

THE BUGLE



LEGACY OF HOPE: GEORGE ARCHIBALD TURNS 80

George Archibald in Kheechan,
India. K.S. Gopi Sundar

International Crane Foundation Co-founder and renowned ornithologist Dr. George Archibald turns 80 this year! Celebrate his conservation legacy with us as we look to a future of saving cranes—grounded in George's determined optimism. Also in this issue, travel the Whooper Highway with President & CEO Dr. Rich Beilfuss and colleagues, and learn about the surprising turnabout in the fate of South Africa's iconic Blue Crane.

FIELD NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

LESSONS FROM THE WHOOPER HIGHWAY

BY DR. RICH BEILFUSS, PRESIDENT & CEO



Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, Kansas. Liz Smith

I've driven many famous highways in the U.S., from Highway 1 down the California coast to the Route 61 Blues Highway across the Mississippi Delta. I've bounced my way along a fair bit of the intrepid Cairo to Cape Town Highway to our project sites in Africa, too.

But nothing beats the Whooper Highway!

The Whooper Highway, a name coined by fellow craniac and photographer-extraordinaire Michael Forsberg, follows the migratory path of the last naturally occurring flock of Whooping Cranes on their journey from the gulf coast of Texas to the remote wilds of Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada. It runs through the heart of North America's Central Flyway, a vital corridor for millions of migratory ducks, geese, and shorebirds—and more than a million Sandhill Cranes too!

Any road trip requires reliable maps, 24/7 gas stations, local brewpubs, and reasonably clean motels along the way. We all know what happens when those options break down—hitchhiking with a gas can, food choices you regret the next day, sleepless nights behind the wheel, or worse. Like us, Whooping Cranes need secure, dependable places to navigate, eat, drink, and roost to ensure they stay safe and maintain the energy they need for migration. That usually means highway



Photo by Mariah Lundgren

routes with plenty of shallow flooded wetlands, surrounded by agricultural fields or grasslands free of powerline and wind turbine hazards. The Whooper Highway provides all that and more along its 2500-mile path, featuring some of the most productive wetlands in North America.

This spring I drove a short but vital leg of the Whooper Highway from Nebraska through Kansas to Oklahoma, along with our new VP of North America Programs Anne Lacy and recently retired North America Program Director Liz Smith. Our goal was to connect in the field with local and national government agency staff, non-profit partners, and university researchers to learn first-hand about the opportunities and challenges at every stop along our route.

After a week on the Platte River with our colleagues at the Crane Trust, we set out to the rainwater basin of Nebraska. The meandering Platte River provides the most important stopover site for Sandhill Cranes on migration, but the adjacent rainwater basin with its numerous Waterfowl Production Areas is even more important for Whooping Cranes seeking shallow flooded wetlands to roost and feed.

Further south we visited the Kirwin National Wildlife Refuge and then travelled on to the Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge of central Kansas. These Wetlands of International Importance provide a mix of shallow and deep wetland habitat for scores of dabbling and diving ducks, geese, and pelicans in the early spring, and then a few weeks later provide

mudflats for hundreds of thousands of migratory shorebirds on the next wave of migration. It takes a range of different wetlands with diverse hydroperiods (the seasonal timing, duration, and frequency of inundation in each wetland) to collectively meet the needs of all these migratory waterbirds, in years of extreme flood or drought as well as in “normal” years.

At Cheyenne, we were impressed by the strong partnership we are joining with Ducks Unlimited, the Nature Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, doubling the effective size of this area by securing and managing thousands of acres of diverse wetlands on public and private lands. At Quivira, we focused on water rights and the challenge of balancing the needs of Whooping Cranes, waterfowl, and farmers in this drought-prone region.

