



Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership News Release

For Immediate Release

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EXPERIMENTAL FLOCK OF WHOOPING CRANES ON THEIR WAY NORTH

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) announced today that after much anticipation, the experimental flock of five (5) endangered whooping cranes that wintered on the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, initiated their northward migration early yesterday. WCEP successfully reintroduced seven whooping cranes to the Chassahowitzka winter site last December, led by Operation Migration Inc. ultralight pilots who taught them a migration route from Necedah, Wisconsin. Five of these first-year pioneer cranes successfully adapted to their new wintering site; unfortunately, two were predated by bobcats.

The initial report on the cranes' movement came in at 10:00 a.m., yesterday from the field biologist monitoring the birds from Fort Island Trail Beach just west of Crystal River, FL, where it seemed the birds were flying slightly east of the coast, in a northerly direction.

"The birds were really active last night (Monday), so perhaps that was their way of saying they were ready to go," said Anne Lacy, International Crane Foundation biologist and one of the two trackers. "They left the pen several times and appeared to be trying to spiral (on the air currents), but then would just circle and return to the pen. We also heard them calling one another much more frequently than in previous weeks."

This morning, Lacy and U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Richard Urbanek, the other whooping crane tracker, reported the birds spent the night in Wilcox County, GA approximately 220 miles north of Crystal River, FL after having flown for more than six hours. Based on weather reports for central Georgia, the biologists believe the birds may resume their north progression sometime later today.

The whooping cranes arrived at their winter home on December 5, 2001 after following ultralight aircraft on a 50-day journey of more than 1,228 miles. This return north will be the cranes' first unassisted migration, guided only by their natural instincts and the mysterious migratory mechanisms that humans, even now do not completely understand. There are many theories of the factors that contribute to the cranes leaving such as the amount of daylight increasing, magnetic fields, barometric pressure, and more but these are only theories.

While the cranes were wintering on the refuge, biologists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and International Crane Foundation monitored the birds daily taking note of their behaviors, as well as weather and habitat conditions in the area.

To aid in keeping track of these birds, each has a radio transmitter and two are also outfitted with satellite transmitters. These transmitters will allow project biologists to monitor the cranes from a distance and determine the return path selected, as well as the type and location of roosting areas that they use during the unaided flight north.

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How long the migration may take is still an unknown, and could vary from year to year. According to project biologists, this year's birds may wander around as a bachelor flock, taking their time moving northward or head straight to their fledging area at the Necedah NWR in central Wisconsin. They could also stop anywhere in between.

As Joe Duff, co-founder of Operation Migration Inc. and the project's lead ultralight pilot, noted recently in a field update on WCEP partner Journey North's web site (<http://www.learner.org/jnorth/spring2002/species/crane/Update040902.html>), the uncertainty of the migration north calls for project partners and the public to exercise patience.

"Just as wild birds do, our birds learned the migration route on a one-way trip. They followed us south as they would follow their parents to the wintering grounds where they separate from them as they mature and become more independent. It is then up to us as surrogate parents to remain calm and patiently wait for their return," Duff said.

During this return migration, the birds will face many of the challenges they faced on the way south and while at the refuge. Weather and predators, as well as human interaction, could all still have an impact on these birds. There will also be a few new challenges for the birds such as telephone and power lines, cell phone towers, fences, as well as finding for themselves the right habitat that protects them from predators and provides food and water.

With such a small number of birds, it will be a very rare treat for someone to actually see these birds during their trip back north. Project partners emphasize that how the public reacts to a sighting could have an effect on the birds.

"The best thing anyone can do, if they see the birds, is to stay away," says Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national whooping crane recovery coordinator. "The project team members have taken extraordinary steps to give these birds a chance to develop wild behavior."

"While we encourage the public to stay interested in the birds and the project, we would ask that they not try to approach the birds should they come across them now or in the future," Stehn said.

These whooping cranes represent only the first group of birds to be reintroduced to the migratory path in eastern North America. Additional flocks will be introduced over the next decade.

"This year we anticipate adding 18-20 more whooping cranes to the Wisconsin ultralight training for reintroduction," according to George Gee, a physiologist in Crane Restoration Ecology at the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. The increase over last year is due to project approval by the International Whooping Crane Recovery Team.

So far, everything is on schedule for this year says Beth Goodman, WCEP Whooping Crane Project Co-team Leader and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

"Captive whoopers are laying eggs for us at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland," Goodman said. "We are starting with early-hatch chicks so that migration this year can begin earlier than mid-October, in hopes we can beat out the kind of bad the migration crew encountered last year. Additionally, the staff at Necedah NWR have developed an additional pen and training site to accommodate this year's large flock."

The whooping cranes's migration north will be tracked on the project's web site at www.bringbackthecranes.org as well as that of project partner Operation Migration, Inc. at www.operationmigration.org

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership is a consortium of people representing a wide variety of private organizations and public agencies working to reintroduce a migratory flock of whooping cranes back into eastern North America. The ultimate goal of the project is to reintroduce enough whooping cranes to the flyway to establish a self-sustaining flock containing at least 25 adult breeding pairs.

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Founding members of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership are the International Crane Foundation, International Whooping Crane Recovery Team, Operation Migration Inc., National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U. S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and Madison Wildlife Health Center, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Many other flyway States, provinces, private individuals and conservation groups have joined forces with and support WCEP by donating resources, funding and personnel.

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

MEDIA REMINDER

There will be telephone-based press conference today at 11:00 a.m. Eastern/10:00 a.m. Central. The press panel is tentatively scheduled to comprise the following individuals:

Beth Goodman, co-leader for Project Direction Team and Project Bird Team Leader (WI. DNR),
Joe Duff, Operation Migration Inc.,
Jim Harris, International Crane Foundation,
Bill Hartwig, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service regional director, Midwest Region, and
possibly one or both of the biologists tracking the birds depending on availability.

I will serve as conference moderator.

Details for calling into the press conference are provided below. You will need to provide the passcode, conference leader's name, your name and your affiliation.

CALL DATE: APR-10-2002 (Wednesday)

CALL TIME: 11:00 A.M. EASTERN TIME

USA Toll Free Number: 888-566-6183

PASSCODE: MIGRATION

LEADER: Charles Underwood