

# First wild whooping crane chicks hatch in Midwest in 100 years

*Special to the Chronicle*

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP) is celebrating a milestone in its efforts to reintroduce a wild whooping crane flock in eastern North America. On June 22, two whooping crane chicks hatched at the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. This historic event marks the first time in more than 100 years that a whooping crane has hatched in the wild in the Midwest.

The two chicks are offspring of whooping crane pair 11-02 (a male) and 17-02 (a female) from the ultra-light-led crane Class of 2002. The pair nested earlier this spring at the refuge, but their egg(s) were lost — likely due to predators. They re-nested and began incubating on May 23.

"This is a long-awaited moment," said Signe Holtz, director of the

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Bureau of Endangered Resources. "The success of this effort sets a goal for endangered species recovery efforts everywhere. The partnership of public, private and government organizations that has made this possible shows what can be done when we all pull together with a common goal in sight. These chicks have a long and dangerous road ahead of them, but with luck we'll see them wing south with their parents this fall."

In May, another "first" occurred when two whooping crane chicks from a nest in the wild hatched in captivity. WCEP biologists removed the two eggs from a nest at the Necedah NWR after their parents wandered away from the newly laid eggs for a long period of time. The chicks were hatched at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland. They will join the

crane Class of 2006, which will learn the migration route between Necedah NWR and Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Citrus County this fall by following Operation Migration's ultra-light aircraft.

Biologists from the International Crane Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have also begun releasing additional chicks into the company of older birds in the fall at Necedah NWR. These chicks will learn the migration route from adult whooping cranes or sandhill cranes.

WCEP asks anyone who encounters whooping cranes in the wild to give them the respect and distance they need to remain wild. Do not approach birds on foot within 600 feet and try to remain in your vehicle. Do not approach cranes in a vehicle within 600 feet or, if on a public road, within 300 feet. Also, remain concealed and

do not speak loudly enough that the birds can hear you. Finally, do not trespass on private property in an attempt to view whooping cranes.

In 2001, Operation Migration's pilots first led whooping crane chicks conditioned to follow their ultra-light surrogates south from Necedah NWR to Chassahowitzka NWR. Each subsequent year, WCEP biologists and pilots have conditioned and guided additional groups of juvenile cranes to Chassahowitzka NWR.

Whooping cranes were on the verge of extinction in the 1940s. Today, only about 300 birds exist in the wild. Aside from the 63 Wisconsin-Florida birds, the only other migrating population of whooping cranes nests at the Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada and winters at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast. A non-migrat-

ing flock of about 60 birds lives year-round in Florida's Kissimmee region.

Whooping cranes, named for their loud and penetrating unison calls, live and breed in wetlands, where they feed on crabs, clams, frogs and aquatic plants. They are distinctive animals, standing five feet tall, with white bodies, black wing tips and red crowns on their heads.

Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership founding members are the International Crane Foundation, Operation Migration Inc., Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and National Wildlife Health Center, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, and the International Whooping Crane Recovery Team.

# Special water tax district approved

*Commission's ruling  
provokes residents' anger*

**TERRY WITT**  
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*Chronicle*

Citrus County commissioners on Tuesday approved financing for a central water system in Chassahowitzka that residents said could drive some people from their homes.

The board unanimously voted to impose a special property tax assessment of \$6,361.88 to pay for a central water system that would replace private residential wells.

The assessment will affect 615 property owners.

Next year, the board plans to levy a second special assessment in Chassahowitzka to partially fund construction of a central sewer line to replace hundreds of residential septic tanks. Grants will pay for most of the sewer.

Commissioners said the idea behind the water project is to provide safe drinking water, but residents were angered by the size of the assessment and the fact that the sewer assessment has not been calculated and could substantially add to their costs.

Many residents warned that people on fixed incomes in Chassahowitzka can't afford the assessment and could lose their homes or be forced to sell out and leave the community.

The assessment will be added to the tax roll in November. If not paid in full, the county will auction tax liens on properties in default.

Resident Jim Bennett, who initially supported the project as a way to protect the sensitive environment in Chassahowitzka, apologized for convincing a handful of residents the project was a good idea.

"I was misled, lied to and played like a cheap fiddle," Bennett said.

The county will buy the water for

6-25-2006

## TAX

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Chassahowitzka from the Florida Governmental Utility Authority. FGUA will build a line from its water system in Sugarmill Woods to Chassahowitzka. The county has a bulk water agreement with the utility.

But Chassahowitzka property owner Michael Hartley questioned why Chassahowitzka residents would have to pay for construction of 7,500-foot of water line to Sugarmill Woods when no property owners living along the line are being assessed for the pipe.

County staff members explained that the pipe would belong to FGUA. The county has no right to place assessments on residents living along FGUA's line.

However, Commission Chairman Gary Bartell said if the county purchases FGUA, the county would own the line.

Hartley said he wants the county to require residents living along the water line to pay the same assessment as Chassahowitzka residents. He said adding customers to the line would lower the cost for those residents of the coastal community.

Bartell at one point called a recess when he was unable to talk above the angry residents in the audience.

Bartell said his motives in supporting the water project had nothing to do with encouraging development in Chassahowitzka. He said Chassahowitzka lies in a coastal high hazard zone that does not allow high-density development.

He said his motive was to protect the sensitive ecology.

"My objective is to take care of the environment in this county and leave it as good as we found it," Bartell said.

At Bartell's suggestion, the board agreed to consid-

er amendments to the special assessment district that might lower costs. They were:

- Extend financing of the assessment from 10 years to 20 years to spread out the impact. That would lower monthly payments, but result in more interest being paid. Residents also can pay as a lump sum with no financing.

- If a landowner wants water and sewer, but is not in the special assessment district, he or she could pay their portion of the cost of the water line and become part of the district. The money would be used to lower the assessment of those residents already in the district.

- Staff is attempting to secure a state loan with a 3 percent interest rate. The estimated rate for the current loan is currently 6 percent.

The county is adding an additional 2 percent to the

loan annually as a commission for the property appraiser, 2 percent for the tax collector and 2 percent for the county's assessment coordinator.

- However, Bartell wants to eliminate the 2 percent charge for the assessment coordinator, a

position the county commission funds. However, Commissioner Vicki Phillips said if the fee is dropped for this assessment district in Chassahowitzka, it should be dropped for all assessment districts.

Commissioners also were questioned about the connection fee and other costs not included in the special assessments residents would pay for water and sewer.

Engineering Director Al McLaurin said the connection fee for water and sewer combined would be \$4,300.

County officials also said residents would be expected to pay for disconnecting their private wells, as well as pumping out and collapsing their septic tanks. They also would pay the cost of installing a water line from their home to the main water line along the street.

Many residents were flabbergasted by the costs. The hearing nearly degenerated into a shouting

match when Midge Tindale questioned why the county was installing a water line. She said she had been under the impression it was a sewer project.

In the midst of the loud conversation that ensued, Bartell gaveled the hearing into a recess, but he was heckled as he left the room.

"Run and hide," several men called out.

When he returned, Bartell apologized, but asked residents to be civil.

Commissioner Jim Fowler added a wrinkle to the conversation when he resurrected one of his old proposals. Fowler said the commission should cap the size of special assessment to avoid this type of situation.

He warned that future special property assessments in Old Homosassa could be even higher than those in Chassahowitzka if the county extends central water and sewer to remote areas of that community.

Fowler said some members of the county commission are afraid if Chassahowitzka residents don't bear the full cost of the project through special assessments, some of the expense would have to be borne by other residents in the county, and they don't want that to happen.

But Fowler said everyone in the county benefits from good water quality on the coast, and an argument can be made that everyone should bear some of the cost. He added that Chassahowitzka residents are not entirely responsible for the pollution that led to county to propose a central water and sewer system for the county.

One University of South Florida study identified septic tanks as the main source of coliform bacteria pollution in the Chassahowitzka River.

The county commission, up to this point, has agreed that it won't use property taxes to fund water projects anywhere in the county. Commissioners have agreed instead to use special property assessments, placing the financial burden on those who directly benefit.

But the board is planning to create a \$2 million water quality fund to be used as matching funds for state grants. Nearly \$6 million of the Chassahowitzka sewer will be funded with grants, but the county was able to secure only a \$600,000 grant for the water portion of the project.

“ I was misled, lied to and played like a cheap fiddle. ”

Jim Bennett  
Chassahowitzka resident.

6-12-06

# For trainers, large flock delights

■ Operation Migration staffers are excited — and kept busy — by this year's bumper crop of whooping crane chicks.

By BARBARA BEHRENDT  
Times Staff Writer

CRYSTAL RIVER — A bumper crop of whooping crane chicks destined to make their maiden migration to Central Florida this year have been keeping their handlers especially busy this spring.

As of last week, 22 chicks have hatched and begun training for their ultralight-led migration at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland.

In a few weeks, the first batch of chicks will

be flown to the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin for final training for the fall migration.

Another eight to 10 hatchlings are expected to become "direct autumn release" birds — chicks that are introduced to adult cranes and are expected to learn the migration path from those older birds.

This year's training has been more hectic than usual, partly because of the large number of chicks. Also, a winter storm damaged enclosures in Patuxent, setting the breeding season back a few weeks.

That meant that eggs laid in Maryland were laid later than usual. Eggs also come to Patuxent for hatching from locations further north, usually weeks later.

But this year they all came at about the same time.

Last year there was a 46-day gap between the youngest and oldest chicks, but this year there is just a 27-day gap.

And there is much to do in the early days of a rare whooping crane's life.

"They are in so many different stages," said Chris Danilko, office manager for Operation Migration. "It's like having a set of quadruplets just born and another set in the terrible twos."

Soon after hatching, the crane chicks begin their training. The sound of the ultralight has been a part of their world since they were in the egg. But teaching them to follow the mechanical flying machine means hours and hours of drilling and piles of tasty mealworms serving as bribes.

Before they fly, the chicks are crated and

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## Cranes from Page 1

taken to the Necedah refuge for final training. The birds migrate back to the location they first see from the air.

Training also involves socializing the animals. Whooping cranes are solitary and do not stay in flocks like the more common sandhill cranes.

Some birds are more social than others, said Operation Migration pilot Joe Duff. He recalled a crane from several years ago that did not get along with one of the handlers. Duff had to step in a couple of times to separate the two.

Two of the chicks in this year's group hatched from eggs laid by birds from previous ultralight-led migrations.

Several pairs of cranes nested and laid eggs this year, but most abandoned the nests or left when predators arrived. All were lost except the two taken from the abandoned nest.

But one set of cranes nested again after losing its eggs, and Operation Migration officials are

hopeful that, for the first time, the second generation of cranes can be born in the wild and learn the migration route from their parents.

"That would be the ultimate proof in the pudding," Duff said.

He said he is very hopeful for this year's migration since eggs for the so-called Class of 2006 came from several groups and should be more genetically diverse.

That diversity is especially important for the survival of any animal as rare as whooping cranes.

In the 1940s, only 15 of the rare cranes existed.

Now there are 470 birds, including those in captivity and in three separate wild flocks. Of those, 64 wild birds are part of the Wisconsin-to-Florida migratory flock trained behind ultralights over the past five years.

For Duff, this time of year is the time to focus on fundraising.

Annually, Operation Migration spends about \$500,000 to make the migration happen. Add in the work of the other partners in the crane project, and the cost rises to about \$1.2-million.

With such a small staff, big

fundraisers aren't possible. This past year, Duff took a pay cut to help make ends meet. The organization's other two employees also donated back to Operation Migration.

Money is raised through the group's "Mile Maker" promotion, which lets people donate for a mile or a portion of a mile of the 1,250-mile migration.

Duff hopes that a corporate sponsor can be found.

In the beginning, he said, people scoffed at the idea of trying to reintroduce the rarest bird in the country by wearing crane costumes and cranking up their ultralight aircraft.

Now in its sixth year, the tiny organization has seen an 80 percent survival rate. The birds have proved they can make every milestone they need to make to recover from the brink of extinction.

"What could be more important than saving a creature that took 65-million years to evolve?" Duff said.

For more information, visit [www.operationmigration.org](http://www.operationmigration.org).

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# Public hearing to discuss Chassahowitzka sewer costs

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*Chronicle*

A public hearing today could set the stage for the county to create a water and sewer property assessment in Chassahowitzka, but the size of the assessment may not be known for several months.

Commissioners must make a decision at today's hearing to impose the assessment if they are to meet the deadline for

adding it to next year's property tax roll.

But County Engineering Director Al McLaurin said the size of the assessment can't be determined until the project is rebid and redesigned.

The county is in a financial jam with the project.

The only bid received for the project was \$11.1 million, or \$6 million over budget. To make up the difference, staff originally proposed a property assessment of \$10,366, plus a connection fee of \$3,760.

12-20-05

■ **WHAT:** Citrus County Commission meeting.

■ **WHEN:** 1 p.m. today.

■ **WHERE:** Citrus County Courthouse.

■ **WHAT:** Chassahowitzka hearing is set for 3:15 p.m.

Chassahowitzka residents objected.

Staff has come up with a new plan. They will ask commissioners today for permission to

bid the two systems separately and design the sewer with shallower pipes. After bids are received, the assessment can be calculated again, said McLaurin.

He is hopeful the new design will attract local bidders who won't have to house employees in motels or travel long distances to reach the work site. He also believes multiple bidders could result in more competition and lower bids.

In July, commissioners will have a final hearing about the

assessment. The final project costs for the sewer will be known by then. Bids for the water system will be advertised in January.

State Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, has pledged to introduce legislation that would give the county \$2 million of additional state funding for the project. The state already has contributed more than \$4 million in grant money.

Fasano said Chassahowitzka is now his top priority for water projects in his district.

## PAY

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Chassahowitzka fire station. It didn't ease their concerns.

Most Chassahowitzka residents say they realize their water is bad and the river needs to be cleaned up. They support the county project in general, but they're angry that it's been since 1999 when a state study showed pollution in the river from septic tanks, and now the county is just getting around to doing the project.

It got worse when a nationwide search for bidders returned just one bid that was twice what county officials had estimated.

With about \$4 million in state grants and loans, the rest falls on the shoulders of Chassahowitzka residents. Officials have pegged the project assessment at \$10,336 per household.

Commissioners are sympathetic but they're not sure what to do about it.

"It's outrageously high," Commissioner Jim Fowler said. "It's unfortunate."

The commission on Tuesday is expected to decide whether to set a public hearing on the assessment. They could modify the project or kill it altogether. The commission meets at 1 p.m. in the courthouse in Inverness.

There's a timeline involved: About \$690,000 in state block grants, expected to expire in February, was given a six-month reprieve by the state Department of Community Affairs.

The grants are to fund hookups for low- and medium-income residents. If commissioners don't spend the money, or get another extension by August 2006, the state will take them back.

Bartell said he has no intention of letting that happen.

His plan would be to approve the contract and use the 18 months it will take to complete the project to pound the pavement for more grants in the hope that when citizens are taxed, the assessments will be lower.

Kind of like rolling the dice. "Yep, sure am," he said.

**“If the river dies, all of Citrus County pays the price, not just the people who live on that river.”**



**Gary Bartell**  
Citrus County commissioner.

### Lawsuit brought

Ironically, the Chassahowitzka project wasn't even on the horizon five years ago.

A group of Chassahowitzka residents and property owners calling itself the Chassahowitzka River Restoration Committee sued the state Departments of Health and Environmental Protection, claiming both agencies were ignoring a 1998 University of South Florida study that showed extensive pollution in the river and bacteria in well water.

The Health Department in particular, the lawsuit said, knowingly allowed old, decrepit septic systems to leach into the river. Citizens who swam in the river got sick, the lawsuit said. Same for those who drank well water.

The DEP was negligent to allow pollution into the Chassahowitzka River, one protected under the state's Outstanding Florida Waterway law.

Citrus County, coincidentally, was neither a litigant nor defendant in the lawsuit. It was settled when the state in 2000 allocated \$1 million for Citrus County to build a central water and sewer system.

Bartell said last week he still doesn't think the county would be eyeing Chassahowitzka if not for that lawsuit.

"Had it not been for the lawsuit, I don't think Chassahowitzka would have been on the radar screen for priorities," he said. "There are many other areas in Citrus County that probably should have been done first."

That kind of talk angers Jack Calbeck, who has called Chassahowitzka his home since 1979.

"We've had septic tanks put in here since the 1950s," he said. "Have you seen the study? They found viruses in the river. This river does not meet any standards."

Calbeck and other Chassahowitzka residents say the state should bear more responsibility. After all, they say, the river belongs to the citizens of Florida.

"These people didn't choose to pollute the river," Mike Stalker, a Chassahowitzka resident of 10 years, said. "Anyone can use the river. Basically everybody in the world benefits from us paying for this."

Petitions are being circulated in the community opposing the project as it now stands.

