

to USFWS. Surprisingly, no one else reported seeing the 5-foot bird, although he spent three more days in McHenry County. Urbanek's assistants, however, were aware of nearly every move he made.

Tracking No. 6

Lara Fondow, 24, has been working with both sandhills and Whooping Cranes since she got her degree in wildlife ecology from the University of Wisconsin. From Crystal River, Florida, where she monitored the 2002 chicks throughout the winter, she said, "My primary responsibility during the fall migration was to track the first bird that left Wisconsin, which was No. 6." When she determined that he was on the move, she searched for him by air, locating him at the Walworth County staging area. On 13 November, she said, he took off with sandhills. At that point, the other intern, Colleen Satyshur, tracked him with her antenna-laden USFWS truck while Fondow waited with the Windway plane at an airport for the go-ahead to take off. Satyshur, 22, holds a biology degree from Cornell University. The plan was for Satyshur to follow No. 6 as far as Chicago, then let the plane take over tracking. "Chicago traffic in an old pickup truck is not fun," she said. "In the plane, the trackers can hop over Chicago and wait on the other side a lot faster than a truck can." Just north of Chicago, the wind shifted, and the birds circled for about two hours, a behavior that indicates they were deciding what to do about the metro area and the changing weather.

"I sat near Libertyville for a long time," Satyshur said. "I had a radio signal on him. It stayed in one direction and stayed the same strength, so I knew he wasn't going anywhere. Then he did move, and the signal changed." The plane was still on the ground at this point, she

said, because it would have been impossible for it to circle in busy Chicago airspace. "I called the plane as soon as he started to move, and I headed in his last direction, which was northwest. It did seem kind of odd. I thought maybe he'd head down around outside of Chicago." Her best guess was to swing south and around Chicago toward Jasper-Pulaski. Without contact with the plane from her truck, however, Satyshur didn't know what Fondow knew from the air: The birds had headed west to look for a roost for the night, landing in Glacial Park.

In the air, Fondow had No. 6's radio signal. "Traveling over Chicago, it's really difficult to track closely because of all the airspace regulations," she said. "You try to keep a signal on the bird and keep an idea of where he is in comparison to you." The Cessna 182 had an antenna mounted on each wing strut. Inside the plane, Fondow had a switch box. "You switch back and forth between the two sides. When you get a strong enough signal, you find out which side of the plane the bird is on and do circles until you can pinpoint where the bird is."

Only when the bird landed at the park did they actually get a visual identification. "I was in the plane, and I saw him there at 2:46 p.m., and I stayed there until about 3." Typically, when a bird settles in suitable habitat in late afternoon, the trackers go off in search of a decent motel. They do a final check on the bird before dark. "We wouldn't have known the bird had left the area had the birders not let us know," Fondow said.

She figures general activity in the park disturbed the birds – the wetland where they landed is near a parking area and historic building. "It would be pretty easy to flush birds out of there," she said. By this

time, Satyshur had driven back to McHenry County, and the next morning both trackers went out in the truck and located No. 6 across the border in Walworth County. They followed him down into McHenry County, where he foraged throughout the day, and back up to Walworth for the night.

On 15 November, No. 6 moved back into Illinois, but low clouds and intermittent rain kept him on the ground most of the time. "He made a short hop to a state park in McHenry and spent the night there," Fondow said. "It took us a long time to see him, so he picked a good spot. This shows the importance of small reserves to migrating birds."

The next day, the whooper took off with two sandhills, stopping in a small cornfield to feed. "It was real close to a condo complex," Fondow said, "but I know nobody saw him." At that point, Satyshur drove Fondow to an airport to link up with the Cessna. When she returned to the cornfield, the cranes had moved, but she found them drinking at a nearby pond. When they took off, she called Fondow to get airborne. Satyshur tracked No. 6 on the ground as far as Bolingbrook. "By the time I lost the signal," Satyshur said, "they had him with the plane." Fondow said, "I tracked him southeast across Illinois and followed the Kankakee River east and kept a signal on him all the way." No. 6 arrived at Jasper-Pulaski at 2:56 p.m. 16 November and cruised low over the area for about two hours. "Once we knew he had gotten to Jasper-Pulaski," Fondow said, "we set down to get fuel because we were really low, having tracked the bird all the way." At 4:25 p.m., No. 6 finally landed in the large area where the sandhills roost. Satyshur caught up with No. 6 and Fondow before dark. "We had a lot of excited people there," she said.