

Another whooper in Illinois

Meanwhile, another possible sighting in Illinois was reported 17 November 2002 on IBET, Illinois' birding list serve. The day before, someone had seen what looked like a Whooping Crane over southern Iroquois County. "What are the chances of a lone whooper going over central Illinois at this time of year?" the poster mused. Pretty darned good, it seemed, especially given the independent nature of one of the HY01 females. "It could possibly have been No. 7," Urbanek said, "if No. 7 stopped somewhere west of Jasper-Pulaski on her first night of migration."

On 23 November, another whooper, this one spotted flying over Lombard with a flock of sandhills, was reported to the DuPage County hotline. Sure enough, updates on ICF's Web site indicated that No. 5 had been at the sandhill staging area in Marquette County 22 November, while 24 November, the refuge manager at Jasper-Pulaski thought he detected a weak signal from No. 5's radio transmitter. The 1 December 2002 DuPage County Rare Bird Alert included the Illinois sighting.

Fondow made a positive identification on No. 5 in Tennessee. "I'm guessing he went from Necedah to Jasper-Pulaski," Urbanek said. "On that schedule, there's no way he could have stopped in Illinois to get to Hiwassee on Nov. 25." Similarly, it's unlikely No. 7 got her feet wet in the Prairie State. "She made it to Florida in six flight days," Urbanek said. "She had to get to Indiana the first day to stay on that schedule." So No. 6 was the only one of the HY01 migrants that sampled Illinois hospitality. The majestic birds' presence in Illinois after a long absence should be impetus for

continued wetlands restoration on public and private property.

No. 6 appeared to have settled, with thousands of sandhills, at Hiwassee for the winter, but the corn crop planted specifically for the cranes ran short, and many of the birds moved south. No. 6 took off from Tennessee 3 January 2003 and arrived in northern Florida the next day. On 5 January, he flew to a wetland one county over, joining a group of 50 sandhills – and No. 7. Urbanek marveled at the fact that, while the birds had not seen each other since early in spring migration, when the plucky female split off from the group, and neither had visited this wetland before, they managed to link up. Throughout the winter, Urbanek and Fondow kept busy monitoring the five maturing birds. Four of the whoopers took up residence at wetlands in northwestern and west-central peninsular Florida. Meanwhile, biologists from ICF kept watch on the 16 HY02 chicks at Chassahowitzka. No. 5 wintered at Chassahowitzka, where he was the dominant bird among the younger whoopers.

Heading north

In mid-February, No. 6 headed north in the company of sandhills. He spent five days in and around Grand Kankakee Marsh in Lake County, Indiana, and was confirmed in Wisconsin on 25 March. No. 7 was spotted in Indiana foraging with sandhills in mid-March. Nos. 1 and 2 left Florida on 25 March and were picked up by radio signal in Necedah National Wildlife Refuge on 1 April. Also on 1 April, No. 5 and the 16 youngsters literally fooled everyone and took off from Chassahowitzka. At press time, they were still northward bound. With good instincts and no small amount of luck, all 21 Whooping Cranes will make it back to Wisconsin for the summer. They face any number of threats, from predators to power lines. But this population has a more hopeful future than the 16 birds – including their forebears – that represented the total wild migratory population of whoopers only six decades ago. Whooping Cranes are returning to the eastern United States, and Illinois welcomes them.

The ultralight-led migration project is coordinated and sponsored by the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, which includes USFWS, ICF, the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Operation Migration, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation and many local partners. For updates on the progress of these birds, visit the International Crane Foundation's Web site, <http://www.savingcranes.org/>

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