

# Summer at Necedah

## IT'S A YOUNG WHOOPER'S LIFE IN WORDS AND PHOTOS

by Liz Condie

THIS CAPTIONED PICTORIAL PICKS UP WHERE LAST ISSUE'S PHOTO STORYBOARD LEFT OFF AND ILLUSTRATES OUR WORK DURING THE TIME PERIOD WE CALL "SUMMER FIELD."



40 odd days old and circle pen graduates.

Early socialization and circle pen training have been done at Patuxent, but as they have yet to grow their flight feathers they cannot fly. It is safer for the youngsters to be crated and moved before they fledge, and because they will consider the location from where they fledge/first fly as 'home,' the move to Necedah NWR is timed accordingly.

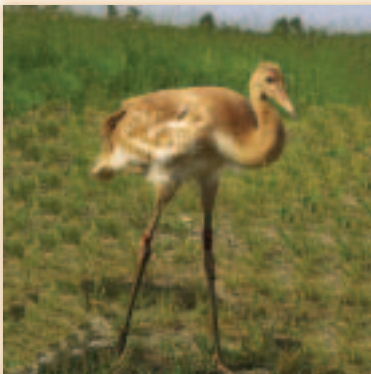
1



Joe Duff checks the loaded crates.

In three time-staggered shipments, cohorts (up to eight birds each) are loaded into Windway Capital's Cessna Caravan aircraft for the flight to Necedah WI Airport. Each year, Terry Kohler of Windway Capital donates the use of his aircraft and pilots' time. In July of 2006 pilot Mike Frakes made Windway's 15th donated flight from Patuxent to Necedah.

4



Old enough for the next adventure.

In general, by 45 days old the birds are ready to leave Patuxent for their summer home and flight training grounds on the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Each year's class of young student cranes is divided into three cohorts according to age, to be shipped by air in stages.

2



All hands needed to unload.

The flight to Necedah only takes a few hours. Necedah airport (where OM's ultralight hangar is located) is only six miles by road from the pen site. Once all the crates are unloaded they are transferred to air-conditioned vans for the trip to the pen. For the birds' safety, top speed over the bumpy back roads is not much above 10-15 mph, so the drive takes a while.

5



A costumed handler coaxes a young crane into his shipping crate.

The young cranes are loaded into crates specially constructed for their safe transport. The crates are also designed to keep them cool, and to restrict their view of humans and their surroundings. Once crated, costumed crew members load the birds into an air conditioned van for the drive to Baltimore Airport only a few miles away.

3



Vets watch while the crew releases birds inside the pen.

Once on site at the refuge the crates are carefully unloaded and moved into the pen. With veterinarians from the WCEP Health Team on hand to check for injuries and watch for signs of stress, the team releases the chicks one at a time. So far, there have been no serious problems moving the birds in this way.

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OM's crew continues to work on socialization, and give the chicks lots of time to forage near the aircraft until they become comfortable with their new surroundings.

*Socializing and familiarizing the chicks to their new surroundings.*

7



Each day the chicks are released onto the runway to socialize. Sometimes they are aggressive toward one another, but most often they are too excited to be antagonistic. Communal time allows the birds to naturally form a social group, and a dominance structure of leaders and followers gradually evolves. Each bird has a place in a pecking order that is maintained by aggression. Sometimes their battles can escalate and the costumed handlers step in to calm the hostilities.

*Who's the boss?*

8



At Patuxent the chicks are trained using a wingless trike. It's less intimidating for them and easier for us to manoeuvre around the circle pen. To avoid changing too much at once, the wing is left off the aircraft for the first few trainings at Necedah. The birds are introduced to the wing on an overcast day when there can be no shadow to frighten them and complicate their adjustment. It only takes a few hours for the youngsters to become accustomed to the wing and ignore it just as if it had always been there.

*Chicks meet the wing.*



The birds are trained every day that the weather allows. They begin to fledge at 80 to 100 days of age. After fledging, the ultralights lead the birds around the refuge. These adventures improve their strength and endurance, and give them more 'out of pen time' to establish their dominance structure.

*Out for a constitutional.*

12



While still a bit insecure in their new surroundings and anxious to stay together, it doesn't take long before the birds are following the aircraft up and down the runway and enjoying their 'taxi-training'.

*Taxi-Training.*

9



Eventually the three cohorts are united at Site one. This pen can be divided into 4 sections and the separate groups can be housed side by side. They can slowly get accustomed to each other without being able to fight.

*Aerial view of Site one at Necedah NWR.*

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It is natural for the older generation of birds to come back to where they were introduced. They are attracted to the chicks and the handlers and maybe even remembering the free meals. But because they often get in the way and interfere with training, the handlers and pilots try to chase them off before beginning the day's early morning training.

*Old friends come to visit.*

10



Many things have to happen to get the Class of 2006 ready for migration. One of them is an individual medical examination. The now sub-adults are also banded and have radio tracking devices attached to their legs. And then..... we're OFF for the Sunshine State!

*Preparations are done - it's time.*

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