



November 2009 Newsletter

*Celebrating 52 Years
of Birding! 1957-2009*

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Visit our website:
roanokevalleybirdclub.com

OCTOBER MEETING

We watched the video *A Boy, A Book, A Legacy* about Roger Tory Peterson. Afterwards, Bill Grant presented an update on the *State of the Birds 2009*.

Peggy Spiegel Opengari Memorial Fund



In honor of one of our most beloved members, the Roanoke Valley Bird Club has established the *Peggy Spiegel Opengari Memorial Fund*. Peggy was

instrumental in fostering the love of birds and birdwatching in many of the club's members. Peggy was a favorite speaker at club meetings, and organized birding trips for many of her friends and colleagues. People around the state mourn Peggy's passing.

A portion of the money donated this year will be used to install a memorial plaque in the new picnic table at Woodpecker Ridge Nature Center in Troutville. But the majority of the funds received, as well as any donations in future years, will be used for hummingbird research and conservation projects, as this tiny bird occupied a special place in Peggy's heart. Donations, which are tax deductible, can be mailed to the Virginia Society of Ornithology, c/o Thelma Dalmas, 1230 Viewmont Dr., Evington, VA 24550-2006 with a notation that it is for the *Peggy Spiegel Opengari Memorial Fund*.

2010 RVBC Calendar Now Available

The 2010 RVBC Calendar is for sale to members and non-members at \$12 each with profits going to the RVBC general fund. Calendars will be available at the Bird Seed Sale November 7 as well as at the November and December RVBC meetings. If you cannot attend one of these activities, contact Carl at 540-297-7336 or carlandlinda@earthlink.net to arrange your purchase. Many thanks to Carl Boast for making this calendar possible.

Have You Remembered to Pay Your Club Dues?

According to the by-laws, members who have not paid dues prior to November 1, shall be dropped as club members in good standing and will not receive further newsletters or notices of club meetings/events until payment is made. Please complete order form on back of newsletter and send it and your check to Robin Austin. Thank you!

NEXT MEETING:

**November 9, 7:00 p.m.
Grandin Court Baptist Church**

Please join us for Carl and Linda Boast's presentation of their trip to Costa Rica.

December Meeting is Members' Night
You are invited to bring 5 minutes worth of slides, videos, carvings, photos, photos on CD, etc. of your best bird images. If you plan to participate, please call Bill Grant (389-3294) and let him know what you plan to present and if you will need special equipment.

Please join us for dinner at 5:30 p.m. before the meeting at the Brambleton Deli at 3655 Brambleton Road.

Volunteers Needed for Girl Scout Duck Watch and Habitat Walk, Dec. 12, 9:00 a.m.-11 a.m.

The Girl Scouts are requesting assistance from RVBC club members for the Duck Watch and Habitat Walk which will take place around the lake at the Botetourt Center at Greenfield.

Please consider volunteering for this important community event. Please contact Elly Wefel if you wish to volunteer: (pewefel@aol.com) or phone (977-0636).

Harvey's Knob Hawkwatch Update

On Sept. 27, Barry Kinzie and other hawkwatchers sighted 11 raptor species at Harvey's, the largest number of raptor species Barry has ever seen in one day in 37 years of hawkwatching. Species sighted: Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, adult Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, American Kestrel, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Osprey. Late in the day, about 6 p.m., two adult Red-headed Woodpeckers flew over the Knob.

For a detailed listing of sightings at Harvey's Knob and other hawkwatch sites in North America visit https://www.hawkcount.org/month_summary.

If you are available to hawkwatch please contact Bill James: 563-9248 or Joyce Holt: 384-6674.

FIELD TRIPS

CHAIRMAN BETH GRIFFIN 265-4853

REMEMBER TO SHARE THE COST OF GAS WHEN YOU CARPOOL

Birding around Roanoke, Sunday Nov. 15, 1:00 PM

Meet leader Linda Cory (580-5214) at the Towers Mall lower level parking lot in front of SunTrust Bank at 1:00. We will bird along the Roanoke River, visit local parks and Mill Mountain. There is a possibility (if approved by the city) that we will also bird the Sewage Treatment Plant on Bennington St. **The city wants a head count, so please RSVP to Linda Cory (580-5214) by 11/12.** Expect moderate walking. NOTE that this is a SUNDAY AFTERNOON walk.

