

NOTES FROM TWRA BRIEFING ON PROPOSED SANDHILL CRANE HUNT

September 21, 2010 Nashville

Among those attending from TWRA were Director Ed Carter, the Assistant Director, Chief of Wildlife, two waterfowl biologists, three regional directors, the Hiwassee Refuge manager, and state ornithologist Scott Somershoe. A representative from Cumberland-Harpeth Audubon Society and the Tennessee Wildlife Federation also attended. Dick Preston and Melinda Welton represented the Tennessee Ornithological Society. TWRA allowed for a free flow of comments, suggestions, and ideas.

There are 3 subspecies of Sandhill Crane in North America. The Greater Sandhill Crane (SACR) migrates through and winters in Tennessee. The breeding range for this subspecies is centered in the Great Lakes region of the U.S. and Canada, and contains about 600,000 individuals. Approximately 10% of these birds migrate through the Mississippi Flyway and winter primarily from Georgia to central Florida.

In recent years, a growing number of SACR have been wintering in Tennessee, mainly on TWRA's Hiwassee Refuge in Meigs County. The 5-year average number of cranes counted during the mid-winter surveys is 22,099, with an extraordinary 48,505 counted in 2010 (and confirmed by experienced USFWS biologists). This average is somewhat inflated because of a hard freeze in Pulaski, Indiana that forced more cranes south during the count period. Excluding 2010, the 5-year average is 12,398.

After a decade of discussion, in 2008 the Tennessee Wildlife Federation requested, and subsequently the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Commission directed, TWRA to pursue completion of a Management Plan for the Eastern Population (EP) of SACR. A committee of the Mississippi Flyway Council, which included two TWRA biologists and Dr. David Aborn of UTC, along with nine others, prepared this plan. The plan was presented to and approved by both the Mississippi and Atlantic Flyway Councils in March 2010. The plan addresses many aspects of crane management and includes an Objective to provide hunting opportunities. No non-consumptive Objectives were included in the plan.

With Flyway approval of the Management Plan, TWRA was in a position to prepare a Hunt Plan for Tennessee. This plan was completed and approved by the Mississippi Flyway Council in July 2010. The plan calls for a quota of 733 permits (maximum three cranes per permit holder) based on a "take" of 10% of the 5-year population average ($22,099 \times 10\% = 2,200$ cranes). TWRA estimates that if all permits were issued, the success rate would be approximately 25%, or 600 SACR, with an additional non-retrieved (crippling) rate of 9%. The 60-day hunting season would be concurrent with the waterfowl season. The zone for hunting SACR would be roughly south of I-40 and east of Hwy 56 (southeast Tennessee). There is no plan to allow hunting of SACR anywhere else in Tennessee at this time.

TWRA recently posted a website < www.state.tn.us/twra/sandhillproposal.html>, which includes information about Sandhill Cranes, links to the proposed hunt plan, and a link for the public to submit comments. The deadline for comments is January 18, 2011. At either the January or February 2011 TWRA Commission meeting (the date and location have not been set, but are usually scheduled for the 3rd or 4th Wednesday and Thursday of the month), TWRA biologists will present the proposed hunt plan. The public will be invited to voice their comments at this meeting as well.

The proposed SACR hunting season would be 60 days and run concurrent with waterfowl season. The zone for hunting SACR would be roughly south of I-40, and east of Hwy 56 (southeast Tennessee). There is no plan to allow hunting of SACR anywhere else in Tennessee at this time.

TWRA concerns included:

- 1) Providing hunters with reasonable use of this resource (SACR are designated as a game bird by the USFWS, but is a non-game bird in Tennessee. Sandhill Cranes are hunted in a number of western U.S. states and parts of Canada).
- 2) Addressing complaints from area farmers of SACR depredation of crops, primarily of winter wheat. In 2008 the USFWS issued four depredation permits for up to 100 cranes; 2009 three permits were issued; 2010 two permits were issued. TWRA feels allowing hunters to control the population is a better method than depredation permits.
- 3) The \$300,000 TWRA spends to manage Hiwassee comes almost entirely from fees and excise taxes paid by hunters and fishermen.
- 4) According to Refuge managers, the number of cranes using Hiwassee Refuge may be reaching carrying capacity.

Concerns raised by TOS included:

- 1) Initiating a Sandhill Crane hunting season would likely damage the reputation of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency among the growing non-hunting, wildlife-viewing public. According to USFWS surveys between 1996 and 2006, hunting declined 25% while wildlife watching increased by 81%.
- 2) Celebrating the fall arrival and over-wintering of tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes on and around Hiwassee Refuge as a wildlife spectacle and a Watchable Wildlife viewing opportunity will likely garner TWRA the critical public support for the broader-based funding so desperately needed by the Agency.
- 3) The Sandhill Crane is not a game species in Tennessee. TWRA alone has the authority, through proclamation, to change the status of a species. Since the founding of the agency, no additional birds have been proclaimed game species. It should also be noted, that no bird species have ever been removed from the game species list, even when populations have declined (i.e. Northern Bobwhite, Common Moorhen).
- 4) An increasing number of Whooping Cranes (WHCR) are stopping and wintering in Tennessee. WHCR have been (rarely) mistaken for SACR and killed in western-hunting states. Immature

WHCR and SACR look very similar. In addition, other non-target species may be shot. Specifically, a common name for the Great Blue Heron in Tennessee is “crane.”

- 5) Lead shot is currently allowed in upland areas where the cranes would be hunted. Scavengers (eagles, hawks, crows, jays, coyotes, bobcats and many others) of crippled or unretrieved carcasses would be exposed to lead poisoning. (TWRA could require steel shot to be used.)
- 6) A SACR hunt could either cause the cranes to leave Tennessee for wintering areas further south, or drive more cranes onto the Hiwassee Refuge. TWRA presented no plan to address the potential of crane over-crowding on the refuge.
- 7) The increase in the eastern population of SACR is very recent, and given the slow growth potential of the species (breeding first occurs at four to seven years of age, with a pair rarely raising more than one young per year), it is premature to propose a SACR hunt in Tennessee.