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Whooping Cranes are joined by Sandhill Cranes

FAILED EXPERIMENT

"Who's Joe Overstreet?" This question comes up whenever we take birders to one of the premium birding locations in central Florida – Joe Overstreet Road. Not knowing the answer, I asked my good friend "Google." Google informed me that Joe Overstreet was a well-known African-American artist, born in Mississippi in 1933, who lived and worked in New York, and was active during the 60's in the Civil Rights movement. Overstreet did spend two years working for Disney, but it was in California, not Florida. My friend, Google, also produced many good birding listings for Joe Overstreet Road, but neither Google, nor my other friend, "Alexa" knew whether or not the road was named after the artist. Mystery still unsolved.



From 1993 to 2004 biologists, working with a partnership of state, federal and non-profit organizations, released 289 captive-raised Whooping Cranes in central Florida to establish a non-migratory flock of cranes to augment the only remaining wild flock that still breeds in Canada and winters in Texas. At the peak of the introduction in the early 2000s three Whooping Cranes could be seen from Orange Avenue on Bud Adam's ranch, but the best place to find them was at the end of Joe Overstreet Road. The birds would hang out with Sandhill Cranes and eat from the grain feeders



provided by the farmer for his cattle. In this photo (*top*) five Whooping Cranes rest with two Sandhill Cranes after eating from the adjacent cattle food dispenser. (*The photo was taken on February 17, 2009 in my very earliest days attempting bird photography, hence the poor quality of the photo.*)

While the original 289 birds have now dwindled down to an estimated 12 survivors, Joe Overstreet Road is still the best place birders may chance to find one. A second number of birds released by the same



consortium of partners attempted to establish a migratory flock from Wisconsin to Florida, teaching the birds the migration route by getting them to follow ultra-light aircraft as simulated parent birds. That program has also been discontinued but approximately 14 cranes still make the trip on their own, ending up in various places from Mississippi to Florida each winter.



Joe Overstreet Road is still one of the best birding spots in Florida. Located north of Kenansville, the dirt farm road runs from Canoe Creek Road (FL Rt. 15) to The Joe Overstreet Landing on the edge of Kissimmee Lake. In the farm fields on both sides of the road it is not unusual to find Wild Turkeys (*top, left*) and Eastern Meadowlarks (*above, right*) commingling with the Cattle Egrets and cows. Pileated Woodpeckers (*above, left*) nest in the telephone poles along the road, while Peregrine Falcons (*below, right*) and Loggerhead Shrikes (*below, left*) can be found in the

pinetrees as one approaches the lake. At the end of the road a small marina and boat launch, Joe Overstreet Landing, affords a view of the lake where Snail Kites, Limpkins, and Bald Eagles might be found, while in the grass parking area Brown-headed Cowbirds frequently search for food.

Just south of Joe Overstreet Road on Canoe Creek Road is the entrance to the Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area camp ground. Here Eastern Bluebirds and Pine Warblers occur in relative abundance. But the best reason to stop here on the way to or from Joe Overstreet Road is to see the Red-cockaded Woodpecker as it is not uncommon to find three or four of these scarce birds on any given trip right in the camp grounds.

And so, while the connection, if any, between Joe Overstreet, the artist and Joe Overstreet, the road, remains a mystery, (or indeed, may be nothing more than pure coincidence, as the road may actually be named for a completely different Joe Overstreet,) there is no mystery in the fact that the road and the surrounding area is a wonderful birding destination. In my birding experience in Florida there are few places that provide the vast variety of birds that can

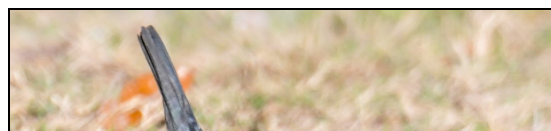


be found on Joe Overstreet Road: from Whooping Cranes to Brown-headed Cowbirds, as well as all of the reasonably expected ducks, egrets, shorebirds, dickey birds and less desirable birds, (Starlings?).

So Joe Overstreet, whoever you are, thank you for giving birders a road that provides so much opportunity, enjoyment and even exhilaration, such as may happen when finding a rare bird like a Whooping Crane. Who knows, in the 1940's the entire world population of Whooping Cranes dropped to a low of 15 birds, just about the same number as believed to be remaining from the reintroduction project near Joe Overstreet Road. Could they possibly rebound from that low number in Florida even yet? Another mystery remaining to be solved with time.

A summary of the various Crane recovery programs can be found www.savingcranes.org/saving-a-species/. Joe Overstreet, artist:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Overstreet





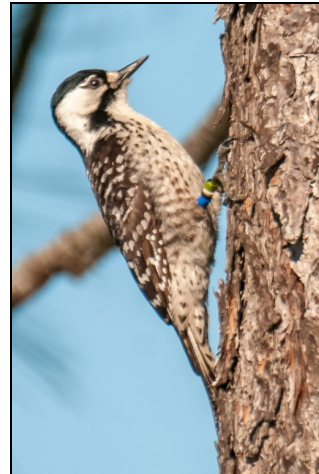
Eastern Bluebird



Cowbird



Pine Warbler



Red-cockaded Woodpecker

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