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Whooping Crane 'First Family' Reaches Florida

(AP) MILWAUKEE Researchers trying to establish a second migratory flock of endangered whooping cranes in North America are celebrating after the first of the birds to be hatched in the wild successfully migrated to Florida from Wisconsin with its parents.

"It's a major accomplishment to get to this point," said Richard Urbanek, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, one of the partners in the six-year-old reintroduction effort.

The parents and young crane, dubbed the "first family" by the researchers, arrived last Saturday afternoon at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge near Crystal River, Fla., after migrating on their own on the 1,200-mile trip from central Wisconsin.

They wound up at the pen site where the cranes spend their first winter as part of the project.

The parents had been hatched in captivity in Maryland four years ago. Like most of the other cranes in the growing flock, they were transported to the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin and raised by researchers wearing crane-like costumes.

In the fall, they were among the young birds led south by ultralight aircraft to spend the winter at the Florida refuge.

From then on, they migrated on their own and nested at Necedah this year, producing a pair of chicks, one of which died in September.

Urbanek said in a telephone interview from Florida Wednesday that the successful reproduction in the wild marked an important milestone for the project, and the next hurdle will be to have more of the birds produce offspring, leading to a self-sustaining flock.

As of this fall, the flock included 64 released cranes that have survived in the wild, plus the one surviving chick that was hatched in the wild.

Operation Migration, a nonprofit organization coordinating the project, has ultralight aircraft leading a separate flock of 18 young cranes to Florida this fall. Those cranes make many stops along the way and are kept in portable pens at

night and when weather conditions aren't good enough to fly.

By Wednesday, they had traveled 1,000 miles to Georgia's Terrell County.

Urbanek said four other young birds released directly into the wild this fall in the vicinity of older whooping cranes and sandhill cranes in Wisconsin also reached Florida successfully, learning the route from the other birds.

The other wild whooping crane flock in North America has about 200 birds and migrates from Canada to the Texas Gulf Coast. A non-migratory flock in Florida has about 60 birds.

The whooping crane, the tallest bird in North America, was near extinction in 1941, with only about 20 left.

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