

TEACHING RUSSIAN CRANES HOW TO FLY by Matthew C. Perry

On September 6, 2012, the Washington Post and several national TV stations reported that the flamboyant Russian President, Vladimir Putin, had put on a white costume with a glove that resembled a bird's bill, and flew a motorized hang-glider to lead a group of captive-raised Siberian cranes on their winter migration to Central Asia. To most of the world observers this was just another one of Putin's stunts to draw attention to himself. However, to folks familiar with the Patuxent long-term program assisting whooping cranes to migrate, it had a much deeper significance. The motorized hang-gliding technique with an ultra-light plane has been commonly used for many years by Patuxent staff, in collaboration with Operation Migration, to assist parentless captive-reared cranes in migration.

Patuxent helped establish the Russian migration program in 1991 when they donated a male sandhill crane and shipped it to Russia to become part of their breeding program. The Russians had requested a crane from Patuxent and our Director, Mr. Hal O'Connor, was willing to comply due to his previous role of international exchanges with Russian and US scientists. The transport by plane occurred due to the generosity of KLM Airlines at Baltimore Washington International Airport (BWI). Patuxent's good friend Walter Townshend, President and CEO of the Baltimore Washington Chamber of Commerce, made the initial contact with KLM at BWI requesting free transport. KLM agreed and were extremely gracious and accommodating to all aspects of the trip, especially the welfare of the bird.

After the crane was inspected by Patuxent veterinarian, Dr. Glenn Olsen, it was transported to BWI Airport. KLM's main location is Amsterdam, Netherlands. Most international flights go through this city so KLM established a large Veterinary Hospital there to accommodate any animals being shipped to or through Europe. Our sandhill crane was immediately taken to the hospital on arrival and received an inspection by their veterinarian. After a 2-3 hour layover in Amsterdam the crane was back on the plane for the trip to Russia.



Crate with crane ready for long flight to Russia



Tight quarters, but I am okay!!!!

Upon arrival in Russia, Mr. O'Connor recalls a quick overnight rest for him and the crane and then first thing in the morning escorting the crane to a Refuge about 300 miles south of Moscow. The Russians provided escorts and interpreters on the bus. It was an all day trip on roads that were well below our interstate quality roads. Mr. O'Connor recalls that the refuge manager had a bathroom in his small house, but the guest house had an outhouse. The walk at night in 2-feet of snow made Hal happy that the stay at the refuge was for only one night.



Animal Hotel maintained by KLM in Amsterdam



Sandhill crane loaded on bus for long trip to refuge

The Russians followed the protocols Patuxent had established with our captive colony of cranes. They took the eggs from the Siberian cranes and placed them under foster sandhill crane parents. The Siberian cranes then laid additional eggs (double clutching), thereby increasing the production of the valuable eggs.



Indoor facility of crane pen complex in Russia



Mr. Hal O'Connor in middle with Russian escorts

The propagation program has been successful so the second phase of “teaching” the cranes to migrate has begun. The current endangered Siberian cranes were raised by the Russian World Wildlife Fund. Putin had been learning to fly the glider for several months, and hoped to be able to start the cranes on their journey before his attendance was required at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference later in the week. Unfortunately, on October 11, 2012, we learned that the assisted migration had failed

and the cranes were returned to their propagation site. Patuxent's program also has had a few setbacks, but, hopefully, with more experience and effort the Russian migration program with captive reared Siberian cranes will be successful. Staff at Patuxent can be proud that they assisted directly with the propagation program of an endangered species in Russia by providing techniques to raise Siberian cranes in captivity and to teach them the most important first migration.



Patuxent's sandhill crane in Russia after long trip by air and bus



Siberian cranes in covered pens similar to pens at Patuxent's captive crane colony