Bartell has strongly hinted he wants to see more support from the state of Florida, though lawmakers and Gov. Jeb Bush have made it clear they will only support water and sewer projects when local governments pitch in as well.

State Sen. Mike Fasano, whose district includes the sliver of Citrus County west of U.S. 19, said blaming state government isn't fair.

"We've done very well in getting funding for water projects in Citrus County," Fasano, R-New Port Richey, said. "We're not talking a few hundred thousand dollars, we're talking millions of dollars."

Fasano is also critical of county officials who, he said, are reluctant to help pay for the project in a community they should have known for years had water and sewer problems.

"This has been an ongoing problem and everybody and their brother knows it, and they still didn't do anything about it," he said.

### Other remedies

When county commissioners debated in September whether to spend a \$3.3 million surplus or lower the tax rate, Commissioners Fowler and Dennis Damato suggested taking \$1 million of that as leverage for receiving Chassahowitzka grants. Other commissioners, including Bartell, disagreed and the board voted 3-2 to return all \$3.3 million to taxpayers.

Calbeck questioned Bartell about that at the town hall meeting. Bartell said a year ago he wanted to use general fund money to offset assessments on water and sewer projects, but other commissioners instead created a policy that wouldn't allow that to happen.

Their thinking is that neighborhoods, and not all county residents, should pay for their own water and sewer projects.

Fowler said last week he is reconsidering that stance in light of the Chassahowitzka situation.

"We established that policy before we got hit with a price tag of \$11 million for Chassahowitzka," he said. "It's a policy we established. We can change it."

Bartell said Friday he was surprised to learn Fowler would consider using general fund money to help get Chassahowitzka grants, though he agrees with the concept.

"My personal feeling is water quality is a county concern, not just a concern of people in those neighborhoods," he said. "If the river dies, all of Citrus County pays the price, not just the people who live on that river."

## SEEPS

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destroying the pristine Chassahowitzka River and adjoining canals.

"There are regulations here that need to be adhered to," Stalker said. "If necessary I'm going to become an expert in this and help get the job done."

During a town hall meeting on the issue two weeks ago, Stalker, 41, suggested if Chassahowitzka residents only must foot the bill for a \$10 million water and sewer system, then they alone should be allowed access to the river.

"That's just common sense," he said.

Calbeck, 61, lives in a small house built in the 1950s that sits on the river's bank. Coincidentally, he doesn't have a septic tank. Calbeck's home and a handful of others are connected to a package sewer plant at the Chassahowitzka River Lodge down the street and around the corner.

During a leisurely boat ride down the river on Thursday, where canoeists and kayakers paddled by, the pair spoke of how the quality of their river has degraded over the years.

"This water used to be absolutely crystal clear," Calbeck, a photography teacher at Lecanto High School, said.

That started to change in the early 1980s, he said, when the government used chemicals to destroy water hyacinths. Those hyacinths sunk, turning the sandy bottom to muck. Slime algae replaced the hyacinths.

"We thought that was the problem for a while," Calbeck said.

Soon, though, attention turned to septic tanks that are dotted along the river and canals. "Some of them were put in (during) the 1950s when there wasn't regulation," he said.

Drainfields leach sewage into a limerock base and then it all seeps into the river, Calbeck said.

The lawsuit that started the Chassahowitzka project, filed in 2000 by a group of property owners and residents, pointed to a Department of Health study that showed extensive pollution in well water and in the river.

Calbeck said he believes county and state officials ignored that study until they were forced to by the lawsuit. After it was settled, the county and Southwest Florida Water Management District conducted another study that found the same conclusions as the Health Department.

"I'm frustrated by the fact that we've had this known for almost four years and so far nothing has been done," Calbeck said.

He doesn't buy the county argument that the state bureaucracy delayed the startup.

Instead, Calbeck and some Chassahowitzka residents believe the county moved money set for their project to the Halls River Road sewer project. Commissioner Gary Bartell has vehemently denied that ever happened.

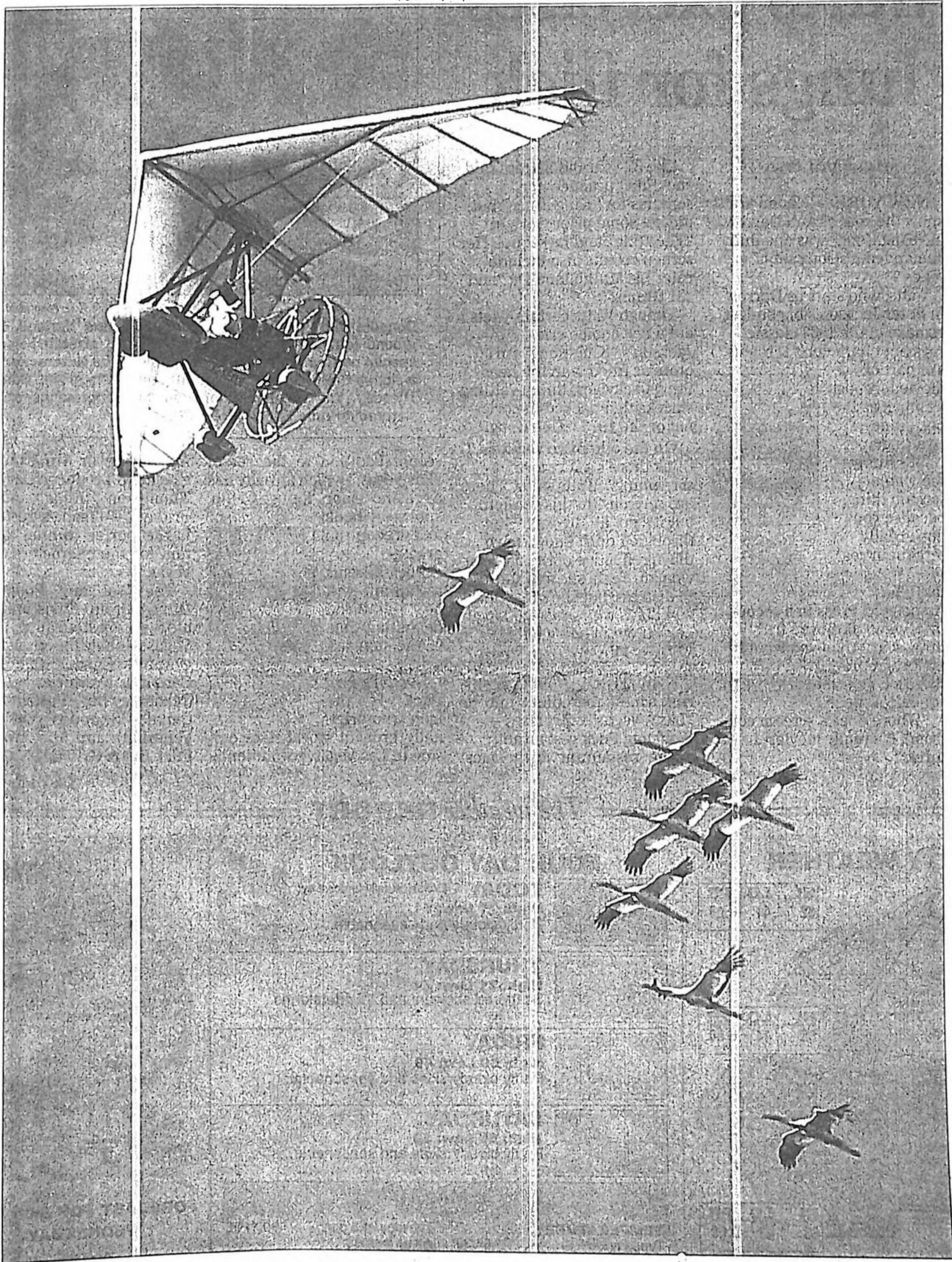
"There seems to be that undercurrent of thought," Calbeck said. "That's the rumor he's trying to dispel. The problem is nobody trusts any politicians to do anything anymore."

Stalker said he knows what will happen if the huge assessment comes in: People will sell, move away and the community will never be the same.

"You're going to see developers," he said. "You're going to see big developments coming in and all this will be gone."

# Whoopers return to Florida

12-14-05



MATTHEW BECK/Chronicle

One of three ultralight aircraft leads a flock of whopping cranes over the Dunnellon Airport on Tuesday just after 9 a.m. All three aircraft and the cranes set down a short distance from the airport for a temporary stay.

## Endangered birds awe spectators

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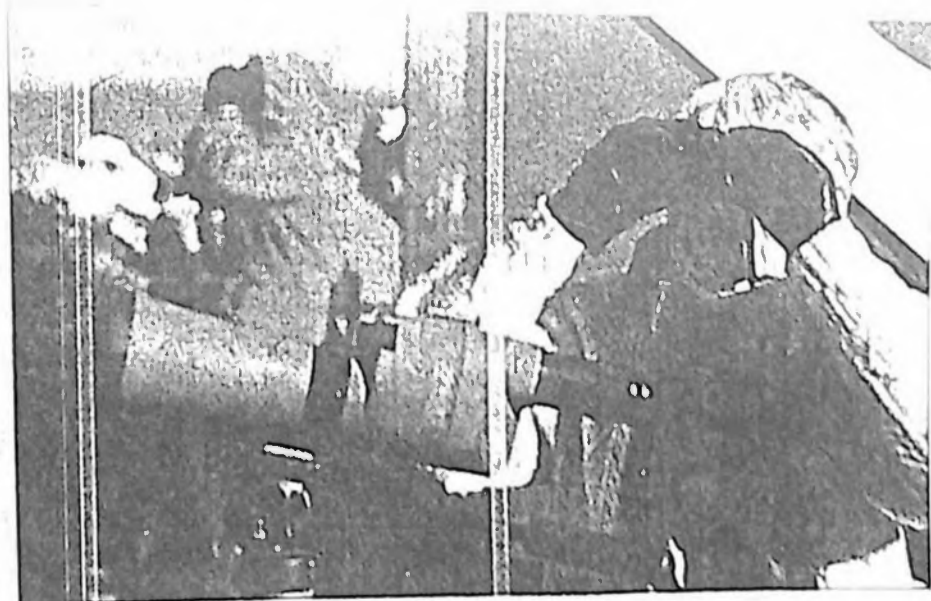
They stood, more than 700 in all, at the Dunnellon Municipal Airport with their eyes focused on the heavens.

Many had been there for nearly two hours, enduring a dry cold that, at times, cut so deep, neither thick socks nor padded coat could keep it out. All of this they wait-

just above the treetops, hoping their most-welcomed guests would arrive soon.

At about 9 a.m., the crowd was abuzz with excited voices and hundreds of camera shutter clicks. Finally, after nearly 1,200 long miles, the whooping cranes, 19 in all, were here.

"We've been tracking this for several years, but this is the first time we could be here," Francis Rowe said. "It's



Virginia McIntosh of Silver Springs looks across the horizon

# CRANES

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so very exciting.”

Rowe and her sister had traveled all the way from Jacksonville to see the “whoopers” arrive, and judging by the bright smile on her face, the trip — and the wait — was well worth it.

Led by three bright yellow ultralight planes, the young cranes made their way to their temporary pen site in Marion County. The first 10 flew west in a long line a few hundred yards from the crowd. The next seven took the same path. One whooper got too tired and landed on a distant airstrip to rest. It later was boxed up and driven to the pen site. The final crane and its lead pilot decided to give the crowd a thrill.

With its comrades safely away, this final whooper flew directly over the crowd, its long, white neck and black-tipped wings presenting a beautiful contrast to the azure ether of the sky.

These young cranes are part of a yearlong program run by Operation Migration and the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership. Whooping cranes are highly endangered birds, with only roughly 300 remaining in the wild. Five years ago, a plan was hatched to get more birds back into wild by setting up a regular, eastern migratory route. To accomplish this, wildlife officials decided on a somewhat unusual solution: train the birds to follow an ultralight plane.

When the birds are first hatched, they will trust and follow the first object they see. This behavior is known as imprinting. Program researchers, acting as surrogate parents, get the birds to focus on an object like an ultralight plane, thereby conditioning them to fly with it.

During this imprinting process, handlers dress in a non-descript costume and don't speak so that the birds will not become too accustomed to humans. The birds are fed using crane puppets, and even the pilots of the ultralights will wear costumes as an

“ It means one more species ... They were gone, and now they're back. This is a part of Florida history that's been brought back. ”

**Sarah Palmisano**

operations specialist at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife refuge, on the significance of the returning whooping cranes.

extra precaution.

During that crucial first year with the ultralight, whoopers hopefully will learn a migration pattern that they will continue to follow throughout their lives. So far, 45 birds from previous years' projects have returned to Florida, and this year's 19 were the most to arrive as a single group.

“This is a phenomenal project,” said Charles Underwood, public information officer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services. “We've had extremely high success here. We were anticipating larger losses each year, but we're well ahead of our curve on this project.”

Originally, 20 birds were supposed to make this year's flight, but one died suddenly during a stop in Indiana. The cause of death is unclear.

This year's trip lasted 61 days and extended from Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin to eventually the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife refuge. During the voyage, wildlife officials faced harsh weather

and a bit of stubbornness from the birds.

“The last 15 and 20 minutes were probably real hard because it was real rough,” ultralight pilot Brooke Pennypacker said. “The birds flew great today. We've had some really bad weather, but we've also had some good flights, too. It's a group effort and everybody did a great job this year. Each year it gets better, and each year the birds get better. We're looking forward to an even better trip next year.”

In the past, the birds were flown directly to the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife refuge, but this year they had to be rerouted as a safety precaution. Older birds have grown accustomed to returning to the refuge, and by doing so they have grown increasingly territorial. To have young and old birds competing for food is unwise, so for now wildlife offi-

cial will wait for the older birds to leave the refuge for other pastures.

For those in attendance, Tuesday morning's successful display hopefully will foretell even better things to come.

“It means that one more species doesn't go extinct,” said Sarah Palmisano, refuge operations specialist at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife refuge. “We are such a small part of a large ecosystem and a large web. When we can do something to benefit another species, to be selfless, to do everything to bring this one species back, it makes me feel like I'm making a difference.”

“Florida never had these birds except for years and years ago. They were gone and now they're back. This is a part of Florida history that's been brought back.”

For more information, visit [www.operationmigration.org](http://www.operationmigration.org).

12-14-2005

11-13-2005

# Deep water, deep pockets

## Who will pay to clean the Chassahowitzka?

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In a county where growth is on everyone's mind, Chassahowitzka is a land before time.

Tucked quietly away in Citrus County's southwest corner, in the community comprised mainly of mobile homes and modest houses, growth is not an issue to the folks in Chassahowitzka. They merely live in their own way without any bother.

No longer.

Now 245 households in the community of 542 people are faced with a staggering \$10,000-plus tax to pay for a new water and sewer system — plus another \$3,500 to connect into it.

The project is two-fold: central water, because well water in the community is, in many cases, undrinkable. Sewer, because ancient septic tanks are polluting the Chassahowitzka River, an Outstanding Florida Waterway that is a vital part of the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.

Citrus County Commissioner Gary Bartell, who is feeling intense heat from the Chassahowitzka community about the proposed assessment, said residents need to understand that the bill is for two projects: water and sewer.

He said that two weeks ago to about 150 residents jampacked into the

Please see **PAY/Page 5A**



Chassahowitzka resident Jack Calbeck is critical of county government leaders saying they have failed to do what he thinks is necessary to clean the river.

