

Nebraska's Platte River | March 16-22, 2025

Trip Report by David Jaffe



Guides Kent Skaggs and David Jaffe, with participants: Maxie, Helen, Beth, Carole, Fred, Gretchen, Michael, Phyllis, Jennifer, and Richard



Sun., Mar. 16: Arrival in Lincoln | Embassy Suites & the Haymarket

Our Nebraska birding adventure began in Lincoln, the state capital. Known for fine restaurants, numerous nature trails and, according to the Lincoln Visitor's Bureau, a "friendly Midwestern attitude", Lincoln served as a great place to start our journey. Since almost all participants arrived at the Embassy Suites on Saturday, the 15th, no airport transports were needed for most guests. However, as David was deplaning in Lincoln, a gentleman made



a comment as the cold air rushed into the plane when the airplane door opened. He said something about needing some heavier jackets to see the cranes. Later, at the luggage carousel, David connected with him and his travel partner. Turns out that this was Richard and Jennifer who were on the same flight from Denver to Lincoln for our tour. So, David invited them to join him in the rental van which was fortunately ready a couple of hours before the designated pick-up time. It was nice that all folks were able to settle in and enjoy a relaxing evening before our first group meeting on Sunday. Maxie would take a shuttle from Omaha to Lincoln on Sunday to meet the group at the hotel.

Our hotel was within easy walking distance of the Haymarket District. This historic district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is known to be a hip and lively section of town, boasting charming brick streets, art venues and historic buildings, and all helping to create memorable experiences for those fortunate to spend a little time in the area.

At 5:00 pm, we met as a group in the lobby for quick introductions before taking a short walk to Lazlo's Brewery and Grill. After sharing a tasty meal and nice conversations, we welcomed the walk back to our nearby hotel to rest up for the exciting week ahead. Mike and Phyllis decided to 'stretch their legs' a bit and extended their walk on the return.

Mon., Mar. 17: Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie | Travel to Kearney

Following a nice breakfast at the hotel, we loaded up in the vans for our first full day of the trip. Folks were early with their luggage and we were packed and rolling by 8:00 am. Today we would leave the capital for adventures in more rural landscapes. Although our final destination was Kearney, we made a few inspiring stops along the way. Our first stop was at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center near Denton. One of a handful of places in North America supporting native tallgrass prairie, the center has focused on the conservation of this ecosystem, and the birds that rely upon it, since 1998. Before we entered the grounds, David shared a quote from Sigurd Olson inspiring us to recall the sense of wonder and the excitement that comes with curiosity. We then spent about 40 minutes learning about the tallgrass prairie through the very well-presented displays in the visitor center. We were amazed by the fact that roots of many prairie grasses extend up to 15 feet beneath the surface as an adaptation to deal with drought, fire and heavy grazing of the Bison that once covered the landscape. After our fill of 'academic learning', it was time to get outside for some 'experiential learning'! As we descended from the visitor center to the bridge that crossed Spring Creek, we were serenaded with our first birds: Red-winged Blackbirds. Along with some good looks at this common wetland species, we got some good looks at American Robins, a Song Sparrow, several Canada Geese in the air and on the ground, and a Northern Flicker in flight. Helen expressed interest in seeing the Eastern meadowlark. Right on cue, we heard the soft, flute-like call



of this bird in the distance. Before long, it flew our way, was lit nicely by the early morning light and continued past our group, giving many of us good looks.

As we continued along the path, Kent pointed out Illinois Bundleflower, which, when present, is an indicator of healthy prairie ecosystems. He also showed the group Big Bluestem and Little Bluestem grasses, two of the species highlighted in the visitor center. Before returning to the visitor center, we eyed a couple of Green-winged and Blue-winged Teals in flight, along with Eurasian Collared-Doves, a very elegant Great Blue Heron, an American Kestrel and a distant Red-tailed Hawk. While walking back to the visitor center, Jen spotted a muskrat swimming across the small spring creek 'reservoir' with vegetation in its mouth. It dove almost immediately after we spotted it. Following a quick bathroom break, we departed the visitor center and were presented with our final two birds of the morning on feeders: a Red-Bellied and a Downy Woodpecker. Because they were very close to the visitor center, we all had wonderful opportunities to look at their intricate details. Two cherries on the cake!

