



Specialized Medical Care & Husbandry for a Migratory Whooping Crane at Disney's Animal Kingdom®

Beth Schille – Hospital Keeper



Operation Migration

The whooping crane (*Grus americana*) is a North American species that is critically endangered. As part of the recovery program for whooping cranes, Operation Migration teaches juvenile birds the species' historic migratory route from Wisconsin to Florida by having the birds follow costumed pilots in ultra light planes.

More recently, a second recovery technique was added to the program called the Direct Autumn Release (DAR) where the chicks are released into small, adult flocks in order



for them to learn the migration route from the experienced birds.

Injured Whooping Crane

On January 7th, 2013 a juvenile female whooping crane that was part of the 2012 DAR group was reported to have an injury to her right leg.



She was observed over the next few weeks and her condition appeared to be worsening. On January 25th, she was spotted in a local neighborhood in

Brevard County, FL - she was lethargic and having difficulty standing. The decision was made to capture the bird for assessment. On January 26th, she was transported to Disney's Animal Kingdom and received a complete diagnostic exam. The veterinarians determined that it was necessary to amputate her right middle toe (digit 2).

Abstract

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) is a group of organizations dedicated to restoring populations of migratory whooping cranes in the Eastern United States. Partner organizations include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the International Crane Foundation; Operation Migration; other public and private groups.

Disney's Department of Animal Health (DAH) has assisted the WCEP by performing post-migration health exams on juvenile whooping cranes, in the field, each year since 2007. If necessary, we will also provide emergency medical care for whooping cranes at Disney's Animal Kingdom (DAK) veterinary hospital.

In January 2013, a juvenile female whooping crane was captured in South Florida and brought to the DAK hospital for evaluation and assessment of a toe injury. Due to the extent of the injury, it was necessary to amputate the right middle toe (digit 2). Following surgery, the crane was hospitalized for medical treatment for 14 days. In an effort to keep the bird from acclimating to humans, DAH hospital staff followed isolation protocols established by the WCEP: keepers wore crane costumes to cover themselves while providing daily care; specially designed hoods were used to cover the bird's eyes whenever she was handled; a crane puppet was used to encourage foraging; staff refrained from all conversation in the presence of the bird. Following these protocols while caring for the crane were essential for her successful reintroduction back into the wild.

Medical Treatment



During the 14 day recovery period, the hospital staff followed the isolation protocols established by The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership.



Keepers wore whooping crane costumes at all times. An adult crane puppet was used to encourage the bird to eat. When it was necessary to handle the bird for bandage changes, treatments and re-check exams, a specially designed

hood was used to cover her eyes so that she did not see the keepers, veterinarians or veterinary technicians. In addition, staff did not talk to one another unless the bird was under anesthesia.



Recovery & Release

Due to the efforts of all involved, the bird recovered successfully and was released into a small flock of whooping cranes in the Hiwassee State Wildlife Refuge in Tennessee.



Photo by Rick Haulk