## Frustration seeps into water situation

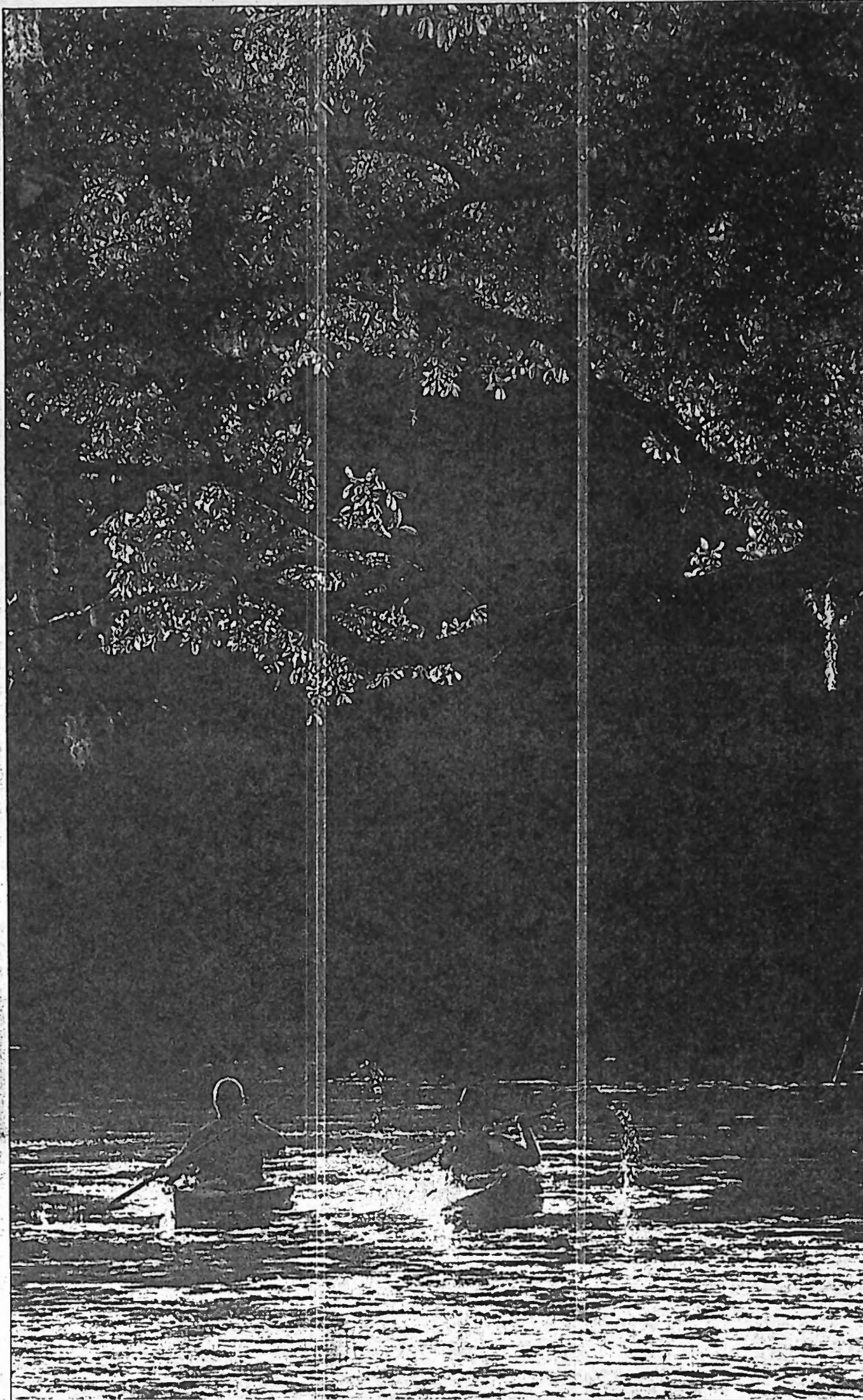
**MIKE WRIGHT**  
mwright@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

Mike Stalker is a Realtor. Soon he plans to become a water-quality expert.

Stalker, a 10-year resident of Chassahowitzka, is incensed that the Citrus County Commission plans to charge more than \$10,000 for a water and sewer project that he admits is badly needed in his community.

He and his friend, Jack Calbeck, believe state and county officials dragged their feet for years, while pollution in well water and leaking septic tanks are

Please see **SEEPS/Page 5A**



MATTHEW BECK/Chronicle

Ron Levesque, left, of Spring Hill, and Bill Pike, of Tampa, pass through a canopy of trees Wednesday afternoon while paddling along the Chassahowitzka River. The shallow tidal river south of Homosassa has long been a popular recreation area for water enthusiasts. Studies have indicated poor water quality along the river, and many believe a sewer system will help solve the problem.

### ABOUT THE CHASSAHOWITZKA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

- The refuge provides habitat for about 250 species of birds, more than 50 species of reptiles and amphibians and at least 21 species of mammals. Endangered and threatened species in the refuge include manatees, sea turtles and bald eagles.
- It provides habitat for migratory waterfowl and other birds.
- The refuge was established in 1941 and consists of 31,000 acres.
- For more, go to [www.fws.gov/chassahowitzka](http://www.fws.gov/chassahowitzka).

# 11-1-05 Senator calls on county to stop passing buck on Chassahowitzka project

**TERRY WITT**  
terrywitt@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

In recent months, Citrus County has stepped up its appeal for more state money to build a central water and sewer system to Chassahowitzka, but a state senator

on Monday said the county is passing the buck.

Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, said the water pollution in the Chassahowitzka River is not the state's fault nor is it the state's responsibility to clean it up, even though the county leaves that impression.

A University of South Flor-

ida study several years ago found septic tanks were polluting the river and possibly impacting drinking water.

Fasano said the state legislature has approved millions of dollars in grants for the Chassahowitzka project, but it's time for the county to step forward with local funding to

match its request for additional state dollars.

"I think what the county is doing is trying to pass the buck," Fasano said. "The state has already stepped up to the plate."

His comments came two days before a scheduled town hall meeting in Chassahowitzka

where County Commissioner Gary Bartell is expected give community residents a status report on the central water and sewer project.

Bartell is expected to tell residents that without additional state or federal grant

Please see **SENATOR/Page 4A**

## SENATOR

Continued from **Page 1A**

its funding, residents will be asked to shoulder a \$10,000 property assessment to help pay for the system.

However, Bartell said he anticipated Fasano's request for local funding and instructed county staff Monday morning to structure any request for state funds with a county guarantee of 25 percent matching funds.

The matching dollars would come from the assessment the county would impose on residents, Bartell said. But if the county can get more state grant funds, the assessment would be lower, he said.

"I just don't want to go through this exercise and have it vetoed because we didn't provide a match," Bartell said.

Gov. Jeb Bush has said grant requests without a local match are less likely to win approval.

The Florida Legislature has

provided \$2.75 million in grant money for the county to build the central sewer system to Chassahowitzka.

The Southwest Florida Water Management District allocated \$1 million to the sewer project. But Fasano said the district's money is also from the state.

However, district spokesman Michael Molligan said while the legislature provides 25.4 percent of the agency's budget the money for Chassahowitzka came from property tax revenues.

When told of Bartell's plan to match state dollars with a 25 percent county match, Fasano said he didn't know if that would be a large enough county contribution.

"I'll do my best to convince my fellow lawmakers and the governor to fund the request, but we've laid out a lot of money already," Fasano said.

State Sen. Nancy Argenziano, R-Dunnellon, said rumors she has no interest in the Chassahowitzka project are untrue.

Argenziano said she obtained the original grants for the Chassahowitzka project and she doesn't see a problem obtaining additional state funds for an ongoing project.

She said the county does bear some of the responsibility

and she realizes Fasano is a big proponent of matching county funds. But Argenziano said she and Fasano are working together on the Chassahowitzka project.

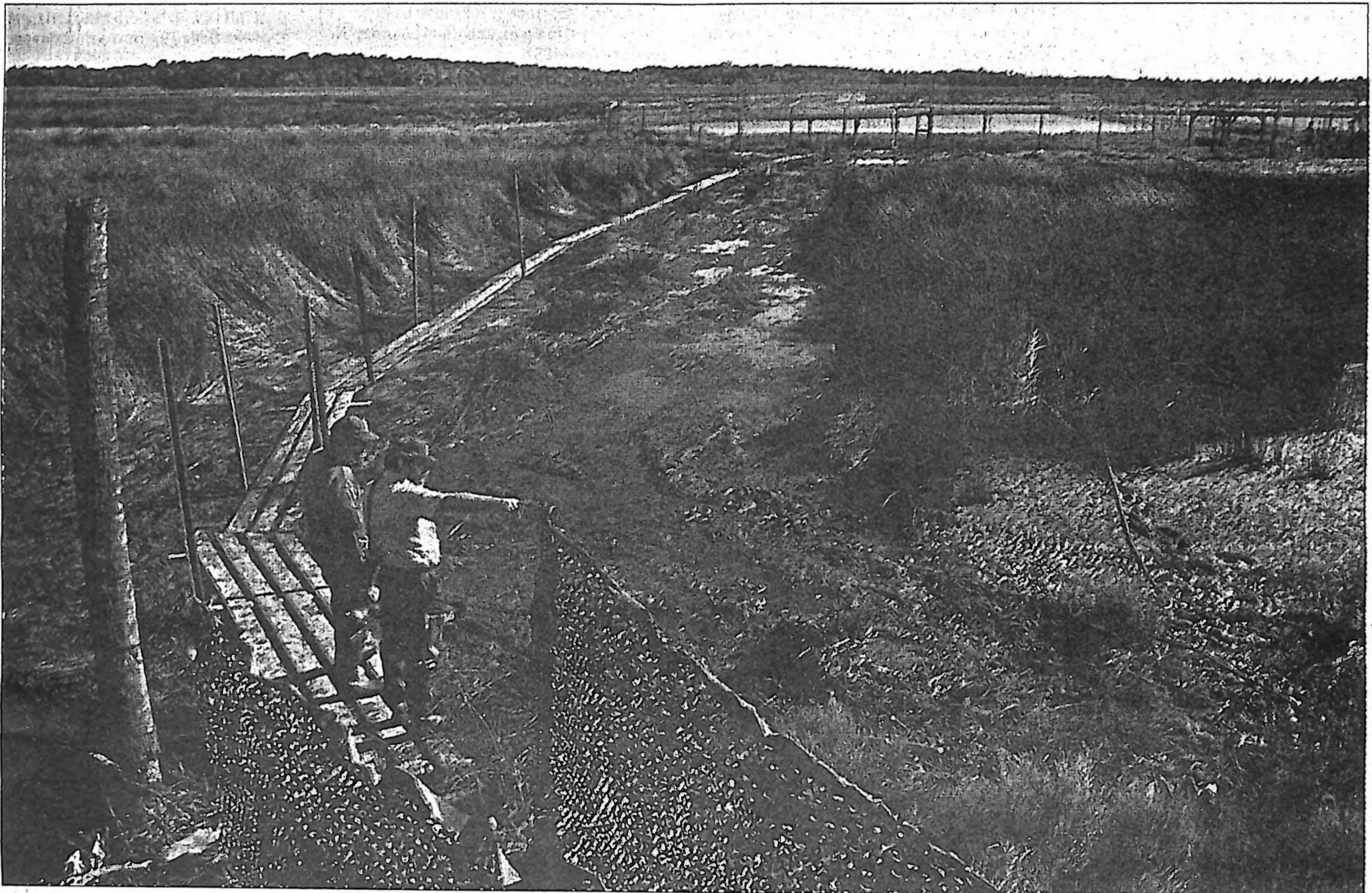
"I'm sure we'll find funding," she said.

*"We want to give them the most secure environment possible to get them through the winter."*

— REFUGE MANAGER JIM KRAUS

11-28-03

# A roost fit for celebrities



Shawn Gillette, left, and Jim Kraus prepare for the return of whooping cranes to Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge. Some birds have already made it to the penned roosting area. The remainder of the flock, mostly birds born in the spring, should arrive in the next two weeks, depending on the weather.

Times photo — TED McLAREN

11-28-2003

# ROOST

Continued from Page 1A

has been prepared in past weeks by controlled burns. It is now coated with 90 tons of crushed seashells.

The public got their only look at the flock Saturday, and they were not disappointed.

"She dragged me out of bed to see this," Jim Malloy of Crystal River said of his wife, Jan.

"I didn't want to come at 6, but I'm glad I bundled up and came out."

Flying in from the northeast into a headwind, 15 of the cranes followed the wingtip of one ultralight, while one strag-

gler followed the fourth and final ultralight into the refuge.

When they arrived at the refuge, the entourage had trouble finding the pen, which is largely covered by trees. After a few minutes, they swooped in.

Two scientists on the ground in crane suits met the flock. They used callers to keep the cranes grounded and so the ultralights could leave the scene without panicking the flock.

The cranes are trained from birth to follow the sounds of the ultralights' motors as if it were their mother.

On Tuesday, the birds will be checked out by veterinarians, who will be decked out in those now-familiar white crane togs.

The birds' freedom to fly will be increased slowly after that.

About 300 spectators turned out for the flyby, which happened minutes before 8 a.m.

Duff said that this year, once the flock made it past Indiana, the trip began to fall into place.

"It seemed to drag on forever and ever, and the wind would blow and blow," Duff said. "It can get tough out there."

The four ultralight pilots faced cold winds during the trip, and Duff said the layers of heavy clothes topped by the white crane suits "make us look like a bunch of little Michelin men."

Heather Ray, a biologist with

Operation Migration who traveled with the flock, said even though the long migration is complete, her work is about to begin again.

Ray said the project's costs — \$1.6 million — come largely from nonprofit foundations.

She said the grant-writing process for next year begins as soon as she gets back to Wisconsin.

Four of the cranes from last year's class have independently returned to the winter site at Chassahowitzka.

The fifth bird, whooping crane No. 6, was last reported in Meigs County, Tenn.

Joyce Kleen, a biologist at Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, mended gaps in the fence to the whooping crane enclosure on Nov. 21. The fence keeps predators away from the cranes and encourages the birds to stay inside, even though they are free to roam.



## Cranes from Page 1

Martins Marsh Aquatic Preserve.

Fish and Wildlife workers haul the extra help to this spot on airboats that wind among the Chassahowitzka marsh islands on ribbons of river. They strategically place wooden boards as a makeshift sidewalk to aid in the messy, muddy trek through the marsh and prepare the large fenced area where the cranes roost.

Once the cranes arrive, they are free roaming, but Fish and Wildlife officials try to make the fenced-in marsh at Chassahowitzka an ideal roosting spot, giving the cranes no reason to want to bed down anywhere else.

"We want to give them the most secure environment possible," refuge manager Jim Kraus said, "to get them through the winter."

The first year of the program, two of the seven cranes that made the inaugural flight didn't survive the winter. They were killed by bobcats.

Fish and wildlife officials had tried to make the crane enclosure as safe as possible. Since 2001, the first year of the project, electric fencing has surrounded the pen, and the pen fencing itself is buried underground in such a way to prevent wild hogs from getting through and to the cranes.

But in subsequent years, organizers have added one more important component. They hauled in shell to create a spot where cranes can roost on a hard surface that is partially submerged in water, so that predators must traverse through water to get to them.

Kraus said he hopes the shell area does more than protect the cranes while they're in the enclosure at Chassahowitzka. He hopes it teaches the cranes to choose similar roosting spots when they are on their own in the wild.

This spring, the young flock now en route to

■ Deep in the marsh, past the electric fencing, whooping cranes go home.

By AMY WIMMER SCHWARB  
Times Staff Writer

CHASSAHOWITZKA — Bill Wix stands 6-foot-2 on hard ground. But out here where mud meets marsh, every exertion can sink him an inch or two deeper, and reaching the top of the fence he's supposed to be securing gets tougher and tougher.

Wix is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service volunteer, one of dozens of people who work to make winter survival as effortless as possible for whooping cranes at the Chassahowitz-

ka National Wildlife Refuge.

One day last week, Wix and the other volunteers and employees had a good day in a section of the refuge set aside for the cranes. The mud was drier than usual. And a couple hundred yards away, three large white birds moved among the marsh grasses.

A handful of whooping cranes that learned the migratory flight in previous years of this program had returned to their winter home, giving the volunteer a rare glimpse of the reason for his gritty work.

"I hear them," he said, listening to the faint warble of some of the rarest birds in the world.

"I do, too," replied Joyce Kleen, refuge biologist.

The glitziest part of the whooping

cranes' voyage takes place in the air. People thrill to see the cranes, born in captivity, fly closely on the heels of an ultralight aircraft that is teaching them a migratory pattern. Within the next couple of weeks, hundreds of people are expected to gather at Crystal River Mall to watch a new flock of cranes, born just this spring, make the last leg of their first flight to Chassahowitzka, following the ultralight all the way.

Without the survival instincts and good parenting that a wild crane would have, the cranes naively follow the lead of workers dressed in oversized white crane costumes that make them resemble adult cranes. The goal of the program is to replenish the population of the endangered whooping crane.

But the dirty work takes place here

in the Chassahowitzka marsh. From fencing to lure the birds in to electrical wire to keep predators out, to a primitive structure from which International Crane Foundation workers monitor the cranes' progress through the winter, every piece of equipment must be hauled here on airboats.

And every year, the Fish and Wildlife workers and volunteers learn more about what the cranes need to make Chassahowitzka the perfect roosting place. The cranes arrive during a busy time of year for Fish and Wildlife officials — manatee season began just two weeks ago — so the agency depends on help from student and retiree volunteers, plus employees on loan from area state park lands, such as the St.

Please see **CRANES** Page 6

11-28-2003

# Volunteers work to make crane migration a success

JAN WITHERSPOON  
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Chronicle

**T**he creation of something new and fragile could be under way in the wild and remote landscape that makes up Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.

A small flock of whooping cranes is expected to come to Citrus County later this week. It is hoped this flock will establish the second migratory flock of whooping cranes in existence.

The Operation Migration crew is now guessing it will be Thursday when they arrive in Citrus County, but that is up to Mother Nature. Weather conditions have hampered the birds' flight since they left Wisconsin in October.

“The opportunity for people to see the whooping cranes in the wild some day depends on this right here.”

Joan Guilfoyle

about the whooping crane project in the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Preserve.

