



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

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## **First Wild Whooping Crane Chicks Hatch in the Midwest in Over 100 Years**

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) is celebrating a milestone in its efforts to reintroduce a wild whooping crane flock in eastern North America. On June 22, two whooping crane chicks hatched at the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, Wisconsin. This historic event marks the first time in over 100 years that a whooping crane has hatched in the wild in the Midwest.

The two chicks are offspring of whooping crane pair 11-02 (a male) and 17-02 (a female) from the ultralight-led crane Class of 2002. The pair nested earlier this spring at the refuge, but their egg(s) were lost--likely due to predators. They renested and began incubating on May 23.

"With the hatching of the first two wild chicks from the migratory whooping crane reintroduction, another chapter in wildlife history has been made. The journey took six long years of dedication, vision and believing it could happen--as well as the blood, sweat and occasional tears of the many partners that worked on the project. This is truly the start of a new generation of wild things...and a symbol for restoring our wild places," said John Christian, co-chair of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership.

"This is an incredible moment for the many dedicated people contributing to this project, however, much like these young chicks, while we've succeeded so far, there's much more work ahead to ensure this population of whooping cranes will sustain itself for generations to come," said Kelley Tucker, co-chair of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership.

"This is a long awaited moment," said Signe Holtz, director of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Bureau of Endangered Resources, "the success of this effort sets a goal for endangered species recovery efforts everywhere. The partnership of public, private and government organizations that has made this possible shows what can be done when we all pull together with a common goal in sight. These chicks have a long and dangerous road ahead of them, but with luck we'll see them wing south with their parents this fall."

(Editor's note: Medium-res. photos of the crane chicks and adult birds are available on request)

In May, another "first" occurred when two whooping crane chicks from a nest in the wild hatched in captivity. WCEP biologists removed the two eggs from a nest at the Necedah NWR after their parents

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wandered away from the newly laid eggs for a long period of time. The chicks were hatched at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. They will join the crane Class of 2006, which will learn the migration route between Necedah NWR and Chassahowitzka NWR in Florida this fall by following Operation Migration's ultralight aircraft.

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. These chicks will learn the migration route from adult whooping cranes 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 north- and 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 DNR biologists, 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 63 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 Resource, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

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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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