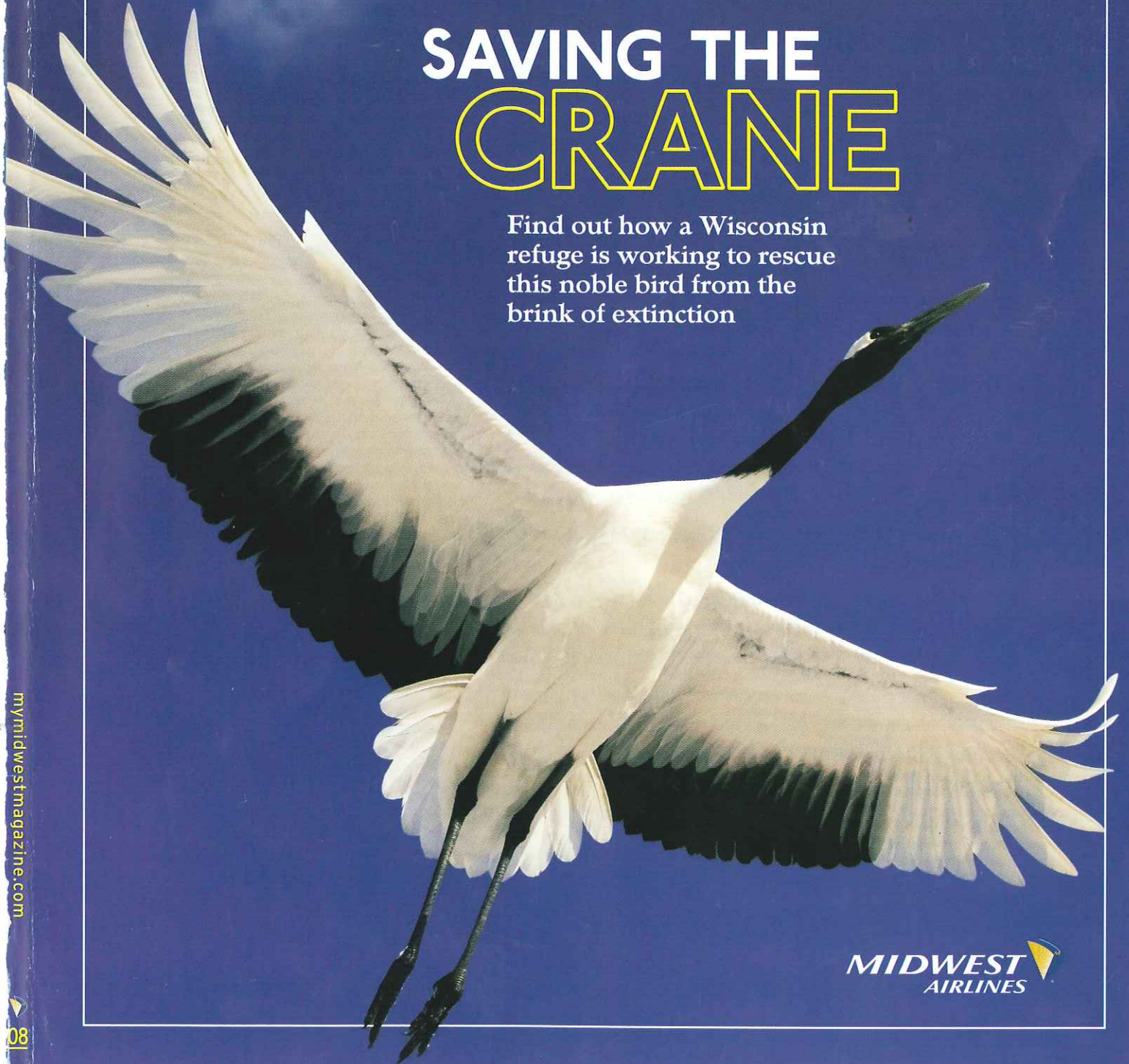


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SAVING THE CRANE

Find out how a Wisconsin
refuge is working to rescue
this noble bird from the
brink of extinction