After a lovely morning of birding at Spring Creek, we returned to the vehicles for the hour-long drive through the prairie to Chances R restaurant in York. This restaurant opened in 1932 and was operated as the "Cozy Lunch" until 1964 when the new owners expanded the seating from 50 to 180 people. New co-owner Raymond Reetz confided to his wife/co-owner Shirley Reetz, "Chances are, we'll go broke, but I want to give it a try". From then on, the restaurant has been known as "Chances R" and has been featured in several magazine and newspaper articles and has been recognized as a number one tour stop for the state of Nebraska.

After a memorable lunch, we made a quick stop at the gas station just north of the highway. This was fortuitous, for as we got out of the vans, 5-6000 cranes were circling above us. This would be our first good look at large numbers of cranes. Little did we know what we were in store for!! Before we left, we also spotted four Bald Eagles, with three of them in our binocular view at one time, and a small flock of Snow Geese with one rogue Canada Goose. Kent then offered the group a short description of 'a day in the life of a crane'. This helped set us up for what we would be observing over the next couple of days.

We continued on for 45 minutes west towards Grand Island to visit the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center. The Crane Trust performs research that helps inform management decisions, conservation policies, and land preservation efforts to help protect wildlife species that depend on the Platte River Valley's unique ecosystems. The group was provided some free time to explore the visitor center and the trails and was told to meet back at 4:00 pm for our transit to Kearney. Some folks took this opportunity to observe the 'local' group of Bison kept on the land; about 10 were close to the fence providing some great up-close looks. Many continued past the Bison



to two bridges that span the Platte River. It was nice to be ‘over’ the Platte River and bird from these bridges. To our trip list, we added two Killdeer, a couple of Eastern Bluebirds, the first of many House Sparrows of the trip, and some Common Grackles. We returned to the visitor center, made a few last purchases, and visited the bathrooms for a final time before we were back in the vans and heading to Kearney via some nice country backroads.

Although Kearney is home to the University of Nebraska at Kearney, our group was more attracted to the fact that it is the “Sandhill Crane Capital of the World” for its significant role in their migration. We were already starting to see why it gets this name! We arrived at the Hampton Inn in Kearney before 5:00 pm. After we checked in, folks settled into their rooms and were able to relax, knowing we would be staying here for the rest of the week. We gathered again around 6:20 pm to head out for dinner at Joy’s Table, just a few blocks down the street from the hotel. This restaurant honors a special woman named Joy (Bailey) Klute. She is said to have been a gourmet cook before that term was widely used. She, her second husband and their 9 children made their home on a farm near Hampton, Nebraska. Joy not only prepared three meals each day for the family of 11, but also took morning and afternoon lunch to the men in the fields on most days. Quite a special woman indeed! After a day of travel and birding, it was lovely to have the time to relax and enjoy a nice meal and continue getting to know our fellow travelers through stories and conversation. After this nice Midwestern “home-cooked” meal, we returned to the hotel, either by foot or by vehicle, to get some rest in preparation for our early rise in the morning.

Tues., Mar. 18: Sunrise on the Platte River | Crane Viewing in the Fields

There’s always a bit of excitement when we intentionally get up before sunrise while on vacation, probably because it suggests something special is about to happen. And indeed, we were in for a very special morning! We loaded up the vans in the coolness of a pre-dawn morning. The temperature was about 40 degrees and there was a slight breeze. Wheels were rolling by 5:30 am and we arrived at Audubon’s Rowe Sanctuary about 20 minutes later. Rowe Sanctuary is another very important facility located in the Platte River Valley that works to conserve and restore the Platte River ecosystem, focusing on cranes, other wildlife, and their habitats, for the benefit of earth's biological diversity.

