

Platte River Cranes: A Migration Spectacular With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

March 22 – 28, 2020

866.900.1146

800.426.7781

520.558.1146

naturalistjourneys@gmail.com

www.naturalistjourneys.com

or find us on Facebook at

Naturalist Journeys, LLC



Naturalist Journeys, LLC / Caligo Ventures PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 866-900-1146
FAX: 650-471-7667 naturalistjourneys.com / caligo.com info@naturalistjourneys.com / info@caligo.com

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Each year, half a million Sandhill Cranes descend upon Nebraska's Platte River. By March, 80% of the world's population crowds a 150-mile stretch of the river, creating a migration spectacle that is simply mind-boggling to witness. This is the largest gathering of cranes anywhere in the world! Here, the cranes rest and feed before they continue on to breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska, and even Siberia.

Among the cranes are over 10-million ducks and geese, bright and beautiful in breeding plumage. This year we time this popular tour a touch on the early side so that our group can have the chance to experience skies full of Snow Geese, too!

We base this tour out of Lincoln to keep the drive-time down and the airport quiet. It's a lovely city and galleries and restaurants abound. You may even want to come in early to enjoy the atmosphere and several excellent museums at your leisure.

Highlights

- Visit National Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie Reserve and enjoy the pleasant trail system and plentiful feeder birds
- Witness hundreds of thousands of Sandhill Cranes as they roost, feed, and sing along the Platte River
- Experience a "crane rise" at dawn as clouds of cranes awake with a symphony of sound
- See thousands of Snow Geese at Rainwater Basin
- Opt to visit the Nebraska Museum of art, small, but a treasure
- Watch the crane spectacle from privately reserved blinds at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary

Tour Summary

7-Day / 6-Night Platte River Migration Tour w/ Ed & Sil Pembleton

\$2190, from Lincoln

Airport is Lincoln Airport (LNK)

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Itinerary



Sun., Mar. 22 Arrival in Lincoln, Nebraska

Arrive in Lincoln, Nebraska, a city of the prairies. Our expert guides are at the airport to welcome you. Enjoy the historic Haymarket District, where shops, galleries, and restaurants abound. Some may even want to come in early to enjoy the city and several excellent museums. We plan a welcome dinner at a favorite restaurant in the Haymarket area.

Accommodations at Embassy Suites, Lincoln (D)

Mon., Mar. 23 Spring Creek Prairie | Drive to Kearney | First Cranes

This morning we enjoy breakfast at the hotel, then pack up for our two-hour drive to Kearney. Your guides share their knowledge of birding and prairie ecology along the way. Our first stop west of Lincoln is at the National Audubon Society's Spring Creek Reserve, where we walk trails and watch bird activity at the feeders.

We then enjoy a restaurant lunch in route, afterwards stopping to see our first Sandhill Cranes and watch their behavior as they feed in farm fields along the way. We settle into our lodgings, unpack, and unwind. Tonight we enjoy dinner as we get to know our guides and travel companions.

Accommodations at the Hampton Inn, Kearney (B,L,D)

Tue., Mar. 24 “Crane Rise” Spectacle on the Platte River

In the early morning hours we experience our first “crane rise” as gray islands of the Platte River turn into clouds of Sandhill cranes departing for the day. Pre-dawn crane music turns into a crescendo of wake-up calls as the cranes awake and leave their riverine roosts. We have reserved blinds at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary for prime views of the cranes in areas along the river's edge. With an expert crane naturalist from Audubon, we experience the almost deafening chorus and clamor of tens of thousands of cranes taking flight toward the cornfields and prairies where they forage during the day. After watching this exciting spectacle, we take time to view the displays at the sanctuary and to watch birds at the feeders: Harris, White-crowned, and White-throated Sparrows, White-breasted Nuthatches, and possibly Red-bellied Woodpeckers. We also may find Green-winged Teal or some early migrating shorebirds feeding on the river's mudflats.

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The remainder of the morning we spend viewing more crane activity in the fields, returning to Kearney for a lunch in town.

In the afternoon we visit historic Fort Kearney to learn more about the pioneers of the Oregon and Mormon Trails. In trees near the fort we look for wintering and resident passerine birds like Cedar Waxwing, Northern Cardinal, and Blue Jay, while keeping an eye out along the river for the majestic Bald Eagles that frequent the Platte. Tonight we enjoy dinner and a relaxing evening at a delightful local restaurant.

Accommodations at the Hampton Inn, Kearney (B,L)

Wed., Mar. 25

An Easy Morning | Nebraska Museum of Art Option | Evening with Cranes

This morning we have breakfast and then head out to drive some of the farm roads parallel to the course of the Platte between Kearney and Grand Island. Many of the groups of cranes are restless by this time of year and displace their energies with dancing, calling, and other displays, or rising and riding thermal updrafts.

Late morning we head into Kearney, where two museums are of interest — the historic Arch Museum and the Art Museum, though small a real treasure! If you prefer to rest at the hotel, that is fine too, but we have lunch while out and about.

