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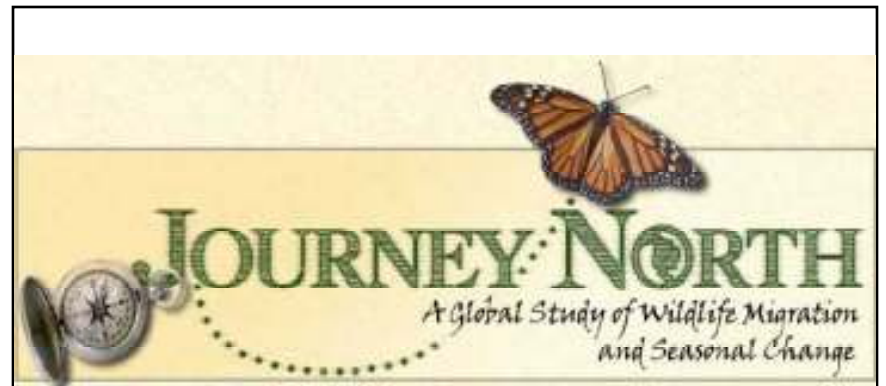


Photo © Richard Urbanek, WCEP

The First Family in the New Eastern Flock

by Jane Duden

June 22, 2006 was a day to celebrate! The **first** wild Whooping crane chicks of the eastern migratory flock were discovered. They hatched to parents #211 and #217. We've been waiting for this day since 2001 when the new Eastern flock of Whooping cranes got started.



Photo © Richard Urbanek, WCEP

Feeding two hungry chicks is a big job for the parents. The little chicks must learn how to hunt their own food. But first they must learn what foods cranes eat!

The chicks stay close to their parents. They learn by imitating them. The chicks will not be able to fly until they are 60-70 days old! They will be much safer after **fledging**, being able to fly.



Photo © Joan Garland, WCEP

Do you see the little chick trying to imitate its mother? The black feathers you see on the adult's wings are necessary for flight.

In just six months the little chicks are nearly the size of adults!

On July 28, the chicks were 36 days old. The family ranged along about 1 mile of the east shore of this pond on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. Here, thousands of acres of wetlands provide an ideal summer home for the Eastern cranes.



Photo © Richard Urbanek, WCEP

In early September the chicks should be able to fly. This is a dangerous time for them. They are too large to hide from predators, and they cannot yet fly away to safety if they get chased.



Photo © Joe Duff, Operation Migration

On September 1 special visitors arrived on the chicks' training strip. The pilots watched in amazement as the flock's first family showed up. This is where the parents themselves trained as chicks in 2002. Pilot Joe Duff said, "I guess we should have expected that one day the wild parents would bring their chicks to visit."

"The chicks look healthy, but one is much larger than the other. In fact, it is bigger than the adult female. The smaller of the two stayed very close to its parents while the larger wandered."

"It was interesting to see how the wild chicks ignored (human) objects...because their parents showed no fear."

The largest chick fledged (clearing 100 meters without touching the ground) on September 5. This was 75 days after hatching—so right on schedule. The smaller chick will soon be flying too!



Photo © Chris Gullikson, Operation Migration

Once they have fledged, experts on the Tracking and Monitoring Team will attempt color banding and radio tagging the two wild-hatched chicks before the First Family begins its autumn migration. Even though the chicks are wild and free, banding will be done for both biological and legal reasons.

The parents and both chicks were together until September 12, 2006. Then the parents and this chick flew just across the refuge boundary to feed and forage while the other chick stayed behind on the refuge.



Photo © Heather Ray

When the family was seen by a busy road, the chick that left with its parents was captured by costumed staff members and returned to the refuge. But the parents didn't return that night as expected. The two chicks roosted alone that night.

The next day the chick flew away to re-join its parents. The three stayed off the refuge for the rest of the week.

September 12, 2006 is the last time the second chick was seen alive. Her remains were found on November 23rd.

Do you see the bands on the remaining chick's legs? The colors will forever identify her as W-1, or the first wild chick hatched in the eastern flock. Experts who banded her learned from the chick's DNA that she is a female.



On November 19, 2006, the parents and their surviving chick began their first migration south! They flew all the way to Indiana on the first day.

On December 9, 2006 at 4:08 pm parents #211 and #217 and their chick arrived at the Florida pen site! The new parents brought their chick to the same place THEIR "parents" — the ultralight plane — brought them in 2002.

On February 23, 2007, the First Family began spring migration from Florida. On March 20, they were confirmed back home on Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin.

On March 23, 2007, the 9-month-old chick separated from her parents.

Besides being the first wild-hatched chick in the eastern migratory population, W1-06 became the first in the flock to complete a round trip migration by following her parents. These successes make a milestone for the reintroduction. It was history-in-the-making!