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Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

The Release of Parent-reared Whooping Crane Colts into the Eastern Migratory Population

The Challenge: Whooping cranes have been successfully introduced using costume rearing techniques in either a direct autumn release or in an ultralight led migration from Wisconsin to Florida. In Florida, we have also released parent-reared whooping cranes. Not much is known about the learning that takes place in this K-selected species over the almost one year that the young whooping crane colt remains with its adult parents.The challenge is to duplicate and study this parent-rearing situation and develop a method to successfully release whooping crane colts into the wild while transferring their relationship with their parent birds to other adult whooping crane pairs on the landscape.

The Science: Whooping crane chicks have been successfully reared in captivity and released into the non-migratory whooping crane flock in central Florida. Their survival and opportunities to breed appear to be similar to that of the costume-reared chicks released in this program. The rearing technique of using the parent whooping cranes to do the parental care, instead of using costumed people as surrogate parents results in a stronger, healthier chick that has less leg and gait problems than the costume-reared cousins. In 2013, 2014 and 2015, whooping crane chicks were parent-reared at Patuxent for release into the eastern migratory population of whooping cranes in Wisconsin. Seven released young whooping cranes have successfully migrated with 'adopted' wild adult whooping cranes to the areas the adult whooping cranes use as wintering territory.

The Future: We do not know if the parent-reared cranes, once they reach adulthood, make better parents themselves, because the numbers of birds released has been small, and they are too young for breeding. We are planning to release more whooping cranes in the fall of 2016. We want to continue the releases of parent-reared whooping cranes for several years to build up their numbers and allow us to gather meaningful data on their survival and reproduction in the wild.

Contact: Glenn Olsen at (301)497-5603 or golsen@usgs.gov