

By GEORGE ROBERTSON, M.D.

People came from all over the United States and three foreign countries to Birchwood, Tenn., to see the rare Asian Hooded Crane. Only three sightings of this large charcoal gray bird have ever been recorded in the United States.

Since the emigrant usually lives in Korea and Japan, to get from there to the States would be quite a feat of flying not to mention the navigation required to get back and forth.

Since the Sandhill Crane, a close relative, summers in Siberia it would not be inconceivable that the similar appearing and habitat minded Crane could link up with the Sandhills on their journey to the warmer wintering grounds in Tennessee.

The Hiwassee Game Reserve just out of Dayton, Tenn., has for years been the favorite wintering site for the Sandhills who flock to the area numbering in the thousands. Last year's count estimated at 40,000 birds still does not come close to the numbers reached in 2000, according to resident viewers who described the fields next to the Hiwassee River as being completely covered with large gray cranes.

A blind set up close to these grounds was equipped with a spotting scope connected to a wireless camera so that the birds could be observed on a large TV monitor from the comfort of a building. This allowed everyone to watch the feeding activities of the sandhills and the one lonesome Hooded Crane.

Back at the school were a myriad of activities set up for children and adults alike. Coloring contests were a favorite with the small fries. Bird nest displays and artificial egg coloring sites were provided. Bird feeder kits of ice cream cones plastered with peanut butter and rolled in birdseed could be taken back home to be used for backyard feeding of the wildlife.

Craft items for sale served as a backdrop to the stage where nature programs and even a visit from James Audubon performed. **Bryan Ellis**, who was in character as the famous ornithologist Audubon gave his rendition of the life and times of one of the most famous birders to ever live. There were nature programs about snakes and even some live raptors were demonstrated for hundreds of people to see up close.

The two-day event ended late Sunday, Jan. 15, as the characteristic calls of the circling cranes echoed over the valley, and the long lines of the "V" shaped formation birds disappeared into the shadows of the surrounding hills. The next viewing event is scheduled for January 2013 where it is hoped that the sandhill cranes will come to visit Tennessee again.

Editor's Note: George Robertson is a physician with Family Medical Associates, PC, in Lebanon.