Our next stop was Great Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge, a striking expanse of wetland “desert” encrusted with a thin layer of salt that provides nesting, breeding, and stopover habitat for 12 million migratory birds annually. Great Salt Plains too is increasingly drought prone, and without water, this vital link in the chain of migration can be broken. Managers are working hard to assure that there is just enough water, at just the right time, to support Whooping Cranes and

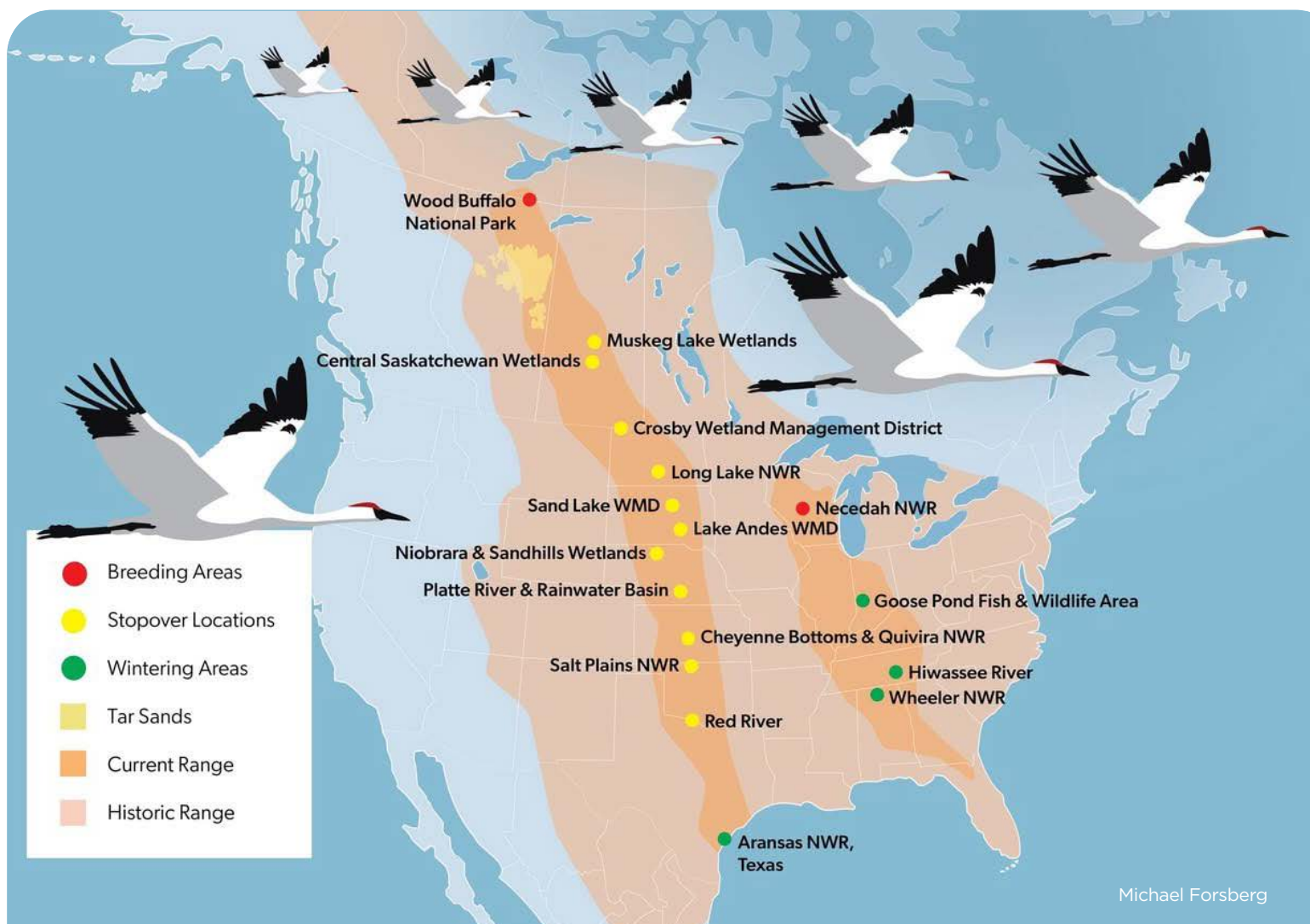
other waterbirds on their journeys north and south.