In the Chassahowitzka landscape, the refuge has about 32,000 acres where a temporary pen was created for the birds that have been hatched, fed and taught to fly by humans

although the fledgling birds didn't know it. They still think their parents are ultralight airplanes.

The cranes will have to learn to be wild and the remote wilderness of the refuge is where they will have the freedom to learn at their own pace. Combined with the St. Martin's Marsh Aquatic Preserve, the birds will have about 100,000 acres in which to become truly wild.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service staff members along with volunteers built a temporary pen for the birds. The site had to have several things: It had to be remote, have an abundance of blue crabs and few predators.

Volunteers and refuge staff have worked since late August to get the site ready. Joan Guilfoyle, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, said, “The opportunity for people to see the whooping cranes in the wild some day depends on this right here.”

Please see **CRANES/Page 4A**

## CRANES

Continued from Page 1A

The undertaking is an effort to save the endangered species from extinction. Although the whoopers are increasing in number, establishing this second flock of migrating birds will greatly enhance the preservation of the species, project coordinators say.

The experimental flock of whooping cranes has caught the attention of many people and in Citrus County volunteers have been generous in helping get the site ready. It has been hard work for them, walking through deep, black muck to put up an enclosure that surrounds about 1.5 acres of water and marshland. The fence is 8 feet tall and wired with electricity to keep predators like alligators out.

There's also a solar powered surveillance system in place so the birds can be monitored by camera.

Volunteers come in all varieties including Katherine Cullen, a winter volunteer who travels around the country in her

### WHOOPING CRANE WATCH

- Call the Whooping Crane Hotline for a daily update and arrival day, (612) 713-5311.
- Monday was the 21st stop for the birds and crew. They spent Monday night in Suwannee County after getting a late start due to weather conditions.
- The only time the public will have an opportunity to view the whooping cranes is during a 7:30 a.m. fly-by at the Crystal River Mall on the day of arrival.

recreational vehicle volunteering at wildlife refuges or working in the National Park System. On Monday, she worked alongside U.S. Fish & Wildlife staff painting the fence camouflage.

Jim Krause, manager of the refuge, said the wildlife service burned about 2,400 acres of the needle grass to give the cranes more open area to explore. The black muck is rich and abundant in fiddler crabs and the Chassahowitzka River will give

the birds all the blue crabs they need.

But, first, the whooping cranes will have to learn that blue crabs are good food. The local delicacy was not on the birds' Wisconsin diet. Krause said Ron Miller, president of the local Audubon Society, has volunteered to catch the crabs for the handlers to feed the cranes.

Krause said the wildlife service “wants to give these birds every change to survive.”

Although there are many private, state and federal agencies working together to make this project a success, Krause and Guilfoyle both said it could not be done without volunteers.

For two years the two U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employees have been part of this endeavor, first with the sandhill cranes last year and now with the endangered whoopers.

Guilfoyle looked around the site where white clouds were reflected in the water and cabbage palms broke the horizon. “I like to stand inside the pen and think, this is where the whooping cranes will be, this endangered species will be right here.”

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2-27-03

# Century of preservation



MATTHEW BECK/Chronicle

The great blue heron is a superior predator, as this largemouth bass finds out in the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge on King's Bay. The large birds use their long, sharp beak as a spear to harpoon passing fish, reptiles or anything else unfortunate enough to swim or crawl past one of the birds. The National Wildlife Refuge system celebrates their 100th anniversary this year, and Citrus County has some 33,000 acres of National Wildlife Refuge sanctuaries within its borders. A group that supports the Chassahowitzka refuge plans two events in March.

*Nature Coast*

# VISITORS GUIDE

AND RELOCATION INFORMATION

WINTER 2002

Volume 4, Issue 2

**FEATURING...**

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## ON OUR COVER

Nature's wonderland enjoyed  
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One of our most popular attractions for many years has been the Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park. During a recent visit, resident Zana Ennis, captured our cover shot while enjoying the park with her grandson Tommy and daughter-in-law Lisa Ennis of Winter Garden.

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(times may vary by season or special event)

## A note from the Publisher...

Welcome the New Year! The happiness and "hurry-ness" of the holidays are behind us. We look forward to the fresh opportunities the year 2002 brings.

Many ask how we decide on our cover each issue. Like the wonderful articles from contributing writers Tom Franklin, Ken Roy, Jim Bruno and others, we often have someone from the community share what would make a great cover. Sometimes it is something that has caught their eye or a photo they've taken during an event or festival. Our cover this issue caught me by surprise.

Out "on the road" as I am each day (meeting with clients, staff or attending a community meeting) I often stop in to see my friends, the Ennis family, who own and operate Inverness Car Wash. While chatting with Zana Ennis, we looked at photos of her grandson's recent visit here. There "it was" ... a most beautiful moment captured on film. I knew immediately we needed that photo for our cover.

Zana was thrilled and we hope you are pleased. The occurrence brought forward in my mind a reminder that whether you are "passing through" or a long time resident, this area is a wonderland of nature's bounty that can be enjoyed so very simply with family and friends.

Our magazine continues to grow at a rapid pace from the love of this community for its community. The staff interacts with hundreds of local businesses and business leaders for a combined effort to continue bringing you, our readers, features and photos that show off our best. Many residents have commented their pleasure in learning about areas of the community they have yet to explore. Most say "until I read about it in the *Visitors Guide*, I didn't know..." I started this publication with the intent on sharing the basic knowledge I had gained from living here. I say "basic" as I have learned so much more! This community welcomes all in. There is a never empty well from which to draw from.

As always, we hope you enjoy our contents. Feel free to contact us with any suggestions or comment! Our door is always open to hear from you. Call the phone number below or send us a letter or e-mail. We'd love to hear from you! We welcome you to grow with us and remember our motto: "We hope you enjoy the area as much as we do!"

*Alana Crowder*

### Nature Coast

# VISITORS GUIDE

AND RELOCATION INFORMATION

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# Whooping It Up IN CHASSAHOWITZKA

By Julianne Munn  
Editor

There's a lot of whooping going in the marshy wetlands of Chassahowitzka, where endangered Whooping Cranes are wintering instead of the traditional northern "snowbirds" that migrate annually to sunny Citrus County.

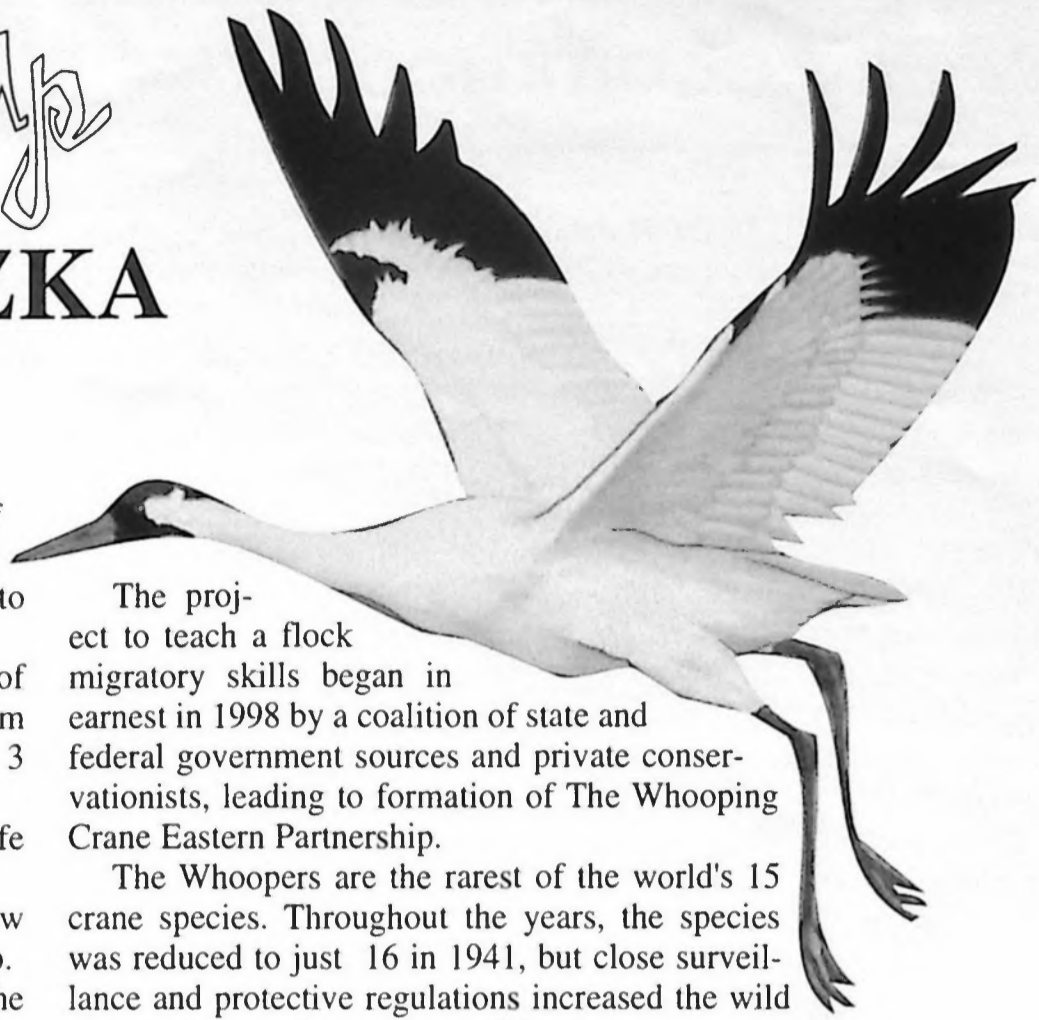
The visiting cranes represent the longest human guided migration of an endangered species in history, a 1,200 journey starting Oct. 17 from the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin and ending Dec. 3 in the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.

The Chassahowitzka refuge is managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, with offices in Crystal River on King's Bay.

The seven cranes were led and guided by a light aircraft flying at low elevations, with close monitoring of the birds throughout the long trip.

It is the hope of conservationists that flight patterns learned by the cranes during the 48 day journey through seven states, will prompt the flock to migrate back north on their own this spring, thus ensuring future annual migrations and regeneration of the species.

If the project is successful, it will be the first time in more than a century that an endangered species has been restored in Eastern North America.



The project to teach a flock migratory skills began in earnest in 1998 by a coalition of state and federal government sources and private conservationists, leading to formation of The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership.

The Whoopers are the rarest of the world's 15 crane species. Throughout the years, the species was reduced to just 16 in 1941, but close surveillance and protective regulations increased the wild and captive number to about 400 today.

A Whooping Crane is a majestic bird, standing about 5 feet tall with a wing spread of 6 to 8 feet. It is pure white with black wing tips and a red crown.

The only other migratory Whooping Crane flock on the continent winters in the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast

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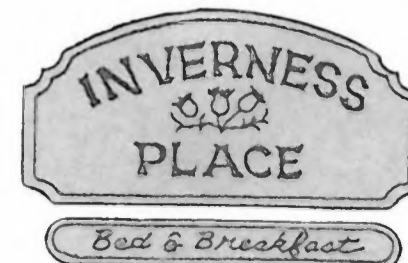
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Wildlife abounds in the Chassahowitzka River. This river otter poses on a log for a photo. Visitors to the river are likely to see deer, wild hogs, otters and a litany of bird life and reptiles.

2-23-2002

# Friends of refuge look back at eventful year

## *Volunteers worked on several challenges*

*Special to the Chronicle*

The annual meeting Jan. 26 of the Friends of Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge Complex Inc. in the Florida Room of Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park was attended by about 100 members and guests.

Dick Blewett, outgoing president, welcomed everyone with an invitation to become part of the friends' volunteer efforts at the refuge, with friends' special events or outreach programs in the community. As Blewett steps down, he returns to become a board member concentrating on volunteer efforts within the friends group.

Elected to the board and also welcomed were Frank Caldwell, Emily Casey and Karen Orr to fill board positions vacated by term limits. All board members stood and were recognized by the group.

Sally Mackler, filling the role of friends president, gave Blewett a commemorative

award to mark both dedication and service during his tenure. The newly elected board members, those currently serving and the new president were given a round of applause.

Jim Kraus, refuge manager, gave an update on the arrival of the whooping cranes and their acclimation to the new environment. Dr. George Archibald was able to further enlighten the group about the efforts of the International Crane Foundation to save the whooping cranes and this mighty effort that has been made to establish a migratory flock.

These efforts are made possible thanks to the many volunteers and organizations enduring the difficulties and frustrations of attempting to save America's rarest crane species. The slides shown by Archibald clearly depicted the decline of the whooping cranes and the dedication of those trying to save them.

The refuge's most popular resident, the manatee, was presented by biologist Bob Bonde, who has been with the U.S. Geological Survey, Biological Resources Division, for 22 years. Bonde's slides showed the challenges faced by winter resident manatees with lessening use of

power plants becoming more critical for their habitat. Manatees drawn north of their natural habitat by the warm water outflow of the power plants now are affected by those plants' declining operations.

The hope that the Everglades restoration project would encourage the manatee to return to its natural environment and slowly move away from the power plants is the critical point ahead.

Lastly, Harold Estep, committee chairman of Swamp Stomp 2002, gave an overview for the plans under way to run, walk, kayak, canoe and bike through the heart of the Nature Coast Saturday, May 4. The scope has been enlarged to include a 30k-bike loop. Participants may elect to join one or all events by pre-registering. Applications will soon be available through the friends office at the refuge.

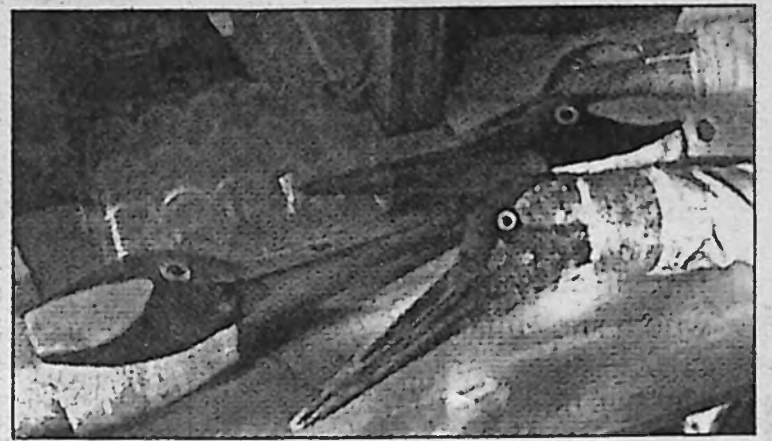
The meeting closed with light refreshments and an informational presentation about the volunteer opportunities available and working within the Friends of Chassahowitzka NWR Complex Inc. group. Those who were unable to attend the meeting may call the Friends at the Refuge at 795-6326 or by e-mail at [fcnwr@nccentral.com/fcnwr](mailto:fcnwr@nccentral.com/fcnwr).

ccc

2-23-02

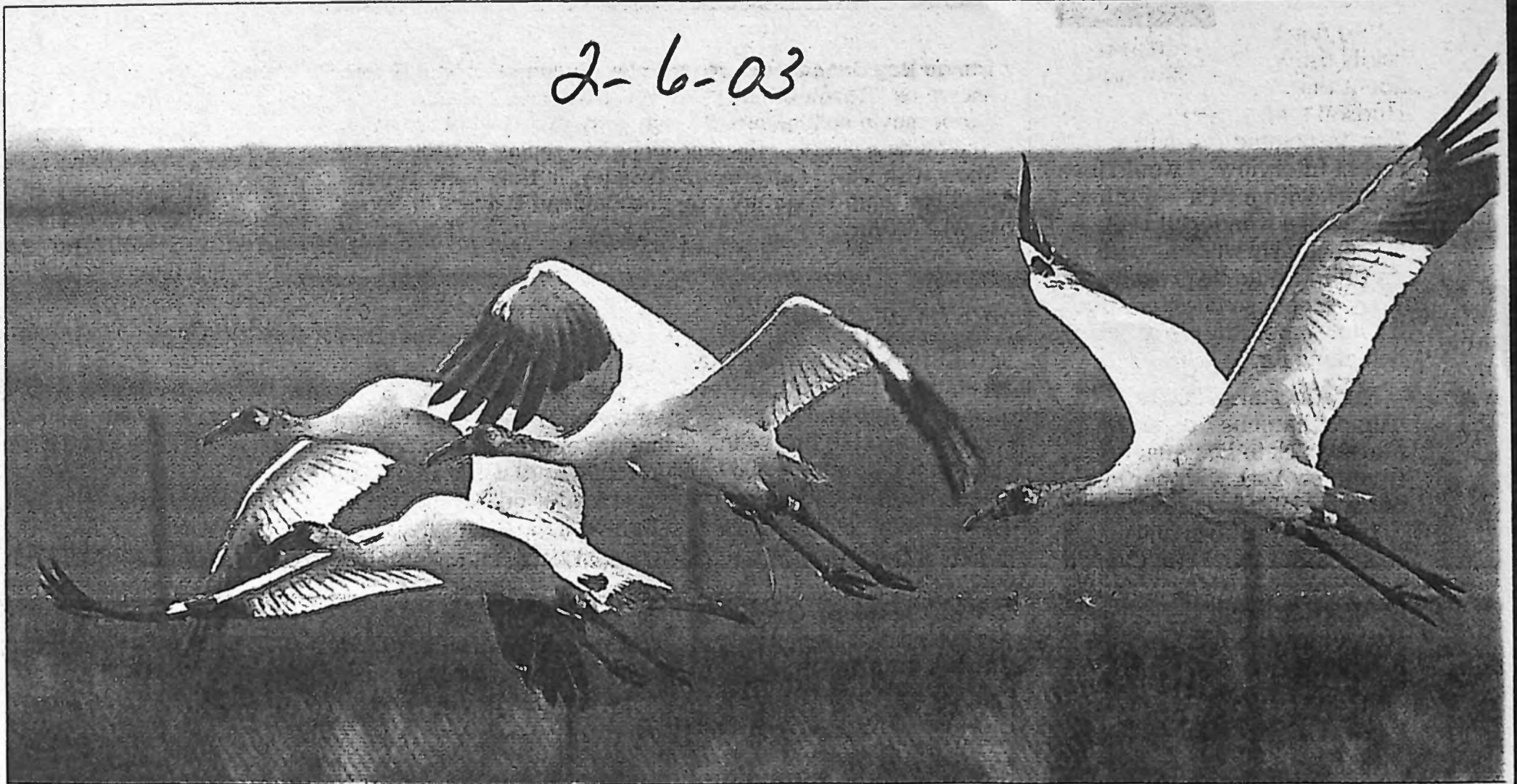
2-23-2002

# Birds on the wing



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2-6-03



MATTHEW BE

Several whooping cranes take flight Wednesday morning from inside of their pen where the birds roost in the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge. The area inside the refuge is home to 17 of the birds during the wintering months.