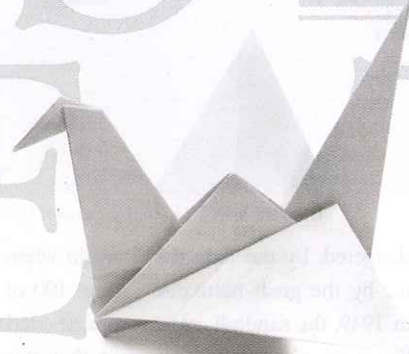


MIDWEST
AIRLINES

SHANE LUTJEVIS



FRIENDS OF A FEATHER



The International Crane Foundation offers a beautiful refuge for observing and learning about these majestic birds. By Joan Fischer

About an hour north of Madison, surrounded by fertile ground that is home to farms, prairie, forest and nearby Baraboo Hills, lies one of the world's greatest sanctuaries for the research and conservation of cranes—a remarkable and, to many cultures, spiritually meaningful bird.

"Cranes are fabulous birds," says George Archibald, a globally renowned crane researcher and cofounder of the International Crane Foundation. "It has been said that everything a crane does is graceful. Their primeval calls, their spectacular dances and the care members of mated pairs lavish on one another and their offspring have endeared cranes to humans since times untold."

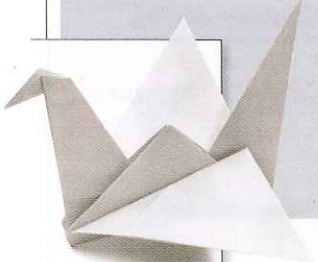
The crane was sacred to the Ojibwe. In 1848, the year Wisconsin was declared a state, Archibald says a delegation of tribal leaders carried to Washington, D.C., a scroll depicting a crane and other clan symbols that served as a petition to remain on their homelands. Totems for peace chiefs were chosen from the crane or loon clans. The sublime aura of the crane has been noted by others, too: The Japanese see them as a symbol of longevity, while they are often a symbol of vigilance in Christian storytelling.

"When we hear his call we hear no mere bird... He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men."

— Aldo Leopold, writing about cranes in *A Sand County Almanac*



ON THE WING An ultralight aircraft leads a flock; (below) a suited conservationist feeds young cranes.



CRANE FACTS:

Whooping cranes are one of the rarest birds in North America.

Cranes appear in the earliest legends of the world's peoples, where they are portrayed as sentinels of heaven and omens of a long life and good fortune.

The sarus crane, native to India, is the tallest flying bird in the world, standing at six feet with a wingspan of eight feet.

But this revered bird is endangered. By the time the classic *A Sand County Almanac* by the great naturalist Aldo Leopold was published in 1949, the sandhill crane had nearly disappeared from Wisconsin. Numerous other crane species around the world were facing extinction, in particular the magnificent whooping crane, which had vanished from Wisconsin in the late 1800s.

That plight moved Archibald and fellow researcher Ron Sauey to found the International Crane Foundation in 1973, only a few miles from Leopold's famous "shack" on the Wisconsin River. The shack is preserved on grounds that are also home to a recently refurbished Aldo Leopold Legacy Center, so a visit to the foundation can include walking hallowed ground of the American conservation movement, where so much of our present-day environmental consciousness took root in the 1960s and '70s.

The International Crane Foundation remains one of the most enduring and effective organizations working on behalf of these birds. Wisconsin is now home to a flock of migratory whooping cranes established through the extraordinary efforts of the foundation and its partnerships with conservation groups. The foundation lives up to the "international" in its name by collaborating with crane preservation projects in countries as farflung as China, Russia, India, Japan, Vietnam and Mozambique, to name a few.

The ICF's home in Baraboo is the only place in the

world where visitors can see all 15 crane species. More than 100 of the birds live on the 225 acres of restored prairie, wetland and oak savanna. This land is protected so that cranes can flourish, but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy it, too: The preserve offers crane exhibit areas, five nature trails with benches and shaded resting areas, guided and self-guided tours, and a visitor's center with gallery and educational resources.

SUIT UP!

The ICF owes much of its success to its ingenuity in developing and adopting new techniques for rearing cranes in captivity while allowing them to retain their wildness—including a healthy fear of humans—essential to their survival when released. Some of the methods rely on the crane's visual gullibility.

