

End of an Era for Ft Gaines and Operation Migration

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Operation Migration has played a lead role in the reintroduction of endangered Whooping Cranes into eastern North America since 2001. In the 1940's the species was at the brink of extinction, reduced to just 13 birds world wide. Using ultralight aircraft, Operation Migration pilots act as surrogate parents and guide captive-hatched Whooping Cranes along a planned migration route beginning in Wisconsin and ending at their wintering destination



in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. The idea for Operation Migration began in 1993 by Bill Lishman and Joe Duff who conducted the first ever human-led migration of birds. At the time, Duff was an ultralight pilot and a successful commercial photographer. The two artists-turned-biologists imprinted 18 Canada geese and, in the fall, they used two ultralights to lead them from Purple Hill in Ontario, across Lake Ontario, to the Environment Studies Division of Airlie Center in Warrenton, Virginia. Sixteen of those birds survived the winter and

thirteen returned on their own the following spring. In 1995 Lishman and Duff formed a limited company called 'In The Sky Productions' and contracted with Columbia Pictures to produce the 1996 film "Fly Away Home", starring Jeff Daniels and Anna Paquin. In The Sky Productions provided the story rights, the wildlife permits, the geese, the flying and even some of the cinematography for the popular film.

For the past 15 years Operation Migration has been instrumental in the reintroduction of the once extinct eastern migratory route that has helped increase the numbers of Whooping

Cranes to over 600 today. Clay County and Ft Gaines Georgia have been number 20 of the 23 layover stops for the 1100 mile migration route since the program started. The dedicated members and supporting volunteers that make up Operation Migration have been hosted by Richard Coates and the Coates Flying Service at the junction of State Route 39 and Mt. Calvary Church Road near the Clay and Early County line. Richard makes his airfield and hangar available for Joe Duff and his crew for as long as needed to service the ultralight aircraft and to wait for optimal weather conditions to depart.

When Joe Duff was asked “What is a typical morning during the migration for you?”, he replied:

“It’s not easy getting ready for work when your occupation is leading birds south. It is a little more complicated than grabbing a coffee and warming up the car. It all starts two hours before official sunrise. On cold days, which they all seem to be, you add the requisite layers to keep warm. Each of us has our own procedures but mine starts with opening a half dozen hand warmers to kick off the chemical reaction that saves toes and fingertips from frostbite. All my gear is pre-organized the night before in hopes I have not forgotten some critical detail, like my left glove. The GPS has to be attached to its mount and booted up so it has time to find the satellites that tell us where we are. That too had to be programmed the night before with the route to the next stopover and the one after that if we get lucky.

Another of my jobs is to connect the antenna and camera to the computer for the trike-cam. I have to wait for it to boot and find a signal while I clear all the standard requests for updates and warning that the system is at risk of a dangerous virus. We leave our coats open and loose so we don’t sweat while we push the aircraft out to where it can be safely started. That layer of moisture can sap body heat when we get up into the 38 mph wind chill.

Once I am finished with all the heavy stuff, I add the final layer like heat packs inside my boots, gauntlets that stop the



wind from blowing up my sleeves, and another three heat packs in each mitten. Once the sun cracks the horizon, we can begin the process of starting a cold and reluctant engine. Our Rotax 503’s produce 50 hp, but they still use a pull rope starting system, the same as you would find on your 5 hp lawn mower. Each one seems to require a very specific balance

between throttle and primer to have any luck coaxing it back to life on particularly cold mornings. Fair enough! They have carried us over inhospitable terrain without so much as a cough and I have no issue with living by its rules. It looks after me, so I look after it. No questions asked. My engine requires a minimum cylinder head temperature of 200 degrees before applying full power without risking a cold seizure. On cold days, I have to bring it slowly up to about half power to reach that target. That means patience while chocking the wheels and holding the brake so it doesn't leave prematurely."

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), a coalition of non-profit organizations and government agencies behind the project to safeguard the endangered Whooping Crane from extinction, during a meeting last Friday decided to end the ultralight aspect of the program. It was noted that although beneficial, the guided migration did not provide the parenting of adult cranes needed for proper reproduction and survival skills for the young cranes to survive in the wild. Furthermore, it had taken away the 'Survival of the Fittest' aspect that would ensure a healthy population of cranes in the future.



To be apart of and to witness the daily triumphs and hardships of Operation Migration has been a once in a lifetime experience that has helped me realize a better understanding for the term 'Commitment'. To watch the pilots launch their aircraft, collect the Whooping Cranes, circle the airfield as they get into formation and finally drop out of sight over the southern horizon is an experience like no other. Knowing that the commitment and dedication of everyone involved who, for the past 15

years, has let personal safety, human comforts, family relations, economic gain and exhaustion take a back seat to the needs of the birds makes the end of the ultralight guided phase of the program even that much more disappointing to all involved. The January 24th, Sunday morning departure of the Whooping Cranes marks the last from Clay County Georgia. For further information go to <http://operationmigration.org/>

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