After a quick bathroom stop, we gathered with others that braved the dark, cool morning to experience sunrise with the cranes! Before heading to the blind for the show, we listened to a brief orientation from Marcos, the center’s director, and then a few more specifics were shared with us from our guides Tom and Sheri. Once we received all the important information, we gathered ourselves and followed our guides for a short ¼-mile walk over relatively level ground to the blind. Those that looked up into the clear night sky would observe both



Dippers (not the birds, but the celestial ones). As we approached the blind in the dark, we could hear the cranes murmuring quietly amongst themselves, but nothing like what we would hear in less than an hour. We were in the blinds by about 6:45 am. People slowly found their places; some in front of the windows, others on a bench in the back of the blind. Now, we waited. It wasn't long before the landscape slowly, but surely, illuminated. As the rising sun lit up the scene in front of us, we could make out the river and the islands in its channel. The islands were exposed sandbars rising above the level of the river. As the light grew, so did our excitement, as did the volume of the symphony before us. There seemed to be a relationship with the loudness of the calls and the amount of daylight. We were seeing more and more cranes: close to the blind, in the distance, in the river, upriver on river bars...Thousands of cranes. We were told the most recent count came in at 700,000, give or take 50,000! On occasion, a smaller portion of these thousands, yet still numbering in the thousands, took flight. The rise of these cranes was followed by yet even more of the incredible music of their calls. Once you hear the call of a single, or even a couple of sandhill cranes, it is unforgettable. But the music of 10's of thousands of cranes is beyond describable.

As more and more cranes took flight, the huge assemblage of cranes dwindled. At one point, roughly 9:00 am, there was a tremendous liftoff of most of the remaining birds, likely due to an eagle moving in to pick off a weaker or younger crane. Although we did not see the eagle, the signs were clear: There was an eagle in the area and the cranes were off! AMAZING! And now, it was time for them to go out and feed in nearby meadows and fields.

In addition to the cranes, we observed several species of waterfowl from the blind. Among the species we added to our list this morning included the stately Northern Pintail, Mallards, Northern Shovelers, and the typically ubiquitous European Starling. Kent also spotted a Baird's Sandpiper in flight.

After about two hours in the blind, our guides informed us it was time to head back to the visitor center. Although it was difficult to leave the incredible spectacle, the idea of a warm venue and bathroom stop was appealing. We took the short walk back to the visitor center, this time in daylight, perused the gift shop, regrouped a bit and then headed back to Kearney, the 5th most populous city in Nebraska (34,362 in 2024). Brunch today would be at Good Evans. Unlike Joy's Table, there is no "Evan". The namesake is derived from the values of the owners: GOOD EATS GOOD VIBES GOOD ATMOSPHERE GOOD NEIGHBORS GOOD SERVICE. Their website states: "Our focus goes beyond food in wanting to create an environment and experience that brings people and communities together." This was a great place to continue fostering the comradeship of our small adventurous group.



Following a wonderful brunch, we had a little down time at the hotel before venturing out again in the early afternoon. We were on the search for more waterfowl and, of course, cranes. Our first destination was the Rowe Sanctuary Pond viewing pullout where cranes would spend time during the midday hours. These areas, known as “loafing areas”, occur in a variety of habitat types, such as meadows and fields; often near water. Not only were we greeted by about 3,000 loafing cranes, but we added a couple species to the trip list including Bufflehead and the Ring-billed Gull. Contrary to the impending blizzard that was forecasted for later in the day, we enjoyed very lovely weather at the pullout, complete with comfortable temperatures, calm conditions and lots of sun. Before we left the pullout, David shared a bit about the Platte River watershed and Kent shared a little more information about the life history of the cranes; discussing breeding, fledging, family structure and challenges to migration. David followed this with a short reading by Helen Keller that provided some fodder to rejoice about our experiences.

