

Bumper Crop of Chicks at Crane Foundation

by International Crane Foundation
Baraboo, Wisconsin

This summer in Wisconsin, the corn may be late from excessive rain but chicks are sprouting early at the International Crane Foundation (ICF). This year's bumper crop of chicks got off to an early start when the endangered Wattled Cranes from Africa laid during a snow storm in February. Now there are 24 chicks at the facility, with another expected. Up to 17 of the chicks are on public display in the "chick yard," where the chicks are attended by volunteer "chick parents."

According to Assistant Curator of Birds Scott Swengel, "We have a diverse bunch, one of the most varied assortments of chicks ever." In the chick yard there are seven Whooping Cranes, five Siberian Cranes, three Sandhill Cranes, and two Wattled Cranes. The chicks range in size from

youngsters about a foot high, to the Wattled Crane named Maozeka who, at ten weeks of age, stands about three feet tall. The chicks grow up to an inch a day, because in the wild many have to migrate more than a thousand miles by the end of summer. Getting plenty of exercise is vital for proper development of their spindly legs.

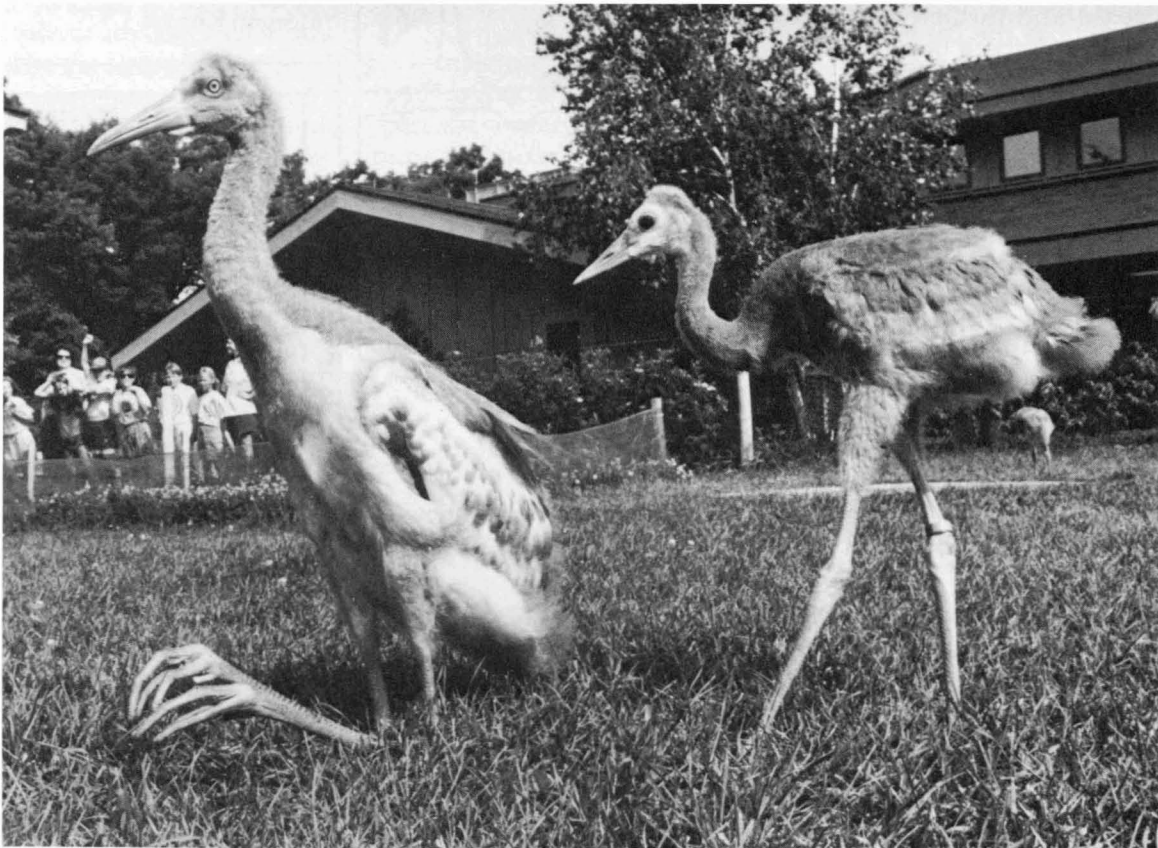
Besides monitoring the health of the chicks and feeding them, the volunteer chick parents have to keep the bullies from hurting less aggressive chicks. In the wild, many species of crane lay two eggs, but usually only one chick survives, in part because of fighting between siblings. So watching out for fights is serious business. Surprisingly, some of the smaller chicks are most aggressive, so it's comical to see a small chick chasing a

larger one. As the gangly chicks run, they extend their wings, which flop as if made of rubber.

