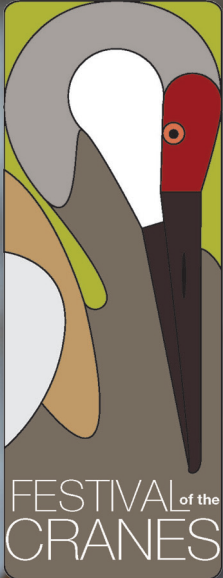


Complimentary Issue



Festival of the Cranes 2026

January 9 - 11, 2026
Wheeler National
Wildlife Refuge
Decatur, AL



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Meet the Presenters

Visit friendsofwheelernwr.org to read more about each presenter



Timothy Joe
Artist



Paul Bannick
Author/Photographer



Michael Forsberg
Author/Photographer



Lee Hedgepeth
Investigative Reporter



Lauren McGough
Falconer



Jimmy Stiles
Herpetologist



Dr. Richard Beilfuss
ICF President and CEO



Christopher Joe
Conservationist



Amber Coger
Alabama State Parks Naturalist



Andy Caven
ICF Vice President of North American Programs



Wings to Soar
Raptor Show



Jessie Taylor
Quail Forever Farm Bill Biologist

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF SANDHILL CRANES ON WHEELER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE



Sandhill Cranes are a conspicuous winter bird on Wheeler NWR. However, that has not always been the case. The reason...historically, Sandhill Cranes in the eastern population migrated well east of Wheeler, moving from northern Canada and the Great Lakes area through Indiana, eastern Kentucky and Tennessee to spend their winter in southern Georgia and northern Florida.

The earliest known reference to them occurring in Alabama can be found in A.H. Howell's *Birds of Alabama* (1928). He noted that "A few pairs are resident and breed in the pine flats of Baldwin County. D.R. Peteet reports a small bunch living within two miles of Foley, and a few are known to occur about the shores of Perdido Bay, having been frequently heard calling in January, 1912, by the residents of Orange

Beach. A pair was reported in the same vicinity in August 1911, and during the same summer an adult and a young bird were captured near the mouth of Perdido Bay, on the Alabama side."

In the early 1990's, for reasons unknown, small groups began to linger and spent the winter in east Tennessee near Hiwassee. The number of birds wintering there increased dramatically and about the same time small numbers found their way to Wheeler. Three wintered on the Refuge in 1995; 11 in 1997; 50 in 2000; 500 in 2005; 1200 in 2007; 10,000 in 2015... doubling and tripling in number some years.

Fast forward to now. Walk outside the Refuge Visitor Center on any winter day and you will probably see hundreds, if not

thousands, of Sandhill Cranes. At their seasonal peak we now expect to see up to 10,000 in the fields surrounding the Visitor Center and Wildlife Observation Building while 15,000 to 20,000 use the Refuge in most years and, in good years, upwards of 25,000 have been recorded. They proclaim their presence in flight and on the ground by raucous call....some might even call it a noisy din.

If we travel back to the winter after July 7, 1938 when Franklin D. Roosevelt established Wheeler NWR by Presidential Proclamation, we wouldn't hear a Sandhill Crane whimper. As a matter of fact, we would have to wait 25 years, when on November 28, 1963, the first Sandhill was reported on the Refuge and we wouldn't see it because only Ernest Jemison of the Refuge staff saw the bird! Fast forward 17 years

to 1980 and we might have gotten to see the next Sandhill because it hung around for most of December.

Sandhill Crane sightings in late fall and early winter increased through the late 1980's but the first wintering birds were in 1992 when three birds remained through January 1993. Small numbers wintered each year through 1997 when numbers started to increase dramatically. Wintering numbers seemed to double each year from 2000 through 2008, establishing the Refuge as an important Sandhill Crane wintering site.

To witness this spectacle, join us January 9-11, 2026 for the Festival of the Cranes. Hope to see you there!

ENDANGERED WHOOPING CRANES FLY ON THE WHEELER LANDSCAPE

*By Sophie Pedzich
Alabama Outreach
Program Assistant
International Crane
Foundation*

Whooping Cranes are an endangered species whose story includes a long history of conservation efforts across North America. Whooping Cranes populations dropped dramatically in the 1800s alongside European settlement. Unregulated hunting and habitat loss caused the population to fall from an estimated 10,000 individuals to approximately 20 in the wild by the 1940s. In response to the noticeable decline of Whooping Cranes and many other iconic North American species, a series of laws and acts were put into place to help safeguard their future, such as the Endangered Species

Act and establishment of a National Refuge System. Today, there are over 700 Whooping Cranes in the wild. Their remarkable rebound was aided by the Whooping Crane Recovery Plan and the establishment of a breeding and reintroduction program, in which Whooping Cranes were hatched and raised under human care before being released into the wild. This effort was made possible through the collaboration of federal, state, and nonprofit organizations, including the International Crane Foundation, or ICF. The Whooping Cranes present in northern Alabama are part of the Eastern Migratory Population, or EMP, that was reintroduced in 2001. The EMP resides in Wisconsin for the spring breeding season and migrates south to Illinois, Indiana, and Alabama.