From here, we visited another pond that was a bit more productive for waterfowl and gave us our first views of Cackling Geese, about two hundred in total. There were a few Canada Geese that provided good scale for comparison, as well as a few Snow Geese in the mix. While this pond viewing pullout gave us a good look at an immature Bald Eagle, we also got some good looks at two mature Bald Eagles, as well as a light and dark morph of Red-tailed Hawks. New for the list were four Greater White-fronted Geese, American Wigeon, our first Rock Pigeon of the trip, and several Gadwall.

We returned to Kearney for a small break before taking a short walk to enjoy our dinner at the Coppermill Steakhouse. Following a dinner of steak, seafood, pasta and more engaging conversation, we returned to the hotel where we gathered to hear plans for the following day.

Due to the forecasted blizzard, the visit to the Prairie-Chicken Lek was cancelled. The group understood and rolled with the fluidity of the plan. Carol summed up the mood of the group: “Blessed are the flexible for they will never be bent out of shape.” While we were disappointed about the cancellation, nobody was heard complaining about the opportunity to sleep in!

Wed., Mar. 19: Presentations | Drive and Bird Adventure

As predicted, the blizzard came in and we awoke to big wind and a snow-covered landscape. In addition to the Prairie-Chicken Lek visit being cancelled this morning, the Archway Museum was closed and our evening visit to the crane blind was cancelled. So, after enjoying a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, the group convened at 10:00 am to go over our bird list. Kent presented a few tips and tricks for filling out the bird list before David went over the birds we observed over the last couple of days. In addition, we added White-tailed Deer and Muskrat to the mammal section of the list. Kent shared some information about the life history of the Prairie-Chickens and showed a video of the birds on a lek. Then, David presented a workshop called, “Delving into the mysteries of



Sparrow Identification and Natural History: Lifting the veil of secrecy”. He talked about sparrows in general, identification tips, and then focused on the possible sparrows we might see in the area. The workshop was interactive, including a few quizzes and even a component where participants walked around a table with images of sparrows they had to identify using their newly acquired skills.

Folks seemed happy with the workshops considering we were not able to get out in the field for much of the day. However, at 3:00 pm we reconvened for a ‘drive and bird’ adventure. This turned out to be quite productive; adding about 10 new species to our trip list. Our first stop was a sand and gravel pit that is now filled with water and serves as a good location for waterfowl. At this location, known as ‘Grandpa’s Steakhouse Pond’, we added the American Coot, Common Goldeneye and the Ruddy Duck. From here, we continued to Fort Kearny State Historical Park where we had some great looks at our first Harris’s Sparrow, American Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, Yellow-headed Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird. It was nice to see the Harris’s and Junco after just recently discussing sparrows earlier in the day. Our final stop for the afternoon was Fort Kearny State Recreation Area where we were able to get Richard his target-life bird for the trip: the Northern Cardinal. We also picked up Ring-necked Duck for the trip list.

After the snowfall, the landscape was transformed into a wintery wonderland - so very different from what we’d experienced the previous days. The windward side of the trees were coated with snow, while the leeward had no snow. There was a contrast and a beauty to the landscape that was very appealing. After our two-hour birding-by-vehicle-adventure, we returned to the hotel to pick up Gretchen, who had decided to have a relaxing afternoon with her book, and then headed to dinner at Whisky Creek. This was another wonderful Nebraska-style establishment, but, like all the others, it had its own style and flare. We enjoyed another tasty meal and great conversations before returning to the hotel for a very brief break before meeting in the lobby at about 7:30 pm for a presentation on cranes by Kent. This was followed by a presentation by David about bird adaptations. So, after another full-day, albeit crafted with an impromptu energy, people retired to their rooms excited about our plans for tomorrow: a day back in the field!

Thurs., Mar. 20: Harlan County Reservoir

This morning, we awoke to crisp, clear conditions. The temperature started at about 16 degrees, but there was not much of a breeze and before long, the temps were well above freezing. We were excited to explore after a mostly indoor day yesterday.