The braided Cimarron River marked our final stop on the Whooper Highway, where we learned about efforts to eradicate the infestation of thirsty salt cedars that have invaded the sandbars and riverbanks that Whooping Cranes and other migratory waterbirds need. We are achieving this impact through partnership with the Oklahoma Conservation Commission.

Throughout our journey, I was struck by how the key conservation challenges—water, wetlands, invasive species, and more—apply equally to other crane flyways across North America, as well as the great flyways of East Asia. So does the power of great partnership. Sharing lessons from trips like ours, as well as ongoing exchanges among our global staff working for safe flyways, helps us prioritize our strategies and actions for all the world’s cranes.

This trip would not have been possible without the dedication of Dr. Andy Caven, who has taken on the lead role for ICF in developing our new Central Flyway Program. We are grateful to Andy, Mike Forsberg, and all our partners who shared their time and expertise along our journey. We can’t do it alone!

Whoop! Whoop!



GEORGE ARCHIBALD'S LEGACY FOR CONSERVATION

BY CURT MEINE AND CLAIRE MIRANDE

The International Crane Foundation has always kept its eyes on the future. While we take pride in our many accomplishments, there is still much more to do. Our work has had an extraordinary impact: populations of most of the world's 15 crane species are now stable or increasing, hundreds of thousands of hectares of wetlands and grasslands have been conserved, and people around the globe have benefited from our programs and partnerships alongside their crane neighbors.

This year, as we celebrate the 80th birthday of our Co-founder, Dr. George Archibald, we have a special opportunity to reflect on how far we have come and the legacy that has helped shape our journey.

The following reflections honor George's remarkable contributions to conservation. The first comes from Curt Meine, a noted conservation biologist, environmental historian, and writer best known as the author of Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work. The second is from Claire Mirande, who retired in 2023 after a distinguished career at the International Crane Foundation, serving as Curator of Birds and later as Asia Program Manager and Grant Officer for Asia.

- Dr. Rich Beilfuss

Across its history, conservation has worn many faces. As an evolving movement, it has reflected the full range of human personalities, displaying our values and visions as well as our flaws and foibles. George Archibald has brought many gifts, not just to crane conservation, but to all who work to care for our Earth, for each other, and for our biodiverse ecosystems.

George built an international and intergenerational organization by knowing that it takes many people, with diverse skills, to make a movement. Scientists and artists, teachers and business owners, farmers and philanthropists, faith leaders and storytellers—all could bring their talents and backgrounds to the global task of saving cranes. Through his passion and infectious enthusiasm, George has invited so many to channel their own hopes and abilities and to serve the cause in their own ways.

George also understood, early and instinctively, that conservation grows best through the local communities with whom cranes share their ecosystems. This conviction was built into the organizational DNA of the International Crane Foundation, long before community-based conservation emerged as a counterweight to “top-down” conservation programs and policies.

But what really stands out about George is his relentless optimism. Those of us who have worked



with George over the years have heard his voice in our heads a thousand times, under countless circumstances: “Keep it positive!” Biodiversity conservation is not a mission for the faint of heart or faith. As ICF’s Wisconsin neighbor Aldo Leopold noted, to be a conservationist is to work with an awareness that, in so many ways, we live in “a world of wounds.” But Leopold also declared that he had “no hope for conservation born of fear.” In an area of endeavor that often involves hard realities and dark prospects, George has been fearless, always leading with heart and light, humor and purpose. – **Curt Meine**

George is truly my conservation hero. As a fledgling grad student in 1984, I spent money I did not have to come to a small meeting at the International Crane Foundation. I was finishing my master’s in ecology and animal behavior under the guidance of the Bronx Zoo and wondered where my path would lead. I sat with others, captivated by stories from this gentle and charismatic man who was building a dream through hard work, deep caring, and a hunger to learn. People flocked around him to pitch in on labor, share expertise, and recruit others who could help. I will always be grateful that he saw my passion and potential, took me under his wing, and gave me opportunities to learn and grow. Little did I know that I would spend nearly 40 years and my entire working career in diverse roles for ICF.