Booker T. Washington National Monument , Saturday, Nov 21st, 9:00 AM

Meet Leader Bill Hunley (774-2397) at Booker T. Washington National Monument in Franklin Co. at 9:00 a.m. Those wishing to carpool from Roanoke should

meet Beth Griffin under the big sign at Tanglewood Mall at 8 a.m. Expect 1 to 2 miles of easy walking.

FIELD NOTES

October 11, The Big Sit!

On this lovely day, club members watched from two circles at the Quinns' house in Burnt Chimney.

Species sighted: Osprey, Pine Warbler, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Field Sparrow, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Canada Goose, Mourning Dove, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Pileated Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Blue Jay, Common Raven, American Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Eastern Towhee, Northern Cardinal, House Finch, American Goldfinch, Northern Flicker, American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, Northern Mockingbird, and Chipping Sparrow.

October 17, 8:00 AM, Fenwick Mines

Five birders showed up on this slightly chilly overcast day. Led by Bill Hunley highlights were: Hermit Thrush, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-headed Vireo, Common Raven, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, White-throated Sparrow, Eastern Towhee, and Yellow-rumped Warbler.

In addition to birding, we learned from Bill that turtles in winter can stay submerged under water for long periods of time by exchanging gases through their orifices, yes, including their rectum. We also learned that during WWII the military attempted to use bats to carry small packs of napalm. The plan was to drop the bats from planes over enemy territory. The project was abandoned, however, after a test in the U.S.—several bats with napalm strapped to their little bodies woke up early in the lab, flew to the brand-new but uninhabited Carlsbad Auxiliary Army Air Base in New Mexico and burned it down.

Sightings

Early October: Mary Lou Barritt heard a Great Horned Owl in her backyard (not far from Mill Mountain Park).

October 14: At Woodpecker Ridge Nature Center in the morning Barry Kinzie birded along the road near the feeders, parking area, and the road to the cabin. In addition to the usual suspects, Barry saw 20+ Ruby-crowned Kinglets, 4 Golden-crowned Kinglets, 5 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, 3 Black-throated Blue Warblers, 1 Black-throated Green Warbler, 2 Yellow-rumped Warblers, 1 Pine Warbler, 12 White-throated Sparrows

and one Dark-eyed Junco.

October 18: Barry Kinzie saw a Lincoln's Sparrow at the feeders at Woodpecker Ridge Nature Center.

Join Us For The Christmas Bird Counts

It's not even Thanksgiving and we're talking about Christmas? Let's not talk about food for Thanksgiving or gifts for Christmas—let's talk about **Christmas Bird Counts**. The counts this year will be:

- Roanoke on December 19th. Please contact Bill Hunley (774-2397) to participate.
- Fincastle on December 20th
- Peaks of Otter on December 22nd.

Barry Kinzie and I will be setting up teams for the Fincastle count. This is a Sunday morning count followed by homemade soup at noon and a tally at Barry's. If you have helped in past counts and would like to help this year, please send an email to uvaau@aol.com or call me at 389-4056. Indicate whether or not your previous territory is okay for this year.

The Peaks of Otter count will be on Tuesday, December 22. Meet at the Peaks of Otter Lodge for breakfast at 7:00 AM. Barry will set up the teams depending on how many show up. We will meet back at the Lodge at noon for a tally and lunch.

We need your help.

—Eunice C. Hudgins

Rehabilitated Eared Grebe Takes Flight

On April 20, 2009 an Eared Grebe was discovered by Kent Davis and Mike Smith at Roanoke's Sewage Treatment Plant. This was the first documented record of this species in the Roanoke Valley. The Eared Grebe was seen by several birders and was photographed. A couple of days later a staff member from the plant ventured out from his office to have a look at the bird that was causing so much excitement.



© Mke Wendelken

He found the grebe with its left foot in the jaws of a snapping turtle. Members of the plant's crew rescued it from the turtle and placed it in the goldfish pond located in front of the main office, where it remained for a few

days until a local wildlife rehabilitator picked it up after it was determined that the grebe had a serious injury to its left foot. The rehabilitator shipped it by air to a rehab

facility in Delaware. Two digits on the left foot had to be amputated, and the foot "healed nicely." The grebe was able to dive and fly and was successfully released at Cape Henlopen State Park in Delaware on May 30, 2009.