Following a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, at 7:45 am we loaded up the vans with excitement and headed towards our first destination of the day: Harlan County Reservoir. As we drove south, the flat prairie landscape gave way to rolling hills and long draws. These changes in the landscape indicated we were leaving the Platte



River watershed and entering the Republican River Valley. This change in habitat back to rolling hills and grass also meant we were re-entering the land of the Greater Prairie-Chicken. Since we didn't have the opportunity to visit the Prairie-Chicken Lek yesterday, we were keeping our eyes peeled for one in this area. And, we got one!! A very brief fly-over, in front of the vans. So quick was this fly-over that unfortunately not everybody observed this bird, but it was reassuring to know they were in the area.

Before we made our first 'official' stop, which would be the bathrooms at the visitor center, we stopped for an opportunity to view a Great Horned Owl on its nest. Upon arrival, Kent spotted the owl on the nest. However, by the time we got out of both vans and scoped the nest, the bird had flown and the chicks were not visible. It returned within about five minutes, but only briefly, and then again about ten minutes later. Once Kent and David confirmed everybody had seen the owl, we left the site to avoid further disturbance to allow the adult to return to caring for the chicks.

Continuing on toward the visitor center, we passed a Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony. As many of them stood at attention, it was easy to think they were welcoming us into the area. They would also be there on the way out, bidding us a fond farewell. The visitor center was just a few hundred yards down the road from the owl nest, so it wasn't long before we stopped for a bathroom and to peruse the displays in the center. For such a small building, the amount of information - replica skeletons of birds and mammals and stuffed animals derived from car hits and accidents - was really quite impressive and very educational.

After this brief stop, we made our way across the dam and stopped at the one place where parking was legal. Here we set up the scopes and scanned Harlan Reservoir with our binoculars. This Reservoir is the second largest body of water in Nebraska and at normal water levels provides 75-miles of shoreline habitat. The reservoir is surrounded by extensive tracts of woodlands, brush, grasslands and weedy areas and therefore attracts a wide variety of species. We were not disappointed! At this stop alone, we observed 23 species, of which seven were new to the list: several Redheads, numerous Lesser Scaups, one Eared Grebe, several groups of the most elegant American White Pelican, a few Northern Harriers, and on the rock covered banks of the dam, a couple American Pipits and one Savannah Sparrow.

Since we had such a productive morning and lunch-time was approaching, we decided on picking up a quick lunch at Subway in Alma and then picnic close to the reservoir so we could continue birding. We chose a small picnic area on the south side of town overlooking the lake to enjoy our meal, complete with more good looks at Pelicans, Bald Eagles and Sandhill Cranes.

What birding trip wouldn't be complete without a stop at the local water treatment ponds?! So, after our picnic, we made our way to the Alma Treatment Ponds south of town. We were rewarded with much closer looks of



many species we had already seen at great distance. Now, being so much closer, we could really enjoy the details and the beauty of these birds. We were also able to compare the Redhead and Canvasback, the latter of which was new for the list. Also new was the Turkey Vulture. After the ponds, we made our way to Methodist Cove campground, but wound up doing a quick drive through since it looked kind of quiet.

Our final stop at Harlan was the Pheasant Ridge Trail at Methodist Cove where we stretched our legs on a really nice trail that had been well cleared of the snow, was relatively level, and provided such a wonderful opportunity for us to really enjoy the day—which had become warm and very comfortable. We scanned the trees for passerines and cast our eyes skyward for the possibility of an owl or other raptor. We were rewarded for our efforts with a Cooper’s Hawk (new for the list) and some good looks at Red-tailed hawks.

One thing about which we were all curious were numerous similar nests consisting of the same material built near the tops of several different trees. Kent and David were not sure who would build a nest in that location or with that material. We left the trail with a mystery warranting further investigation!

We again passed our welcoming and ‘farewelling’ prairie dog colony, and then stopped by the Great Horned Owl nest for a gander. We were in luck! An adult was on the nest and we all got good looks from the vans. Having experienced a piece of Nebraska that was new to the group, we began our journey back to Kearney after a full day of birding, with 10 new species for the day.

