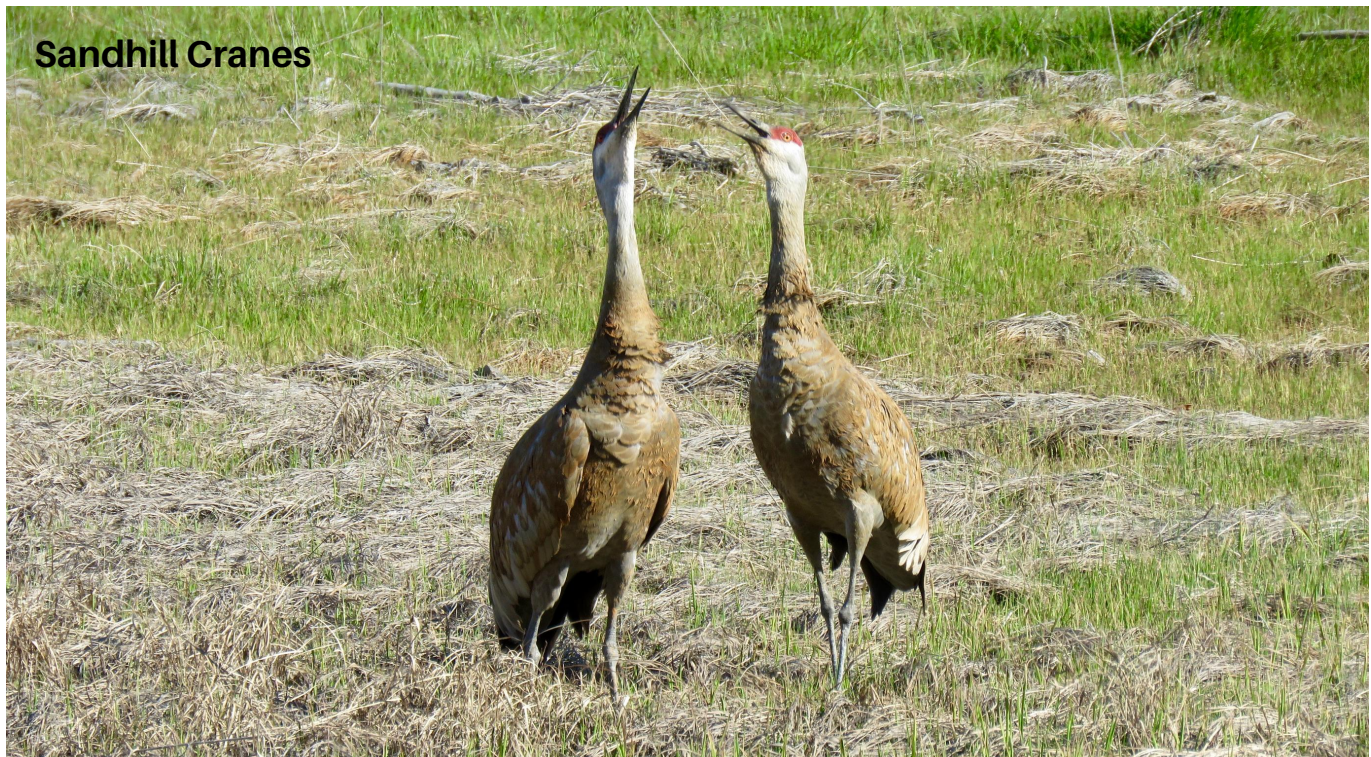




## Cranes & Waterfowl: A Winter Week in the Southeast

December 1-7, 2020



This short driving tour will provide participants with an opportunity to spend time birding in four southeastern states: Tennessee; Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina. Though perhaps not thought of as "bucket list" destinations by most birders, each state has much to offer visiting birders. Through my efforts to see 150 birds in every U.S. state, I have spent time in many out of the way and little known places and have learned that there is something worthwhile and interesting see practically everywhere, and these states are no exception. During the tour we will visit the Hiawasee Wildlife Refuge in Tennessee, the winter home of the largest Sandhill Crane flock in the eastern United States; Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama, where up to 15 Whooping Cranes have joined the wintering flock of sandhills for at least the past 10 years; the Bradley Unit of Eufala NWR in Georgia where large numbers of wintering waterfowl congregate each year and where it is possible to encounter seldom seen birds like King Rail and Barn Owl; Harris Neck NWR in Georgia's Coastal Plain where birds like Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill and Purple Gallinule will be possible and Huntington Beach State Park, the Palmetto state's premier birding venue. During the course of the trip we can expect to record 125+ species of birds and witness the spectacle of large concentrations of wintering ducks, geese, cranes and raptors. However, rather than frenetically racing about trying to accumulate a lengthy list, we will bird at a leisurely pace and take time for photography and discussion of some of the more difficult identification issues that might arise. In that sense, this will be a good tour for both experienced and inexperienced birders alike. Though many of the birds we see along the way will probably be familiar, we are certain to turn up something a bit out of the ordinary that will add some spice to the adventure.





