

Sandhill Cranes and Whooping Cranes at the Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge



Photo credit: Cyndi Routledge

The Eastern Population of Greater Sandhill Cranes is a unique population that breeds and migrates only in the east. By the 1930s this population of cranes had declined to only 25 known breeding pairs in Wisconsin and biologists feared it would become extinct. Hunting restrictions, conservation of wetlands, and the Sandhill Crane's ability to adapt to smaller breeding territories and feed in waste grain fields brought this population back from the brink of extinction.

In the early 1960s the Sandhill Crane was suspected as migrating through Tennessee but rarely observed. Today the population migrating through Tennessee is estimated to number 75,000.

The Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge is located at the confluence of the Tennessee and Hiwassee Rivers and provides vital habitat for many migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. The refuge is managed by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and was historically planted in corn and other grains to attract migrating ducks and geese. The combination of shallow wetlands that cranes need for safe roosting and a readily available food source made the Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge a perfect resting place for migrating cranes. It is now one of the largest Sandhill Crane staging areas in the east, second only to Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in Indiana.

In 2001, the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership began its ultralight-led Whooping crane re-introduction project. In the fall of that year, Operation Migration's piloted ultralights successfully led five captive-reared juvenile Whooping Cranes on their first 2050 mile journey south from Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin to wintering grounds in Chassowitzka National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, stopping at the Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge midway through their journey. In the spring, these five cranes migrated north again without human assistance, returning to their fledging grounds in Necedah. This marked the first time that migrating Whooping Cranes had been present in the east in over one hundred years. Today, more than 100 endangered Whooping Cranes migrate through the east each fall and spring.

Photo credit: David Roemer



Tennessee's Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge provides a vital staging area for Sandhill Cranes and Whooping Cranes and offers a spectacular viewing opportunity for the public to celebrate the recovery of both these majestic crane species.