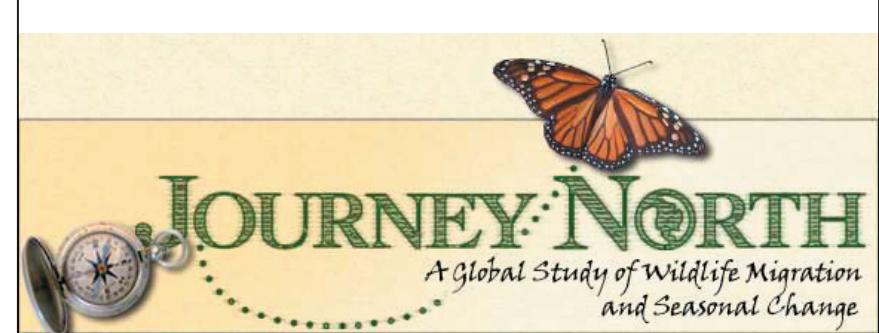




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Who Am I? Imprinting

by Jane Duden



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Where's My Mommy?

Imagine being a baby crane, worn out after the hard work of hatching. How strange the world seems! But all is well as long as Mommy is near.

This baby cuddles with a crane puppet head and thinks it is Mom. The chick must see other Whooping cranes from birth. That's how she gets the right idea about the species she belongs to. We say the chick gets **imprinted**.

This baby hatched without parents. She came from an egg in a captive breeding center. The puppet looks like her species so she imprints right.



© Photo WCEP

Learning to be a Crane

Wild baby cranes learn from their parents what food to eat, where to sleep and how to fly. They learn because they identify with their parents. Chicks try hard to stay with their parents and imitate them.

Imprinting is a quick way of learning who their parents are. Then they can follow them within hours, and they won't get lost.

Chicks born in captivity imprint and learn, too. But their "parent" is a puppet that looks just like an adult crane.



Role Models and Decoys

Joe Duff is a pilot for Operation Migration, the group that uses tiny planes to teach captive-born cranes where to migrate. Joe holds a plastic crane **decoy**. Decoys help the chicks feel safe wherever they are.



Where is the tiny, day-old chick in this photo? His pen is next to a real adult crane. He is also near a decoy. Which is which? Which one shows the chick where to find water?

Even in the wild, whooper parents must teach their chicks to eat and drink. Wild whooper parents catch food for their chicks all day long. They teach them what to eat.

The captive-born chicks have much to learn. Real whooping crane role models, puppets and decoys teach these chicks.

These look-alikes work because the chicks have correctly imprinted on their species from the moment they were born.



© Photo Jane Duden

Meet Robo-crane

Dan Sprague helps care for and train these chicks from their birth. Dan helped make a special puppet called Robo-crane. It has a trigger that drops treats from its beak. The chicks get the treats when they perform well in training. Crane experts in big white costumes wear this puppet on their arm.

Robo-crane has a tiny hidden recorder. It plays the whooping crane parent's call to its chick. The call means "It's okay. Follow me." To a chick, Robo-crane looks and sounds real. This puppet is a big help to the humans who are raising the chicks for the new Eastern flock.



Robo-Crane in Action

How does Robo-crane help the tiny chick feel safe to follow this ultralight plane? How does the pilot hide his human form?

Captive baby whooping cranes hatched to be in the new Eastern flock must learn to follow the plane on their first migration. Experts who train the chicks never let the chicks see or hear humans. They are silent and wear white suits. They worked hard to be sure the chicks have been imprinted to imitate their own species: wild whoopers.

It's Ground School now, Flight School next!