

Aircraft lead Whooping cranes to winter

Conservation flight team pauses in Hardin County during seven state migration journey toward warmer climate

Clayton Vertrees ■ Staff Writer

Twenty rare cranes followed four pilots skyward as the group departed from the Savannah-Hardin County Airport.

As the cranes climbed into a cold, morning sky, loud speakers played a digital recording of the birds' signature whooping call.

Last Thursday's take-off marks the start of the second half of Operation Migration's journey from the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin to the St. Marks and Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuges in Florida.

According to Joe Duff, Operation Migration CEO, the current migration which began Oct. 16 in Wisconsin, comes as the final stage of an effort to reintroduce whooping cranes into the wild and teach the birds how to migrate south for the winter.

For birds involved, Duff says training for the winter journey begins while still in the egg.

To simulate the childhood typical of whooping cranes raised in the wild, Duff says organizers play a recording of the bird's call to unhatched eggs.

After the eggs hatch, those involved with the reintroduction effort continue to mimic adult whooping cranes as they feed the young birds through



File photo

WHOOPING CRANES trail alongside ultralight aircraft as pilots guide the birds from Wisconsin to Florida.

use of an artificial whooping crane beak while dressed in a white costume which disguises the human form.

The final stage of the cranes' development comes when the youngest bird in the group can follow an ultralight aircraft in flight for 20 minutes.

While in the sky, Duff says loudspeakers positioned on the back of the aircraft project the same digital recording of

a whooping crane's call which the birds heard while in the egg.

Despite the ultralight's resemblance to the combination of a go-kart and hang glider, Duff says imprinted behavior learned throughout the birds' lives teaches the cranes to follow the aircraft the same way they would a parent in the wild.

According to Liz Condie, chief

operating officer for Operation Migration, the winter migration allows cranes, as well as pilots involved in the project to experience the sensation of flight with other cranes in the wilds.

"In the words of Joe Duff, the experience is like no other," Condie said. "It's as close as you can be to feeling bird-like. It's an indescribable feeling."

Because of the aircraft's

composition, Brooke Pennypacker, pilot for Operation Migration says ultralights require little technical background to pilot.

"It's like riding a motorcycle in the sky - it's very intuitive," Pennypacker said. "It's much easier than a three axis airplane. It's just directly flying."

Although ultralight aircraft offer the intimate experi-

ence of flying natural pilots, Pennypacker says the close relationship between yourself and the elements can become physically demanding.

"The only drawback is if you get into turbulent weather, flight becomes a physical challenge you can't lose," Pennypacker said.

Support for Operation Migration's reintroduction efforts comes from a variety of governmental and non-profit organizations dedicated to wildlife conservation.

Under the collective title Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin provide support to guide the way from Wisconsin to Florida and the egg to independent, adult birds.

Aside from teaching birds how to migrate from colder to warmer climates, Pennypacker says Operation Migration takes its part in a much larger effort.

"Flying a bunch of birds from point A to point B doesn't accomplish much as far as I'm concerned," Pennypacker says. "But the reality is, we want to pique people's interest and get them involved in what's going on with this planet and what's going on with conservation."



OPERATION MIGRATION stored four ultralight aircraft inside a hanger at the Savannah/Hardin County Airport before their departure last Thursday.

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December 2009

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1		Jellico 10-6	Sweetwater 10-5	Jellico 10-6	Winfield 10-6	Jellico 10-2
2		Harragate 10-6	Sevierville 11-6	Cleveland 10-5	Harragate 9-5	Sweetwater 8-2
3		Cleveland 10-5	Cookeville 10-6	Knosville 10-6	Athens 10-5	Cleveland 9-1
4		Maryville 10-5	Gallatin 10-6	Cookeville 10-6	Lenoir City 10-5	Maryville 10-2
5		Savannah 10-6	Portland 10-6	Portland 10-6	Maryville 10-5	Chattanooga 9-2
6						
7		Jellico 10-6	Sweetwater 10-5	Jellico 10-6	Winfield 10-6	
8		Harragate 10-6	Sevierville 11-6	Cleveland 10-5	Harragate 9-5	
9		Cleveland 10-5	Cookeville 10-6	Knosville 10-6	Athens 10-5	Sweetwater 8-2
10		Maryville 10-5	Gallatin 10-6	Cookeville 10-6	Lenoir City 10-5	Maryville 10-2
11		Savannah 10-6	Portland 10-6	Portland 10-6	Maryville 10-5	Harragate 10-2
12						Chattanooga 9-2
13		Jellico 10-6	Sweetwater 10-5	Jellico 10-6	Winfield 10-6	
14		Harragate 10-6	Sevierville 11-6	Cleveland 10-5	Harragate 9-5	
15		Cleveland 10-5	Cookeville 10-6	Knosville 10-6	Athens 10-5	Sweetwater 8-2
16		Maryville 10-5	Gallatin 10-6	Cookeville 10-6	Lenoir City 10-5	Maryville 10-2
17		Savannah 10-6	Portland 10-6	Portland 10-6	Maryville 10-5	Harragate 10-2
18						Chattanooga 9-2
19		Jellico 10-6	Sweetwater 10-5	Jellico 10-6	Winfield 10-6	
20		Harragate 10-6	Sevierville 11-6	Cleveland 10-5	Harragate 9-5	
21		Cleveland 10-5	Cookeville 10-6	Knosville 10-6	Athens 10-5	Sweetwater 8-2
22		Maryville 10-5	Gallatin 10-6	Cookeville 10-6	Lenoir City 10-5	Maryville 10-2
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24						Chattanooga 9-2
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30						Chattanooga 9-2
31		Jellico 10-6	Sweetwater 10-5	Jellico 10-6	Winfield 10-6	
32		Harragate 10-6	Sevierville 11-6	Cleveland 10-5	Harragate 9-5	
33		Cleveland 10-5	Cookeville 10-6	Knosville 10-6	Athens 10-5	Sweetwater 8-2
34		Maryville 10-5	Gallatin 10-6	Cookeville 10-6	Lenoir City 10-5	Maryville 10-2
35		Savannah 10-6	Portland 10-6	Portland 10-6	Maryville 10-5	Harragate 10-2

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