For the next 12 years as Curator of Birds, I learned from George’s intuitive understanding of crane behavior. We brainstormed regularly as we refined techniques to encourage reluctant cranes to breed, collaborated with other zoos to jointly manage healthy populations, and tested novel and controversial costume-rearing techniques that are commonly used today.

Much of the focus of my later work was on the Critically Endangered Siberian Cranes. George has a rare ability to open doors and be accepted in countries where the U.S. had limited relations. He went with an open heart and mind and earned the trust and respect of the local people and leaders. We travelled to Russia during the sensitive period of Perestroika as part of efforts to build a shared captive flock to support release efforts. Collaborating with the UNEP Convention on Migratory



George Archibald in Nepal in 2025. The Kathmandu Post

Species, we convened an international meeting in Iran to work with 11 countries developing a conservation action plan for the Siberian Crane leading to securing a \$10 million grant from the UNEP.

In cultivating partners, George never burned a bridge. He is not political. He never sees competitors. Instead, he saw opportunities for collaboration and combining our strengths. He is an eternal optimist and constantly curious. He is a wonderful communicator. Instead of sharing facts, he tells engaging stories that draw people in. Soon they start asking questions and want to learn more.

George has an affinity for people who have “a fire in their belly” for conservation. By recognizing and supporting these special souls, he has fostered creative and effective leaders throughout the world who are making real impacts. He inspires others and challenges them to trust in themselves and reach their full potential. In turn, each mentors others, creating a momentum carrying his dream forward and creating a legacy of hope. – Claire Mirande



George reached across politically sensitive borders in Russia, Iran, and China to open doors for the Critically Endangered Siberian Cranes. The species recovered from 3,600 to 7,000 birds with skilled advocates empowered throughout their flyway. Zhou Haixiang

CONSERVATION CAN'T PAUSE: LESSONS FROM SOUTH AFRICA'S BLUE CRANES

BY KERRY MORRISON, VICE PRESIDENT – AFRICA PROGRAMS

Blue Cranes, South Africa's national symbol, are found almost exclusively in this country, with only a small and declining population remaining in Namibia. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Blue Cranes suffered a dramatic decline across South Africa, driven by habitat loss, poisoning, and power line collisions.

Then, through a remarkable collaborative effort bringing together conservation organizations, researchers, government, and, critically, farmers, the

trajectory changed. Initiatives led by the Endangered Wildlife Trust, Overberg Crane Group and KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation halted the decline. Populations stabilized and then began to increase. Around 15 years ago, Blue Cranes appeared to be one of conservation's quiet success stories.

At the same time, other species across Africa were facing far more immediate threats. Grey Crowned Cranes were declining rapidly across East Africa. Black Crowned Cranes faced pressures from trade and habitat loss. Wattled Cranes depended on fragile floodplain ecosystems under increasing strain. ICF prioritized where the need felt greatest. Blue Cranes, it seemed, could wait. And so their quiet success story almost unraveled.

Fortunately, even as our programmatic focus shifted, we continued investing in monitoring and understanding the species. Annual surveys in KwaZulu-Natal showed that Blue Crane numbers were recovering in the grasslands, reflecting the benefits of sustained conservation action. We also supported research to assess the broader status of Blue Cranes and confirm that populations remained secure.

Instead, the findings revealed a troubling reality. Over the past 15 years, the Blue Crane population in the Western Cape has declined by approximately 40 percent. Similar declines are suspected in the Karoo, although recent data from that region remain limited. We now estimate that fewer than 30,000 adult Blue



Bradley Gibbons/International Crane Foundation/Endangered Wildlife Trust

Cranes remain in South Africa. In Namibia, the small and isolated population continues to shrink; partners there counted only eight individuals in 2025.

