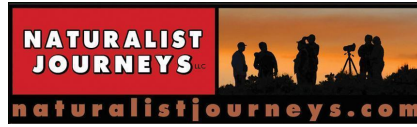


# Nebraska's Platte River

## March 14 – 20, 2026 | Trip Report

### by Kent Skaggs



**Guides Kent Skaggs and John Carlson, with 11 participants: Janet & Philip, Kristin, Martha & Dennis, Mary, Pam, Rebecca, Sue & Bill and Sue**



#### **Saturday, March 14      Arrival in Lincoln | Embassy Suites & the Haymarket**

Our adventure began in the capital city of Lincoln at the Embassy Suites by Hilton. Located downtown, the hotel is within easy walking distance of the historic Haymarket District and is where we would be eating dinner. Four of our guests needed a transfer from the Lincoln Airport on Saturday as most of the participants had arrived early and had already done some exploring on their own. Two of the group had been delayed en route to Nebraska and would join us in the morning, while the rest gathered at 5:00 PM in the lobby of the hotel for quick introductions and then made the short walk to Lazlo's Brewery and Grill to get better acquainted. After enjoying a very good meal and good conversation, we returned to the hotel to rest up for an exciting week ahead.

#### **Sunday, March 15      Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie | Travel to Kearney**

Travel day! After a leisurely breakfast, we loaded our gear into the vans and started towards Kearney, with a few stops along the way. The first was Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center. A weather system was in the process of



moving through the state bringing strong winds and as we arrived those winds began to pick up. We went inside the visitor center and checked out the displays on tallgrass prairie, before stepping outside on the south side of the building out of the wind to see what birds were in view. There were Canada Geese, Wood Ducks, Mallards, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, an American Coot and one mammal, a Muskrat, seen on a pond near the center. The wind was limiting the activity on land but we did see a couple of Eastern Bluebirds and had a brief look at our first Harris's Sparrow.

Then it was back on the road so we could get to Chances "R" in York for lunch. As we headed west, the winds continued to increase and snow began to fall making travel a bit challenging, but we made it safely and sat down to enjoy a hearty Nebraska lunch. Fueled up, we continued on to our next stop, the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center. The snow had stopped but the wind continued, so we spent most of our time in the visitor center looking at the displays and checking to see what was at the bird feeders. Some Yellow-headed Blackbirds were seen under one set of feeders, before they joined a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds in a pasture where several of the Crane Trust's captive herd of bison were foraging on some hay.

From here our next and final stop would be Kearney, but we did take a slight detour in order to try to view Sandhill Cranes out in fields. We found most in areas that were more sheltered from the wind which was to be expected. Then it was on to the Hampton Inn in Kearney where we would be staying the rest of the tour. After everyone had an opportunity to get settled into their rooms, the group gathered again to take a very short drive for dinner at Cunningham's Journal On The Lake. After enjoying some tasty entrees and getting to know each other a little more, we returned to the hotel to get some rest as we would have an early departure in the morning.

## **Monday, March 16      Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary | Archway**

We were on the road at 5:30 AM for the 20 minute drive to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. Once there, we checked in, found out what blind we would be going to and listened to a brief orientation. Then we followed our guides in the darkness to the blind. The wind had died down overnight making the half mile walk more tolerable, but the temperature had fallen to single digits. Once in the blind, our guides kept most of the windows closed so we didn't have to contend with what wind remained. As the light levels slowly increased, we could better see what



was happening on the river. The river had frozen solid on the surface overnight and it appeared that some of the cranes were stuck in the ice while others were standing on the ice. Most of the cranes had their heads tucked under a wing and were doing their best to conserve energy. As the sun rose above the horizon and began to warm the landscape, the cranes began to wake up and move about a bit. Eventually the cranes started taking flight, heading for the fields for breakfast. There were a couple of large liftoffs as the cranes were being harassed by Bald Eagles who were also looking for breakfast.

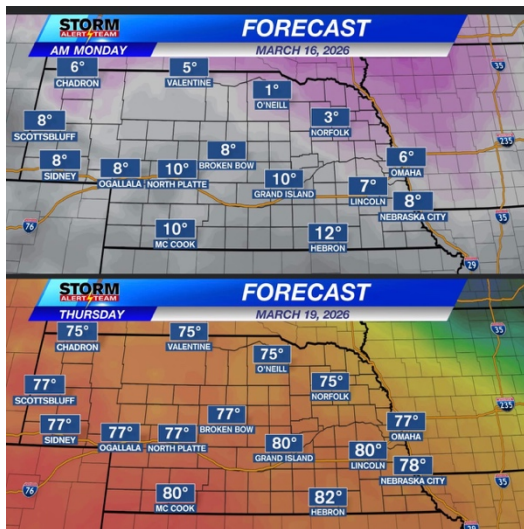
When we left the blind to head back to the visitor center, there were lots of cranes still in the river. If ice was the reason for them staying, they wouldn't have to wait long to be set free as the sun and the rising temperature would open the river up quickly. Once back, the group checked out the displays and the gift shop before loading back into the vans to head back to Kearney for brunch at Good Evans. After enjoying a very good breakfast, the group returned to the hotel for a little downtime.