## *A day in the pen of Citrus County's whooping cranes in Chassahowitzka*

**GEORGE HUTCHENS**  
ghutchens@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

**T**he whoopers get all the glory, but Sara Zimorski does the dirty work. She slogs through ankle-deep mud and is pecked by the endangered animals. In other words, she has a blast. To spend a morning with the International

Crane Foundation aviculturist is to get as close to the 17 whooping cranes at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge as the law allows.

About every day, she swoops down the Chassahowitzka River by airboat to the secluded pen where the whoopers learn to forage and live in the wild.

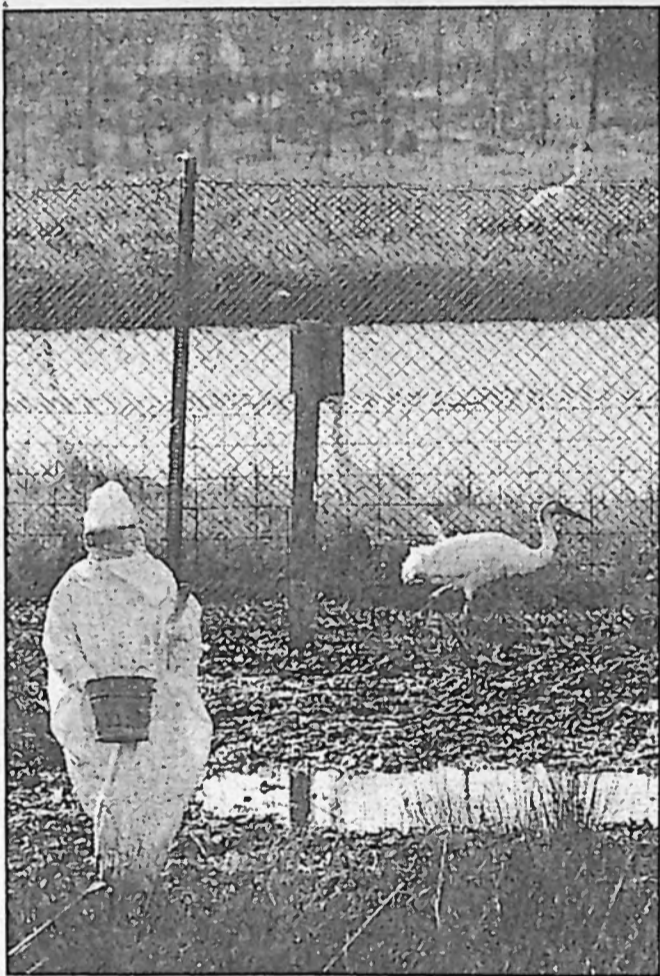
On Wednesday morning, Zimorski clopped across the muddy island, leading a small group

to a camouflaged tower near the pen. Before the morning was through, she had taken notes on their behavior, and entered the pen in white crane suit, establishing herself as the dominant crane to avoid pecking the pen's real dominator.

"As long as you're the tallest, you're the shape," she said, brushing off the lat

Please see **BIRDS**

2-6-2003



MATTHEW BECK/Chronicle

Sara Zimorski, an aviculturist with the International Crane Foundation dresses in a white costume when she interacts with the birds. The costume is used to disguise the human form so the birds will not associate people with any of their daily activities.

## BIRDS

Continued from Page 1A

suit always seems to attract.

She headed out in costume with a bucket of Zeigler zoo animal feed, and was approached by a number of cranes as she entered the pen. She held her decoy crane head high, however, and most of the territory-conscious animals backed off.

In addition to wearing the white suit, Zimorski spends days checking waters near the cranes' pen for salt levels and depths. She keeps a journal and watches the cranes for signs of maturity like changing color bands. She even listens for changes in their voices.

"It's like a teenager's voice changing, almost," she said.

Most of all, scientists at the refuge keep an eye out for signs of adjustment to the wild. The purpose of the project, after all, is to have a regular migration of wild whoopers. "They're learning to be wild birds," she said.

Zimorski said their adjustment to the wild is coming along. The birds regularly venture out of their pen, foraging in the river for blue crabs and mollusks, she said. Feed is always available, but Zimorski said the reliable supply won't keep them from

migrating north when the time is right. "Whenever they're ready to migrate, they'll just go," she said.

She said sometimes the birds can be nervous when she arrives, but on Wednesday they were calm, even as the group gathered and made noise in the tower 100 yards away.

Scientists like Zimorski owe much of their lifestyle to the extensive partnership between the U.S. National Wildlife Refuge System, the ICF, the Citrus County Audubon Society and the number of other organizations that help out by volunteering and providing forms of support.

"The project would be impossible without all our partners," said a spokesman Shawn Gillette.

One volunteer from the partnership came along Wednesday. Pat Casse works with the International Crane Foundation, Operation Migration, Friends of Chassahowitzka Wildlife Refuge and Florida Fish & Wildlife Services. She got a glimpse of the cranes.

"I get excited every time," she said.

The cranes were led by ultralight aircraft to the refuge last year from the Neotoma National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. The project is designed to show the endangered birds, which were hatched in captivity, their natural migration path and restore the species' population in North America.

# Cranes near winter home

*Officials  
estimate arrival  
later this week*

**MICHAEL TERRY**  
mterry@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

One thousand eight hundred and seventy nine miles down and only 138 miles left to go.

That relatively short flying distance is all that remains before an endangered species of whooping cranes from Wisconsin reaches their winter destination at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in western Citrus County.

12-6-2002

Unfortunately, due to adverse weather conditions during the past few days, that's the exact same distance that was remaining at days end Saturday.

Chuck Underwood, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, who is with the crew traveling on the ground from Wisconsin to Chassahowitzka, said the cranes have been grounded in Hamilton County and would not fly on Sunday

because of high winds in the cranes' flight path.

“It's really just a matter of wind and weather.”

**Chuck Underwood**  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife.

“It's just way too windy,” he said, noting that while they plan to give it another try Monday, that isn't looking too promising, either.

“The next three of four days are not

looking great,” he added.

In an effort to combat the unfavorable weather conditions, Underwood said his crew spent most of Sunday trying to find a couple of interim stops for the cranes on their journey to Chassahowitzka. On average, the cranes have been travelling between 55 and 65 miles a day.

“If we can get the weather to cooperate, we can get maybe 25 miles a day,” he said. “Just to get us a little farther south so we can get them as close as we can.”

With the weather so unpredictable, Underwood said it was really hard to say for sure when the cranes will reach Chassahowitzka.

“Right now, we are looking at a window of no earlier than Wednesday,” he said. “But more than likely it could be as late as Friday or Saturday.”

Underwood added that even though this year's migration is taking longer than last year's migration, the cranes are in no danger.

“While we have a general timetable of around four to six weeks for migration, we know from previous studies that they can take as little as 25 days or as many as eight weeks,” he said. “It's really just a matter of wind and weather. We just need the weather to cooperate a little better with us and then we'll be on our way.”

# Latest report has whoopers arriving Saturday

**JAN WITHERSPOON**  
jwITHERSPOON@  
chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

The crew of Operation Migration makes a daily decision — to fly or not to fly.

The weather is the decision-maker for the ultralight pilots leading their flock of endangered whooping cranes from Wisconsin to Citrus County.

Latest reports indicate it may be Saturday before the cranes will make it to their new home.

The birds and crew spent Monday night in Suwannee County and flew 20.4 miles Tuesday morning.

Fog is delaying flights until late mornings. The birds are unaccustomed to the heat and it strains them to make flights longer than about 20 miles.

The staff at Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge and the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership have worked together to create an opportunity for the public to see the endangered birds, flying behind the ultralight planes

## WHOOOP IT UP HOTLINE

■ For a daily update and arrival time in Citrus County call the Whoop it up Hotline at 564-0326. On the day of arrival, the public may view the cranes' fly-by at 7:30 a.m. at Crystal River Mall.

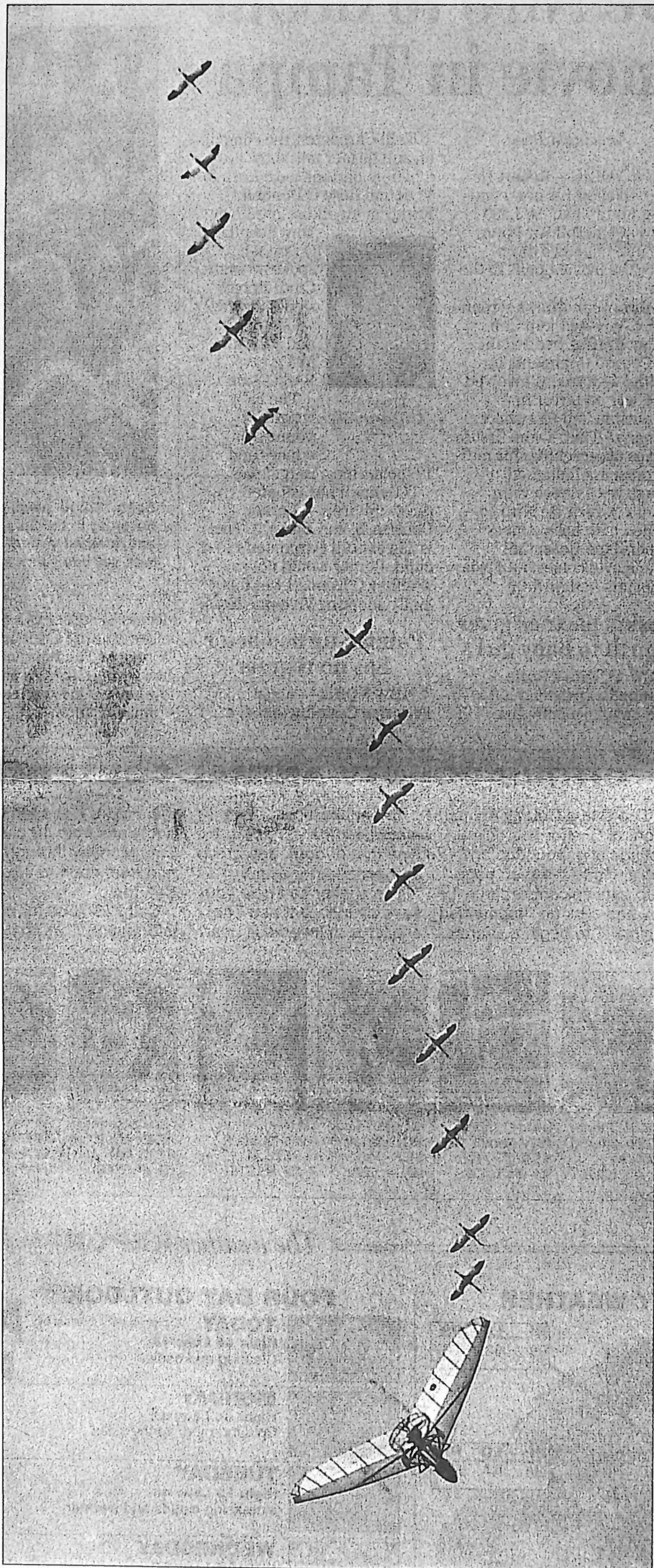
that have been their surrogate parents for many months.

On the day of arrival the public is invited at 7:30 a.m. to Crystal River Mall for a fly-by. Be at the north end of the mall

in the grassy area where representatives of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership will give an educational presentation at 8 a.m.

The journey through seven states with the flock of young whooping cranes is the beginning of what is hoped will become the second migratory flock of whooping cranes in the country.

If whoopers return to Wisconsin in the spring, it will help accomplish the project's efforts to save the species from extinction.



# Home to roost

*Whooping  
cranes land in  
Chassahowitzka*

**GEORGE HUTCHENS**  
ghutchens@  
chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

**S**ixteen whooping cranes took the high road Saturday morning into Citrus County, soaring 1,200 feet over a crowd near Crystal River Mall before arriving at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.

It took the flock and a team of 170 volunteers 49 days to complete the 1,204-mile odyssey. The trip began Oct. 13 at the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. Last year, seven cranes completed the trip, and officials hope to have 20 young birds next year.

The final leg began 29.5 miles away in Levy County, just a short hop in comparison to some of the earlier legs in the journey.

Joe Duff, co-founder of Operation Migration, the nonprofit organization helping with the trip's logistics, said the final leg was the most satisfying.

"There's nothing like coming in on the last day," he said. "The most exciting point on the whole trip is approaching that Chassahowitzka pen."

The cranes were led into a smaller pen that's actually inside a 4-acre pen. The big pen will become the cranes' winter home, and

Please see **ROOST/Page 4A**

**Whooping cranes follow an ultralight aircraft Saturday morning as they fly over Crystal River before landing at the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge. Sixteen of the whooping cranes finished a 1,200-mile journey from Wisconsin as part of a project to reintroduce the birds to the wild.**

BRIAN LaPETER/Chronicle

11-2002

# Whooping cranes reach Florida

*139 more miles  
to go*

*Associated Press*

A small flock of endangered whooping cranes migrating south from Wisconsin, led by ultralight aircraft, reached Florida on Saturday after a 39-mile flight from Georgia.

Organizers said the flock of seven whooping cranes had covered 1,078 miles and had only another 139 miles to reach the final destination, the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in central Florida.

The cranes started out from the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin Oct. 17 and had been able to fly on 20 days, as weather conditions permitted.

The cranes were hatched and raised at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland before researchers transported them to Necedah.

The project's goal is to create a second migratory flock of whooping cranes, with the birds finding their own way back to Wisconsin in the spring. The other flock winters in Texas and nests in northwestern Canada.

At 5 feet tall, whoopers are North America's tallest birds and one of the world's rarest, with only about 400 left. The whooping crane was near extinction in 1941, with only about 20 left.

Chassahowitzka

# Nature sends refuge centennial party indoors

## *National refuge system benefits from upsurge in volunteerism*

**MICHAEL TERRY**  
mterry@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

Not even a change in venue to celebrate the 100th anniversary of America's National Wildlife Refuge System could dampen the spirits of those who care about preserving the fragile environment.

In a setting like the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge where the weather often times forces biologists in the field to make adjustments, it was only fitting that Mother Nature saw fit to rain on her own celebration.

With a chance for rain in the forecast, Sunday's event was moved to the Plantation Inn & Golf Resort where organizers were not disappointed with the packed house of loyal supporters, which included U.S. Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, R-

Brooksville. 3-3-03  
Refuge manager Jim Kraus said the national refuge system has benefited from a tremendous upsurge in volunteerism and the establishment of countless friends groups.

"Now there are more than 225 friends organizations around the country," he said, noting that these groups have played and will continue to play a role in the preservation of fragile environments for the next 100 years.

One of those committed to its preservation is Jim Green, who said friends groups are responsible for bringing an awareness to the importance of the national refuge system.

