

Cranes Galore & More, Hiwassee Refuge & Chattanooga, TN Itinerary

Day 1 – Friday, December 10– Arrive in Chattanooga; Brainerd Levee

Please plan to arrive in Chattanooga by 10 AM this morning. Transportation is included from Asheville, NC but if you are traveling from elsewhere you can make your own arrangements for arrival. Just let the Ventures office know of your plan.

After meeting at the hotel, we will head out for the trip's first birding. The weather will of course influence our exact itinerary, but we will likely spend some time at Brainerd Levee, located right along the Chickamauga Creek Greenway. This is usually an excellent spot for various dabbling ducks such as **Green-winged & Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, and Gadwall**, among others. We should also find an abundance of **Wilson's Snipe** in addition to a good selection of winter sparrows, including **Savannah, Swamp, and Field**, and there's a good chance we'll find **Rusty Blackbirds** here as well.

Following lunch, we'll check nearby Chickamauga Dam, which can hold an impressive variety of diving ducks. Some winters here have been spectacular with numerous **White-winged Scoters, Long-tailed Ducks, and Common Goldeneye** being seen on past trips. We may not end up with such a selection of rarities this time around, but we can at least hope for good numbers of **Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, and Bufflehead**, and we'll look for **Bonaparte's** and other uncommon gulls in the usual horde of **Ring-billed Gulls. *Night in Chattanooga***

Day 2 – Saturday, December 11 – Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge; Booker T. Washington State Park

This morning will mostly be spent birding at the observation platform at Hiwassee Refuge, home of the largest wintering flock of **Sandhill Cranes** in the southeast, outside of Florida. Though our visit will be a little after peak numbers, we should still find thousands of these elegant birds feeding in the fields, bugling, and flying to and fro. We will scope through the flocks for any **Whooping Cranes** that might still be lingering around, and we will search amongst the usual **Bald Eagles** for the rare but annual **Golden Eagle**. The selection of waterfowl is typically quite good and we could add **American Wigeon, American Black Duck, and Northern Pintail**. Last winter, over 500 **American White Pelicans** were seen here so you never know what may drop in! We'll also check the adjacent countryside and farm fields for more cranes and anything else we can find. There very well may be **Greater White-fronted, Snow or Ross's Geese** feeding in the fields.

After lunch, we'll head to Booker T Washington State Park, located farther east on Chickamauga Lake. In the past we have found **Canvasback, Horned Grebe, Common Loon** and others here. We will also keep our ears out for any local rarities that have been reported elsewhere and may have time for other stops before dinner. ***Night in Chattanooga***

Day 3 – Sunday, December 12– Tennessee Aquarium; Mop-up; Departure

Today we switch gears for a bit of fun as we have a planned visit with our friends at the Tennessee Aquarium. On past trips, we've enjoyed a 'behind the scenes' tour, including a close encounter with some of the aquarium's resident penguins. This will be an especially nice experience should the weather be particularly wintry or miserable. Afterwards, we'll have our last lunch and will then have time for one or two more stops to look for a rarity or for something we previously missed.

Our tour will end in the afternoon. Those that are heading back to Asheville should return by 6 or 7 PM.