## Cranes & Waterfowl: A Winter Week in the Southeast

December 1-7, 2020

To maximize safety for everyone we will not travel together in a large van. Instead this will be a self-driving tour and the number of participants will be limited to six. We will also not have group meals in restaurants, but instead will stay in hotels with microwaves and refrigerators so that participants can eat in their rooms. By following these safety protocols we can reduce close contact and thus minimize risk of contracting Covid-19.

### Birding Sites

**Hiawasee Wildlife Refuge:** This refuge is operated by the Tennessee Wildlife Authority and is located at the confluence of the Tennessee and Hiawasee rivers. The refuge consists of over 6000 acres that include upland agricultural land that is planted to attract wintering geese and cranes. There is also a substantial water component including Lake Chickamauga and the Tennessee River as well as scattered upland forests where wintering passerines can be found. Bald Eagles are abundant here in winter and a few Golden Eagles join them each year, though it can be challenging to find one.

Orange-crowned Warbler





## Cranes & Waterfowl: A Winter Week in the Southeast

December 1-7, 2020

**Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge:** This 35,000 acre refuge is a hidden jewel unknown to most birders outside of Alabama. Although designated as a waterfowl refuge, Wheeler provides for a wide spectrum of wildlife. Its great diversity of habitat includes deep river channels, tributary creeks, tupelo swamps, open backwater embayments, bottomland hardwoods, pine uplands, and agricultural fields. This rich mix of habitats provide places for over 295 bird species to rest, nest and winter, including over 30 species of waterfowl (ducks and geese) and an increasing population of Sandhill Cranes joined annually by a small number of federally endangered Whooping Cranes.

**Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge:** Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1964 to provide habitat for wintering waterfowl and other migratory and resident wildlife. The 11,184-acre refuge is located along both banks of the Chattahoochee River in southeast Alabama and southwest Georgia. The Bradley Unit of Eufaula NWR adjoins the Chattahoochee River on the Georgia side and contains ditched impoundments, weedy fields, and mesic hardwood forests. It is home to a wide variety of wintering waterfowl as well as rarer species like King and Virginia rails and Barn Owl. On the west side of the river the Kennedy Unit provides some of the best birding in all of Alabama. In addition to wintering waterfowl, the shrubby roadside vegetation here holds a nice variety of wintering sparrows including Vesper, White-crowned and Lincoln's.

**Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge:** This 2,800-acre coastal refuge offers excellent birding year-round. With a mix of saltwater marsh, managed freshwater ponds, fields, and maritime forests, Harris Neck has a bird species list of more than 260, putting it among the best birding sites in Georgia. The refuge is on the site of a former military airfield, and the four-mile auto tour loop utilizes an old runway. Driving the loop and hiking some of the 15 miles of trails could should yield species such as Anhinga, Wood Stork, Northern Bobwhite, Roseate Spoonbill, Clapper Rail and Red-headed Woodpecker. Purple Gallinules nest at the refuge and although they migrate south in winter, a few sometimes linger into December.

**Huntington Beach State Park:** This coastal park located south of Myrtle Beach is South Carolina's premier birding destination where a morning's birding can yield 90+ species. The richness of the birding here lies in the diversity of habitat as the park contain coastal hardwood forest, salt and brackish marshes, beaches and a rock jetty attractive to wintering shorebirds like Ruddy Turnstone and Purple Sandpiper. In the coastal waters one can find both Common and Red-throated loons, Horned Grebe, scoters, scaup and occasionally rarer sea ducks like Long-tailed. A few Piping Plover often winter here along with larger numbers of Wilson's Plover, and in the salt marshes one can look for Saltmarsh and Neslon's Sparrows.