Mike Purdy

Weekend Birding Field Trip in VA Beach, Dec 4-6

Register EARLY for this popular birding weekend in VA Beach. The annual VSO field trip to VA Beach and environs features a Saturday morning trip to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel Islands. Three of the four islands are closed to the public so this is a great opportunity to visit a birdy spot that's not open to the public on a regular basis.

Field trip coordinator, Clark White, has made arrangements for us to visit all four islands and has reserved security guards such that 45 people can attend this trip.

As with all VSO field trips, they are open to the public -- VSO members and non-members—newbies and bird nerds alike. No fees except those for the CBBT islands trip (see note below) and hotel/food. Cheap in the winter.

Visit the VSO Web site for hotel/logistics info: http://www.viriniabirds.net/f_trips.html

Here are more details about the birding opportunities for the weekend:

Friday Afternoon -- December 4

As a special enticement to get an early start on the weekend, a field trip will leave the hotel at 12:15 PM for the Whitehurst Tract, one of the many good birding areas in Virginia Beach. The Whitehurst Tract is a patchwork of marshes, weedy and cultivated fields, narrow freshwater impoundments, and pine woodland. This affords the possibility of a wide variety of bird species. Several sparrows, such as LeConte's, are possible as well as numerous waterfowl and raptors. The trip will return to the hotel by 6:00 PM. On the VA Birding and Wildlife Trail, this is CSY09: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/site.asp?trail=1&loop=CSY&site=CSY09>

Friday Evening -- December 4

Again this year an evening is planned at the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum, hosted by Tom and Karen Beatty and members of the Back Bay Bird Club. Light refreshments will be served at 6:30 and there will be an opportunity to enjoy the wonderful displays at the museum. At 7:15 there will be a slide presentation on some of the birds that might be seen during the weekend field trips. The museum is located at 1113 Atlantic Avenue, Virginia Beach, just a few short blocks from the hotel.

Saturday Field Trip -- December 5

Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel islands. The Saturday field trip to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel (CBBT) islands will leave promptly at 8:00 AM from the parking lot of the CBBT visitor center. Participants must check in at the CBBT office by 7:45. Those staying at the hotel may want to meet near the hotel entrance at 7:00 to form carpools. The trip should end about noon. Participants should bring spotting scopes, lunch, snacks and beverages and be prepared for winter weather. *On the VA Birding and Wildlife Trail, this is CSY01: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/site.asp?trail=1&loop=CSY&site=CSY01>*

Participation on this trip is limited to the first 45 people who sign up since there is a requirement to pay a security guard to accompany each group of 15. The cost is \$10 per person to defray the cost of the guard. A security information form will be mailed to each person who registers for the trip. The completed form must be returned to the trip coordinator no later than November 20, 2009. *Contact Clark White to get the form: [cwbirds at cox dot net](mailto:cwbirds@cox.net). Phone: 757-875-7649*

Sunday Field Trips -- December 6

Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge and False Cape State Park. The tram trip at Back Bay will begin at 8:00 AM. Those staying at the hotel may want to meet near the front entrance at 6:45 to form carpools. This will be a half day trip. Participants should bring spotting scopes as well as lunch, snacks, and beverages. After a leisurely tram ride with many stops to view a variety of shorebirds and waterfowl a good amount of time will be spent birding and lunching at False Cape State Park. The tram will leave False Cape at 1:00 PM for a slow return back to the Back Bay NWR Visitor Center. *On the VA Birding and Wildlife Trail, this is: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/site.asp?trail=1&loop=CSY&site=CSY06>*

Participants may want to stop at the beach in Sandbridge to check out the birds before returning to the hotel. Birds seen on this trip could include both swans, American Bittern, Common Snipe, and numerous waterfowl. This year the trip will be limited to the first 25 participants who register.

Alternate Field Trip -- Sunday morning

For those who do not go to Back Bay, a trip to First Landing State Park in Virginia Beach will be available. This trip will meet at First Landing State Park at 8:00 AM. Directions will be provided to those who sign up. *On the VA Birding and Wildlife Trail: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/site.asp?trail=1&loop=CSY&site=CSY02>*

Hope to see you there! Contact Clark White if you have questions: [cwbirds at cox dot net](mailto:cwbirds@cox.net). Phone: 757-875-7649

2009 Bluebird Trail Results

—from Tim and Alyce Quinn/Pam and Elly Wefel

Another year and many more cavity nesters were brought into the world with the help of the dedicated volunteers who went out every week to monitor the progress of our 74 bluebird boxes on three local trails. While our success rate was down a bit from last year, we still helped many birds raise families.