Currently, the EMP's estimated population size is 72 individuals. Last year, approximately 18 of those birds wintered in Alabama, in and around Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. Excitingly, 8 chicks raised in human care were released into the EMP this fall. Preparing chicks to be released into the wild is done multiple ways; they are either raised by captive Whooping Crane "foster parents" or by ICF staff wearing costumes that resemble Whooping Cranes. Researchers put colorful leg bands on nearly every Whooping Crane in the EMP with a unique combination of red, green, white, and black bands so they can monitor individual birds once they are released. If you observe a banded Whooping Crane, you can submit your sighting to bandedcranes.org and an

ICF staff member will give you information about the Whooping Crane you saw! Sightings from the public provide invaluable support in monitoring this small but growing population.

Despite the remarkable recovery of the species, Whooping Cranes are still endangered and face many threats across their flyway. The loss of wetland habitat, due to human development or degradation, threatens cranes and other species that rely on wetlands as a safe place to rest and forage. Predation, vehicle or powerline collision, and poaching also pose threats to Whooping Crane survival. Whooping Cranes are very territorial and sensitive to disturbance, so it's important to respect their space and avoid causing them stress.

Continued on page 8

Flushing birds, whether intentionally or accidentally, risks sending them into new and unsafe habitat. To safely observe Whooping Cranes, remember to stay at least 200 yards away, respect private property boundaries, and do not share the location of the birds with others or on social media.

For those hoping to see Whooping Cranes at this year's Festival of the Cranes, don't skip a visit to Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge's Visitors Center! The observation building provides visitors a chance to view Sandhill and Whooping Cranes. ICF will be present throughout the Festival to answer any questions you have about cranes and conservation. Cultivating a sense of com-

munity pride and stewardship for Whooping Cranes is essential to protecting this charismatic species.

We hope to see you at this year's Festival!

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CRANES ARE MY SPIRIT ANIMAL



*By Amber M. Coger
Northwest District Naturalist
Alabama State Parks*

Cranes are my spirit animal. No, really. Crane sightings have literally altered the course of my life and I am so thankful for it. This grainy, old cell phone photo of a flock of cranes is from 2015, when I went hiking in metro Atlanta, where I am from. On that chilly February day, a walk in the woods was just what I needed to try and clear my mind so I could make a critical decision about my future in Environ-

mental Education. See, I was offered two AMAZING internships on the same day. One for a camp in San Diego and another for some bird organization called the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin. At the time, I had never heard of a Sandhill Crane or Whooping Crane in my life, but the job sounded like so much fun!

I was riddled with anxiety about which job to take. As I walked through the forest, going back and forth on the different jobs, I kept hearing these crazy bird calls. They

were loud and there was a lot of them, but I couldn't see them through the trees. I was perplexed. Finally, I decided perhaps I should look up and there I saw a flock of Sandhill Cranes flying over me. At that point, I knew my decision had been made for me. If that isn't an obvious sign, I don't know what is.

I took the internship with the International Crane Foundation in Wisconsin and didn't look back. This is a picture of me standing in front of the prairie area at the International Crane Foundation's

facility when I first arrived. Since 2015, I have worked with the International Crane Foundation on two other occasions spreading knowledge about these incredible birds to as many people as will listen. They are silly, graceful, tough, resilient, loyal, and charismatic birds. They have personalities of their own and I can't wait to share some of my stories from working with these birds with you all at the Festival of the Cranes 2026!

