

the ground,” Urbanek said. A 7-foot-long Yagi directional antenna protrudes through the roof of his Ford Expedition. “As long as the birds are in the air, you can follow them.” From the air, the cranes’ VHF radio transmitters have a broadcast range of 30 miles, but on the ground that drops to a mile or two. “That’s when you need a plane to pick up the signal,” Urbanek said. During the fall migration, Windway Aviation of Wisconsin donated radiotelemetry-equipped aircraft and pilots to help track the birds.

Urbanek’s strategy is to stay about 15 miles ahead of the birds. “If you get behind them, and they go down, your chances of finding them are really small,” he said. “But if they land and you’re ahead of them, you just backtrack on a straight line.” Even a veteran like Urbanek can misjudge what the birds will do and lose the signal. He noted that sightings by birders, such as those called in and e-mailed to USFWS and ICF during the spring and fall migrations last year, can be useful.

“Four of the five cranes followed the same general pattern,” said Urbanek. Although they took off from different locations on different days – No. 7 from Horicon, on Nov. 15; the pair from Necedah on Nov. 21; and No. 5 from a sandhill staging area in Marquette County, Wisconsin, on Nov. 23 – they each arrived at Chassahowitzka after six consecutive flight days. Three of the four definitely flew nonstop from Wisconsin to Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in Indiana, an easy hop for whoopers, overflying Illinois. They also joined sandhills at the Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge, a major stopover in Tennessee, and made three opportunistic night stops before arriving at Chassahowitzka.

Because No. 7’s summer grounds were so far from the other birds, Urbanek generally kept track of her through daily roost checks by the

refuge manager. “She wasn’t tracked because we didn’t know she had left until she didn’t return to her roost,” he said. By that time, he surmises, No. 7 was in Indiana.

Society, Buchwald wrote, “I was able to see that the bird’s dark legs each had bright green bands on them with reddish bands below and what looked like braces as well. I’m

Richard Urbanek works with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to track Whooping Cranes.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



By far the most interesting migration, he said, was that of No. 6. “He didn’t do what the other birds did. They made a direct flight from Wisconsin to here,” the biologist said from his winter field station near Chassahowitzka. “No. 6 left a staging area in Marquette County on Nov. 9 or 10 and moved to a big staging area on the Illinois-Wisconsin border that includes parts of Kenosha and Walworth Counties in Wisconsin and McHenry County in Illinois.”

McHenry County sighting

Around 2:30 p.m. 13 November 2002, Vicki Buchwald was birding Glacial Park in McHenry County when she spotted a white crane standing head and shoulders above two dozen sandhills in a grassy area surrounding a wetland. In field notes on the whooper sighting submitted with fellow birder Darlene Fiske to the Illinois Ornithological

happy I saw the legs then, because the bird decided to walk into taller grass later.” Buchwald and Fiske watched the whooper graze for nearly an hour. Then, she reported, “At 3:17 p.m., the Whooping Crane decided to take off with a dozen sandhills to the northwest. They circled for a few minutes, then the Whooping Crane took the lead, followed by the tight group of Sandhill Cranes. We hoped they would land again, but they kept flying.”

Buchwald quickly contacted Heather Ray of Operation Migration, the Canadian conservation organization that pioneered the ultralight-introduction technique. At the time, Ray was on the road with the 2002 migration, helping lead 16 whooper chicks to Florida. Ray identified the bird as HY01 No. 6, a male with red/green/red bands that had passed through the same area of McHenry County on the flight north in April. Fiske’s husband also reported the sighting