

Platte River Cranes

Species List | March 17 – 23, 2024

with Naturalist Journeys



Compiled by: Lena Moser with guide Kent Skaggs. Our clients included Mary, Sally, Don, Nancy, Candi, Ed, David M, Dave H, and Lynn.

Summary: Every March, over one million Sandhill Cranes stage along the Platte River in central Nebraska to fuel up before continuing to their northern nesting grounds. Our group gathered at the heart of the cranes' staging area to experience one of the greatest animal migrations on Earth. We all felt very fortunate to observe the magnificent migration of thousands of cranes! Beyond the cranes, our trip yielded other interesting species as well, such as lekking Greater Prairie-Chickens, lifer Ross's Goose and Harris's Sparrow, and large flocks of careening Red-winged Blackbirds (with a Yellow-headed Blackbird or two tucked in among them). Below is a list of species seen on the tour.

We saw a total of 64 bird species on the tour, two less than the eBird checklists that didn't include incidental sightings of Double-crested Cormorant and Sharp-shinned Hawk. Mammals seen during the trip were fox squirrel, thirteen-lined ground squirrel, black-tailed prairie dog, American bison, American beaver, vole sp., eastern cottontail, white-tailed deer, common raccoon and boreal chorus frog (heard only).

If you're new to eBird, be sure to click "Show All Details" on the right side of the list to expand the report and reveal where and when each of the birds were seen and how many.

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Family or Species Common Name: Scientific Name - # species total, with # species which were heard only (HO)
(I) = Introduced

KEY to Abbreviations: PRRIP: Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, WTP: Waste Treatment Ponds, HCR: Harlan County Reservoir, HBT: Hike-Bike Trail.

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: ANATIDAE (17)

Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens* — Seen every day, but in small numbers—usually pairs.

Ross's Goose *Anser rossii* — The Ross's looks nearly identical to its Snow Goose cousin, but it's smaller, with a short neck, rounded head and relatively small bill. We had great in-the-scope comparisons at the Rowe Sanctuary crane loafing area.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* — Common to abundant migrant and year-round resident. We saw them daily. Fun fact: Canada Goose has at least 11 recognized subspecies!

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa* — We had excellent scope views of six birds at the pond stop in Ravenna on the third day. Two fly-bys on the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail (HBT) during sunset, too.

Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors* — Great looks at 10 birds right by the bridge on the HBT. Males have a distinctive white crescent on the front of their face, and a white hip patch. They showed off their chalky blue lesser and median coverts ("shoulder") when they bathed and flapped their wings.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata* — We estimated approximately 250 shovelers at the Alma Waste Treatment Ponds

(WTP)! The shovel-shaped bill of this bird has about 110 lamellae—fine projections that act like a colander, filtering out tiny crustaceans, seeds, and aquatic invertebrates that the ducks consume.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera* — A common duck seen at multiple spots. Gadwall have increased in numbers since the 1980s, partly thanks to the conservation of wetlands and adjacent uplands in their breeding habitats in the northern U.S. and Canada.

American Wigeon *Mareca americana* — We saw several to a dozen almost daily at various locations along the Platte River and at ponds and wetlands.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* — Recorded on all days of the tour.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* — A slender and elegant waterfowl; the male has a long, pointed tail (hence the name) with an unmistakable white breast and brown head. The majority were seen at Rowe Sanctuary, where we counted around 30 birds.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca* — Fairly common sighting, almost daily. The largest flock was seen from the Fort Kearny HBT bridge.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* — Best looks were at the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP) sandpit.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis* — From a distance, the males can be identified by having a black head, dark gray back, white sides and black tail end as well as by their frequent diving behavior. These features combined create the “gestalt” necessary to identify this species from afar. Plentiful at Alma WTP.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola* — Our best looks were at the birds from above as we were driving over the Harlan County Reservoir (HCR)—a neat perspective! Fun fact: Buffleheads nest almost exclusively in holes excavated by Northern Flickers, occasionally, in tree cavities made by Pileated Woodpeckers.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* — Seen at the HCR and at the Alma WTP.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser* — Regularly seen with the largest flock of nine birds at the Fort Kearny HBT.

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* — We counted 29 ruddies at the Alma Waste Treatment Ponds. Also known as “stifftails,” their long tail is often raised straight up in the air. The dark caps and white cheeks of nonbreeding-plumaged males were distinctive.

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS AND ALLIES: Phasianidae (3)

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo* — Seen on our drives on the third day, with a particularly large flock on the way to the Crane Trust in the evening.

