



Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge, Chickamauga Wildlife Management Area, Yuchi Refuge at Smith Bend & Environs


[Sandhill Crane Survey 1968-2004](#)
[Map \(Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge\)](#)
[Bird Finding](#)
[Directions](#)

Location: On the Tennessee River (Chickamauga Lake) at river mile 499 (border of the counties of Hamilton, Rhea, and Meigs), upriver to Watts Bar Dam, river mile 529.9, and from the mouth of Hiwassee River to river mile 7.4 (Tennessee 58 bridge and Agency Creek) to include all water and shore areas, islands, and public lands (among them--Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge, parts of Chickamauga Wildlife Management Area, and Yuchi Refuge at Smith Bend) in the counties of Meigs and Rhea, Tennessee.

Physiographic Area: PIF 13 (Southern Ridge and Valley); BCR 28 (Appalachian Mountains)



Geographical Coordinates:

Hiwassee Island--Lat. 352518N Long. 0845918W

Watts Bar Dam--Lat. 353715N Long. 0844653W

Agency Creek at Tennessee 58--Lat. 352210N Long. 0845429W

Elevation Range: 682'-702'

682' Hiwassee Ferry (former, now Tennessee 60 bridge at river)

702' Hiwassee Island

682' Watts Bar Dam

699' Agency Creek at Tennessee 58

Size: 10,500 acres + water area upriver from Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge to Watts Bar Dam

USGS 7.5' quads: Big Spring, Decatur, Graysville

Description: The Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge is 6,000 acres (2,500 acres land and 3,500 acres water [Hiwassee River]) located on Chickamauga Lake at the confluence of the Hiwassee River with the Tennessee River. Beginning at Tennessee 60 (over the Tennessee River, about river mile 499.5), the refuge stretches to around river mile 505 at Armstrong Bend and from the mouth of the Hiwassee River upstream to Tennessee 58 at Agency Creek (about river mile 7.4). Included is Hiwassee Island (400 acres). Of the land area, approximately 30% (750 acres) is agricultural land that is cropped. Crops grown include corn, wheat, soybeans, milo, varieties of millet, and buckwheat. Most of the refuge is farmed by Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) personnel. The remaining 70% of the land area (1,750 acres) is a wooded mix, mainly of pine and hardwood forest.

The Chickamauga Wildlife Management Area within the IBA site is composed of around 2,000 acres in 8 units--Mud Creek, New Bethal, Moon Island, Cottonport, Washington Ferry, Goodfield Creek, Gillespie Bend, and Yellow Creek. (The wildlife management area is composed of 16 units of land totaling approximately 4,000 acres along the Tennessee River and Hiwassee River [both part of Chickamauga Lake], beginning immediately downstream from Watts Bar Dam and ending upstream of Chickamauga Dam.) Most of the units are about 50% agriculture and 50% mixed pine-hardwood forest. There are small pockets of early successional stage habitat, i.e. shrubby-grassland areas. Most all lands on the wildlife management area are sharecropped by private, local farmers. Twenty-five percent of the crops are left in the fields for wildlife.

The Yuchi Refuge at Smith Bend, acquired by TWRA in 2001, consists of approximately 2,500 acres in Rhea County. The area is characterized by its rich diversity of habitats ranging from rugged upland areas to wetland swamps and marshes.

IBA Criteria: 4a, 4e, 4g



Photo by Kevin Calhoun

The view from the observation building on Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge.

Ornithological Importance: This site has the largest winter flock of Sandhill Cranes in the southeast United States outside of



Photo by Kevin Calhoon

Seeing and hearing the thousands of Sandhill Cranes that use the refuge during migration and to winter is an experience not forgotten.

Florida. Waterfowl and gull numbers are good for the area of the state. Great Blue Heron numbers are substantial in winter. On the Hiwassee CBC in the period 2001-2005, there was an average of 192 birds with highs of 253 birds (January 1, 2003) and 244 birds (January 1, 2004). Bald Eagle, a Tennessee In Need of Management species, numbers in winter rank among the top five in the state. In the period 2001-2005, Hiwassee CBC counts of Bald Eagles were: January 1, 2001 (20); January 1, 2002 (20); January 1, 2003 (26); January 1, 2004 (15); and January 1, 2005 (20); for a 5-year average of 20.2 birds. One pair of Bald Eagles nest on the refuge and several pairs nearby.