Close to the hotel we have an early dinner before we return to Rowe Sanctuary for an evening session in the blinds, savoring crane music at sunset. Spectacular!

Accommodations at the Hampton Inn, Kearney (B,L,D)

Thurs., Mar. 26 Rainwater Basin: Ducks & Geese Galore | Free Evening or Optional Evening with Cranes

This morning enjoy breakfast at the hotel, with a more leisurely rising time before we head south to wetlands

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and ponds of the famous Rainwater Basin, one of the west's most important areas for migrant waterfowl. Depending upon season and weather conditions, the sheer number of birds in these wetlands often defies the imagination in a wet year.

We hope to find over a dozen species of waterfowl, and with luck we find some of the thousands of wintering Snow and Ross's Geese and perhaps a few White-fronted Geese still lingering there. We scout a local prairie dog town looking for Burrowing Owls, too. Then, as we angle our way back through farm fields and roads, we have a chance to watch crane behavior in detail. We look for pair bonding activities, dancing, strutting, feeding, resting, and other flock dynamics.

Enjoy lunch at a delightful local café in Minden or one of the farm towns along our way. Returning to Rowe Sanctuary, we check the feeders to see if we can find Harris' Sparrow or Cedar Waxwing. We also point our scopes towards the Platte River in search of migrant shorebirds.

Tonight you can choose to relax or die-hard crane fans can venture back out at sunset to watch the cranes come in to roost from the vantage point of a nearby bridge over the river. Those going back out can catch something to eat quickly and close to the hotel. Those at leisure can enjoy dinner at a local steakhouse or another restaurant in Kearney. The restaurant near our hotel can even deliver your meal, if you wish to tuck in after a full day.

Accommodations at the Hampton Inn, Kearney (B,L)

Fri., Mar. 27

Morning Crane Immersion | Celebratory Dinner | Gibbon Bridge

This week is an immersion into one of the world's truly great migration spectacles, and we have booked a final round of crane viewing at the Rowe Sanctuary for sunrise this morning. After an unforgettable crane rise, enjoy coffee and time to browse exhibits or shop at the Visitor Center. Keep your eyes peeled for Bald Eagle along the river, or even a Great Horned Owl. By late morning, we head to lunch and then take a rest.

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This afternoon, we drive out into the prairie, to celebrate our great week with an early dinner at a favorite restaurant located in a historic farmhouse inn and then return to the Gibbon Bridge over the Platte River for one last symphony of crane sounds.

Accommodations at the Hampton Inn, Kearney (B,L,D)

Sat., Mar. 28 Departures

This morning, we return to Lincoln for flights out after noon, arriving the airport by 10:30 AM.



Guides Ed & Sil Pembleton

Guides Ed and Sil Pembleton, our talented and devoted “Craniacs!”

As Aldo Leopold said, “There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot.” Ed and Seliesa Pembleton count themselves among those who cannot. The couple delights in introducing children and adults to the wonders of the natural world. For over 30 years as educators, naturalists, and conservationists the Pembletons have lead field trips to explore

landscapes, celebrate wild things, and marvel at the annual gathering of more than 500,000 Sandhill Cranes along the Platte River in Nebraska. As a 14-year employee of the National Audubon Society, Ed was instrumental in directing national and worldwide attention to the river and the cranes. As director of the Leopold Education Project, he promoted Aldo Leopold’s philosophy of land ethics. An accomplished photographer, Ed’s pictures appear in books and national magazines. Seliesa has written wildlife books for children, worked at the Smithsonian Institution and for 10 years was director of environmental studies at Hard Bargain Farm, an outdoor education facility on the Potomac River. She has been invited to Japan several times to teach environmental education “American style.” The couple enjoys birding, hiking, gardening, and canoeing. They enjoy sharing their expertise on rivers and prairies on Naturalist Journeys’ adventures.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$2190 DBL / \$2650 SGL, from Lincoln, Nebraska. Cost includes: all accommodations; all meals as stated in the itinerary; group airport transfers; ground transportation; professional guide services; park, preserve, and other activity fees; and miscellaneous program expenses.

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Tour price does not include: roundtrip airfare to and from Lincoln, Nebraska, or items of a personal nature such as laundry, portage, telephone charges, or alcoholic beverages. Gratuities for your guides and other staff are not included; these are at your discretion, but highlight appreciated and recommended.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive in Lincoln no later than 5:00 PM on March 22. Please plan on departures after NOON on March 28.

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Photo Credits

Sandhill Cranes on the River, Ed Pembleton (EP); Burrowing Owl, Greg Smith (GS); Red-winged Blackbird, GS; Western Meadowlark, Hugh Simmons Photography; Flying Sandhill Cranes, GS; Cranes at Sunset, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese, Peg Abbott (PA); Wild Turkeys, PA; Misty Morning Cranes, GS; Cranes on the River, GS; Bald Eagles, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Northern Cardinal, SS; Cranes at Sunset, GS; Snow Geese at Rainwater Basin, NJS.