"The National Wildlife Refuge System has grown along with our nation's commitment to preserving its natural heritage through a system of 540 refuges encompassing about 94



BRIAN LaPETER/Chronicle

About 100 people turned out Sunday at the Plantation Inn for Wood, Winds and Water, a fund-raiser by the Friends of Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge and Complex. The event marks the centennial of America's National Wildlife Refuge System. Quintessential, a quintet from Gainesville, performed during the event.

million acres," he said.

Green said one only has to look at endangered species like the manatees and the flock of migratory whooping cranes that call Citrus County home to

see the importance of preservation.

The National Wildlife Refuge System will celebrate its centennial anniversary March 14.

# Cranes begin journey to Citrus

GEORGE HUTCHENS  
ghutchens@  
chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

Citrus County's most famous snowbirds have launched their migration to their winter home in Chassahowitzka.

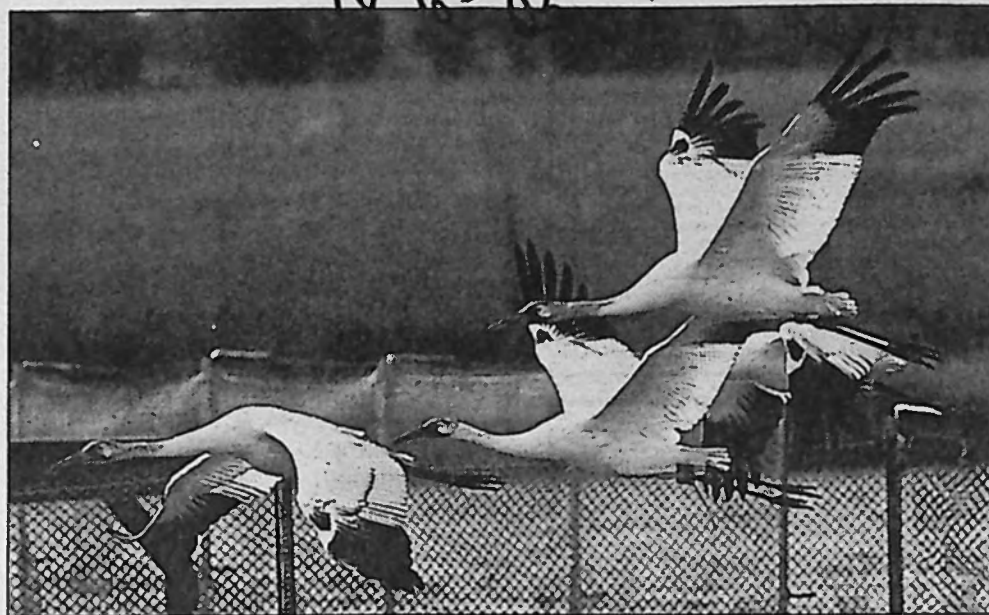
Fifteen whooping cranes, all of them less than a year old, on Thursday left the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. By late morning Friday, the birds had traveled 45.8 miles and were resting in a field in Sauk County, Wis.

The cranes were supposed to take off Oct. 8, but strong winds kept the ultralight aircraft that guides them grounded. A good day to fly didn't come until Thursday.

Scientists with a partnership that includes the International Crane Foundation, Operation Migration, Friends of the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge and state and federal wildlife agencies travel with the birds.

One ultralight pilot said once the cranes leave the refuge in Necedah, the birds are likely to be a little more focused on flying.

"We're fairly confident that now that these birds are away



MATTHEW BECK/Chronicle file

The annual migration of whooping cranes from Wisconsin to Chassahowitzka has begun. These birds, photographed in the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in February of 2003, successfully made the long trek last year.

from the familiarity of Necedah refuge, they'll more consistently follow the ultralight aircraft," said Operation Migration pilot Joe Duff.

The birds' departure marks the beginning of the long, sometimes arduous trek south. Sometime in November or December, the flock is expected to appear here. They will land at the pen on an isolated island within the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.

Shawn Gillette of the Crystal

River National Wildlife Refuge, said on this end of the migration, officials will soon begin burning off brush on the island with a brand-new toy.

A tank-like "Marshmaster" now sits near the Crystal River refuge office, and will be used to burn brush around the island. Funds were raised by Conico Phillips and a federal grant to buy the machine, Gillette said.

"All we have to do now is get a team together," he said.

10-2-03

# Local & State

CITRUS COUNTY CHRONICLE

## Park celebrates wild things

*Birding tour, open house, speaker planned*

**CHERI HARRIS**  
charris@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

From whooping cranes and manatees to bald eagles, a variety of protected creatures find shelter in the 32,000-acre Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge complex.

For those who enjoy catching glimpses of unusual wildlife, it's a natural reason for making merry.

On Saturday, the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge headquarters will throw open its doors for the ninth annual National Wildlife Refuge Week celebration.

Shawn Gillette, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge ranger, said this year's festivities mark the 100th anniversary of the wildlife refuge system.

"This year is extra special," Gillette said.

Early-risers can enjoy a King's Bay birding tour that will depart at 7:30 a.m. from the dock at the refuge headquarters. Boats will load at 7:15 a.m.

Experienced guides will point out unusual birds along the tour route. After the tour, Friends of the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge Complex Inc. will serve breakfast. Fee for the boat tour and breakfast

is \$15 per person. Reservation deadline is 4 p.m. Friday. For more information, call 563-2088.

The open house at the refuge headquarters will start at 10 a.m. with live Florida folk music throughout the day, lectures, educational exhibits and children's activities. Refreshments will be for sale.

At 11 a.m., Phyllis Baker will give a talk titled "Living Gems, Butterfly Awareness." At noon, Pat Casselberry will talk about the Whooping Crane Project that brings migrating whooping cranes from the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin to Chassahowitzka. Harold Nugent from the Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, will give a presentation at 1 p.m. titled "The Incredible Survivors:

- **WHAT:** Ninth annual National Wildlife Refuge Week Celebration.
- **WHEN:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- **WHERE:** Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge headquarters, 1502 S.E. Kings Bay Drive, Crystal River, located next to the Port Hotel and Marina.
- **COST:** Free
- **INFO:** 563-2088

The American Alligator and the American Crocodile."

Free boat rides on King's Bay will be offered from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. During one boat ride last year, Gillette said several manatees surrounded the boat.

"It was just great," he said.

# Wild, 1000

## Refuge celebrates birthday in style

**GEORGE HUTCHENS**  
ghutchens@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

On Saturday, the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge — the famous home to hundreds of manatees — opened its doors to the community to celebrate its 100th birthday.

The refuge system was inaugurated in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt. An outdoorsman himself, Roosevelt probably would have loved Saturday's celebration in Crystal River.

Kids got close-ups of turtles. Some even touched the shells.

"I knocked on his back when he put his head in," said Patty Lynch, a kindergartner.

Roosevelt would have liked the turtles, and he certainly would have gone for the free rides around

the refuge's waterways. Visitors were treated to bright blue skies and glassy-smooth waters on Saturday.

"We would have paid," said Sally Leathering, a visitor from Levy County. "It was the perfect day for it."

Roosevelt would have fallen for the music on Saturday, too.

Amid wooden cutouts of whooping cranes — the actual birds are beginning their migration from Wisconsin this month — folk singers pounded out old Bob Dylan and Neil Young tunes as volunteers and visitors lunched.

The earliest risers took in a King's Bay birding tour, and throughout the day, lectures, educational exhibits and other children's activities saw a steady stream of wide-eyed kids.

The Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge complex includes the Crystal River Wildlife Refuge with its manatees, and the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, home to whooping cranes. The refuge hosted the event.



BRIAN LaPETER/Chronicle

Chase Cox, 6, looks at a diamondback terrapin Saturday during the National Wildlife Refuge Week Celebration at the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge headquarters. The protected species is indigenous to the area.

9-26-03

# Cranes, crew ready to soar south

■ The autumnal migration of ultralight-led whooping cranes from Wisconsin is set for Oct. 8.

By BARBARA BEHRENDT  
Times Staff Writer

CRYSTAL RIVER — With an eager flock that seems even more ready for the challenge than last year's group, the whooping crane reintroduction team from Operation Migration have set Oct. 8 as the tentative departure date from Wisconsin.

Weather and all other variables permitting, ultralight aviators in their crane costumes will crawl behind the wheels of their aircraft that morning and lead 16 new whooping cranes into the sky for the beginning of the flight of their lifetimes.

During the weeks that follow, the birds will fall into formation behind the aircraft winding their way south for as many miles a day as they can fly and the weather permits until they finally arrive in their prepared winter home deep inside the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge.

Along for the flight will likely be cranes from the classes of 2001 and 2002, which successfully made the 1,200-mile flight to Citrus County and the return flight home.

Fall has begun to grip the bird's training site and summer home at the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Windy conditions for the past four days have kept the training birds grounded, according to Heather Ray, administrative director for Operation Migration, the Canada-based non-profit group, that has been working for several years to reestablish a mi-

gratory whooping crane flock in west central Florida.

"At this time of year, we'd like to get in more training days," she said Thursday. But Ray was still very optimistic about this year's birds. At this time last year, trainers were pushing to get 20-minute flights on a regular basis before starting the migration. This year's group has already done several 30-minute sessions.

The decision of when to leave is based on a variety of criteria including the age of the birds, their ability, health and endurance and the readiness of the crew. "The kicker, of course, is the weather," Ray said.

The staff also has to check with the 38 potential migration hosts along the route to be sure they are ready and aware that they might soon see the telltale outline of ultralights

Please see **MIGRATION** Page 6

## Migration

from Page 1

and whooping cranes in formation heading in their direction.

Seventeen crane chicks made it to training this year but one, No. 14, died after a training accident. That means this year's flock equals the number that flew the route last year. A total of 20 birds have made the flight and return trip in the past two years. Twelve of them were hanging around Necedah earlier this week, and the others were in nearby areas, Ray said.

Last year, the birds headed

south Oct. 15.

Ultimately, the crew hopes the birds will begin breeding in a few years and teaching their own youngsters the flight path. By 2010, the ultralights might not be needed any more, and a viable flock will do all the migration work on their own.

Even though this work mirrors the past two years' efforts, Ray said the crew doesn't look at this as just any job. A certain amount of passion for this mission is required. "It's hard to put it into words," Ray said.

"There are people who tell us it's an awful lot of money to spend on a bird, but who are we to put a value on this bird?" she

said. "And especially when we were the cause of its decline."

Before crane conservation efforts got under way several decades ago, only 15 whooping cranes survived in the world. If this year's migration is successful, just this migratory flock will have reached 36, more than twice what once existed.

To keep the public informed on the progress of the birds both before the migration begins and while it is going on, Operation Migration makes regular updates on its Web site, which is: <http://www.operationmigration.org/>.

— Barbara Behrendt can be reached at 564-3621 or [behrendt@sptimes.com](mailto:behrendt@sptimes.com).

# Rare cranes receive training

*Birds taught  
how to migrate*

**TERRY WITT**  
terrywitt@  
chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

Getting up with the birds every morning has a special meaning for Joe Duff.

It's his job at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin.

Duff is co-founder of Operation Migration, a group dedicated to the survival of the endangered whooping crane.

Duff and a team of experts are spending the summer at Necedah training a flock of 17 young whooping cranes how to migrate.

In the fall, Duff and fellow pilot Richard Vanhevelen will lead the human-trained flock to Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Citrus County using ultralight aircraft.

The remaining team members will follow the migration on the ground, tracking birds that may tire and land in unexpected places, and troubleshooting other problems.

The goal is to establish a wild flock of whooping cranes that can migrate to Chassahowitzka in the winter and return to Necedah in the summer to breed.

Two human-trained flocks made the trip from Chassahowitzka to Necedah on their own in the past two years.

Whooping cranes are extremely rare.

In 1941, there were only 22 known whooping cranes left in the wild, and in 1950, six were lost in a severe storm.

Currently 400 whooping cranes exist in North America. In 2001, the only wild migrato-

Please see **CRANES/Page 4A**

## **RARE INDEED**

■ In 1941, there were only 22 known whooping cranes left in the wild, and in 1950, six were lost in a severe storm.

■ Currently 400 whooping cranes exist in North America.

■ In 2001, the only wild migratory population consisted of 174 birds.

# CRANES

Continued from Page 1A

ry population consisted of 174 birds that wintered in Arkansas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas and summered in Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada.

Scientists say a natural disaster, a disease outbreak or human impacts could wipe out a single isolated wild population of whooping cranes.

That was why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the International Whooping Crane Recovery Team, Operation Migration and other groups teamed up to form the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership in 1998.

"Every species is of critical importance to the ecosystem," said Duff, explaining why the whooping crane is important. "We have 6 billion people on the Earth and 400 whooping cranes. Which is more important?"

William Lishman pioneered the technique of using ultra-

light airplanes to lead birds on manmade migrations. Duff joined him in 1994 to lead the first aircraft migration of 18 geese from Ontario, Canada to Virginia.

At Necedah, Duff, along with the whooping crane trainers and biologists, never let the young cranes see them as people. They wear special white suits to make them look like parent birds.

The trainers dress in the suits before they go to work and never speak when they are near the birds. Instead, they carry recorders on their hips that play a comforting whooping crane call.

The trainers also carry a puppet with them that looks like the head and neck of a whooping crane adult. Food is released through the bill of the puppet to teach the birds how to forage in the wild, a skill their parents would convey to them if they were born in the wild.

Later in the summer, the birds begin flying for longer periods of time behind an ultralight to build strength. The pilots also dress as adult birds



TERRY WITT/Chronicle

Operation Migration team members gather at their headquarters in Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin. Clockwise, from left, are: handler Mark Nipper, biologist Dan Sprague holding a crane puppet, Operation Migration co-founder Joe Duff, who also pilots an ultralight, pilot Richard Vanheaven, biologist-handler Sara Zimorski and public use ranger Molly Mehl.

and play whooping crane calls through a loudspeaker.

When the weather cools, the ultralights and pilots will fly to Chassahowitzka, stopping 50 times along the way to rest and

feed the birds.

In the wild, the strongest bird takes the lead and the others follow in his wake. The same is true of the ultralights.

"It's like surfacing on a

wave," Duff said.

*Editor's note: Chronicle reporter Terry Witt recently visited Necedah National Wildlife Refuge while vacationing in Wisconsin.*

8-2-2003

# Chassahowitzka sewer project a team effort

**C**hassahowitzka property owner Mickey Newberger has been on a crusade to save his beloved Chassahowitzka River. In carrying his crusade forward, Newberger appears to see himself as a knight in shining armor single-handedly pressing the battle to obtain state funds for the construction of a main sewer line into the unincorporated community of Chassahowitzka.

It is not surprising, that an amendment made by Sen. Richard Mitchell, D-Jasper, has Newberger fighting mad. Mitchell's amendment would reallocate \$400,000 from the original \$1.25 million earmarked for the Chassahowitzka project to meet the urgent wastewater needs of the small town of Callahan on the Florida border near Jacksonville. With his ire raised, Newberger has made a number of claims that don't wash and only serve to make the Chassahowitzka's political waters muddier.

Inexplicably directing his ire toward County Commissioner Gary Bartell, Newberger has claimed that Mitchell reallocated the funds to the town of Callahan only after Bartell gave it his blessing. This claim doesn't wash. Mitchell's difficult decision to reallocate the funds within his senate district to another community in need was

Perturbed over the county and its legislative delegation renaming the Chassahowitzka project as Homosassa Phase IV, Newberger has further claimed that the project's loss of identity places future Chassahowitzka funding in jeopardy.

This claim doesn't wash at all.

Gov. Jeb Bush's budget guidance clearly affirmed on-going projects would receive funding priority and new projects would, as a rule, be disapproved. The linking of the Chassahowitzka with the on-going Homosassa project has proven to be a wise decision. It has made state funding of the Chassahowitzka possible, especially during a time of reduced state revenues, and has garnered \$941,000 in matching funds.

Newberger's claim that much of the \$3.5 million received by the county for water and sewer projects during the past four years would not have been possible were it

not for his connections with the Legislature's leadership doesn't wash either. Working in concert, County Commissioner Bartell, Rep. Nancy Argenziano, R-Dunnellon, and Sens. Mitchell, Anna Cowin, R-Leesburg, and Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Spring Hill, have been instrumental in obtaining Bush's funding approval for both the Chassahowitzka and Homosassa projects.

#### **THE ISSUE:**

Chassahowitzka sewer funds.

#### **OUR OPINION:**

Not a one-man band.

Mitchell's alone. As Mitchell acknowledged, "Someone has to make the hard decisions and I made it."

Newberger also claims that Bartell "has been an obstructionist on this project since day one, and we're going to complete it in spite of him." This claim also doesn't wash. Bartell has been a highly tenacious point man on water issues for the Citrus County Board of Commissioners. Steeped in regional water issues, he has relentlessly led the fight to preserve our county's waters and has worked diligently to make central water and sewer a countywide reality.