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**FRIDAY
January 9, 2026**

7:00 pm
The Cleverlys

Princess Theatre

Presentations are 1 hour unless otherwise noted

**SATURDAY
January 10, 2026**

9:30 am
**Lauren McGough
(falconry)**

11:00 am
Wings to Soar

12:30 pm
Wings to Soar

2:00 pm
**Michael Forsberg
(Whooping Cranes)**

3:30 pmm
**Richard Bielfuss (ICF)
Live Raptor Show**

**SUNDAY
January 11, 2026**

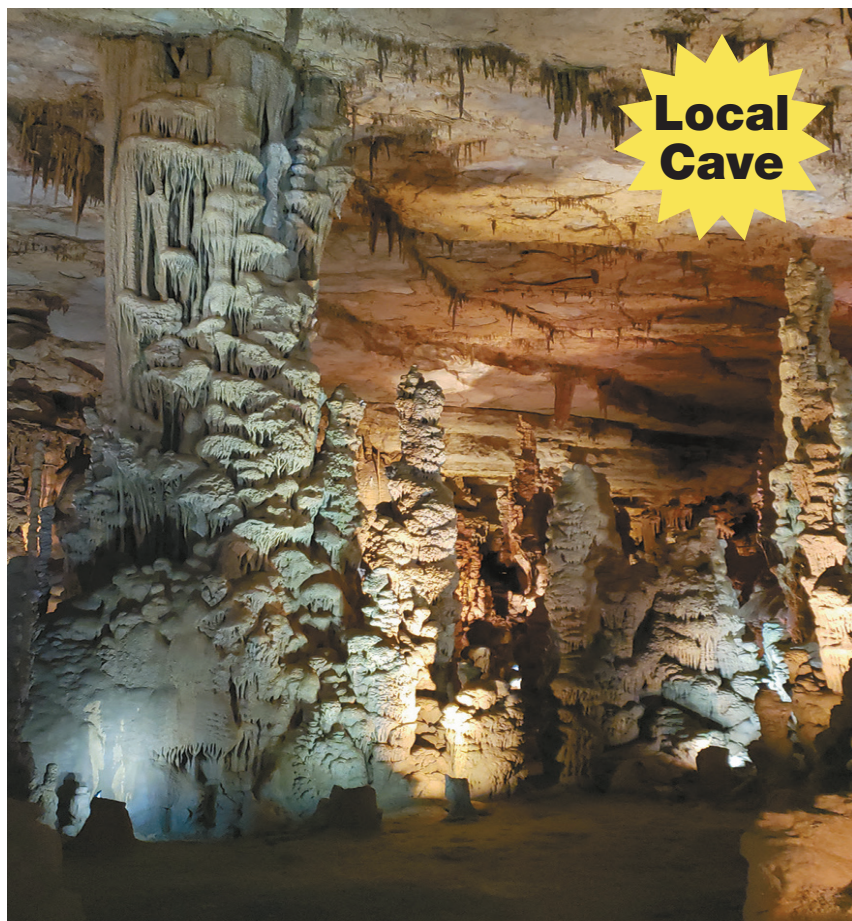
10:00 am
**Paul Bannick
(Woodpeckers)**

11:30 am
Wings to Soar

1:00 pm
Wings to Soar

2:30 pm
**Lauren McGough
(Midway Albatross)**

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SATURDAY

January 10, 2026

Performing Arts
Building (Recital Hall)

10:00 am

Christopher Joe
(Black Belt Birding/Ecotourism)

11:30 am

Paul Bannick
(Woodpeckers)

1:00 pm

Lee Hedgepeth
(Climate/Environmental Issues)

2:30 pm

Southern Film Festival
(Environmental Issues)

Visual Arts Building
(Room 113)

10:00 am - 12:00 pm
Children's Activity
with ACA staff

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Timothy Joe
(Art Demonstration)

Visual Arts Building
(Room 118)

10:00 am
Amber Coger - Cranes Can Dance (family)
(45 minutes)

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm
ICF Crane Behaviors (Family Activity)
(2 hours)

SUNDAY

January 11, 2026

10:00 am

Amber Coger
(Cranes)

11:30 am

Jimmy Stiles
(Reptiles)

1:00 pm

Jimmy Stiles
(Reptiles)

3:00 pm

Andy Caven (ICF)

Visual Arts Building
(Room 113)

10:30 am
Jessie Taylor
(Crane Habitat)

2:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Tracy Roberts McCann Art Class
(\$ and registered event - not by WWRA)

Visual Arts Building
(Room 118)

10:00 am - 12:00 pm
ICF Crane Behaviors
(Family Activity)
(2 hours)

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm
Forsberg Photography Workshop

