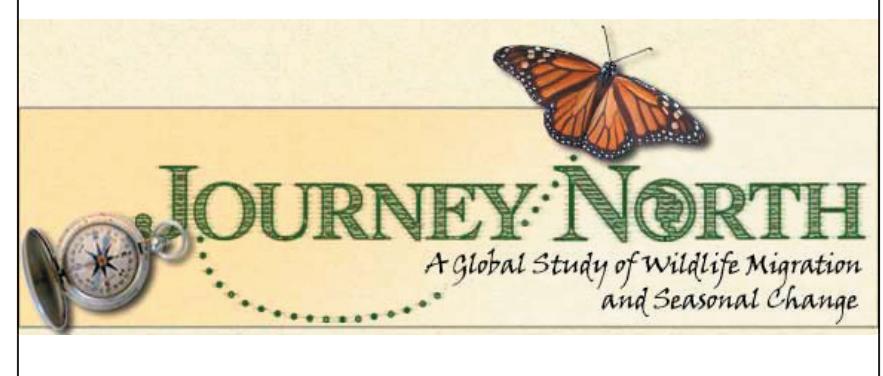




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Countdown to Migration

by Jane Duden



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When Will They Leave?

It's October. The leaves in central Wisconsin are changing color. Mornings are foggy. Days are shorter. Nights are cooler. The older "ultra-whoopers" summering in Wisconsin are getting restless. It's almost time to **migrate** south to their winter homes in Florida.

The **target departure date** is set for the ultralights and colts. It is the date when the crew and equipment are all in place. Each of the potential migration stopover/ host sites has been checked. But weather will be the deciding factor. What kind of weather do they need?



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Getting Ready

The pilots and ground crew train and tend the cranes. But that's not all. They must build and repair the travel pens (see above). These pens will keep the birds safe at the **stopover sites** along the the way. The crew packs up whatever it takes to keep planes, cranes, people, pens, trailers, vehicles, and motor homes in top condition on the journey south, over 1,200 miles.

Each of the chosen stopover sites must be ready too. Many people work together to carry out the migration plan, from fundraisers to pilots .



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Several Planes Work Together

A tiny fleet of planes is ready. The **lead** pilot flies the ultralight that launches with the birds. The **chase** pilots fly behind. They help any birds that get tired or break away. How do the pilots know when a bird is tired and might drop out? (Hear pilot Joe on the Web as he tells four signs that a bird is tired.)

A faster **scout** plane flies ahead. The scout makes sure the next stopover site is free of people or animals. Finally, the **top cover** pilot flies a fast little Cessna. This pilot talks with air traffic controllers to clear the way for the birds and ultralights.



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Eager to Fly

By now the birds know the drill. Helpers walk to the pen as the trike taxis or flies low past the gate. The trike's speaker plays the **contact call** to say "Follow me. Let's go!" The doors to the pen are flung open. The cranes race out in a blur of white feathers and black wingtips. They jump and flap, eager to go. The pilots rev up their engines. Next they're airborne with a line of trusting birds behind.

The birds wear new transmitters on their leg bands. They have worked out their flying order. Daily flying has built up their endurance. Are they ready to start the long journey?



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The “Sweet Spot”

Cranes could travel faster without the ultralight. It is a necessary partnership for the chicks’ first migration. Why?

Do you see the lead bird? It is only 6 or 8 inches from the trike’s wingtip.

Flying with the plane can help to a whooper—particularly the bird closest to the wing. The ultralight’s wing creates **lift** that gives the nearest crane an easier ride. The bird can **soar** more and **flap** less. That’s why pilots say the “sweet spot” is the position closest to the wing. Birds know it, too. Learn more about the birds’ flight order on the Web.

Some of the Team



© Photo Operation Migration

Go Team!

Before the long migration begins, each team member takes a final visit with family back home. They’ve already spent the summer in Wisconsin, away from their loved ones. Now, when they are not working with the birds, they are busy preparing for all the things that could happen on the migration. What unexpected things might happen? You’ll soon see!

Are You Ready?

Go to the Web and print your own Journey South Journal pages. Watch for daily Web reports on this year’s migration. The countdown has begun!