George Archibald's wife, Kyoko, came up with a way



CRANE FACTS (CONTINUED)

Whooping cranes can live for 25 years in the wild and 40 or more in captivity.

Two species of cranes—the sandhill and whooping crane—are native to North America.

All cranes are omnivorous, eating a wide variety of plants and animals.

The whooping crane is the tallest bird native to North America, standing five feet tall with a wingspan of seven feet.

Cranes generally mate for life.

All cranes leap in wild dances when they are courting.

Cranes fly anywhere from 15 to 50 mph, depending on wind speed and direction.

Cranes are considered an "umbrella species": Their habitat requirements are so broad that protecting cranes means protecting other living things, too.

to feed chicks without getting them used to humans in the 1980s. Visual isolation from humans was the key, so disguising the hand that fed them only seemed logical. She covered the entrance to a rearing room with cardboard and, through a hole, extended a simple puppet resembling the head and neck of a crane to feed the chicks. The method worked. While never clearly seeing or interacting with a human, the cranes eventually were moved to their parents' wetland nesting area, where they joined the wild flock.

Around the same time, Wisconsin conservationist Robert Horwich took the disguise a step further by creating a crane costume. It consists of a gray fabric sack covering the entire head and body, with the face hidden behind a screen and one arm fitted with a crane puppet. Crane mother sounds are played on a recording hidden under the costume. As amusing as it looks, this method keeps crane chicks from getting too comfortable with humans. The costume, now used around the world with some modifications, remains standard gear for crane keepers at the ICF as they lead the young birds to feed and exercise.

After the costumes, the biggest step was yet to come. Conservationists were determined to bring back the whooping crane. By 2000, there were 376 of these majestic birds—snowy white and five feet tall, named for their primal, haunting call—in the world and only one migratory flock in North America. Establishing another flock was considered crucial. But migration is something young birds learn from their parents. What happens when birds are raised in captivity with no wild parents to teach them? Could humans step in?

In Canada, artists-turned-researchers Bill Lishman and Joe Duff were experimenting with teaching captive-bred Canadian geese to migrate. In 1993, they got the first human-led flock of birds—18 Canada geese—to migrate

south, inspiring the 1996 feature film *Fly Away Home*. They found that leading birds south kicks in their internal mapping system, allowing them to fly back north on their own in the spring.

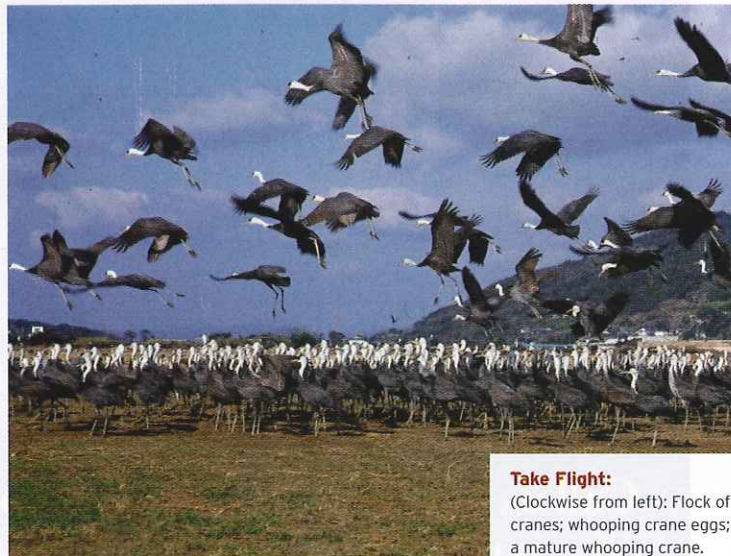
The two formed a charitable organization, Operation Migration, to use this method with endangered species. The group partnered with eight other organizations, including the ICF and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to lead cranes from the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin to the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Florida—a 1,300-mile stretch that would be the longest human-led migration in history.

They started with sandhills before building their first migratory flock of whooping cranes. About 75 have been taught the route and now make the Necedah refuge their spring and summer home. New flocks are led down each fall, with the goal of establishing a population of 125 migratory whooping cranes in Wisconsin by 2020. The foundation's role includes providing eggs of captive whooping cranes and tracking and monitoring the birds.