Once back at the hotel, we all retired to our rooms for some rest, although brief, well-deserved. We headed to Cunningham’s Journal on the Lake for an early dinner with a view. After dinner it was back to the hotel to complete our bird list, preceded by a short humorous reading from David. After this we all headed to our rooms for a good night’s rest in preparation for our last full day, which would, again, begin before the sun showed itself.

Fri., Mar. 21: Sunrise with the Cranes | Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail

By now, the group was hip to the early morning starts and by 5:30 am we were ready to roll and make our way out to Audubon’s Rowe Sanctuary for our last morning with the cranes. We were oriented and received our guide assignment, this time with Brian and Pam. The excitement that was expressed before the briefing in the Audubon’s headquarters building was silently carried along the trail to the blind and it seemed like we weren’t the only excited beings in the area. This morning’s chorus was a bit more robust than that of Tuesday. The birds were louder and there was more activity, visible even in the dim light. As the light of the day increased, we began to see the hordes of animals before us.

Like Tuesday, large groups of cranes would occasionally take flight as the morning became lighter. However, unlike Tuesday, Bald Eagles swooped in looking for old or injured cranes by 7:30 am. The implication of the early



arrival is that the majority of the flock was still on the river, so when the lift off occurred, it was much larger and much more dramatic than we had previously observed. There were a couple hundred thousand birds in the air...at one time...in front of us...calling, circling, and trying to evade being the one victim of an eagle attack. After a few minutes of circling, David scanned the river bar and found only one bird remaining about a half mile downstream from the blind. Clearly, this bird was injured or it would have flushed with the other thousands of cranes seeking safety. It's interesting to ponder what this one, isolated bird might have been thinking. After the lift off, most of the birds continued to circle and eventually left the river area for the fields to begin their feeding for the day. It is likely the flock expended a large amount of energy keeping warm during the blizzard that passed through the area and now it was time to refuel.

Following another memorable time in the blind viewing this incredible natural phenomenon, we slowly made our way back to the visitor center for a last spin through the gift shop and a bathroom run. There was a lot of gratitude and rejoicing for the wonderful opportunities we shared together with the cranes, the waterfowl, the songbirds...so many amazing opportunities! It wasn't over yet!!! There was still more to explore...but first back to Good Evans for some good food.

Well fed, we returned to the hotel for a rest before reconvening at 3:00 pm in the lobby. It was time for the 'surprise' we promised our group yesterday. David facilitated an appreciation circle. In front of every person was a wooden pin with a Sandhill Crane carved onto the front. Each person, in turn, would pick a pin and present it to another and share something about the recipient that they appreciated: something they admired, something they learned, something that left a mark on them. Then that recipient would pick a pin and present it to another in the group, and so on. Some very heartfelt and sincere comments and stories were shared. This group took to the activity wonderfully and it made for a very memorable occasion. Towards the end of the Circle, David expressed some thoughts on the value of a 'shared experience' and finished the appreciation circle by reading a piece highlighting the value of sharing experiences in nature with others.

After the appreciation circle, we all shared something about the trip: a favorite moment or a favorite bird. Helen has waited 40 years to do this trip. Ever since she learned about bird migration, she has wanted to be with the cranes. She will always remember walking out to the blinds on Tuesday, looking up to the heavens and seeing both Dippers. Richard had not really thought about the Northern Cardinal until David asked him if he had any target birds. He thought, "Cardinals". We were fortunate to see cardinals on several occasions! Phyllis really enjoyed seeing the Yellow-Headed Blackbird and truly appreciated the openness of the group. Carol felt that everyone in the group was wonderful. You could sit down with anyone and have engaging and enjoyable



