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Plentiful Sandbill Cranes Blaze Trail for Rare Relatives

By ELIZABETH STANTON

Twelve young sandhill cranes and an equal number of biologists and wildlife specialists are on their way to completing the longest human-led bird migration yet, over 1,250 miles from Wisconsin to Florida.

The humans are teaching the cranes, born in captivity, to migrate in hope that they can use the same route and training process on their endangered cousins, the whooping crane, next year.

At least nine other human-led migrations have been tried with other species, including trumpeter swans and Canada geese. Large water birds, like geese and cranes, need to be led on their first flight south by their parents so they can memorize the landmarks. But these birds do not have parents that have migrated.

So, in the parents' stead is Joe Duff, one of the project designers and the pilot of a yellow ultralight plane propelled by an engine and a propeller, which is covered with a bird guard.

The birds regard this single-seater as their leader. Kept aloft by its large wings that resemble those of a hang glider, the ultralight craft can fly up to 35 miles an hour. Flying about two hours a day, the birds can cover 50 to 75 miles, but travel time and distance depends on the cranes' energy and the weather.

To signal flight time, Mr. Duff, dressed in a baggy gray drawstring flight suit to disguise his human features, starts the engine and plays a tape of adult crane calls off the tail of the plane.

When all goes well, and it generally has, the cranes follow his lead and soar behind him in a V-formation off the large white wings until they reach the next stop.

"We just have to get up every morning and see," Mr. Duff said. "Some

days are beautiful and others we have the fog and winds to battle. But once we are up there, the sights are incredible and it is just a matter of a slow climb to get there."

The entourage left Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin on Oct. 3 and the caravan of biologists, wildlife experts and veterinarians expect to arrive in early November at Chassohowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, along the Gulf of Mexico, in Florida.

The human support group, traveling by land and by air, will make about 24 stops.

Joan Guilfoyle, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the sandhill cranes were selected for the experimental migration because of their large numbers, with an estimated population in the United States of 650,000. That was not always the case: in the 1930's there were as few as 25 breeding pairs, but the population rebounded in the 1970's and has flourished.

The whooping crane has not done as well. In 1865, its numbers were estimated at 700 to 1,400, but in the 1930's the birds began to disappear, and hit a low of 16 migrating birds in 1941. Since then, the population has gradually increased, to about 400 today, but only about 188 of these are wild, migrating from Canada to Texas for the winter.

The goal of the experimental migration is to train birds born in captivity to survive in the wild and to make the annual migration, adding another flock of migrating birds.

"The depletion of our nation's wetlands and the early hunting of these birds has resulted in their endangered status," Ms. Guilfoyle said, "and now we have a chance to bring experts together to determine how to create a second migratory group."

Raised to test the route for their crane cousins, the sandhills began training in late May. Dr. Daniel Sprague, a biologist, played ultralight motor sounds and the parental brood call to the chicks 24 hours before they were hatched. For the next few weeks, Dr. Sprague continued to acclimate the cranes to engine noises and the ultralight by playing recordings of adult cranes and feeding them from an outstretched crane

puppet as he circled their pen, eventually getting them to follow the plane.

The project, expected to cost about \$850,000 this year, is financed by the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, a consortium of public and private agencies.

Operation Migration is one of the private groups working with the partnership. Bill Lishman and Mr. Duff founded the nonprofit group in 1994 after pioneering the human-led migration technique with Canada geese. Plans are on track for next year's effort with the whooping cranes.

"If this happens, it will be amazing because these birds don't have a negative side," Mr. Lishman said. "They have never been a hugely populated species so they won't inundate an area or overpopulate it and we will be on the road to reintroducing an element of nature that we forced out."

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