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FRIDAY

January 9, 2026

12:00 pm - 1:00 pm

Meet & Greet with Hope

*Come meet Hope, the mascot for the
International Crane Foundation!*

SATURDAY

January 10, 2026

10:00 am - 5:00 pm

Wild About Whoopers

FREE General Admission

10:30 am & 11:30 am

"The White Feather" Story Time & Book Signing with Phoebe Goodwin

11:00 am & 1:00 pm

Slow Birding Presentation with the Land Trust of North Alabama

10:30 am, 11:30 am, 12:30 pm & 1:30 pm

Cool Cranes Science on the Spot

10:00 am - 4:00 pm

Hands-On Activities & Photo Station

All Day

The Whoopers At Wheeler Video

All Day

Crane Dance Party

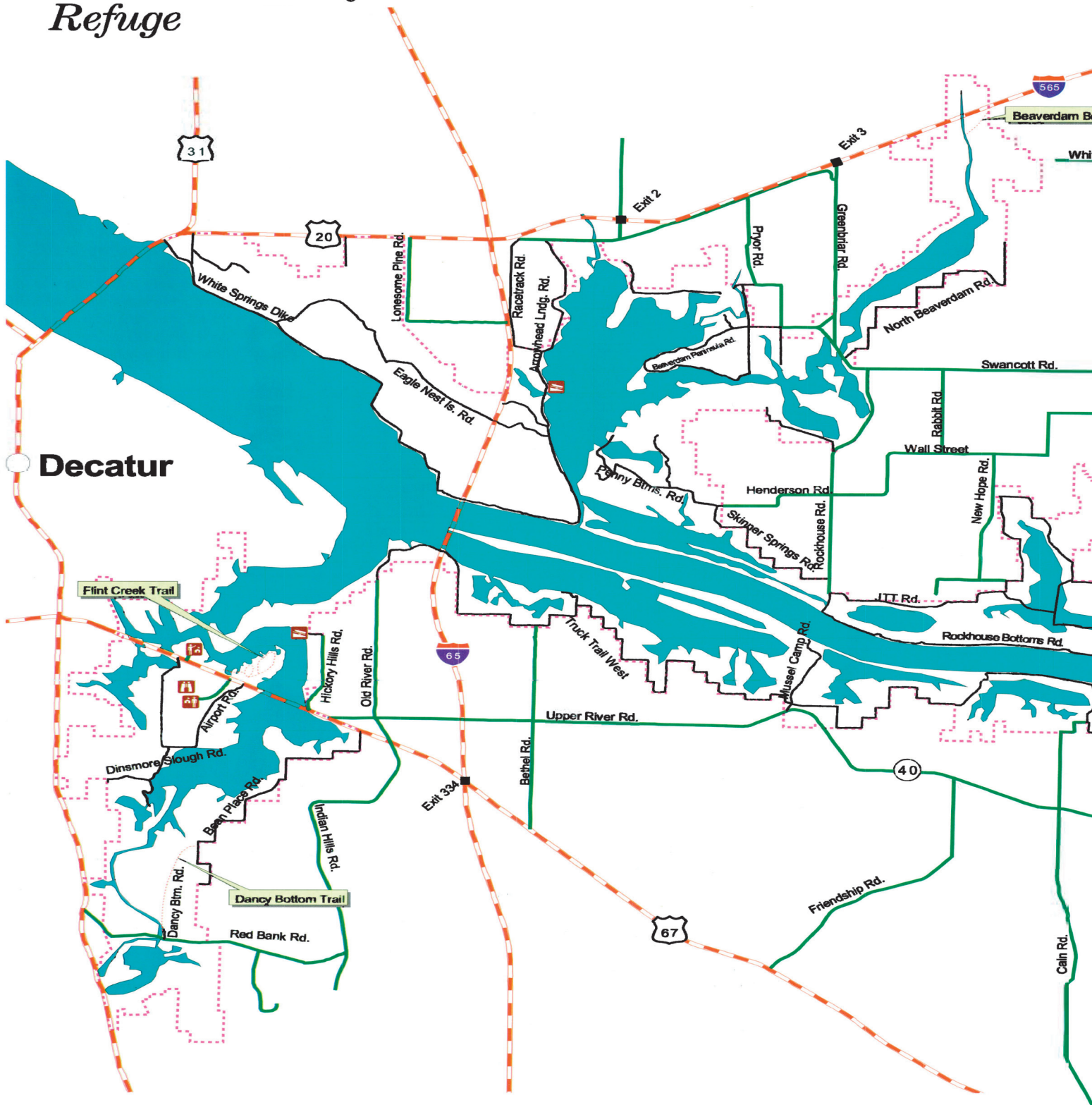
All Day

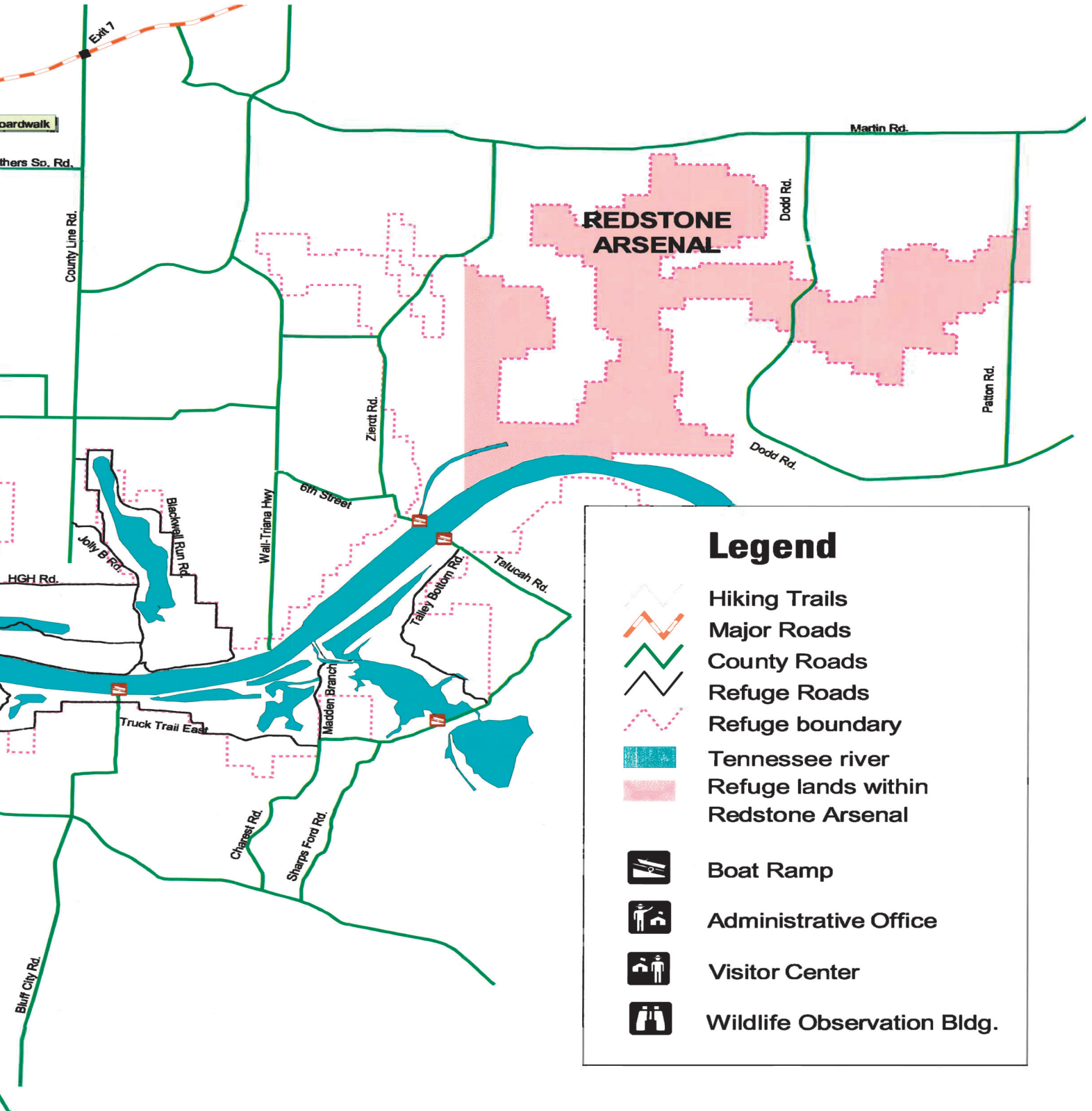
Migratory Birds Collectible Cards

ALL TIMES CENTRAL STANDARD TIME

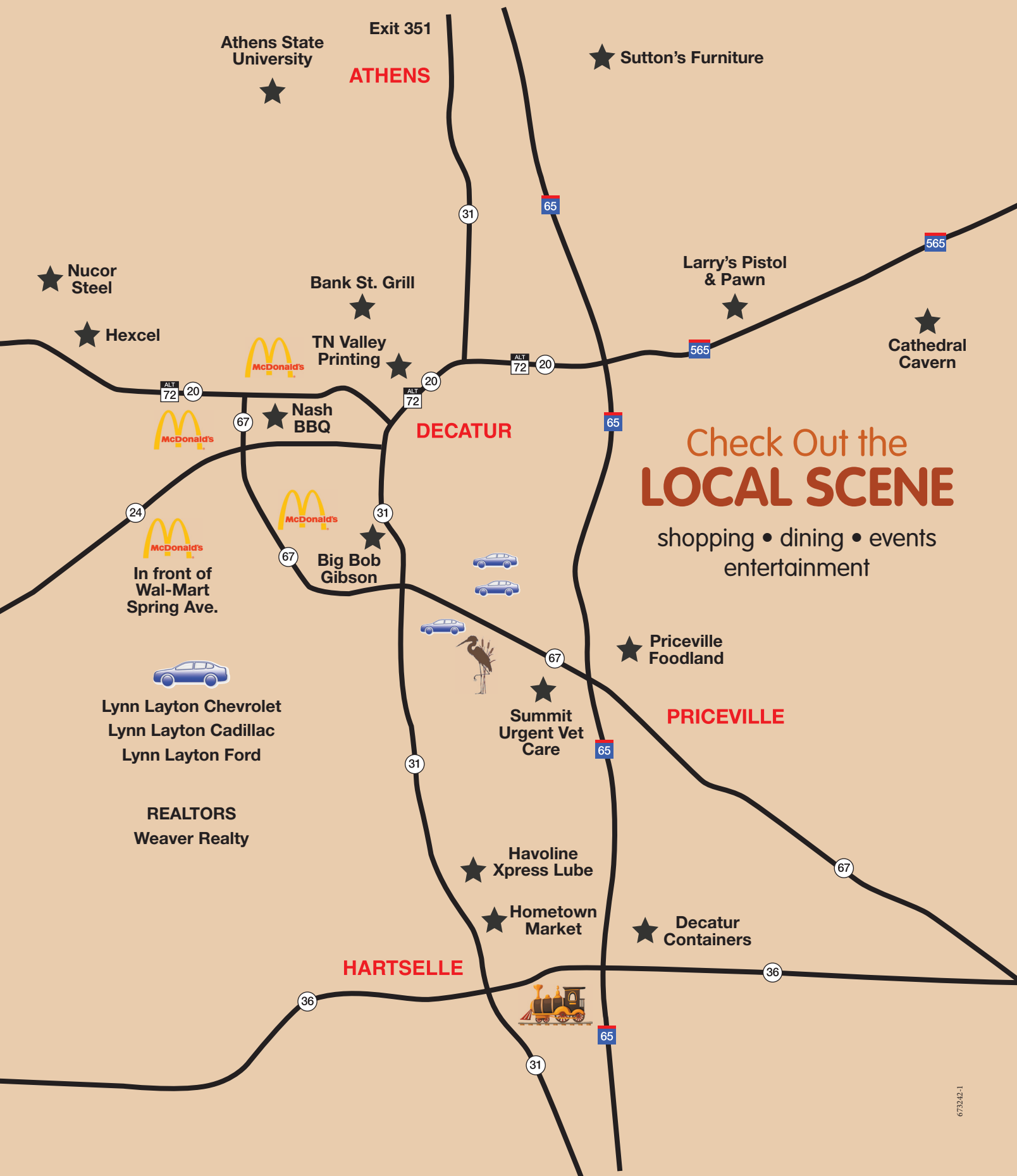
Wheeler

National Wildlife Refuge

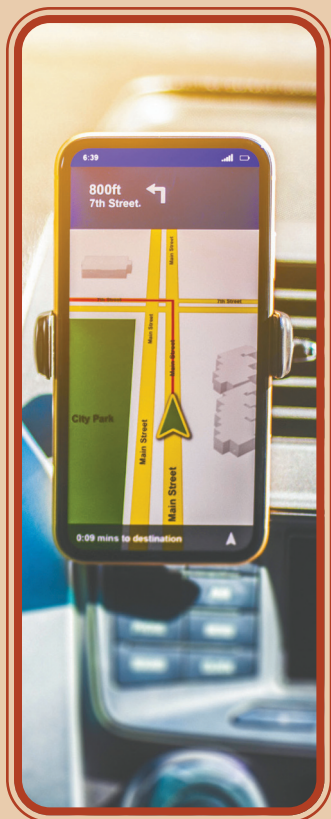




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Decatur Public Library

Decatur Public Library will host free children's activities during the festival

FRIDAY
January 9, 2026
4:00 pm - 5:00 pm
Story Time with Hope
Hope, mascot for the International Crane Foundation, will present this free story time for all ages. Hope appears courtesy of the International Crane Foundation.

SATURDAY
January 10, 2026
11:30 am - 12:30 pm
Trunk Goes Thunk! Story Time,
with author Heather C. Morris
Author Heather C. Morris will read her book Trunk Goes Thunk! A Woodland Tale of Opposites and talk with kids about opposites, forests, and using all five senses to explore our wide and wonderful world. All ages are welcome to this free program.

1:00 pm - 2:00 pm
Meet & Greet with Hope
Come and meet Hope, get your picture made with her, or even practice your crane dance moves with her!

2:00 pm - 3:00 pm
Photography Tips
with Donald Hood of
Status Image Photography