conversations. She also really enjoyed the ‘pepper in the sky’-first the pepper (cranes) would come at you and then you would hear it. A major take-away for Mike was the snow, the wind and the cold. He had never been to the plains; the beauty of the region shocked him and the snow placed a wonderful veneer over the trip. Fred really enjoyed looking closely and repeatedly at all the wonders: grasses, birds, trees, etc. Maxie has done a lot of traveling and been with a lot of groups. She mentioned they were not all as open as this group and that she was very happy with the way we all interacted with each other. She got some really good looks of the Killdeer for the first time and was very impressed with the Yellow-headed Blackbird. For Gretchen, a highlight was the sparrow presentation and admired David for caring so much about them. She enjoyed the music of the cranes and described their songs as ‘wooden wind chimes’. Beth mentioned how much she enjoyed the gift shops, the diversity of the places we visited and the nice mix of down time and ‘up time’. The ‘liftoff’ this morning was amazing. She will return to Alaska a better birder. Jen was very impressed by the number and sound of the cranes and felt very fortunate for the experience. Her big take away was seeing the Great Horned Owl on the nest. She was also inspired by the diversity of birds we observed. Kent has been here so often that he looks for something different to be able to share with participants. This tour, he felt the snow added something beautiful; the spaces between the patches allowing the different colors of the meadow to shine through was really impressive. He also enjoyed birding from the dam as it was very peaceful and so nice to have a 360-degree view. David also felt very fortunate to have such a wonderful group that got along so well and were so engaged with the experiences and genuinely curious. Like Kent, he felt the time on the dam was very spacious and just simply comfortable. Everyone was happy to be patient and allow the landscape to present itself on its own schedule. Afterwards, Kent informed the group that, after a bit of research, he had determined the mystery nests were those of the Orchard Oriole. For all, sharing these sentiments about the trip was such a lovely and inspiring way to spend our afternoon.

Doing the appreciation circle set the tone for a celebratory dinner at The Alley Rose. We had a table on the ‘edge’ of the restaurant for this final dinner together. The relatively quiet and comfortable space provided a wonderful atmosphere where we could continue to share our highlights from the week and enjoy each other’s company for one final shared meal.

Following yet another incredible meal, we returned to the hotel to pick up a few warmer layers and made our way to the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail. Although we didn’t hike all 13 miles of this trail, we did take a short stroll from the parking area to the bridge that crossed the south channel of the Platte River. From here, we enjoyed watching the cranes come back to their roost as the sun slowly set over the landscape. We had almost no wind, a gorgeous sunset and thousands of Sandhill Cranes fly over us while we stood on the bridge in utter amazement. At one point, after a huge flock of cranes flew overhead, I looked over to Mike who exhaled one of those exhales that says, ‘whewf, this is amazing’ and then he quietly, almost inaudibly spoke, “Wow!” That pretty much sums

up the evening...HOWEVER, just to add one more cherry to an already cherry covered cake, or maybe five cherries, we spotted Whooping Cranes! FIVE!!! (thus, the five cherries) We viewed them through the scopes and continued to marvel at our good fortune as thousands of cranes continued to arrive from the fields in the darkening skies. As we walked back to the vans after another memorable experience, stars shined brighter and brighter, and the calls of the cranes continued, as if no one was watching.

Sat., Mar. 22: Return to Lincoln

Today, we left Kearney for Lincoln. We offered two departure times: Carol, Beth and Maxie left with David for Lincoln at 8:15 am to catch an 11:00 am shuttle from the airport to Omaha. The remainder of the group left with Kent at 9:15 am for a quick stop at the airport so Gretchen and Fred could pick up their rental before heading off to Omaha. The others went for lunch at Toast in Lincoln before being dropped off at the airport for their afternoon flights. It was sad, challenging, sweet and engaging to say our good-byes after such a wonderful trip. Strong connections were made and new friendships were forged. We shared experiences and created memories that will last a lifetime with hopes that we meet again on another adventure with Naturalist Journeys!

Photos: Group (Kent Skaggs - KS), Sandhill Cranes (KS), Group birding (Jennifer Epp - JE), Bison (JE), Group Birding (David Jaffe - DJ), Sandhill Cranes (KS), Viewing at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary (KS), Flying Sandhill Cranes (DJ), Sunrise with the Cranes (DJ), Sandhill Crane (DJ), Crowded Skies (KS), River Scenic (KS), Birding Harlan County Reservoir (DJ), Group (KS), Flying Sandhill Cranes (KS)