



New chicks are learning new tricks. It's all part of a whopping success story for the rare whooping crane.

How low could things go for the world's rarest crane? Pretty low, as it turns out. A half century ago, only 21 whooping cranes still survived. How could anyone even imagine a comeback?

Fortunately for the whoopers, some people imagined exactly that. And now, after many years and plenty of hard work, the dream of a whooping

crane recovery is coming true. By last fall, the total number of whooping cranes was 539!

For a species—even one that never was very plentiful—that number is still terribly low. But it's way more than 21, and scientists refuse to give up on these big, beautiful birds. They just never seem to run out of new ways to help save cranes.

JOANNE WILLIAMS/JAYNES GALLERY/DANITADELIMONT.COM (22-23); DEE ANN PEDERSON/DANITADELIMONT.COM (INSET)



After many more tidbits, the whooping crane chick below should grow big and strong—bringing new hope to the flock.

The young whooper above (still cinnamon-colored around its head) is now in its winter territory in Texas. By watching its parent, it may pick up some tips on how to nab a crab.



BY ELLEN LAMBETH

Whoo-hoo for WHOOPERS!

That's not a wolf in sheep's clothing in the photos below. It's a human in crane's clothing—sort of! The chicks are fed, led, and exercised by disguised caregivers. They even think that yellow flying machine in the bottom photo is part of the whole parent package. Meanwhile, the birds keep getting bigger and stronger (below, far right).

SAVING THE WHOOPERS

For a long time, there had been only one flock of wild whooping cranes. This flock breeds in northern Canada and migrates to Texas to spend the winter in marshes along the Gulf Coast. But there's a problem with all the birds being in

just one flock. A huge hurricane, pollution spill, or outbreak of disease could totally wipe them out. There are also many possible dangers along their migration route: storms, power lines, and fewer and fewer resting places, for example.

So in the early 1990s, scientists started a new

flock in Florida that didn't have to migrate at all. (They may soon try the same thing in Louisiana.) And in 2001, they started another flock that would migrate between Wisconsin and Florida. Where do they get the birds for these new flocks? They raise them in captivity.

UP, UP, AND AWAY!

The orphan chicks need to think that their families are made up of other whooping cranes—not humans. So scientists caring for the chicks keep quiet and hide in white outfits.

They use crane hand puppets to feed the chicks. The chicks grow up following after these crane “foster parents.”

Chicks raised for the new migrating flock must follow their foster parents even in flight. It's a “fly away home” plan called Operation Migration. For these chicks, a disguised scientist soon begins driving along the ground in a small flying machine called an *ultralight*. The growing chicks run behind, legs getting stronger

and wings a-flapping. One day, the ultralight actually takes off—and so do the youngsters!

When the time is right, the ultralight leads the young whoopers from Wisconsin to a winter home in Florida. If everything goes well, the birds will take the same path back to Wisconsin in the spring. Guess what—Operation Migration is working!

Scientists are also trying a new plan: Set some young captive-

raised whoopers free directly into Florida's migrating flock in the fall, instead of leading them there with the ultralight. The hope is that they will follow the older cranes in the flock back to Wisconsin in the spring, even though they've never migrated themselves.

Between all the good plans and hard work, the species keeps getting another chance. So keep your fingers crossed for whoopers.

Whooper chicks will follow their costumed foster parents anywhere—even when they take to the skies! (above) That's a good thing, since they're now being led to their new winter home in Florida.

Rangers: Discover more about Operation Migration at this Web site: operationmigration.org. Also visit Journey North at learner.org/jnorth and click on “Whooping Cranes.” —R.R.



You see, a female whooper usually lays two eggs each year, but she and her mate can raise only one young. Scientists figured out that they can remove the extra eggs, hatch them, and raise the “orphan” chicks. That can double the number of young whoopers that survive each year!