Donald Hood, of Status Image Photography, will discuss ways to make sure your wildlife pictures are the best they can be. Whether you shoot with your phone, a point-and-click camera, or a professional-grade camera, there are techniques you can use to take your pictures to the next level. We will also introduce the amateur photography contest that will be part of the 2027 Festival of the Cranes, giving you one year to perfect your technique. This program is for all ages.

ALL TIMES CENTRAL STANDARD TIME



207 Church Street NE, Decatur, AL
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Carnegie Visual Arts Center

SUNDAY
January 11, 2026

1:30 am - 3:30 pm

Art Workshop with Timothy Joe

Join artist and instructor Timothy Joe for an inspiring watercolor workshop focused on capturing the beauty of nature in your own handmade mini zig zag watercolor journal. Participants will explore painting techniques suitable for plein air studies and intimate nature sketches, guided by Timothy's expertise in watercolor and storytelling through art.

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ALL TIMES CENTRAL STANDARD TIME

If I Were a Crane

By: Amy H. Stewart

Dedicated to my grandsons Jaxton and Braxton whose imaginative dreams of the life of a crane inspired this poem.

If I could be a crane even for a day, I would float and I would flutter and I would soar and I would swoop.

I would flap my enormous wings and fly with my family to places that my natural instinct leads me.

I would fly in perfect formation until I reached my winter destination.

I would land on still waters beside all my relatives at a lovely refuge that welcomes me each year.

I would make loud and beautiful crane calls that sound like a symphony.

When I landed, I would call out to all my feathered friends letting them know I had arrived.

I would dance in the air and make smooth landings with a flair.