Here are this year's results:

Blue Ridge Parkway

Species	Eggs	Fledged	Success Rate
Eastern Bluebird	202	165	82%
Carolina Chickadee	18	11	61%
Tree Swallow	34	20	59%
House Wren	7	0	0%

Hanging Rock Golf Course

Species	Eggs	Fledged	Success Rate
Bluebird	130	113	87%
House Wren	6	6	100%

Botetourt Country Club

Species	Eggs	Fledged	Success Rate
Bluebird	132	107	81%
Tree Swallow	41	38	93%

These trails would not be possible to maintain without the help of the volunteers who monitor the boxes, so join us in thanking: Ann Allen, Bob and Andy Biggs, Debra Billings,

Eleanor Dye, Bill Grant, Polly Holloway, Alice Hylton, Deborah Ingram, Lily Johnston, Ardy Kidd, Susan Kidd, Connie Marsh, Barbara Martinet, Carole Massart, Bob and Sherri Miller, Rita and Jerry O'Brien, Joe Riggins, Bob and Ellen Rummel, Jeanne Marie Sawtelle, Laurie Spangler, Bill and Anne Tucker, and Liz Williams.



Eastern Bluebird
Courtesy of Birdfreak.com.

Special thanks also go to Eunice Hudgins and Laurie Spangler for calling all of us when it was time for us to monitor. It's easy to forget it's your turn! And before the season started, a bunch of us got

together to build boxes. Thanks to everyone who helped out: Allen and Robin Austin, Gary Brunk, Jim Bush, Norris Ford, John and Eunice Hudgins, and Tim and Alyce Quinn. Did we miss anyone?

Please consider joining us next year as a monitor on one, two, or all three trails. We start signing up volunteers in March. Thanks everyone, for a great year!

In the Bluebird Beginning

By Sandy Cheapé

(Sandy and her husband Jack, pioneered what are now the RVBC's Bluebird Trails. We are grateful for their hard work and foresight.)

Years ago, Jack and I began monitoring several worn and tattered bluebird boxes on Route 24. After a while, we abandoned that trail because it was too dangerous beside the busy road. The Blue Ridge Parkway had a few boxes on fences so we decided to install boxes on the Parkway. We didn't have anything to go by, so we checked out possible sites, and did our own thing installing the poles, nailing boxes, numbering, etc. We dug so many holes that Jack said if he had to dig one more it was going to be for me! (I think I shall write a book, would probably be a best seller.)

We kept track of where we put them and created detailed spreadsheets with the box locations by parkway mileage markers. A hundred times over we thanked Bill Opengari, who in his love for the bluebirds, built many boxes.

In the beginning, we checked the boxes ourselves, and then enlisted the Roanoke Valley Bird Club to help every week. Everyone was as excited as we were. I was in touch with the National Blue Bird Society and annually sent in our area's counts. Our number of boxes grew from just a few to 31 houses stretching from mile markers 107 to 128.

These beautiful bluebirds became family to us and it broke my heart whenever I found out that something had gotten the eggs or babies. Each spring we listened to the sweet soft whistles of the male bluebird as he called his mate only to realize that she was playing "hard to get." But he persevered and finally won her heart. Seeing those little blue eggs in that circular pine needle nest just made it all worthwhile.

The Tree Swallows, Carolina Chickadees, and Tufted Titmouse shared the boxes too and it was fun to see which of God's feathered babies would rent the house. It is a lot of work, time, record keeping and patience, but I would do it all again for the satisfaction of building up the bluebird population.

In 1997 the *Outdoor Traveler* Magazine did a feature story about the Blue Ridge Parkway Bluebird Trail and interviewed us for the March/April/May issue. The reporter took photos and traveled the parkway with us as we monitored the boxes. The author did a nice job with the article

and it was great advertising for the Roanoke Valley Bird Club.

I was saddened when we had to give it up with our retirement move to Myrtle Beach, but Alyce and Tim Quinn took it over and they have been absolutely awesome keeping it going, improving and expanding it to even greater trails. I am so thankful that they have the love, interest and heart to be the coordinators. They installed the new type boxes so the predators couldn't get in, which was a mammoth job!

