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Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership statement on swap of eggs at wild whooping crane nest in Wisconsin

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On June 9, biologists with the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) attempted to place a captive-produced egg in a wild whooping crane nest at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. At the same time, they removed an egg from the nest laid by pair of whooping cranes, 3-03 and 17-03, that are full siblings (brother and sister).

Since the egg produced in captivity was known to be fertile, WCEP was capitalizing on the potential for a chick to hatch from that wild nest. We have found that whooping cranes nearly always return to a nest and continue to incubate after human manipulation of eggs like this, meaning there was good potential for the egg to hatch successfully, becoming the third wild whooping crane to hatch in Wisconsin in more than a century.

The egg removed from the nest was found to be infertile. Unfortunately, the cranes flushed from the nest and did not return. Biologists then removed the captive-produced egg, replaced it with a dummy egg and returned the captive-produced egg to the International Crane Foundation, where was expected to hatch soon. The resulting chick will become part of the Direct Autumn Release of whooping cranes this fall.

Crane chicks produced from full sibling pairs are likely to show low survivability due to the expression of genetic mutations; if they do survive to breeding age they are unlikely to breed successfully.

One of the goals of any reintroduction is to try to maximize the variety of genes in the new population. This increases the chances for survival of those populations since some genes are better adapted to certain environmental factors than others.

Replacing eggs of poor genetic prospects, with individuals that increase the genetic diversity of the population is one strategy to reach that goal. Managing the genetic makeup of the reintroduced Eastern migratory whooping crane population in this way will help ensure genetic diversity and survivorship of the flock.

The egg switch was authorized by the International Whooping Crane Reintroduction Team, based on the recommendation of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership.

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) is an international coalition of public and private groups which is reintroducing this highly imperiled species in eastern North America, part of its historic range.