I would admire my handsome reflection in the deep blue water and I would think, oh what a magnificent sight I am.

I would dip my head and long neck deep under the water and catch a tasty fish to eat then

I would come back up shaking my long feathers as I ate.

I would float and prance on blue waters or take off and fly about and land, then call out loudly to all the many visitors who come to see me or take photos and admire my beauty.

They might even have a special festival just for me because I am so special.

I would fly to the same place year after year guided by my inner compass that tells me exactly how to get there.

Then one day when it is time, my family and I will fly into the clouds and disappear from sight until just the right time to return rolls around again.

What a wonderful adventure it would be, if I were a crane.

WHERE ARE THE WHOOPING CRANES?

*By Tom Ress
Volunteer Naturalist
Wheeler NWR*

Whooping cranes are one of North America's most endangered species, with only about 500 left in the wild. We are fortunate to have a dozen or more of these special birds winter on the refuge every year.

The whooping cranes that winter on Wheeler NWR cover more than 700 miles and cross several states migrating from their summer home in Wisconsin to Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama. Knowing where these whooping cranes feed and roost and where they stop and rest on their migration is crucial to the conservation of the species.

An important part of this effort is location tracking. By following the coming and going of the cranes on the refuge we can manage refuge resources and focus efforts on those areas that the birds frequent. Thanks to the unique combination of colored leg bands and, on some birds, transmitters or GPS satellite trackers, individual birds can be identified and tracked and their preferred habitat better understood.

