

Whooping Cranes over Illinois: on course for recovery

by Karen Furnweger

In November of 2002, five yearling Whooping Cranes (*Grus americana*) – three individuals and a pair – made their first unassisted fall migration flights.

Responding to an age-old urge and flocking with Sandhill Cranes (*G. canadensis*), the young whoopers left their summer range in the wetlands of Wisconsin and rode the thermals to Florida, stopping only briefly along the way to forage and sleep. The birds are part of a 10-year U.S./Canadian program to establish a migratory flock of Whooping Cranes, consisting of at least 125 birds, with 25 breeding pairs, in eastern North America. Captive-bred, and raised and trained by costumed handlers to keep them from imprinting on humans, they learned to follow ultralight aircraft, which were used to lead them from Wisconsin south on their first migration. Now they were heading south on their own. But while they were independent of the ultralights that showed them the way in 2001, most of the birds were never far from the watchful eye – or more accurately, the powerful radiotelemetry receivers – of biologists who tracked their routes in trucks and planes to monitor these precious birds' progress as wild Whooping Cranes. As biologists had hoped and anticipated, the young whoopers joined large groups of sandhills and were introduced to some of the best wetland areas down the middle of North America. Heavily developed regions like northeastern Illinois presented some challenges, but for the trackers more than for the birds.

Two adult Whooping Cranes at the International Crane Foundation.

Photo courtesy International Crane Foundation.



Richard Urbanek is a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and a seasoned crane tracker. As one of the scientists working on the whooper program, he has seldom been out of contact with the five 2001 hatch-year (HY01) birds since December of that year, when the birds followed the ultralights into Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, on Florida's Gulf Coast. Throughout that winter, Urbanek checked their daily movements in and out of a large, protected release pen in a remote area of the refuge. He tracked them north in spring of 2002, when four of the cranes surprised scientists and delighted local conservationists with their two-night layover at a Cook County forest preserve pond.

In late spring 2002, all five kept Urbanek driving the backroads of central and southern Wisconsin as they independently moved about the state's extensive wetlands. Four birds finally settled at Necedah

National Wildlife Refuge, where they had fledged, while the fifth bird took up residence at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge. In fall of 2002, Urbanek hit the road again, tracking the migration of the yearling pair, No. 1 and No. 2, while two interns provided by the International Crane Foundation tried to keep ahead of two of the solo birds, No. 5 and No. 6. The fifth bird, an independent female identified as No. 7, got the jump on everyone and was not tracked.

Tracking cranes

Crane tracking combines electronics, experience, and intuition to discover where the birds are headed. Each crane has a radio transmitter affixed to one leg. Nos. 2 and 5 also have satellite tags, but these devices transmit only once every 10 days and, according to Urbanek, they have been marginally useful. "Tracking is totally dependent on conventional radiotelemetry, and most of it is done from a truck on