



GREAT BIRDING PROJECTS



An approach to bird-related editing, education, tourism, and marketing 18 January 2012

Some Festival Lessons

A view from the Tennessee Sandhill Crane Festival

I was fortunate to have attended the 2012 Tennessee Sandhill Crane Festival last weekend, a festival that has two decades of collective experience. The festival was based in southeast Tennessee, in the town of Birchwood, and centered at the state-run



Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge. The refuge consists of 6,000 acres (2,500 acres land and 3,500 acres water) located at the confluence of the Hiwassee and Tennessee Rivers. Between 10,000 and 15,000 Sandhill Cranes (one individual which is shown on the left) from that species' eastern population can gather at the Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge as they either stop there before migrating farther south or simply winter at the refuge.

The grand spectacle of thousands of Sandhill Cranes was enhanced this year by the appearance, starting in mid-December, of a Hooded Crane, a bird which should normally be in eastern Asia at this time of year. The origin of the Hooded Crane - whether a rare vagrant or an escaped bird - is under debate, but it still attracted over 2,700 individual birder-visitations from more than 40 states and a dozen countries *even before* the festival began. You can read a news story and see a photo of the Hooded Crane [here](#).

The festival itself hosted an estimated 2,800 visitors over the weekend, many of whom were able to see the Hooded Crane on Saturday, when that bird mixed in for hours with the Sandhill Cranes on a grassy hillside across from the festival's designated observation area.

The [Tennessee Sandhill Crane Festival](#) was not only packed with cranes and visitors, it was full of lessons, five of which are listed here. (These lessons are appropriate for just about any bird festival and are useful for a scenic byway, birding trail, CVB nature project, or land-management agency event):

1 Great sponsors and partners

The "presenting sponsors" were the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA), the Barbara J. Mapp Foundation, and the Tennessee Ornithological Society (TOS). The listed partners included the American Eagle Foundation, the Birchwood School, Blue Moon Cruises, Cherokee Removal Memorial Park, Holiday Inn Express, International Crane Foundation, Meigs County Tourism, Rhea County Tourism, Operation Migration, Vickie Henderson Art, Warioto Audubon Society, and others. It was the combination of these elements - agency, business, NGO, and others - that gave everyone a role to play

and a stake in the outcome. Any festival planning operation should include the effort to engage such varied partners.

2 Thoughtful volunteers

Those partners produced gracious and helpful volunteers over the weekend. The TWRA played an essential role in making this festival run so smoothly - this included getting the refuge entrance road graded and graveled, opening the site's warm and welcoming refuge building, and keeping the parking situation under control. Blue Moon Cruises contributed their buses and bus drivers for two full days of festival. The Birchwood School was open for shuttle-parking, entertainment, and presentations. The TOS provided on-site helpers for the visiting crowds and performed many tasks that normally go unnoticed.

3 Reaching the uninitiated

This was not a birders' festival; it was a bird festival. As such it was most welcoming to those people who were unfamiliar with many of the species, yet wanted to experience the wonder of the many Sandhill Cranes visiting the area. (If they could see the Hooded Crane or one of the Whooping Cranes in the area, that was an added bonus.) Seeing Bald Eagles, or a Northern Harrier, or Wild Turkeys was a first-time treat for some of the participants, particularly the younger ones. Planning a festival to be welcoming to the newer bird watchers is a requirement for ongoing success and continued popular participation.

4 Planning for rarities

The fact that there are experimental-population Whooping Cranes visiting Hiwassee or that there was the mega-rarity of the Hooded Crane only made the festival more exciting for visitors. When such birds were spotted, the word went out, and there were always experienced birders manning scopes to help the visitors find the special birds at the festival. Having "assigned docents" at rarity sites is a very wise move, and it makes the event particularly special for the dedicated birders. The photo on the right shows just such a set of "helpers" and visitors at Saturday's early morning viewing of the Hooded Crane.



5 Linking with a conservation message

The very existence of Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge is what made the event possible. And it is the purchase, expansion, and appropriate management of Hiwassee by TWRA that adds up to provide a great place for the cranes and a quality wildlife-watching experience for visitors. The businesses (motels, restaurants, gas station, etc.) that benefited from the presence of this land-and-wildlife resource and the thousands of visitors in early January can all be presented a valuable lesson. Yes, avitourism dollars add up, and every festival ought to make that a central theme linked to conserving the resource.

Buy and display your Stamp:



Show your support for U.S. wetland and grassland acquisition in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Funds collected through the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (often called the Federal Duck Stamp) go to secure vital habitat for multiple species of birds (and for other wildlife).

You can get your Stamp for \$15 at most U.S. Post Offices, staffed National Wildlife Refuges, better sporting goods stores, or online

[by clicking here.](#)

If you have a hard time finding a Stamp, you can send me \$15.50, and I'll mail you one. If you also want a clear plastic key-ring holder in which to place your stamp (on your binoculars, backpack, or simply to be used as a key-ring) include another \$1.00. Just make your check payable to "Paul Baicich," and mail it to me at my address below.

Words to Consider:

"It is no accident that so many people are turning to the outdoors these days. . . To me birds, of all wild living things, have the most immediate appeal. They have wings, can fly where they want when they want. Earthbound, I would almost give my soul to enjoy similar freedom."

- Roger Tory Peterson (1908 -1996)

For contact and more information:



If you wish, you can contact me concerning your avitourism interests, site and trail/byway evaluations, and group presentations. (A list of my standard 2012 talks can be sent to you on request.)

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