# **Cranes & Waterfowl: A Winter Week in the Southeast**

December 1-7, 2020

## **Daily Itinerary**

### **December 1, Day 1: Arrival and meeting in Lenoir City TN**

The tour will begin today with arrivals in Lenoir City TN located about 45 minutes southwest of Knoxville. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 health situation we will not use a group van for transportation during this tour. Instead, participants will either drive separately during the tour or car pool depending upon their comfort level. Night in Lenoir City.

### **December 2, Day 2: Hiawasee Wildlife Refuge and travel to Huntsville AL**

We will spend much of today birding at Hiawasee Wildlife Refuge in southern Tennessee. The refuge is about an hour and fifteen minutes from the hotel and we will plan an early departure to arrive by dawn. The highlight here will be the huge wintering flock of Sandhill Cranes that often has a few Whooping Cranes mixed in. Hiawasee also has a sizeable wintering population of Canvasbacks and this will probably be our best chance to see this diving duck. By mid-afternoon we will begin the 2.5 hour drive to Huntsville AL where we will spend the next 2 nights. Night in Huntsville.

### **December 3, Day 3: Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge**

Wheeler NWR is located about 30 minutes south of Huntsville and we will spend the entire day exploring various sections of the reserve. Our primary target bird here will be Whooping Crane as they have become regular winter residents at Wheeler in recent years. Though they are always present, finding one among the large numbers of Sandhill Cranes can be challenging and there are no guarantees, but with luck and diligence we should be able to turn one up. We will likely amass a sizeable list of waterfowl here and will also have our best chances of the tour to find Greater White-fronted, Snow and Ross's geese. Covering all that this refuge has to offer in a single day is impossible, but we will try to see as much of it as we can. Several viewing sites on the Tennessee River will give us a chance to see diving species like Common Loon and Red-breasted Merganser and winter often brings something rare to the refuge. A boardwalk trail through the largest tupelo swamp in Alabama will give us a chance for woodland species like Barred Owl and Pileated Woodpecker and the viewing area at the visitor's center provides great chances to see cranes from a warm and dry environment. With all of the birding possibilities here it is sure to be a memorable day that will add many species to your Alabama bird list! Night in Huntsville.

### **December 4, Day 4: Wheeler NWR & travel to Eufaula AL**

We will spend a few final hours at Wheeler before driving about 4 hours south to the small town of Eufaula AL. If time allows, we will visit the Kennedy Unit of Eufaula NWR which is located on the Alabama side of the Walter George Reservoir. Night in Eufaula.





# **Cranes & Waterfowl: A Winter Week in the Southeast**

December 1-7, 2020

## **Daily Itinerary**

### **December 5, Day 5: Eufaula NWR-Bradley Unit & travel to Savannah**

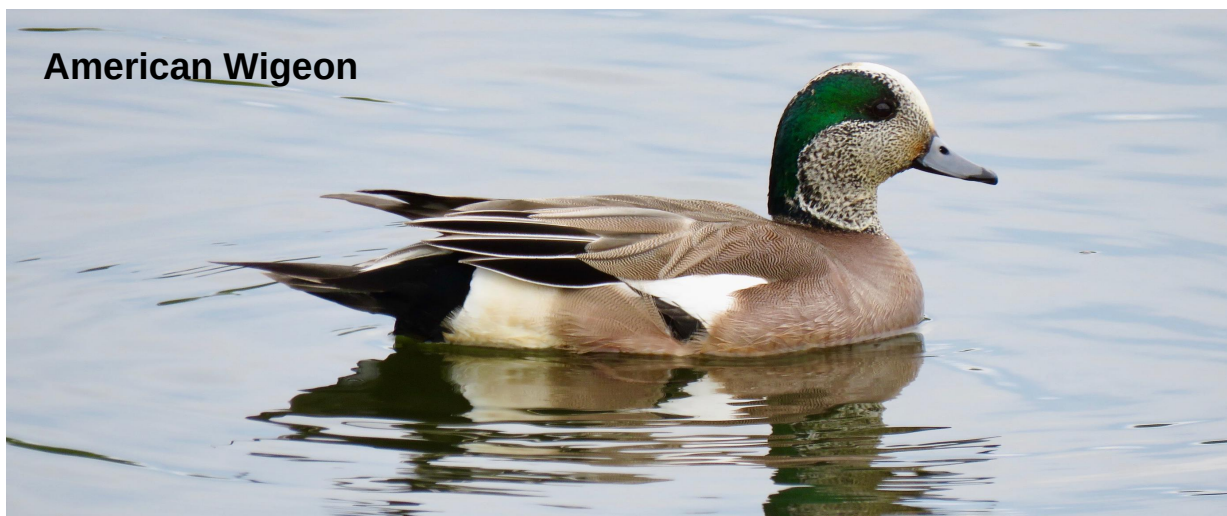
The Bradley Unit of Eufaula NWR is located on the Georgia side of the reservoir and we will spend much of the morning hiking the various dike trails here looking for waterfowl and wintering sparrows. King and Virginia rails and American Bittern are regular winter residents here although seeing any of them is difficult. Barn Owls also are resident here and we will have good chances of seeing them on a day roost. This is a good place to practice your sparrow skills and in some winters a LeConte's joins the more common Swamp, White-crowned, Savannah, Song and White-throated. Less common are Fox and Vesper, but they are also possible. After lunch we will drive about 4 hours across the state of Georgia to the coastal city of Savannah where we will spend the night. Night in Savannah.