One side benefit of this individual identification is that some birds who are multiple return visitors to the refuge have become local celebrities among area whooping crane aficionados. One in particular, affectionately known as "Reba", is a

regular in the fields around the Observation Building and visitors often ask about her.

The refuge puts a lot of effort into whooping crane tracking. Around the first of November, when the cranes are anticipated to arrive on Wheeler, our volunteer whooping crane tracker springs into action. Equipped with binoculars, a spotting scope and telemetry equipment, she travels miles of refuge roads and trails tracking and identifying the elusive cranes on the refuge's 35,000 acres. Through the entirety of the winter she spends multiple days locating and recording the location of every resident crane. Thanks to her efforts we are able to keep up to date on numbers and locations of "our" whooping cranes.

This season she is keeping tabs on around fifteen whooping cranes that are wintering on the refuge. "Around" fifteen because they move on and off the refuge throughout much of north Alabama so the number present on the refuge on any given day varies. We may also experience additional arrivals as the season progresses.

If you see a whooping crane on the refuge, check out the array of the colored leg bands and report it to refuge staff or volunteers.

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WHEELER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE...AT THE CENTER OF WINTERING WHOOPING CRANES IN EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

When the first captive-reared young Whooping Cranes followed Operation Migration ultralight pilots from Wisconsin to Florida in 2001, no one knew for sure what the future held for the attempt to re-establish a migratory population in eastern North America. The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, a coalition of conservation organizations and state and federal agencies, had chosen two re-introduction techniques to establish the Eastern Migratory Population. One technique trained cranes to follow costumed pilots flying ultralight aircraft from Wisconsin to Florida. The other, Direct Autumn Release, initially released young birds directly into wild Sandhill Crane populations nesting in Wisconsin hoping they would “learn” how to migrate and return.

The first Whooping Cranes recorded near Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge were three found just north of the Refuge on the 2004 Christmas Bird Count. Unfortunately, one of the three was found dead shortly thereafter and the remaining two quickly made their way to

St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in Florida.

Not knowing if Whoopers would be seen in subsequent years, we were pleasantly surprised when two showed up on the Refuge’s Garth Slough in December of 2007. To our great joy, those same two birds, 13-02 and 18-02 from the 2002 cohort of birds led by ultralight aircraft to Florida, would become regular wintering birds for the next several years. How did we know they were the same birds? All birds released were fitted with a metal leg band and plastic color bands in unique combinations allowing individual identification if those band combinations could be recorded. In addition, most were also fitted with telemetry transmitters with different frequencies on their legs so they could be monitored, at least as long as the transmitter batteries lasted.

The birds that wintered in 2007 heralded increasing numbers of cranes using the Refuge and that usage continues today. It is not unusual for 10-20 Whoopers to use the Refuge while

26 is the highest number recorded. Not all Whoopers recorded on the refuge winter here. Some stop during their autumnal migration to Florida and others stop on their return to their nesting grounds. However, 10-15 usually spend their winter here.

To add spice to the saga, consider this. The first ten years of effort to establish an eastern migratory flock proceeded almost without a hitch. Operation Migration led young cranes from Wisconsin to Florida each year. However, as we all know, even the best laid plans can go awry. After flying over 700 miles with several multi-day stops, the ultralight-led cranes made it to their planned rest site in Franklin County, Alabama on December 11, 2011.

A few days rest and it’s on to the next site. It was not to be. The cranes and ultralight pilots were grounded because of a potential Federal Aviation Administration rule violation. Ultralight aircraft are licensed as light sport aircraft which prevents them from being flown for compensation under rules that took

effect in 2008. Eventually, the FAA provided a temporary waiver allowing them to continue their trip.

Now, the cranes could head toward Florida. They could but they didn’t! They refused to follow the ultralights. After considering all options, the decision was made to transport the young cranes by truck to Wheeler NWR. They made the 70-mile trip on February 4, 2012 and they were eventually released to mingle with thousands of Sandhill Cranes and seven Whooping Cranes wintering on the Refuge. They remained on the Refuge until April 12 when they took wing, soared high, and headed north. They spent the next night in Kentucky and eventually made it back to Wisconsin. Several of them returned to winter on the Refuge over the years.

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, with its 35,000 acres of wetlands, forests and cropland, continues to provide a sanctuary for migrating and wintering Whooping Cranes. From their primary roost sites in the Refuge’s shallow waters

surrounding Flint Creek Island and Garth Slough, they spend much of the day foraging and loafing in Garth Slough, Limestone Bay, in the Tennessee River backwaters off White Springs Dike and often around the Refuge Visitor Center and Wildlife Observation Building. In late afternoon, prior to making their way to their roost site, upwards of 10,000 Sandhill Cranes gather around the Wildlife Observation Building. It's an awesome challenge sorting through all those Sandhills for Whooping Cranes.

