

Wildlife staff hopes 1 crane survived
18 birds were led from Wisconsin to Florida

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Wildlife workers were holding out hope Saturday that one of the 18 young whooping cranes thought to have been killed in Friday's storms in Florida may have escaped.

The birds were led from Wisconsin to Florida by a team's ultralight aircraft last fall as part of an ongoing effort to revitalize a species that was once nearly extinct.

Initially, workers thought the storm killed all 18 birds being held in an enclosure in the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge near Crystal River, Fla.

But a closer inspection Friday showed Bird 1506 was missing.

"We have radio transmitters on every bird," said John Christian, assistant regional director for migratory birds at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "So the field crew ran through all the frequencies, and lo and behold they found a signal from one of the birds from outside of the pen."

Christian said workers have been trying to locate the bird. He said the signal from the tracking device indicated the bird was in a swampy area some distance from the enclosure.

"At first that signal was stationary, indicating a dead bird on the ground," Christian said Saturday. "They went out this afternoon, and were able to follow the signal, and when they got close the signal disappeared. That doesn't necessarily mean the bird is alive, and we don't have confirmation [that it survived], but it's a good sign. And out of this disaster, we need something good."

Since 2001, Christian and a coalition of organizations have raised and trained young whooping cranes to migrate from the Necedah National

Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin to their winter home in Florida. Since the birds do not have parents to teach the migratory route, the birds are trained to follow an ultralight aircraft.

Until the storm, this addition swelled Florida's migratory flock to 81 birds, which is in addition to a second flock of cranes that live in Florida year round. A separate flock migrates between Canada and Texas.

Christian said his group hopes to raise 36 birds in Wisconsin this spring, with the intent of teaching them to migrate to Florida in the fall.

By coincidence, members of the whooping crane recovery team were meeting in Louisiana, going over the past year's progress and setting goals for this year, when they learned what had happened, said Joe Duff, the senior pilot and co-founder of Operation Migration, a non-profit organization coordinating the whooping crane project.

"We were all excited we'd reached such a great milestone," he said. "We led all 18 to Florida and had not lost one."

While Bird 1506 may prove to be a slight bit of good news, Christian said the loss of the other birds should be viewed in the proper context.

"We're looking forward, not backward," Christian said. "While this loss is devastating, it's one of the things nature dishes out that we just have to deal with. And the storm that hit Florida also killed [20] people, so we need to keep the loss of these cranes in perspective."

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