### **December 6, Day 6: Harris Neck NWR & travel to Murrell's Inlet SC**

Another day and another national wildlife refuge: Harris Neck NWR located about 45 minutes south of Savannah. Here the makeup of our bird list will take on a different look as we will have a chance to see species associated with coastal regions. Species expected here will be Wood Stork, Roseate Spoonbill (most years), Clapper Rail and possibly Purple Gallinule. We will spend several hours at Harris Neck before driving about 4 hours north to our final destination in South Carolina. Night in Murrell's Inlet SC.

### **December 7, Day 7: Huntington Beach SP and travel home**

Our final morning of birding will be spent at Huntington Beach State Park where we will focus on wintering shorebirds, gulls, terns and sea ducks. Along the way we will hope to add Piping Plover, Red-throated Loon and Purple Sandpiper to our list and we will also search the marshes for Nelson's and Saltmarsh sparrows. We will conclude the tour around lunchtime to allow people to begin the return trip to their homes.





# **Cranes & Waterfowl: A Winter Week in the Southeast**

December 1-7, 2020

## **Tour Information**

The tour will be limited to six participants.

## **Tour Cost**

The cost of the tour will be \$1650 per person from Lenoir City. The price includes 6 nights lodging in single rooms, a prorated share of the leader's expenses and a guide fee. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 health situation, the price does not include meals or transportation during the tour. Since social distancing practices are being observed, all accommodations will be in single rooms and there will be no single supplement surcharge,

## **Registration & Deposit**

In order to reserve a space on the tour, a completed and signed registration form is required along with a deposit of \$500. Registration forms are available on the website at [www.otusasiotours.com](http://www.otusasiotours.com)

Payments should be mailed to:

### **Otus asio Tours**

900 Hillsborough Road  
Chapel Hill NC, 27516

## **Cancellation Policy & Final Payments**

Final payments will be due October 1 and invoices will be sent in September. Given the unusual circumstances that we find ourselves in, there will be no cancellation penalties for this tour after deposits and final payments are made. All cancellations will be issued full refunds less any unrecoverable expenses that have been incurred by Otus asio Tours. Any such expenses on this tour will be minimal.

## **Transportation**

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 health crisis we will not be using a van for transport during this tour. Participants will be responsible for arranging their own transportation via private vehicle during the tour. At some sites we may choose to car pool while birding depending upon the comfort level of the participants.



# Cranes & Waterfowl: A Winter Week in the Southeast

December 1-7, 2020

## Tour Information (cont)

### Weather

The weather in the southeastern U.S. in December is variable and could range from warm and pleasant to chilly and damp, so participants should be prepared for a range of conditions. In general the expectation is cool early mornings and comfortable afternoons. Since this is a temperate area the possibility of rain exists and a rain coat should be included in your trip luggage.

### Covid Policies

Masks will be required throughout the tour and we will try as best as we can to maintain social distancing while birding. If participants are comfortable we may do some car pooling when possible, but this will be determined during the tour and will always be at the discretion of the group. If car pooling is used masks will be required in the vehicle and we will drive with the windows down. Hand sanitizer will be available at all times, but participants should also plan to bring their own supply.

### Information

For further information, contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or [otusasiotours@gmail.com](mailto:otusasiotours@gmail.com).