Although Mickey Newberger's efforts have helped to focus the Legislature's fiscal eye on the Chassahowitzka River, the orchestration of state funding has not been the result of a one-man band. To the contrary, the success in obtaining state funds, as well as matching funds from the Coastal Rivers Basin Board, have been made possible by the team effort of county officials, the county's legislative delegation and concerned residents.

The notion that one person has been primarily responsible for preserving the Chassahowitzka River as an "Outstanding Florida Waterway" simply doesn't wash

# Chassahowitzka water agreement gets preliminary OK <sup>1-29-03</sup>

## *Bulk H<sub>2</sub>O to be sold from Sugarmill system*

**TERRY WITT**  
terrywitt@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

The county's efforts to find a clean drinking water source for the southwest Citrus County community of Chassahowitzka have borne fruit.

A tentative agreement was reached on Jan. 18 calling for the Florida Governmental Utility Authority to sell bulk water to Chassahowitzka.

The water would be supplied by the

Sugarmill Woods water system, which is operated by FGUA. Sugarmill is a neighboring community.

Representatives of Citrus County, FGUA and the Sugarmill Woods Civic Association verbally agreed to the arrangement.

A study by the University of South Florida four years ago found that fecal coliform bacteria from septic tanks has polluted the Chassahowitzka River. The bacteria can cause illnesses in people.

While no septic tank-related bacteria

were found in residential wells, the study found indicators of the bacteria in 3 of 10 wells tested.

Citrus County is preparing to build a grant-funded central sewer system in Chassahowitzka. County Commissioner Gary Bartell said the county wants to build a central water system at the same time.

The county has received \$3.5 million in government grants to connect Chassahowitzka to the Homosassa system, which is still under construction. He said those grants should pay for nearly all the costs associated with building the sewer lines.

A \$750,000 grant has been awarded to the county to offset the cost of extending central water to Chassahowitzka, and Bartell said the county has applied for additional grants. The estimated cost of building the Chassahowitzka water system is \$2 million.

Whatever the grants don't fund, Bartell said, residents will pay through an assessment.

"I've been clear from the start when I talked to residents that there's no such thing as a free ride," Bartell said. "We've been getting grants to buy down as much of the cost as we can, but the

Please see **WATER/Page 4A**

# TIME

Continued from Page 1A

ing over us," she wrote.

By the result of their work, Calbeck said students clearly appreciated the beauty and history of Chassahowitzka. Research included a field trip on the Chassahowitzka River, which left a lasting impression, he said.

One of the boat captains for that trip was Howard Bryant, whose only access to his home is by river.

"I think this is wonderful," Bryant said. "They have great imaginations. I wouldn't have missed this..."

Strickland's great aunt was Maggie Smith, as in Miss Maggie Drive, the main road

that winds through Chassahowitzka.

He offered his hotel to showcase the artwork. Students will leave them there for a week.

"They've done a good job, they really have," he said.

Students showed their individualism. Emily Merritt's effort was a pleasurable scene of the old hotel.

She wrote: "After observing this picture for the first time, in black and white, my first reaction was, 'what a mess!' Now I see it as a place that on a sunny Saturday afternoon, I would love to go outside under the trees and sit back and relax."

The project was Erin Fields' brainchild. As it turns out Fields, a senior, may be the only student in the class with

“This is an all-A class.”

Jack Calbeck  
photography teacher.

memories of old Chassahowitzka.

So she recalled that spooky, mysterious sensation that normally accompanied nighttime visits to the river.

"Most of the times I have gone there have been at night, so to me, Chassahowitzka is a scary place," Fields wrote.

Calbeck, who lives in Chassahowitzka, could not suppress his pride.

"This," he said, "is an all-A class."

# National Wildlife Refuge system gears up for 100th anniversary events March 14

## SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

Community groups are planning events to boost revenue for Citrus County's wildlife refuges:

- From 3 to 5 p.m. Sunday, a concert will be performed at Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge by a University of Florida quintet. The event is \$40 per person or \$75 per couple. For information, call Jim Green at 382-4402 or Bonnie Smith at 382-3087.
- March 22, residents are encouraged to take part in a 10.5-mile run, 15-mile paddle and "enviro-challenge" called "Swamp Stomp" sponsored by the Friends of the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge. The event will also include a nature walk. Cost for the event is \$10-\$35; call 563-5423.

**GEORGE HUTCHENS**  
ghutchens@chronicleonline.com  
*Chronicle*

**M**iles from the traffic that roars up and down U.S. 19 in Citrus County, the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge provides an amazing contrast: no roads, no buildings, almost no noise.

But to say that nothing goes on in its 33,000 acres is a big mistake.

The Chassahowitzka refuge is one of 540 of its kind in the country. The federal National Wildlife Refuge System celebrates its 100th anniversary March 14.

President Theodore Roosevelt sold Congress on the idea in 1903. Its goal: to set aside land where endangered or threatened species of ani-

mals could thrive.

In other words, allow nothing to happen so that everything can happen.

And that is exactly the scenario at the area's refuge regional complex, which includes Chassahowitzka, Crystal River and Egmont Key in Tampa Bay.

After about five minutes at Chassahowitzka, most visitors find out that many of those animals aren't hiding out.

"We were in the water for about 30 seconds, then boom!" said Jon Campbell, 32, a Wisconsin schoolteacher who visited the area with a few friends this week. "We figured we'd go on a quiet boatride. Then we saw about a hundred bald eagles. It's like a city of animals. It is very different once you step onto a national refuge."

Please see **CENTURY/Page 4A**

## CENTURY

Continued from Page 1A

What now is the world's largest program of public lands dedicated to wildlife protection was born a century ago after a dispute over brown pelican feathers.

Hunters in Sebastian, drawn to the area by a market for ladies' hat feathers, had damaged the population of brown pelicans roosting on an island off the Atlantic coast at the beginning of the 20th century.

A German immigrant, Paul Kroegel, and Frank Chapman, an ornithologist, convinced Roosevelt to create the system and protect the pelicans.

On March 14, 1903, Roosevelt created the 5.5-acre Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, the nation's first.

Today, more than 35 million people visit the refuge system each year.

The Chassahowitzka refuge was established in 1943 to set aside land to let the birds play on their own. Today, 250 bird species, reptiles and amphibians and at least 25 species of mammals roam the refuge.

Not to mention its most famous residents, the whooping cranes.

Anyone with a boat that can navigate the refuge's shallow waters may get a glimpse of a manatee. But the flock of 16 whoopers is in a fenced-in, limited access pen on a small island located miles from the neighborhoods of Old Homosassa, where they are cared for and watched by scientists. The pen is not accessible to the public.

The flock of the endangered animals was led to the refuge by ultra-light aircraft last fall.

Friends of the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, a booster club of sorts, dedicates time and energy to

## REFUGE FACTS

- Number of refuges: 540.
- Total acreage: 95 million acres.
- Percentage of land open to the public: 98 percent.
- Annual visitors: 35 million.
- State with most refuges: North Dakota, with 64. California is second, with 38, and Florida is third, with 29.

Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

getting the word out about the refuges, and raising funds for its auxiliaries.

It is a passionate group.

"Basically, I think any one of us, deep down, has a sense of conservation, where we're wanting to conserve what we have. It's just a general feeling we have," said Dick Blewett, the club's president.

"The unique thing about 'Chaz' is that nobody ever developed it," he said. "It is strictly wild, and beautiful. It's not very accessible because of its shallowness, but nobody is stopping anyone from going there."

In 1983, the Crystal River refuge was created as a home for endangered West Indian manatees. That refuge is more accessible to tourists who plop into the water for a look at the sea cows. That is in line with the refuge system and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which tries to reach out to ecotourists and the like as the federal budget tightens.



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# In touch with nature

10-15-04



## SECURITY



Times photos — TED McLAREN

Rick Amick, a volunteer for U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, passes the camouflaged observation post next to the whooping cranes' roosting area at Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge. Biologists will monitor the cranes daily throughout their stay.

Chassahowitzka will be expected to fly on its own back to its summer roosting area in Wisconsin.

"If they make it back to Wisconsin, then they've achieved something very important," Kraus said. "And after that I would hope that they've picked up some survival skills."

So far, the Chassahowitzka site appears to be appealing, because cranes from previous years are already arriving on their own at the refuge.

Besides the muddy work that takes place in the marsh, a network of other volunteers is doing other work to prepare for the cranes' arrival. Dick Blewett, president of the Friends of the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge Complex, said his group is preparing for the morning when the cranes fly over Crystal River Mall.

Blewett said he estimates the cranes could be here in about one week, but organizers must act quickly as the cranes move in closer because each day's weather determines whether the ultralights and the cranes will

fly on a particular day.

The flyover is one of the rare public aspects of the crane program. Once the cranes are in place for the winter at Chassahowitzka, wildlife officials do all they can to keep them separated from curious humans.

When the cranes arrive, their pen will be awaiting them. Getting it ready hasn't been an easy job.

Fish and wildlife workers have yanked a few helpers from waist-deep mud, sometimes yanking them so hard that their boots remain stuck behind in the marsh.

"This is a treat," refuge ranger Shawn Gillette said one day last week, referring to the firmer-than-usual mud he was working in. Not one person had to be rescued that day.

Not every day is as pleasurable.

"We're ahead of the game this year," Gillette said. "So far we've retrieved all the employees, all the volunteers — and all their boots."

# Outdoors options

Are you fine in a sleeping bag under the stars, or do you need a mint on your pillow? However you camp, Florida has something for you.



A place to park a recreational vehicle is all that is needed by many campers.

By MIKE SCARANTINO  
Times Correspondent

The concept of camping is different for many people. I have friends who think staying at a motel without remote-control TV is camping. Some say if room service is late, that's roughing it.

But camping appeals to many, and some call it luxurious. Campers usually speak affectionately about their time in the wild.

There are those who find value in roughing it to the maximum. This group backpacks miles into the wilderness, pitching Spartan campsites in remote locations. When first light comes, it's on to the next destination. They experience the outdoors from a deliberate perspective.

Some people wish only to limit the extravagances of modern living when camping. This group finds life in a tenters' primitive section of a campground acceptable, but the showers and facilities can't be too far off.

Then there are those who define camping by the amount of luxury they can carry, drive or pull into the wilderness with them. Their needs are different than those looking for more Spartan accommodations.

Most of this group are willing to forgo roughing it, but love their time in the outdoors.

Florida has camping for all of these groups.

Campgrounds vary. Some are basic, offering no more than a place to pitch a tent or park a recreational vehicle.

Then there are locations offering all the amenities, including pools and recreational opportunities.

In the fancier campgrounds, the showers and facilities are near the laundry machines. The pool may be Olympic sized, and camping spaces are equipped with water, electric, sewer and cable TV hookups.

For those who enjoy roughing it, excellent camping can be found in many of Florida's national

forests and Wildlife Management Areas. A camping permit must be obtained to camp in Wildlife Management Areas.

There are 11 national parks and four national forests in Florida that offer camping in one form or other. People who enjoy deliberate camping may find remote backpacking and primitive opportunities in the national forests more to their liking.

Nearest to home, and one of the more visited forests, is the Ocala National Forest. It offers devel-

oped campgrounds and rustic undeveloped opportunities, with the most developed campgrounds at Alexander Springs, Salt Springs and Juniper Springs.

Other camping opportunities include state parks, county or city parks and privately owned campgrounds. All fill a niche.

National and state parks and forest camping areas are usually well maintained. Many county and city parks are in good condition, but the quality varies. Privately owned campgrounds can vary greatly, so find a way to check them out before checking in.

Florida is home to a wide array of ecosystems and wildlife. From the pine forests and black water,

cypress swamps of the Panhandle to the sandy beaches of both peninsula coasts, clear to the low-lying keys, campers can enjoy a huge variety of natural settings.

Fees for camping vary greatly. Short-term campers find reasonable fees at state and national parks. Costs can vary from a few dollars a day for more rustic settings to hundreds of dollars per week in privately owned campgrounds with luxurious accommodations.

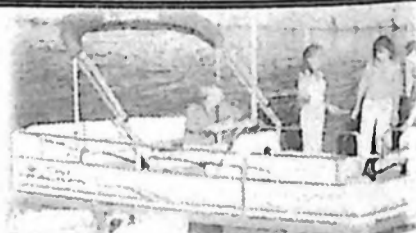
Weather is always a factor for campers, and Florida's weather, while mild much of the year, can range from chilly to blistering hot. Be prepared for all temperatures. Nothing can ruin a vacation faster than excruciating sunburn.

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EXTRA PERSON	\$3.00
<b>WEEKLY IF PAID IN ADVANCE</b>	
FULL HOOK-UP	\$120.00
REGULAR SITE	\$108.00
EXTRA PERSON	\$15.00
<b>MONTHLY</b>	
FULL HOOK-UP	\$300.00
REGULAR SITE	\$275.00
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# Volunteers help to rebuild Dog Island



**By Ken Dougherty**  
*Staff writer*

Dog Island, one of the few pieces of fairly solid ground outside the mouth of the Chassahowitzka River and nestled in the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge Complex, has served as a storm sanctuary and picnic area for boaters for about 25 years.

Saturday about 35 volunteers were busy giving the island facilities a facelift it has needed since the "no-name storm" blew through in 1993.

Pat Conrad, who lives within sight of the island to the south, remembers that the storm

*Ken Dougherty/For the Chronicle*

**Volunteers and Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge Complex staff worked Saturday to renovate the Dog Island recreational facility. The island was badly damaged in the "no name storm" in 1993.**

took his and two other homes as well as some of the Dog Island facilities.

"It completely destroyed all three houses. Where that chimney is standing was a house, and we put the other two back," he said while gazing south of the renovation project.

Conrad, who was raised in Inverness, declined to say how old he is, but said that he has been on the Chassahowitzka River since he was 12 years old.

He said that he graduated from Citrus High School in 1939 and his graduating class recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, and since he was a youngster he loved the area where he now lives.

"This is a good part of the world," declared Conrad, who traveled through Europe during World War II. "We drank a lot of beer out here,

*Please see ISLAND, Page 5A*

## ISLAND

*Continued from Page 1A*

but we also would come out here and clean it all up.

Bob Quarles, refuge officer with the Fish and Wildlife Service, worked Saturday on the dock and shelter he originally built a quarter-century ago.

"I built it with a couple of kids, including an outhouse," he said, noting that the shelter over the picnic area withstood the 1993 storm that took many people by surprise and is likened to a Category 1 hurricane in wind strength and storm surge.

"There was a 16-foot picnic table under the shelter made from two-by-10s. It disappeared during the storm and never was found.

The shelter held up except for a little roof damage," Quarles said.

Since the 1993 storm, the dock deteriorated and needed replacement, and since the place was a popular stop for local boaters it became the first project for the Friends of the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

"It's always been a place people enjoyed. You can tell it is popular by seeing all the people who are here to help," refuge director Elizabeth Souheaver said.

Quarles said that at one time tours and bird watching trips were offered by the wildlife service in that area and the island was a popular rest area on the tours.

"It looks like we'll be getting into that again," Quarles said, and Souheaver agreed.