According to ICF intern Debra Bourne, the tiny bullies can be useful when they chase the larger chicks. Since they can't catch and harm the larger chicks, all get plenty of exercise. But the ICF staff has to be careful not to put a bully in the chick yard along with smaller chicks they might pick on. If the excitement gets out of hand, the offender is placed in the "penalty box," a small pen within the chick yard, to simmer down.

Because there are so many chicks this year, the ICF staff was kept busy thinking up names. The first chick, an African species, was named after Friday Moazeka, an ICF intern from the country of Zimbabwe. Many of the chicks were named after characters

Photo by David Thompson, ICF



If you liked the movie "Jurassic Park," you'll love the chick yard at the International Crane Foundation (ICF), located five miles north of Baraboo, Wisconsin. Here, two chicks, a Siberian Crane named Mana Olana (left) and a Sandhill Crane named Ranger, seem to tower over a group of visitors, but these two chicks are actually only three and two feet tall. Some adult cranes stand as tall as a man. Because of their large size, fierce behavior, and scaly legs, cranes offer a glimpse of what some dinosaurs may have been like. Some ancient species of cranes, now extinct, were alive during the time of the dinosaurs. Fossils from Nebraska show that the Sandhill Crane has remained unchanged for seven million years — it's the most ancient species of animal known that still survives today.

from children's books by Dr. Seuss. Parents who have read Dr. Seuss to their own brood will recognize the names of "Lorax," "Horton," "Sneech," "Grinch," "Yertle," and others.

According to Scott Swengel, 1993 is a bumper year because, "We had the highest fertility of eggs ever, more than 90%. We also had our highest hatching rate ever, again over 90%. And all 24 of the chicks that hatched are still alive." Here's a summary of why this year's success with chicks is important:

Whooping Crane. The most endangered crane is the Whooper, with only about 308 of the birds in existence. ICF and two other breeding centers are producing as many chicks as they can, to build the breeding flock so more chicks can be produced for future reintroduction efforts. Now ICF has nine Whooper chicks. ICF recently sent another four to Idaho for an experimental program in which wild Whooping Cranes will hopefully teach the chicks to migrate. These chicks are raised in isolation from humans, so they will think they are wild.

Siberian Crane. Only about 2,700 Siberian Cranes still exist in the wild. The two critically endangered western flocks contain only ten and five birds, respectively. On May 8, 1993, ICF sent six eggs to Russia for a reintroduction program in Siberia, where the birds breed. Three of the eggs hatched, and the chicks are being raised in the Siberian wilderness near the last wild cranes. The chicks are being raised by Russians wearing crane costumes, so the chicks will be wild and suitable for reintroduction. Some of the chicks now being raised by adult birds at ICF may be sent for a reintroduction attempt in India, where the birds winter. Only a few years ago, Siberian Cranes were thought to be extremely difficult to breed, but now all six females at ICF are producing young.

Black-necked Crane. Recently, ICF researchers counting the cranes on their wintering grounds in Tibet found at least 5,500 birds, doubling the known population. But there are few of the birds in captivity outside of China, so it's important to add to the captive population, as a safeguard against extinction in the wild. On June 19, ICF sent two Black-necked eggs to the Bronx Zoo, where both have

already hatched, and we expect to send two more eggs on July 3. ICF's first Black-necked chick, named Trung Trung, is now three years old and is on public display at ICF. This year, she laid her first egg.

Wattled Crane. There are only about 10,000 left in the wild, with populations declining. When the first Wattled egg hatched on April 21, ICF could finally claim that it had bred all 15 species of crane. This was an important milestone, especially because ICF is organizing the African Crane and Wetlands Conservation Workshop this August in Botswana. The conference may stimulate reintroduction efforts in South Africa.

The International Crane Foundation is located five miles north of Baraboo, Wisconsin, just off Highway 12 on Shady Lane Road. Hours are from 9 to 5 daily until October 31, with guided tours daily at 10, 1 and 3. When weather is good, the chicks are usually on display in the chick yard by 9:00 a.m., and return to their individual pens by about 4:00 p.m.

For more information, contact David Thompson at (608) 356-9462. ●



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