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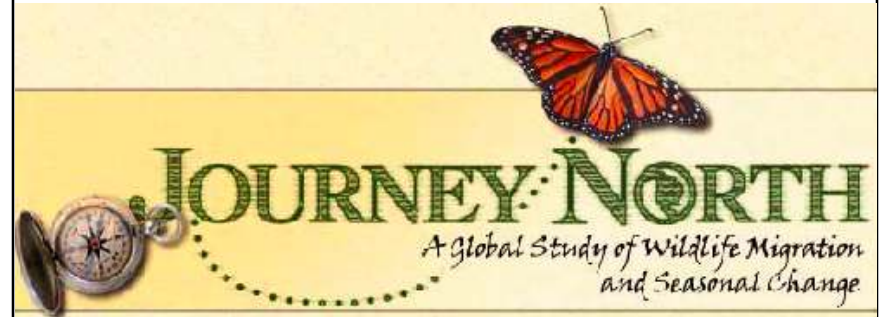


Photo Karen Richter

Taylor Flies With the Cranes

As Told by Taylor Richter to Jane Duden

Journey North's crane writer Jane Duden had the pleasure of meeting craniac Taylor Richter on his tenth birthday. Taylor and Jane were both in Indiana to see the 2007 crane-kids on migration. Taylor and his parents made the long car trip from their home in southwest Georgia. Taylor has always been interested in flying and nature. He told Jane an exciting story to share with Journey North readers: he flew with the cranes! Enjoy Taylor's wonderful story and photos.



When I was younger I was in an ultralight plane on the ground. In 2006 I actually went up with Joe. I wore headphones so I could hear and talk to Joe. The headphones were very heavy and the air was very cold. I was not scared — but I wore my lap belt and held on!

We flew over a couple of ponds. My dad was watching and he said a blackbird was following us. I really liked watching the environment.

No cranes were flying with us. When cranes are flying, the pilot wears the white costume. The reason is they don't want the Whooping Cranes to see or get used to humans.



This is me in Georgia in 2006 with pilot Joe Garner and his Cessna 172. Mr. Joe Garner flew top cover for this part of the crane migration.

Mr. Garner let us fly with him on two different days. My dad was in the plane with us the first day. Mr. Garner's wife came with me in the plane on the second day. I was nine years old in this picture.

Do you wonder how I got so lucky? When I was 3, my dad and I came upon the crew where they'd landed in a field near our home. Ever since then, we get to see the crew every year.



I was wearing the headphones because the noise of the engine was too loud. We had to use the headphones to talk to each other and listen to each other. It was kind of cold.

Mr. Garner, the pilot, talked on an intercom to the ultralight pilots and to the ground crew. The top cover pilot flies above the four ultralights and the cranes to watch that everything is okay. He talks with airports and other planes. He could also tell the pilots where a bird dropped out if that ever happened.

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The first day we we stayed about 1,500 feet above them and took pictures. Our job was to be sure to have all four ultralights and all 18 birds in sight.

Keeping an eye on all of them from above was tricky. The second day it took us 45 minutes to find the fourth ultralight. We flew in circles until we knew where they all were.



What is this one bird going to do? You can't be sure, so all four ultralights fly at the same time. Then if one bird wanders away, another ultralight can fly in front to "pick it up" and be its leader. This is Richard's plane. (I call him "Mr. Richard" to show respect.)

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We are watching an ultralight swoop back to get some birds that wandered away from another ultralight. The green edge on the wing shows it's Mr. Chris's plane. This is in south Georgia.



It looks like Mr. Chris's plane is level with us but we're 1,500 feet above him. The camera is tilted.

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This is at least 7 birds over a lake and it's Mr. Joe (with the black edge on his wing). You can only make out six birds, but if you look to the very right you can see the tip of the wing of another crane. The rest of the 18 birds were with other pilots.



This is Mr. Joe and the birds over a pecan orchard. Georgia is famous for pecans. It's December.

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This is an example of how the birds look when scattered about. It's Brooke's plane, with 15 birds really scattered. When the birds scatter they are changing from one ultralight to another. Mr. Joe calls that a "rodeo." We have to watch carefully.



They flew pretty long before they got in order again.



Now the birds formed up again on the wing.

Then the lead bird got in front of the left wing. The pilots don't want this to happen because they don't want the crane to think it knows the way. The plane needs to be the leader. It's also dangerous for the birds to get in front.



I saw the birds taking turns and switching positions. Sometimes they even moved over to the other wing.

Look how close the lead bird on the right is. Do you know how when you're in the car behind a big semi and the semi seems to pull you along? The same thing happens with the ultralight and the birds. The plane actually helps the birds fly, especially the ones closest to the wing.



Do you know whose ultralight this is? It's Mr. Brooke's. You can tell by the wing's red edge. He had 8 birds. I could see a couple other ultralights and they had the rest of the birds.



I fell asleep the second day up. This was right after they landed. I'd been up since 6 am for several days in a row. We went there at 6:30 every morning to see if they'd get to fly out. Many mornings were too foggy to fly. We live in the Leesburg/Albany area, only about 10-15 miles from the Dawson airport where the ultralight hangar was for this part of the migration.



This is Taylor in 2007 on his tenth birthday. Taylor and everyone in his story wanted to help the cranes safely along their migration route, and they did! All 18 birds of hatch year 2006 arrived safely in Florida just a few weeks after Taylor flew with the cranes.

Thanks for sharing your story, Taylor!