"We want to start the birding tours again. There's not a lot of

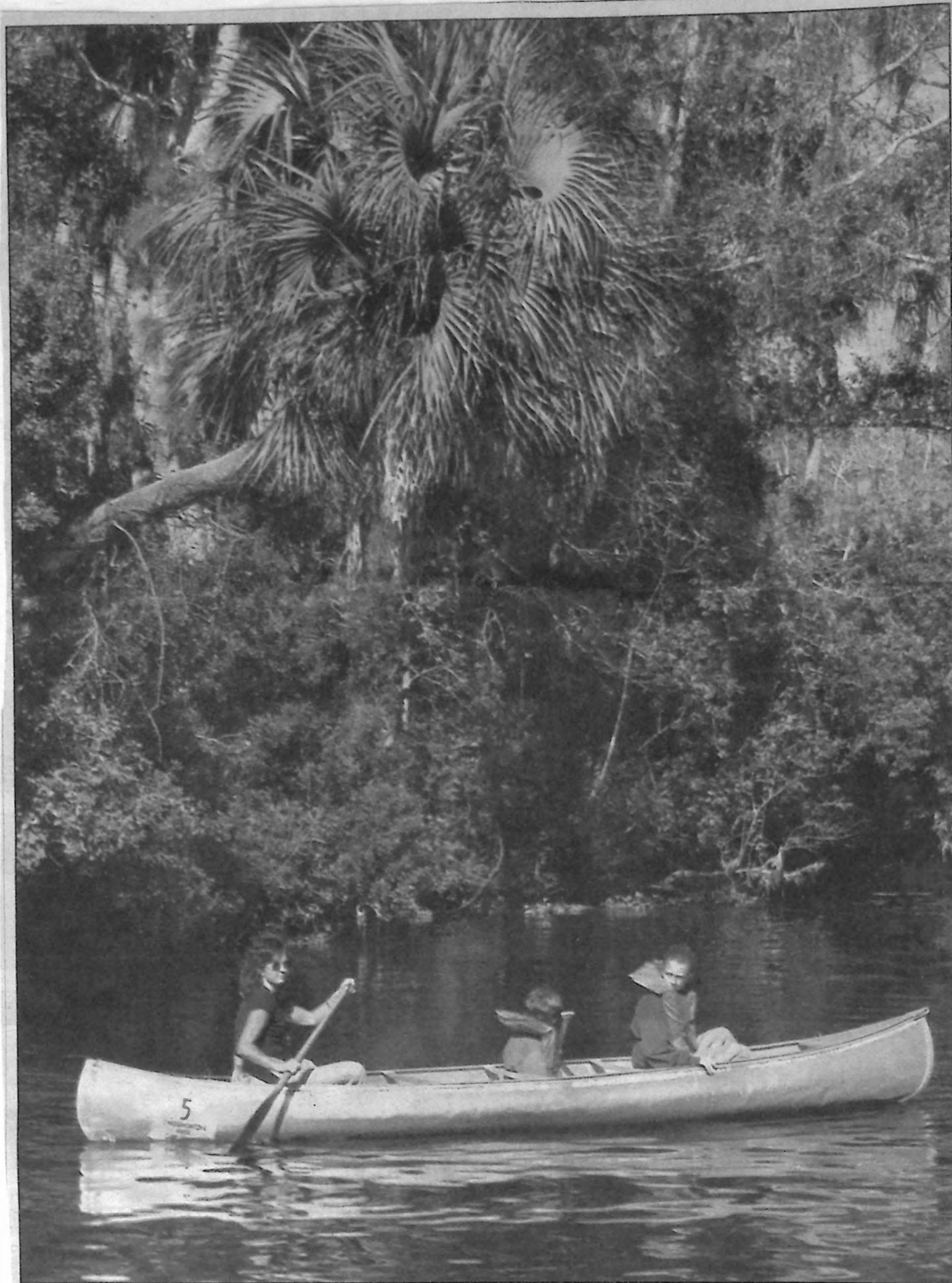
uplands in this area, which is why we decided to reclaim it. These people love it here, which is why so many of them turned out to help. Someday we'd like to have a fishing pier, and we can make it accessible to the handicapped. We have specifications from our engineers," Souheaver said.

Jane Shaw, member of the friends of the refuge and chairwoman of the Dog Island project, was pleased with the turnout of volunteers.

"It's a very good turnout, and we have a lot of highly skilled people, too," she said.

Craftsmen and volunteers spent the morning building new picnic tables, adding on to the roof cover for the picnic area, finishing the new dock and installing a composting toilet on the island. The day finished with a lunch cooked on the island.

*Monday, June 21, 1999 Citrus County (FL) Chronicle*



Alyse Preston/Chronicle photo

Patty Weeks, left, takes advantage of the beautiful weather Saturday by taking a canoe ride down the Chassahowitzka River with her son, Steve, and daughter Samantha. A group of Chassahowitzka property owners have announced plans to sue the state over pollution in the river.

# Officials seek ways to fix river's woes

By Jim Hunter  
Staff writer

As a group of property owners in Chassahowitzka have filed suit against the state over pollution in the Chassahowitzka River, local officials and representatives are continuing their efforts to find a way to bring sewer to the area.

County Commissioner Gary Bartell, who has spearheaded the effort to bring a regional sewer system to the southwest quadrant of the county, said the county has been working for more than six months with U.S. Rep. Karen Thurman, D-Dunnellon, to find money to fund a hook-up for the community to the nearby Sugarmill Woods sewage treatment plant.

Sugarmill Woods is now served by Florida Water Services, a private utility that also serves a number of Citrus County communities.

The strategy officials are using is that the federal government should be concerned enough about the effect of pollution that flows into the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge to come up with some money to help remedy the situation.

Samplings last year showed times of extremely high bacterial counts in some of the canals and parts of the headwaters of the river.

Charles Bradley of the county's Environmental Health Unit said the pollution problem has been known for a number of years and when septic systems can be identified as direct pollution sources, the owners have been forced to take remedial action.

Part of the problem, officials have said, is that the area itself is not a good one for septic systems and some of the older ones would not pass today's standards even when new. That, along with the soil situation and runoff, contributes to the high bacterial counts, they have said.

The county and the Southwest Florida Water Management District are funding a \$70,000 study to do more in-depth testing, which Bradley said could help pinpoint exactly where the pollution is coming from.

A University of South Florida analysis last fall indicated the presence of pathogenic viruses.

The property owners' lawsuit cites that and other tests as showing the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has not protected the resource or the citizens. The suit demands action to remedy the situation.

The DEP would not be the agency to build a sewer plant or collection system and connection to Sugarmill Woods, but it can help find the money for a private or government project.

## RIVER

continued from Page 1A

Bartell said that even as he has been talking with Florida Water about its possible expansions and the possibility of connecting Chassahowitzka to its system, the county has been negotiating with Florida Water to buy its sewer and water utilities in the county.

That would have to be done through a bond issue, he said, but he added that the negotiations for purchase are only in the very beginning stages. Figures haven't even been formulated yet, he said.

In the meantime, though there was no congressional appropriation last year for a solution to the problem, one of Thurman's aids, Nora Matus, said there is some hope.

"It's a brand new Congress," she said and pointed out that after Bob Livingston's announcement of retiring, Florida Rep. Bill Young took over as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, which might bode well for such a project.

She said, however, the agencies involved, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuge, would also have to recognize the problem and make that a priority in their agency budgets.

Bartell said that even if the

county didn't buy the Sugarmill Woods utility, it probably at some point would want to create tie-ins with that system once the new regional plant on County Road 480 is constructed, and so the county is moving in a direction that will provide options to solve the problem.

The Chassahowitzka River Restoration Committee, the group that filed suit against the DEP, however, is trying to force that solution sooner than later, saying the state has an obligation to protect its citizens against what it calls a serious health threat.

Another avenue for funding is the state Legislature, and state Rep. Nancy Argenziano, R-Crystal River, who last year got \$750,000 for the southwest sewer project, said she will again ask for appropriations.

Meanwhile, the DEP has 30 days to remedy the problem before the suit can actually be filed. David Guest, the Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund attorney who filed on behalf of the property owners, said he hoped to begin talks with state officials before that but felt the group will file next month in Citrus circuit court and end up with some kind of consent decree or court order for action on the issue.

Bradley said he had forwarded the suit to Citrus Health Department Administrator Mary Beth Nayfield and the state health department.

Please see RIVER, Page 4A

Jan. 17, 1999  
Chassahowitzka River

1/17/99

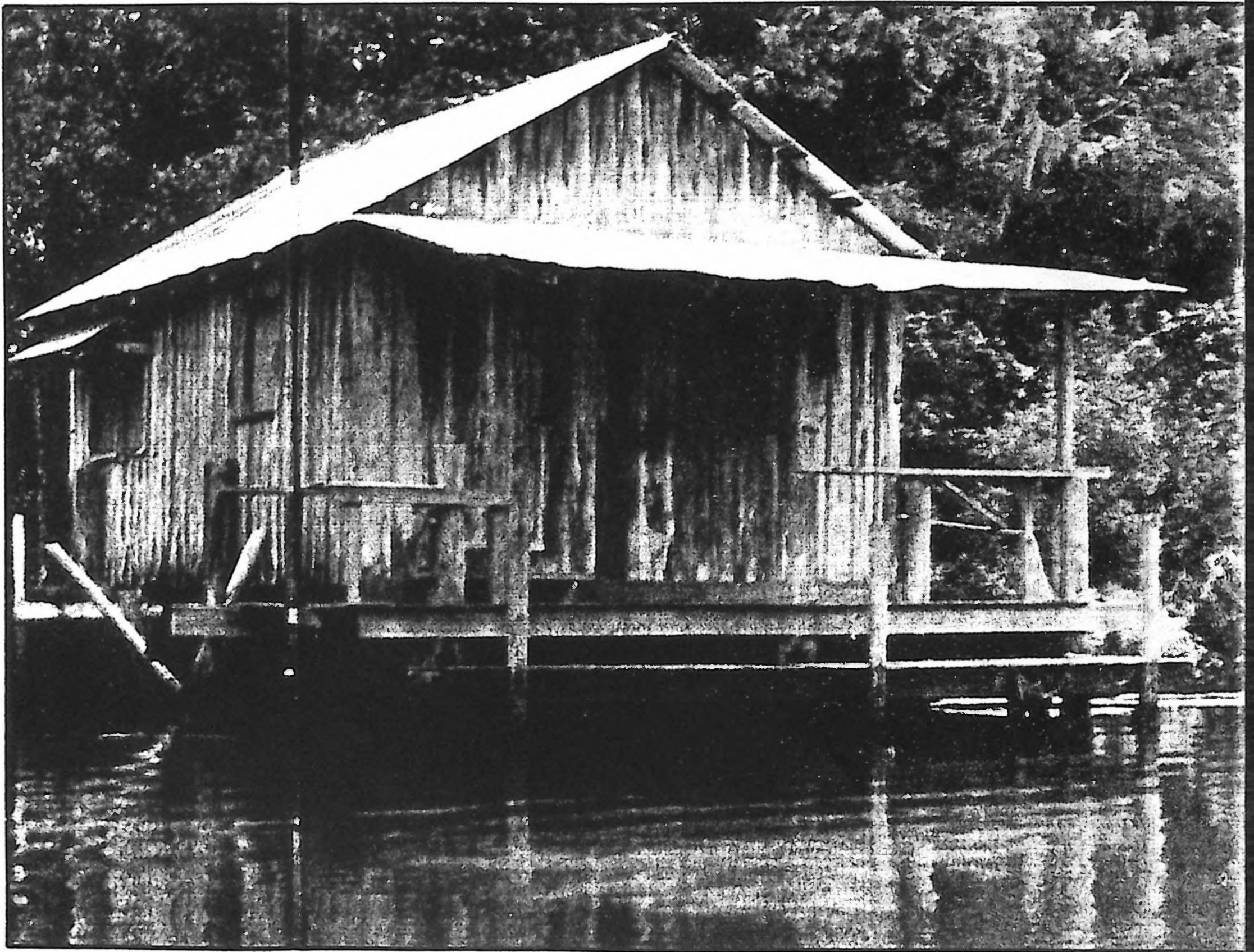
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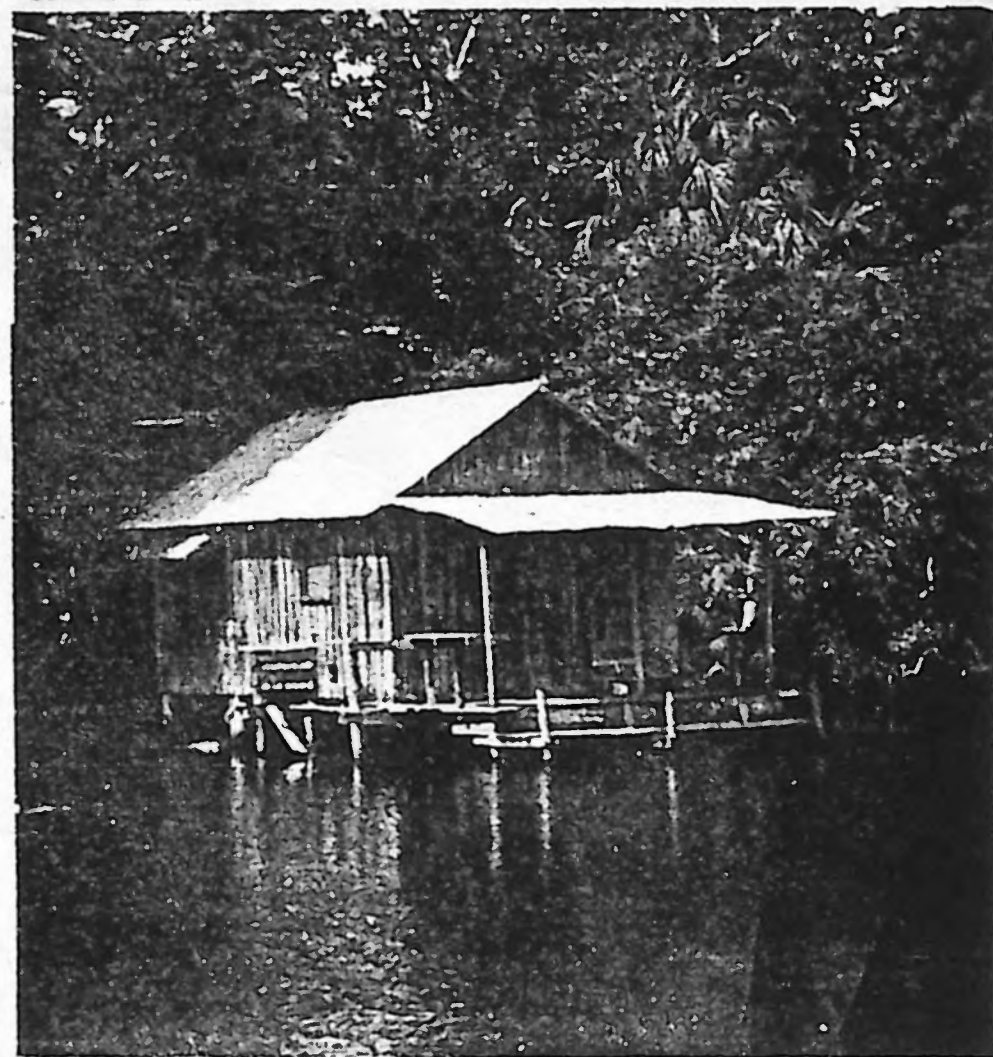
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### Peaceful escape

The quiet Chassahowitzka River in south Citrus County is one of our hidden assets. While boaters clog the Crystal and Homosassa Rivers each weekend, the Chassahowitzka manages to attract those seeking a

quiet time where Mother Nature still rules. The cabin is a weekend fish escape. (Photo by Gerard Mulligan).



**SCENES ON THE RIVER:** Below, Bob Quarles, left and Bob Zlabro, conduct tours of Chassahowitzka River via airboat. Old fishing shanty, small cove, are typical of refuge area.

**Photos By  
Lawrence Bugg**



# Refuge

## Chassahowitzka Wilderness Area Haven For Endangered Wildlife

By **LAWRENCE BUGG**  
Correspondent

**CHASSAHOWITZKA** — The Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge is a vast marshland of 24,000 acres in Citrus County and 7,000 acres in Hernando County.

It is not classified as a "wilderness area" because it welcomes human visitors who abide by the rules and permits hunting and fishing.

One of 400 such refuges in the nation, a major purpose of the refuge is conservation of plant and animal life including especially some of the species classified as "endangered" or "threatened."

Among the rarely observed species at the refuge is the bald eagle, national emblem of the United States, which many people feel is heading for extinction. The eagle seems to be allergic to human civilization and its numbers appear to be dwindling.

Ed Collinsworth, manager of the refuge, said he had counted seven eagles so far this year, but four

years ago he counted 16. "I don't know why the number has dropped," he said.

"Most of them move out in May but one or two may remain, especially young ones."

Florida has one of the largest eagle populations in the nation. The bald eagle is so named because of the whiteness of its head feathers.

Another bird, the brown pelican, which is present here, is on the federal endangered list, Collinsworth said. Also on the list is the peregrine falcon, one or two of which are seen here each winter.

Collinsworth said osprey, which build nests on tops of trees, are not on any list yet but are fewer in number than formerly.

The refuge also provides a home for alligators, which are listed as threatened, and manatees, commonly called sea cows, which are considered endangered. These latter are giant, gentle mammals that seek the comparative warmth of

the underwater springs as winter weather approaches.

The wood stork, which is on the threatened list, is common in winter, Collinsworth said, but it has not been reproducing well, especially since drought conditions have lowered the water table.

Seven to ten thousand birds, mostly herons, cormorants, and egrets, nest in the outer islands. The vividly colored wood ducks are more abundant than was originally thought, Collinsworth said.

The refuge manager said there are about 20 bobcats in the area. This animals, larger than a house cat and having an abbreviated tail, is found throughout Florida but is being considered for the "threatened" list. Bobcats, Collinsworth said, require a large territory in their foraging for food.

A few black bears are in the refuge, Collinsworth said, and a few wild turkeys. He said the bears sometimes feed during the day.

Hunting is allowed in season. During the duck season, which is from Thanksgiving to mid-January, hunters must use steel shot in order to protect the game from lead poisoning.

Collinsworth said people are invited to take tours of the refuge in organized groups. More than 600 students visited last year.

Transportation in the refuge is by airboats, which glide among the grassy waters with an ease not possible with ordinary water craft.

The boats can travel at speeds up to 55 miles an hour but even at 30 miles per hour the wind rushes into the face briskly.

On a recent tour Bob Quarles