A deeper analysis of the data uncovered additional warning signs. Breeding productivity had fallen, collisions with power lines had increased, and poisoning incidents were becoming more common. A population we once believed was stable was, in reality, beginning to erode.

This is where one of the most important principles of our work comes into focus. Conservation must be grounded in science and continuously informed by evidence. As an organization, the International Crane Foundation's approach is driven by applied research and adaptive management. That is, we learn, adjust, and respond as conditions change. Without our adaptive management focus, the alarming drop in the Blue Crane population may have gone unnoticed until much later.

Blue Cranes are now once more a focal species in our Africa Program strategy, and we are renewing our efforts with urgency and intent. We've learned that the landscapes in which Blue Cranes live are dynamic, complex systems shaped by agriculture, markets, climate, and socioeconomics. To be effective, conservation must work within these systems. Blue Cranes are now at the center of a renewed effort to position them as ambassadors for integrated conservation-agriculture landscapes. This reflects a broader approach that defines our work across Africa: using cranes as flagship species to drive landscape-scale solutions that benefit ecosystems and people alike.

At the heart of this effort is partnership. Our work in South Africa is implemented through a long-standing collaboration with the Endangered Wildlife Trust, alongside farmers, government, researchers, and local communities. As we have learned time



and again, farmers are essential conservation partners. The future of Blue Cranes depends on their participation, their deep knowledge of the land, and their commitment to managing the land in ways that sustain both livelihoods and biodiversity.

The most important lesson from Blue Cranes might be that conservation doesn't end when a species recovers. To secure cranes for the future, we have to think in decades, not years. We need to anticipate change, monitor continuously, and be willing to adapt our strategies as conditions evolve. This is what it means to save cranes and to keep saving cranes. It's also the long-term commitment at the core of our work: staying with landscapes, species, and communities until outcomes are sustained.



CRANE MAMA WINS LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

For a species as rare as the Whooping Crane, we bolster the population by breeding chicks at our site in Baraboo and releasing them into the wild. Chicks raised in human care may be reared by adult Whooping Crane pairs, while others may need to be reared by our staff. This presents a challenge, as crane chicks imprint on the first large moving object they see. Chicks who see their human carers might never learn to think and act like cranes. International Crane Foundation Senior Aviculturist/Chick Rearing Supervisor Marianne Wellington is the driving force behind the success of the isolation costume-rearing techniques that revolutionized Whooping Crane reintroduction efforts. The Association of Zoos & Aquariums Avian Scientific Advisory Group awarded Marianne the Lifetime Contribution to Captive Avian Husbandry Award in recognition of her work over almost 40 years at the International Crane Foundation, solving the problem of raising crane chicks in human care.

The idea of costume-rearing is to disguise the human caregiver as an adult crane so that the chicks imprint on their own kind. Marianne helped develop the protocol we use now, where crane keepers interact with chicks while wearing a full-body white suit with a detailed crane puppet head on one arm. Marianne is a genuine crane foster mother, using the puppet to teach the chicks how to forage for food and how to recognize and respond to predators. Marianne and the chick-rearing team even encourage the birds to fly by mimicking pre-flight running and flapping. Under Marianne's leadership, we've reared almost 400 Whooping Crane chicks at ICF—an extraordinary contribution to the recovery of this endangered species.

"Ultimately, our aim is to help create a self-sustaining population where all the youngsters will be reared by real cranes," Marianne says, "so we can get rid of the costumes. Although I would miss my interaction with the chicks, what an amazing outcome that would be."