Greater Prairie-Chicken *Tympanuchus cupido* — Wow, what a show from these charismatic birds! We saw four males prancing about on their lek near the town of Ravenna. Sally was the first on the bus, and saw two birds flush while four remained, so perhaps there were two females in the vicinity, too. One male (likely the dominant individual) even flew to the top of our bus to show off. We smiled as we listened to the pitter-patter of his feet above our heads and booming vocalizations.

Ring-necked Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* — One seen at Funk WPA.

GREBES: Podicipedidae (1)

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* — We saw one at the Fort Kearny State Historical Park, in a pond among the campsites.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae (3)

Rock Pigeon (1) *Columba livia* — Seen every day on the tour.

Eurasian Collared-Dove (1) *Streptopelia decaocto* — Encountered daily, especially in and around town.

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura* — Multiple sightings on four of our five days together.

CRANES: Gruidae (1)

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis* — The birds we all truly came here for! Almost one million Sandhill Cranes gather on the Platte River each spring during their northward migration. These cranes have been part of Nebraska’s landscape for millions of years. Fossil beds in several parts of Nebraska contain the remnants of prehistoric cranes dating back to

10 million years ago. Coming to this major staging area to witness the continued, extraordinary migration of these adaptable, resilient cranes was such a gift. Approximate total of cranes seen was around 70,000.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae (1)

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus* — Best views were at the Rowe Sanctuary Pond viewing area (crane loafing spot). This is the only species of plover with two black bands across the chest.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: Scolopacidae (1)

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca* — Seen on the river “mudflats” at the Crane Trust, Rowe Sanctuary and from the Fort Kearny HBT bridge.

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae (1)

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* — Encountered in town, at Rowe Sanctuary and standing on the shore of Harlan County Lake. This species of gull is especially comfortable around humans and fast food joints!

CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae (1)

Double-crested Cormorant *Nannopterum auritum* — Seen in flight along the interstate near Kearney.

PELICANS: Pelecanidae (1)

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* — Five were floating on the water, and one flew past us at the Harlan County Reservoir.

HERONS AND EGRETS: Ardeidae (1)

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* — We saw a total of five birds while driving around HCR. Although they look impressive in size, Great Blue Herons weigh only five to six pounds. Looking heavier than they actually weigh is true for all birds due to their hollow bones, a feature all birds share.

HAWKS, KITES AND EAGLES: Accipitridae (6)

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius* — Seen almost daily. These slim, long-tailed hawks are distinctive at a distance as they glide low over grasslands, wings held up in a dihedral.

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus* — Guide-only sighting by Lena on her run outside the hotel during an afternoon break.

Cooper’s Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* — One seen at the Fort Kearny HBT.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* — Encountered daily, usually near the cranes, who were extremely wary of the eagles and flighty if they neared.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis* — We enjoyed observing a dark morph of this common hawk at the Fort Kearny HBT.

Ferruginous Hawk *Buteo regalis* — One seen in the distance at the prairie dog town in the Clark WPA.

OWLS: Strigidae (1)

Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus* — What a treat it was to see this beautiful bird on its nest along the road near Republican City.

WOODPECKERS: Picidae (4)

Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus* — Seen well at Spring Creek Prairie, coming to the feeder.

Downy Woodpecker *Dryobates pubescens* — This small woodpecker showed itself at Spring Creek Prairie, Fort Kearny, and Alma WTP.

Hairy Woodpecker *Dryobates villosus* — Flyby seen from the bridge at Fort Kearny, as well as one at Alma WTP.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus* — Common woodpecker, heard and seen at multiple sites.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae (2)

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius* — This diminutive, colorful falcon was seen four of our five tour days; usually seen perched on an electric wire along the road.

Merlin *Falco columbarius* — Seen in flight as we were returning from the prairie-chicken lek.

SHRIKES: Laniidae (1)

Northern Shrike *Lanius borealis* — Two seen on this tour! One at Rowe Sanctuary, perched on a wire past the loafing ponds, another was seen along Kilgore Road on our way to the Fort Kearny HBT.

CROWS AND JAYS: Corvidae (1)

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata* — A couple encountered at Spring Creek Prairie.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos* — Three birds were seen at the Crane Trust on our walk along the nature trail.

NUTHATCHES: Sittidae (1)

White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis* — Seen or heard at multiple locations. Possible nest hole at the Fort Kearny HBT.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae (1)

European Starling (1) *Sturnus vulgaris* — Common throughout.

