

# On Migration

## IT'S A MIGRANT'S LIFE IN WORDS AND PHOTOS

by Liz Condie

THE THIRD IN A SERIES OF PHOTO STORYBOARDS, THIS CAPTIONED PICTORIAL PRESENTS AN OVERVIEW OF THE ANNUAL FALL MIGRATION.



Last training flight over the Necedah NWR.

At the end of the summer after an average 100 days of training and working with the young Whooping cranes, the team starts preparations for the upcoming journey south. Camp becomes a beehive of activity with crew replenishing supplies, checking and repairing gear, and winterizing pen sites and equipment. The fall migration can only begin when all three cohorts have been integrated and socialized, and all the birds can fly for at least 30 minutes.



OM's four trikes 'tucked in' for the night.

Although the birds and the aircraft often bump together, the custom-made propeller guard and the new wings have virtually eliminated the danger of mid air impacts. Thanks to the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, in 2006 new, strut-based wings were installed on all four ultralights. The old wings required overhead support wires which could entrap birds in flight and cause injury and mortality.



Lead aircraft and birds take-off with two trikes in chase position.

1,250 miles lie between Wisconsin and the migration's finish line in Florida. Throughout the migration the lead pilot position is rotated between OM's four pilots. The lead has the task of coordinating the take-off with the ground crew so all the birds make it out of the pen at one time.

Sometimes there are stragglers that can't catch up. They get discouraged and attempt to turn back. The other three pilots, flying in 'chase' positions, move in to pick up these errant birds.



The birds benefit from the vortices created by the aircraft wing.

In the wild, Whooping cranes are soaring birds. They fly on thermals or rising columns of warm air and can stay aloft all day, travelling 200 miles without expending much energy. Neither our aircraft nor pilots have those abilities or range. Following us, the birds learn to use the wake created by the wing to help carry them along. The lead bird is often only inches from the wingtip. Because this kind of formation flying requires smooth conditions we only fly in the early morning when the air is calm.



Culinary masterpiece baked by a neighbor of a stopover host.

It can take an hour or more to get all the birds moving in the right direction after days of being grounded due to weather. Sometimes the departure turns into an aerial rodeo, and the round-up is coordinated over aircraft radios. On the worst days, cranes and planes can be spread out over several miles. Despite all this we have never lost a bird.

We rely on the hospitality and generosity of more than 35 landowners and stopover hosts strung out along the migration route. On average, each migration uses only 23 stops.



It takes less than an hour to transform the travel trailer into a travel pen.

On migration we haul two custom-built, self contained travel pen trailers. The pens have a feeding station, shade shelter, a water and feed container, and once erected are protected from predators by three strands of electric fence. We 'leap frog' our stops with the pens so that one is always waiting for us at the next location. However, if good weather allows us to skip a stop, the pilots and birds then have to wait for the ground crew to catch up and set up a pen.



When the pilots have to wait for the ground crew to arrive with the travel pen they lead the birds off to an isolated area until the pen is set up. Because the trip by road takes much longer than the flight, the wait can sometimes be hours long.

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Holding the birds in isolation, waiting for the travel pen.



When the weather, winds, and birds are all cooperating, the pilots do their best to give watchers on the ground an eyeful as they depart on the next leg of the migration.

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Watchers are sometimes rewarded with fantastic photo-ops.



The ability to fly on any given migration day is totally weather dependent. While on average the 1,250 mile migration takes approximately 60 days, the cranes and planes are able to fly on less than half of them. The rest of the days are spent on the ground waiting for flying weather. Moisture is the enemy. Warm temperatures create fog and cold temperatures, frost.

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Fog and frost ground the cranes and planes.



Realization that it is the last time that we will fly with them dawns as we lead the birds out over the salt marsh toward the pen site at the Chassahowitzka NWR. There is a sadness in ending our long relationship, but gladness in knowing that they will soon take their rightful place in the wild. Our hope is that we have replicated the natural process and left them without human influences except the knowledge of a new and safe migration route.

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Departing from the Halpata-Tastanaki Preserve on the last leg of migration.



In Tennessee we must cross the Appalachian Mountains' Cumberland Ridge. In the photo, the trike and birds are clearing this obstacle by a good 500 feet but there have been times when we had to coax the birds over the ridge, clearing the trees with only a few feet to spare. During those flights we are too busy to take pictures.

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Crossing the Cumberland Ridge; 'The Beast'.



Once we arrive at the Chassahowitzka NWR near Crystal River, Florida, the birds are kept in a 4-acre pen that is protected by a high fence and electric shock wires. The pen is not top netted and the birds are free to come and go. They learn to forage in the marsh during the day but generally come back at night for food, and are consequently protected from predators. This past February the birds were in a top netted enclosure adjacent to this pen when an unexpected storm swept through the area and 17 birds were lost.

Arriving at the Chassahowitzka NWR.



During the migration we try to arrange for locations where the public can witness an early morning departure. The Muscatatuck National Wildlife Refuge in Indiana is such a place, and the departure flyover draws a large and enthusiastic crowd.

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Early risers waiting for the chance to see the cranes and planes.

Will you help?



We need sponsors for the 2007 migration!

Please call 1-800-675-2618 or visit [www.operationmigration.org](http://www.operationmigration.org)