Jack and I now have four bluebird boxes in our Myrtle Beach yard and have fledged many broods. We are thrilled that we can enjoy them year round. You will not believe this but I have trained them to go in a bluebird feeder to get mealworms. They sit on a pole, looking in the Carolina Room window (honest), and wait for us to come out and feed them. Several of our friends from Roanoke have visited and watched this. It's expensive to buy the worms throughout the nesting season, but isn't that what a family does for their children? Our neighbors probably think we are ready for the loony bin, but that's ok, fellow birders can relate, right?

Project FeederWatch Begins Nov. 14

What happens in the backyard should not stay in the backyard—at least when it comes to bird feeders. By sharing information about which birds visit their feeders between November and April, backyard bird watchers can help scientists track changes in bird numbers and movements from year to year, through Project FeederWatch, a citizen-science program from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada.

Project FeederWatch begins on November 14 and runs through early April. Taking part is easy. Anyone can count the numbers and kinds of birds at their feeders and enter their information on the FeederWatch website. Participants submitted nearly 117,000 checklists last season. Since 1987, more than 40,000 people from the United States and Canada have taken part in the project.

Project FeederWatch is for all ages and skill levels. To learn more and to sign up, visit www.feederwatch.org or call the Cornell Lab toll-free at (866) 982-2473. In return for the \$15 fee (\$12 for Cornell Lab members) participants receive the FeederWatcher's Handbook, an identification poster of the most common feeder birds, a calendar, complete instructions, and *Winter Bird Highlights*, an annual summary of FeederWatch findings.

Regional highlights based on 2008-09 FeederWatch reports:

- Southwest & California: On most lists: House Finch. Fewer reports: Western Scrub-Jay. Increasing: Lesser Goldfinch and Eurasian Collared-Dove.
- Southeast & South-Central: On most lists: Northern Cardinal. Increasing: White-winged Dove and Eurasian Collared-Dove. Rare bird: Yellow-headed Blackbird

(Florida).

- Pacific Northwest & Rocky Mountains: On most lists: Dark-eyed Junco. Increasing: Anna's Hummingbird and Golden-crowned Sparrow. Rare bird: Yellow-throated Warbler (Alberta).
- Northeast quarter of U.S. & Southeastern Canada: On most lists: Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees. Fewer reports: Evening Grosbeak. Rare bird: Green-tailed Towhee (New Jersey).
- North-Central & Mid-Central: On most lists: Downy Woodpecker. Fewer reports: American Crows. Increasing: American Robin and Cedar Waxwing. Rare bird: Cape May Warbler (Saskatchewan).
- Alaska & Northern Canada: On most lists: Common Redpoll. Increasing: Pine Grosbeak and Bohemian Waxwing. Fewer reports: Steller's Jay. Rare bird: Purple Finch (Alaska).

Blackpoll Warblers: Marathon Travelers

During fall migration, this large Warbler takes an over-water flight from the coast of New England/southern Canada to the Caribbean and South America, a distance of 3,000 to 4,000 kilometers.

The Blackpoll's over-water flight to South America keeps it aloft for 80 to 90 continuous hours, an effort which researchers conclude "requires a degree of exertion not matched by any other vertebrate; in man the metabolic equivalent would be to run a 4 minute mile for 80 hours. If a Blackpoll Warbler were burning gasoline instead of reserves of body fat, it could boast of getting 720,000 miles to the gallon."

Summarized from: Park Migratory Bird Center: http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Fact_Sheets/default.cfm?fxst=4

Whooping Cranes Head South



Courtesy of H. Ray of Operation Migration, Inc.



*Whooping Crane in Wisconsin
Courtesy of Birdfreak.com.*

In mid-October, 21 endangered Whooping Cranes left the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin and headed southeast to a Florida marsh, tracking close behind their "parent," a loud, slow-moving ultralight airplane.

The Whooping Crane, once the rarest of birds, stands five feet tall, has a wingspan of seven feet or more, utters a peculiar trumpeting sound, and performs a captivating dance. The bird is white, except for a red head and black feathers at the wingtips.

At Necedah, both 30 first-time migrants and 77 adults are progeny of a campaign to return the bird from the edge of extinction. All of the approximately 544 Whooping Cranes alive today descended from 21 birds that had survived hunting and habitat destruction in 1941.

The effort to establish the Florida-Wisconsin flyway is managed by a collaboration of private and government agencies called the [Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership](#).

