWR, 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 65 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 NWR the Texas Gulf Coast. A non-migrating flock of approximately 60 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 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, 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 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.

WCEP thanks Terry Kohler and the Windway Capital Corp. pilots for their continued efforts in helping to safeguard endangered whooping cranes.

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For more information about the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, visit our Web site at <http://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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