

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center

The Release of Parent-Reared Whooping Crane Colts into the Eastern Migratory Population.



- **The Challenge:** Whooping cranes have been successfully introduced using costume rearing techniques in either a direct autumn release or in an ultralight led migration from Wisconsin to Florida. In Florida, we have also released parent-reared whooping cranes. Not much is known about the learning that takes place in this K-selected species over the almost one year that the young whooping crane colt remains with its adult parents. The challenge is to duplicate and study this parent-rearing situation and develop a method to successfully release whooping crane colts into the wild while transferring their relationship with their parent birds to other adult whooping crane pairs on the landscape.



- **The Science:** Whooping crane chicks have been successfully reared in captivity and released into the non-migratory whooping crane flock in central Florida. Their survival and opportunities to breed appear to be similar to that of the costume-reared chicks released in this program. There has not been a release of parent-reared chicks or colts into a migratory population of whooping cranes that has been successful. The rearing technique of using the parent whooping cranes to do the parental care, instead of using costumed people as surrogate parents results in a stronger, healthier chick that has less leg and gait problems than the costume-reared cousins. We do not know if the parent-reared cranes, once they reach adulthood, make better parents themselves, because the numbers of birds released have been small, the opportunities for breeding in the Florida non-migratory flock have been few, and the parent-reared birds choose mates from the more abundant costume-reared birds when it comes time to choose a mate.



- **The Future:** We have been trying to conduct this experiment for several years but initially were stymied by lack of funds. Grant proposals have given us the funding to proceed in 2010, but there were not enough whooping crane eggs laid to spare a half dozen for this experiment. We are hopeful that in 2011, there will be more whooping crane eggs available to allow some to be used in this new research project. If successful, we would hope to continue the releases of parent-reared whooping cranes for several years to build up their numbers and allow us to gather meaningful data on their survival and reproduction in the wild.