Outside of pictures, few people get to see snow-white birds trailing flying machines. Although this confluence of old and new arrests attention, "The Whooping Crane deserves affection on its own terms, says Joe Duff, CEO of Operation Migration and ultralight pilot, "they make a call you can hear for four miles. They have been around for 60 million years, have seen the shift in continents, and then we came along and forced them close to extinction."

The need for another migratory flock is evident from a look at the crane's perilous history outside of captivity:

- Half of a non-migratory flock was killed by a hurricane in Louisiana in 1940; the rest of the flock vanished by 1950.
- A non-migratory flock of 40 whoopers in Florida has stagnated, and is not receiving new captive-bred chicks.
- A flock of about 247 birds (all descended from 15 wild whoopers alive in 1941), continues to migrate between [Wood Buffalo National Park](#) in northern Canada and [Aransas National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Texas. Last

winter, drought reduced river flows at the refuge, and as the marshes grew saltier, the blue crab moved to deeper water, and 20 whoopers died as it became more difficult to reach their primary food. The incident shows that further drying, climate change or development around the marshes, could reverse years of stringent protection for the birds.

A key survival tactic is to disperse the cranes into new flocks, but establishing a new migratory flock is difficult. Normally, cranes learn their migration route from other cranes, but how to start a new route in the absence of an established flock?

A previous effort to have the whoopers follow Sandhill Cranes failed, and only one aircraft can fly slow enough to lead cranes: the ultralight. On a level flight, whoopers average 38 miles per hour, just above the ultralight's 32 mph minimum.

Since 2001, Operation Migration's ultralights have been leading cranes more than 1,200 miles from breeding marshes in Wisconsin to winter marshes at Kissimmee Prairie in Florida. Because cranes must flap their wings while following the ultralight, they can only fly an hour or two a day, so the southbound flight can take two or three months. Normally, whoopers loft on warm, rising air and then soar ahead. This energy-saving tactic allows them to cover several hundred miles in a day.

Three ultralights are available to guide stragglers, but occasionally a bird that insists on landing must be caught by ground trackers and trucked to the next night's crane-corral. During eight trips south, and nearly 10,000 miles of crane commuting, the operation has not lost a pilot or a bird, says Duff.

In 2008, Operation Migration altered its southbound route to avoid polluted air over the mountains in Tennessee, but building a new route is no simple matter. After identifying remote marshes on maps and photos, the group offers the property owners an unusual sales proposition: "Hi, we're leading birds south. Can we take over your property and park our motor homes here? That wetland down below, you won't be able to go down there. And we don't know when we will leave." Despite such a rigorous request most landowners are supportive.

Cranes learn the migration route after a single trip south. Although they return fairly close to their southbound route, they revert to the normal soaring flight, which allows them to cover the migration much quicker than the energy-

intensive flapping used to follow the ultralight plane. "We leave them with nothing except the memory of the route," Duff says.

With 77 adult birds in the Wisconsin population, plus 30 that were added this spring, the Wisconsin-Florida flock is close to its goal of 125 birds in a sustainable population, except for one bummer: the whoopers are abandoning their nests. "The birds on the reserve form pairs fine, build nests fine, lay eggs fine," says John French, research manager at [Patuxent Wildlife Research Center](#) in Maryland, a headquarters of Whooping Crane survival, "and they begin the incubation fine, but almost every nest is abandoned part way through. It's the biggest problem, and we don't know why.



1955 flyer: part of an early effort to rescue Whooping Cranes. Courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey Earth Science

A key suspect is clouds of black flies, which elsewhere have forced Common Loons from their nests. If further studies convict the flies, the Necedah refuge may use targeted insecticide sprays, or perhaps change how it manages water to reduce fly numbers.

Nest abandonment could also signify a deeper difficulty, says French. The crane was "essentially extinct... and it's possible that they have a genetic inability to deal with stress; have very little ability to withstand chance events." A drastic population crunch has forced the cranes through a "genetic bottleneck" that stripped away the genetic diversity it could need to survive disease and other changes in the environment.

Still, the major story about whoopers is survival, not poor genes. "A lot of geneticists said the Whooping Cranes could not survive, but they did not tell the Whooping Cranes," says George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation, another component of the whooper partnership. "Their rate of increase [in the wild] has been absolutely normal, but they do seem much more prone to accidents; they are very fragile."

summarized from The Why Files
<http://whyfiles.org313crane/>

