



BRIEFING NOTES

Background

Due to destruction of habitat and over-hunting, Whooping cranes were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s when their population was reduced to only 15 birds.

Since falling under the protection of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the only naturally occurring population of migrating Whooping cranes has grown to just over 200 birds. This population migrates between Wood Buffalo National Park, which spans the border of northern Alberta and Canada's Northwest Territories, and the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on coastal Texas.

Because the Aransas-Wood Buffalo population of Whooping cranes is extremely vulnerable to severe weather, avian disease, and catastrophes such as oil and chemical spills, scientists and conservationists were anxious to establish additional flocks to guard against the impacts such threats could have on the species' future.

For many avian species, the ability to migrate is a learned process; that is, passed on from one generation to the next. As a result, when the last bird vanishes from an area, the once-traditional route is lost forever.

Building on the innovative work done by Canadian visionary and Operation Migration (OM) co-founder, Bill Lishman, OM originated and spent years researching, developing, and refining a unique method and protocol for an aircraft-led bird migration. OM's work with the endangered Whooping crane was preceded by a number of successful migration studies involving Canada geese, Trumpeter swans, and Sandhill cranes, and became the subject for the major motion picture, *Fly Away Home*.

In 1999, Operation Migration was asked by the Canadian/US Whooping Crane Recovery Team to spearhead an experiment to reintroduce Whooping cranes into central Wisconsin, and teach them to migrate by leading them with ultralight aircraft to the west coast of Florida. This program required the combined effort of many jurisdictions and precipitated the formation of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP). Operation Migration is a founding member of this international organization that includes Federal, State and private agencies.

The Protocol

Using captive-hatched birds from captive propagation centers throughout North America, OM rears and trains Whooping crane chicks to accept and follow specially modified ultralight aircraft in order to teach them a migratory route.



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, Maryland. There, imprinting begins with the chicks still inside their eggs being exposed to ultralight aircraft sounds. Once hatched, the young chicks are reared in total isolation from humans.

To ensure the impressionable cranes remain wild, project biologists and pilots adhere to a strict no-talking rule and wear big, baggy, white costumes designed to disguise the human form. The costumed handlers and pilots wear a crane puppet on one arm that can dispense food or, by example, show the young chicks how to forage, as would their real mother.

At approximately 45 days of age the young birds are transported by air, in individual containers, to the reintroduction area at the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin. Due to differing age ranges, the birds are usually moved in three shipments and housed at three separate locations within a closed area of the refuge. Over the summer OM's Field crew and pilots, condition the birds to follow the aircraft, which, along with its pilot, has now been accepted as a surrogate parent.



As the now juvenile birds begin to fledge, the individual cohorts are introduced, and penned together at one site. Once their dominance structure has been established and their endurance is sufficient, the migration takes place, typically beginning in early October.



Using four ultralight aircraft, OM's pilots, along with a ground crew of bird handlers, top cover pilot and spotter, and education and outreach staff, cover from 0 to 200 miles per day depending on weather conditions. More than half the days of the migration are spent on the ground, waiting for weather conditions to improve.

The migration passes through seven states,

covers 1250 miles, and takes anywhere from 60 to 90 days to complete. Each stopover is pre-selected for its isolation, and the birds are housed overnight in portable pens to protect them from predators.

On reaching Florida, the Class of the Year is split into two groups. Half winters on the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge just south of Tallahassee, and the other on the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge on Florida's west coast. The birds are housed in a four-acre, open topped pen surrounded by strands of electrified wire. Regular visits by costumed handlers and a constant supply of food and fresh water ensure that they return to this pen to roost in water every night where they are protected from predators.



At St. Marks, the birds are monitored over the winter by a team from Operation Migration and partners Disney's Animal Kingdom. At Chassahowitzka, they are watched over by a team from the International Crane Foundation and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

In early spring they begin their unassisted return migration to the central Wisconsin area for the summer. Each bird is tracked by a conventional radio-tracking device attached to its leg. Some birds also carry a Platform Terminal Transmitter (PTT), or satellite tracking transmitter.

Geography

The population being reintroduced by Operation Migration under the auspices of WCEP begins its migration in central Wisconsin and is led through Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia and then to Florida. This seven-state flyway is part of the historic range of the Whooping crane, and these states, along with thirteen surrounding states, and Canadian provinces into which these birds may voluntarily disperse, are co-operators in the reintroduction project.



Project Goal and Benefits

A federally listed endangered species in both the United States and Canada, the ultimate goal of safeguarding them from extinction benefits all North Americans.

The success of this project is an exemplary model for multi-jurisdictional, government and private agency cooperation in the name of conservation. Moreover the public and media interest this project generates focuses attention on conservation and endangered species issues throughout the continent and around the world.

Through daily updates on our website and those of our partners and affiliates, we reach an internet audience of over 7 million annually including over 750,000 school age children. More than 500 media stories in print and broadcast are generated each year.

This additional migrating population is making significant gains toward the eventual recovery of the species. Operation Migration's success in the reintroduction effort is shared with its partners in Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP).

Educational



Whooping cranes, named for their loud and penetrating unison calls, live and breed in wetland areas, where they feed on crabs, clams, frogs and aquatic plants. An adult Whooping crane is a distinctive creature, standing 5 feet tall, with a white body, black wing tips and a red crest on its head. Juveniles have golden-brown plumage that gradually disappears during their first year.

Protection Protocol

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

1. Do not approach birds on foot within 600 feet. If you are in a vehicle, remain inside and keep your vehicle well outside 600 feet.
2. In all cases, please remain concealed and do not speak loudly enough that the birds can hear you.
3. Finally, do not trespass on private property in an attempt to view whooping cranes.

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