Costume rearing. Hannah Petrilli/International Crane Foundation



Marianne Wellington. Anne Readel/The Guardian



HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ARE AT THE CORE

To me, conservation is not just about birds or the environment, it's about people. International Crane Foundation Co-founder George Archibald's impressive career in conservation has shown me this beautifully. While he has an incredible scientific record, including breakthroughs in crane breeding techniques that allowed many rare crane species to reproduce in captivity for the first time, **what stands out is the web of personal relationships that George built through his passion to save cranes.** Here's how our staff member Khadija Dalacha explains George's impact on her work today with farmers in Kenya, where we're fighting to help Grey Crowned Cranes survive:

"George's legacy gives our work its human heartbeat. On our farmer-led planning walks in Trans Nzoia, the farmers share stories of where the cranes used to dance. As they speak, a technical restoration plan becomes a shared promise to bring the music back to the wetlands. We see every day that when you solve a human problem, you save a wild place."

Hou Bo, Program Coordinator on our China team, says, "Conservation work may appear to be about cranes, wetlands, laws, and regulations, but at its core, it's about communication, trust, and cooperation among

people. In our environmental education programs, the goal is not directly to protect a specific crane or a particular wetland. Instead, it is to help more people understand cranes and fall in love with them. Only when we get the human relationships right can conservation truly succeed. **Human relationships are at the core** of our conservation work."

Let's keep inspiring people to care about cranes.

If cranes have touched your heart, if wild places are dear to you, if you share George's hope for a better future for cranes, people, and our natural heritage, please make a gift to support the International Crane Foundation today.

In gratitude,



Kari Stauffer
Kari Stauffer

Vice President - Development
International Crane Foundation

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MEMBER SPOTLIGHTS



Eileen and Rick Lankow
Hortonville, WI
Members 50+ Years

50-plus years ago when my now-husband and I were dating, we used to go "boonie-stomping" in the marshes of east-central Wisconsin. One day we found a nice picnic spot in a grove of pine trees. While we sat enjoying our

bag lunches, a Sandhill Crane somewhere in the trees behind us let out a very loud alert call and scared the bejeesus out of us! Moments later, after we collected ourselves, we found their ginormous footprints not 30 feet away. It made quite an impression on us, and we have loved the cranes and their distinctive, beautiful music ever since.

We've been ICF members almost since its inception and are grateful for the work this organization does. Because of the International Crane Foundation, people can keep hearing and loving crane music for ages to come!



If you're a Wisconsin driver, a Cranes of Wisconsin license plate is one of the most visible ways to support the International Crane Foundation's work. Wherever the road takes you, your license plate helps raise awareness for North America's cranes and contributes funding to our vital conservation efforts. Every mile helps showcase these iconic birds and supports our efforts to protect and save them for future generations.

The International Crane Foundation receives a \$25 donation each time you register a new Cranes of Wisconsin license plate and every time you renew it. These contributions directly support conservation efforts for Wisconsin's Sandhill and Whooping



Sharon Mertens
Greendale, Wisconsin
Member for 5 years
Crane Legacy Society

Sometime in the late 1980s, I was fishing with my husband at Granger Lake near Austin, Texas, where I lived at the time. Fishing was slow, and I decided to take a walk through the grassy part of the county park adjacent to

the lake. As I came over a rise, I saw two HUGE white birds with red "caps" flapping their wings and dancing around. To me, all of 5'4", they seemed bigger than me, and I was both a little scared and enchanted. At the time, I didn't know what a Whooping Crane was, nor how rare they were. I stood and watched them, maybe 50 yards in front of me, for a few minutes before they took off, probably for Aransas Pass or parts near there. When I described the scene to my husband, he told me I'd seen a pair of rare Whooping Cranes, and we educated ourselves even more when we got home. After that, we always followed the story of the Texas population, as well as the crane migrations starting from Necedah in Wisconsin. Those cranes have been in my heart ever since. Becoming a member of the International Crane Foundation has given me many more opportunities to learn and add to my crane stories.

YOUR CAR CAN SHOW YOUR LOVE OF CRANES

Cranes—species that rely on sustained, on-the-ground work year after year. By choosing a Cranes of Wisconsin plate, you help fund the research, habitat protections, and community partnerships essential to ensuring a future for these remarkable birds.