Note 1. Waterfowl (ducks, geese, and swans) numbers are significant for southeast Tennessee. There are two winter surveys.

In the period 2001-2005, the Hiwassee CBC averaged 16 species and 5,485 individuals. Totals were (first number species/second number individuals): January 1, 2001 (17/9,189), January 1, 2002 (17/5,281), January 1, 2003 (14/3,072), January 1, 2004 (19/3,569), and January 1, 2005 (15/6,315), for a 5-year average of 16 species and 5,485 birds. Major species averages were: Mallard (3,339), American Black Duck (871), Canada Goose

(634), Gadwall (404), and Hooded Merganser (193). Double-crested Cormorant numbers in that 5-year period are among the highest in the winter in Tennessee with highs of 258 birds (January 1, 2005) and 222 birds (January 1, 2003), for a 5-year average of 148 individuals.

In the "Tennessee Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey," 2001-2005, totals were: 2001 (9,563), 2002 (6,172), 2003 (5,283), 2004 (3,390), and 2005 (5,819), for an average of 6,165 birds. Major species averages were: Mallard (4,820), American Black Duck (371), Canada Goose (362), and Gadwall (82).

Note 2. Gulls on the Hiwassee CBC in the period 2001-2005 averaged 1,700 individuals. Totals included: Bonaparte's Gull--January 1, 2002 (745), January 1, 2003 (11), January 1, 2004 (272), and January 1, 2005 (328), for a 5-year average of 271 birds; Ring-billed Gull--January 1, 2001 (460), January 1, 2002 (2,230), January 1, 2003 (822), January 1, 2004 (484), and January 1, 2005 (3,139) for a 5-year average of 1,427 birds; Herring Gull--numbers were small or absent.

Note 3. Sandhill Crane winter numbers are the highest in the southeastern United States outside of Florida. From a beginning in 1968 with 20 birds, this area now attracts over 14,000 birds each winter. The area is one of only two major staging areas for the eastern population of Sandhill Cranes during the fall and spring migration periods. These birds nest in the area surrounding Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. Each fall they migrate from their nesting grounds to the Jasper-Pulaski Wildlife Management Area in Indiana, the northern staging area. From there they fly, frequently non-stop, to Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge and environs where they rest and feed before some of them continue to migrate to Florida for the winter (Wally Akins). See [Sandhill Crane Survey 1968-2004](#) and the [Hiwassee CBC](#) for annual counts. On the Hiwassee CBC in the period 2001-2005, totals were: January 1, 2001 (8,788), January 1, 2002 (11,658), January 1, 2003 (12,817), January 1, 2004 (13,951), and January 1, 2005 (14,610) for a 5-year average of 12,365 birds. In addition, the re-introduced eastern population of Whooping Cranes use the site as a stopover during the migration periods and, at times, for part of the winter.

Site Criteria	Species/ Group	Season ¹	Avg. No Season	Max. No. Season	Years of Data	Source ²
4a	Waterfowl (see Note 1 above.)	W	5,485 (CBC)	9,189 (CBC)	2001-2005	3, 5, 6, 7a
4e	Gulls (see Note 2 above.)	W	1,700 (CBC)	3,473 (CBC)	2001-2005	3, 6
4g	Congregatory: Sandhill Crane (See Note 3 above.)	W	12,365 (CBC)	14,610 (CBC)	2001-2005	3, 5, 6, 7a, 7b

Season¹ B = Breeding, W = Wintering, SM = Spring Migration, FM = Fall Migration

Source² 1-Atlas Breeding Birds of Tennessee 2-Breeding Bird Surveys

3-Christmas Bird Counts ([Hiwassee](#), Kevin Calhoon, compiler) 4-Point Counts 5-Refuge Counts (Hiwassee Wildlife Refuge)

6-Personal observations (Kevin Calhoon) 7-Other (a-Wally Akins, b-David Aborn)

Ownership: Tennessee Valley Authority. Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency.

Contact: Wally Akins, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Hiwasee Refuge Manager, 423-614-3018 (office), 423-559-8764 (fax), James.Akins@state.tn.us.

Conservation Concerns: Potential concerns are fishing conflict and hunting conflict.

Management Program: There is a management plan written by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and The University of Tennessee.

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Approved as an IBA site: December 2005--Yes 7 No 0

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