While leading the way, the pilots wear crane costumes, and the PA system on the ultralight plays recorded crane sounds. Seeing the aircraft leading the cranes is a moving and wondrous sight. Sharon Wilkening, postmaster of West Brooklyn, Ill., was lucky enough to see the flock being led in fall of 2000: "The sun had not yet broken the horizon and the sky had a golden glow with the birds and aircraft dark silhouettes against it," she wrote to Operation Migration.

VISITING THE CRANES

You probably won't find whooping cranes in the wild, so seeing them at the ICF is the next best thing. The exhibit is set in a wetland area with no fences, and visitors watch members of the captive flock comfortably from



Take Flight:
(Clockwise from left): Flock of cranes; whooping crane eggs; a mature whooping crane.





VISITING THE INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION

The International Crane Foundation offers an engaging learning opportunity for visitors of all ages, with a field guide and educational materials for children. It is the only place in the world housing all 15 species of cranes. The foundation is open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., April 15 to October 31. Reservations are not required for individuals and families. Guided public tours are offered daily at 10 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. Memorial Day through Labor Day, and on weekends the rest of the season. Self-guided recorded tours are also available. The grounds have five nature trails and a visitor's center with a library, an art exhibition and other educational resources. Admission is \$8.50 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$4 for children ages 5 to 11 and free of charge for children 4 and younger. Most visitors spend at least two hours there. Guided tours last an hour and a half to two hours.

E11376 Shady Lane Road
Baraboo, Wis.
608-356-9462;
savingcranes.org

ICF is easy to find. It is located just off Highway 12 about 45 miles north of Madison, about a one-hour drive.

NEARBY

The Aldo Leopold Legacy Center is an educational facility near preserved grounds that include the "shack" where Leopold did much of his thinking and where he died fighting a brush fire in 1948. Exhibits and guided tours interpret the noted conservationist's and legacy. The building itself is a unique attraction featuring modern technologies that allow it to produce as much energy as it consumes.

E13701 Levee Road
Baraboo, Wis.
aldoleopold.org;
608-355-0279

Located 10 minutes from the International Crane Foundation.

amphitheater seating. "It's the highlight of a visit here," says Joan Garland, the foundation's education outreach coordinator. "I've seen people watch them for hours—or head straight there if they only have half an hour."

Often on display will be a pair of whoopers—usually a male and female who need encouragement to breed. Somehow being alone together in the exhibit ambience is conducive to crane romance. Garland says some foundation staffers have nicknamed it "the honeymoon suite." If the pair mates during the season, visitors may get to see them raising their chicks.

The other 14 species of cranes may be viewed in fenced enclosures along walkways. Visitors are drawn most to the species with colorful crowns, says Garland, who often leads tours. The red-crowned crane is native to East Asia and is often depicted in Japanese art and poetry. The black crowned crane, native to Africa, has a fanning crown of stiff gold feathers and red and white cheek markings. The redheaded Indian sarus crane is the world's tallest flying bird at six feet.

Watching any kind of crane is fascinating. Cranes are territorial and the presence of humans is enough to make them defend their pens. They do so with an array of displays that include the threat walk, a slow, stiff strut with toes extended,

and the flap display, in which they vigorously flap their wings with their heads down. The unison call, in which a mated pair will raise their long necks toward each other, heads stretched high, is also fascinating to watch.

This summer brings an exciting new feature. Video cameras installed in the preserve's "Crane City," a whooping crane breeding area off-limits to the public, will give visitors viewing access as cranes rear their chicks. They are a welcome addition to cameras and mounted binoculars in other private parts of the preserve that allow visitors to view crane-suited researchers interacting with the birds. Visitors can zoom in on whatever is happening, offering unparalleled access to the private world of these endangered birds.

They also offer a reminder that real science is taking place here. This is not a zoo, but a conservation effort of the most serious kind. Visitors can leave the ICF knowing that they are not only learning a great deal about cranes, but also supporting a respected worldwide effort to save them. Not many places offer such a perfect, joyful blend of a worthy mission and educational experience. You may find yourself returning often. ■

MIDWEST AIRLINES offers daily flights to and from Madison. Details can be found at midwestairlines.com.