THRUSHES: Turdidae (1)

American Robin *Turdus migratorius* — Encountered frequently and in good numbers at multiple locations.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS: Passeridae (1)

House Sparrow (1) *Passer domesticus* — Common around town.

FINCHES AND EUPHONIAS: Fringillidae (2)

House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus* — Common in the Haymarket District of Lincoln as well as Spring Creek Prairie.

American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis* — One at Spring Creek Prairie and the other at the Fort Kearny HBT.

NEW WORLD SPARROWS: Passerellidae (4)

American Tree Sparrow *Spizelloides arborea* — Several at Spring Creek Prairie

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis* — Seen at Spring Creek Prairie and the Fort Kearny HBT. The Dark-eyed Junco is one of the most common birds in North America, found across the entire continent.

Harris's Sparrow *Zonotrichia querula* — One seen at the Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center. Just as we were about to leave, bird activity around the center picked up, and one handsome male perched up for us long enough for everyone to get great looks. This is a large, grayish sparrow with a distinctive black face and bib. Great bird!

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia* — Regulars at the Crane Trust and Rowe Sanctuary.

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS AND ORIOLES: Icteridae (6)

Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta* — Nebraska's state bird did not disappoint and showed itself to us frequently. Commonly spotted along roadsides on all our drives, our best views were in the scope on the second day at the Rowe Sanctuary crane loafing area.

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna* — Around 10 birds were seen and heard at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus* — Commonly seen throughout the tour.

Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* — Lena saw three yellow-headed fly past the blinds on the first day at Rowe Sanctuary. Kent and Lena also saw one male on the fourth day in a large flock of 200+ red-winged at Funk Waterfowl Production Area. But this blackbird shifted from "guide only" to "the group got it!" when we saw a few hanging with a Red-winged Blackbird flock in someone's front yard as we drove out of Rowe Sanctuary on our last day

there.

Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater* — Seen on the Fort Kearny HBT.

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula* — Found in the Haymarket District in Lincoln as well as at the Rowe Sanctuary Pond viewing area.

NEW WORLD WARBLERS: Parulidae (1)

Yellow-rumped Warbler *Setophaga coronata* — Two very quick looks at the Fort Kearny HBT (the birds were just passing through).

CARDINALS, GROSBEAKS AND ALLIES: Cardinalidae (1)

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis* — Seen and heard singing loudly at Spring Creek Prairie. Also found on the Fort Kearny HBT.

MAMMALS

Fox Squirrel *Sciurus niger* — Seen along a road on the first day.

Eastern Cottontail *Sylvilagus virginianus* — Two seen in the evening, as the light faded, while we were walking back to our vans from the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail.

White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus* — Present both at the Crane Trust and Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail bridge.

Common Raccoon *Procyon lotor* — One seen on our first day at the Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, holed up in a tree hollow. Another was spotted running across the road on the way to Harlan County Reservoir.

Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel *Ictidomys tridecemlineatus* — Two spotted on the first day at the spot where we pulled off the highway to have our very first look at cranes, which were loafing and feeding in a field.

Black-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys ludovicianus* — Seen at Prairie Dog WPA and Clark WPA where the Ferruginous Hawk was perched on the ground in the distance, keeping an eye out for its next meal.

American Bison — A reliable, reintroduced herd at The Crane Trust.

American Beaver *Castor canadensis* — Seen swim-crawling through the water on the first day from the blind at Rowe Sanctuary.

Vole sp. — Seen by Dave only. Likely in the genus *Microtus*.

ADDITIONAL SPECIES

Boreal Chorus Frog *Pseudacris maculata* — Heard vocalizing along the Fort Kearny HBT. Its song, with a rising inflection, is reminiscent of running a finger through a comb.

“BIRD” OF NOTE (NOT!)

Whooping Crane *Grus americana* — This bird was an emotional roller-coaster! We thought we all got to see this rare, highly endangered bird on the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail. Beth spotted a white bird in the distance (great sighting!), but it turned out to be two Whooping Cranes: one a real bird and the other a decoy. Once we finally figured out that one of the birds wasn't moving and saw the stake it was on, we all had a good laugh. The second bird appeared real enough, moving about and feeding. We *thought* the decoy attracted a real whooper to land and feed near it, and we were thrilled! Later, however, a biologist informed us that both birds were decoys, and perhaps the second bird only appeared real because it was blown about by the wind in such a way that made it seem like it was actively feeding with its head tucked in the grass. How deceptive a long distance, heat-hazed view can be! Alas, no Whooping Cranes were seen on this tour, but our powers of perception were certainly well-tested.