Help us reach our goal of 5,000 crane plates on the road! Learn more and find a link to order from the Wisconsin DMV at savingcranes.org/cranelicenseplate.

This project was made possible by the generosity of the Patti and Jack McKeithan Northwoods Fund.

License plate artwork by Jay Jocham.

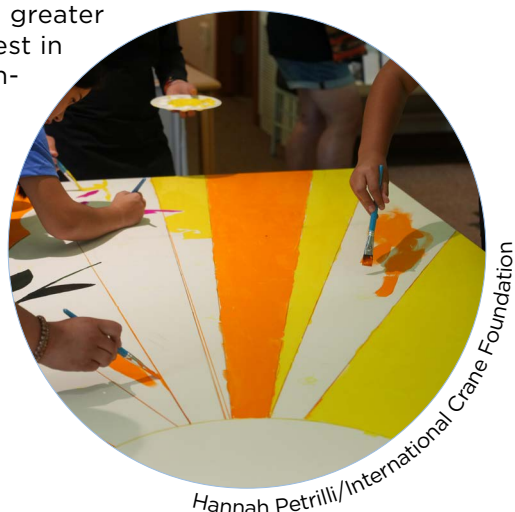


Campers at work on their mural in summer 2025. Hannah Petrilli/International Crane Foundation

FLOCK TOGETHER SUMMER CAMP

BY JENNIFER DRAYNA,
CONSERVATION EDUCATION DIRECTOR

Last July, the International Crane Foundation hosted 15 indigenous middle schoolers from the Ho-Chunk and Lac Courte Oreilles tribes for our first summer camp. Over the course of four days, campers got to learn about conservation careers, enjoy the outdoors, and create an art piece for display at the Crane Discovery Center. A highlight for many campers were the evening conversations while trying different crafts such as beading or porcupine quillwork. This program gave our staff the opportunity to strengthen our relationships with community partners such as Little Eagle Arts Foundation and Upham Woods to provide a varied and meaningful experience for all involved. At the end of the week, campers reported having a greater appreciation for nature and interest in learning more about conservation-related careers. The camp is running this summer and next year, too, thanks to a grant from the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife Network.



Hannah Petrilli/International Crane Foundation

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The Bugle is the triannual newsletter of the International Crane Foundation. The organization was founded in 1973 by Ronald Sauey, Ph.D. (1948 - 1987) and George Archibald, Ph.D.

Editor: Angela Woodward

Bugle comments or questions? Please email Bugle@savingcranes.org or send mail to P.O. Box 447, Baraboo, WI 53913. To become a sponsor of this publication, please contact the editor. Memberships make our work possible. Please join or give a gift membership. Email membership@savingcranes.org if you have questions about your membership.

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ROYALTY OF THE WILD

Check out new exclusive artwork created for the International Crane Foundation by Cindy Lindgren. This artwork depicts the majestic nature of Grey Crowned Cranes as they gracefully perch to watch over their domain. The print measures 8"x10" and is also available on cards, dishcloths, drinkware, magnets, and more.



Your purchase directly supports the work of the International Crane Foundation to save cranes and the places where cranes dance.

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COME OUT FOR MEMBER APPRECIATION DAY SEPT. 26

Mark your calendar for our annual **Member Appreciation Day on Saturday, Sept. 26, from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m.** at our Crane Discovery Center in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Learn how your membership saves cranes and their habitats through talks and presentations by our talented staff. Experience the cranes of the world up close and take a relaxing walk on our beautifully restored prairie. And join us as we honor International Crane Foundation Co-founder Dr. George Archibald's 80th birthday as part of the day's festivities.

Visit savingcranes.org/memberday to learn more. Questions? Contact Membership Manager Jennifer Fiene at **608-356-9462** ext. 151 or email us at membership@savingcranes.org.

Thanks to our 2026 season sponsors: Patti Manigault and Viking Village Foods.



Member Appreciation Day
Hannah Petrilli/International Crane Foundation