The number of Whooping Cranes using the Refuge annually varies from 10 to 20 birds with a high of 26 recorded during the winter of 2017-2018. The good news is that it appears the Winter of 2025-2026 may be another banner year on the Refuge with 15 Whooping Cranes recorded on the November 30 Survey!

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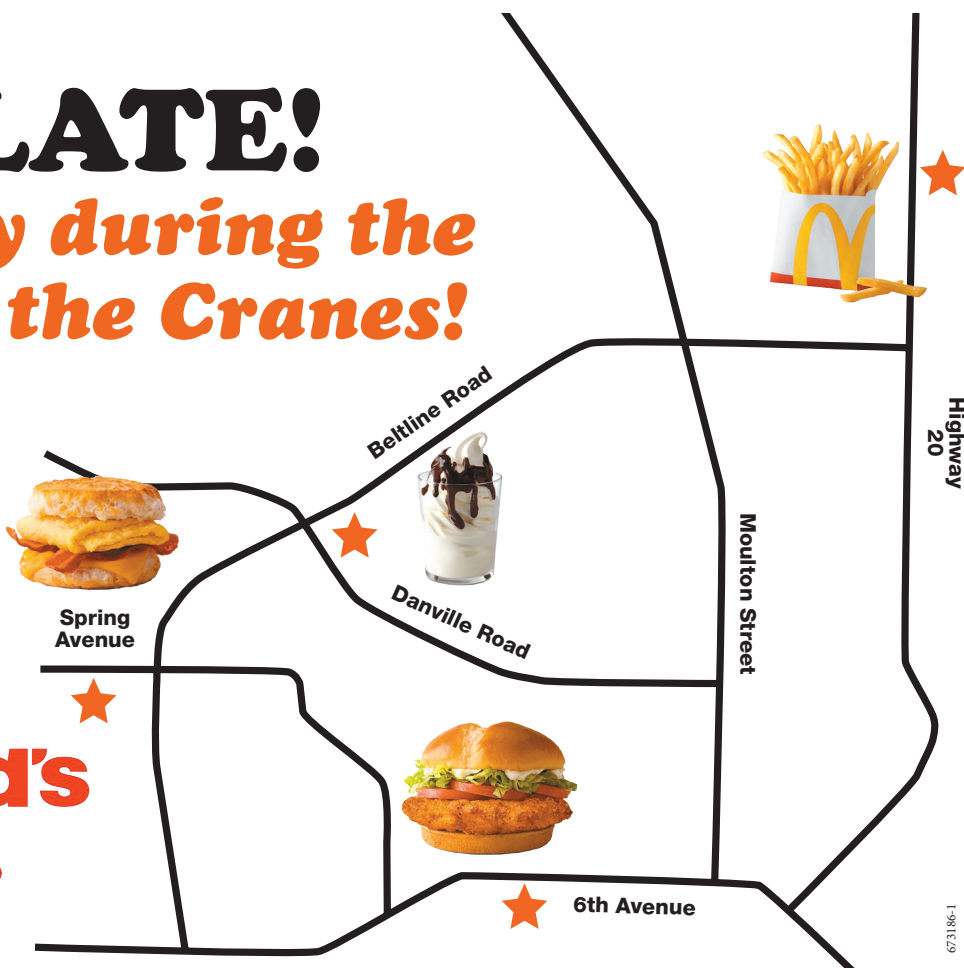
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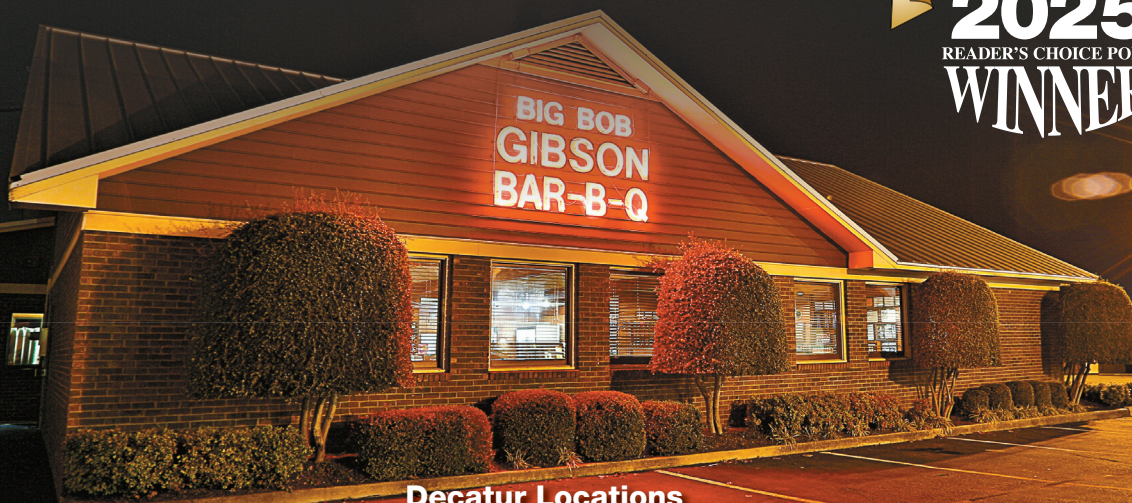
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