With the sudden cold snap freezing a lot of the open water in the area, it was necessary to adjust the itinerary for the afternoon and take in one of the local attractions. Most of the group went mid-day to the Great Platte River Archway Monument, or Archway, where a person can step back in time to the great migration along the Oregon, California and Mormon Trails and see how transportation developed from that time period to current day. After about an hour the group returned to the hotel for a little break before gathering again for a short ride to dinner at Joy's Table. After another tasty meal, it was back to the hotel to get some rest as we would have another early start in the morning.

## **Tuesday, March 17      Morning with Prairie-Chickens | Evening with the Cranes**

A slightly later start this morning as we hit the road at 5:45 AM for the 20 minute drive to Prairie Wind Birding Tours located a few miles north of the town of Odessa to see the mating display of Greater Prairie-Chickens. Upon arrival we were greeted by the owners of the operation, Kent and Robyn Hubbert. Robyn provided an overview of the operation covering the history of the land, what to expect on the lek and dos and don'ts while in the blinds. Kent then led a caravan of vehicles filled with customers out to the lek and got everyone situated in the blinds. Once everyone was in place, the windows were opened and we waited for the arrival of the prairie-chickens.

As it became light enough to see the landscape before us, faux birds - tufts of grass and small cedar trees - appeared on the edge of the lek. Then the real McCoy showed up with one male prairie-chicken appearing on the right side of the lek, followed by two more males on the left. Soon after, 16 more flew in from the surrounding grass covered hills to take their place on the lek. With the males now on their territories, neighboring birds paired up to spar with one another while others did their best to attract females by making



their characteristic ‘booming’ sound to let the females know they were ready for inspection. This activity went on for the entire time we were in the blinds, with some of the sparring taking on a more serious tone as blows made with the feet and wings could easily be heard. One male nearby tried to make himself more visible by perching on top of one of the blinds, doing this on a couple of occasions. At one point it appeared the activity was about to ratchet up a notch as additional vocalizations typically made when a female is present were heard. A few males cackled and whined and there were a couple of half-hearted whoops and flutter jumps indicating that a female may have been near or more likely a case of mistaken identity. It was still early in the mating season and with recent inclement weather, the females had decided to sleep in this morning. The males eventually realized this and departed the lek in unison, flying out of sight and allowing us to exit the blinds.

Back at the Hubberts’ residence, we loaded into our vehicles and headed back to Kearney for brunch. Then it was back to the hotel for a break before gathering again in the early afternoon. Our first stop was at the Museum of Nebraska Art, where we took about 45 minutes to check out their exhibits. Then it was on to Cottonmill Park on the west side of Kearney to see what birds we could find. We added several diving ducks and some Cackling Geese before briefly returning to the hotel and then heading to Whiskey Creek for an early dinner.

Then it was back in the vans to head east to the Crane Trust for an evening tour to see the Sandhill Cranes return to the river. We arrived at the visitor center, got checked in and watched an orientation video before getting back in the vans to caravan a few miles to where we would park and walk to the blind. As we walked to the blind, we could see cranes flying in to join others that had already returned to the river. Once inside the blind, we looked downstream at the roost that was increasing in size with each passing minute. Cranes were streaming in from the west, passing right in front of us before landing further downstream. As the roost grew, cranes started walking upstream in part to spread out and also to look for a snack before settling in for the night. By the time we departed, cranes had started to fill in the area directly in front of the blind. With everyone back in the vans, we made the half hour drive back to Kearney and the hotel. It had been a fun-filled day, but a long one as well so everyone was looking forward to a good night's sleep.

**Wednesday, March 18      Prairie Dogs | Harlan County Reservoir**

The group was afforded a later wake up time this morning and had breakfast at their leisure before loading into the vans at 7:45 AM. The primary destination for the day was Harlan County Reservoir, which was about an hour southwest of Kearney near the Nebraska-Kansas border. On the way there we paused briefly at Prairie Dog Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) which is owned and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As the name suggests there are prairie dogs here, specifically, Black-tailed Prairie Dogs. It was early in the day so not



many had made it out of their burrows yet, so we kept moving. About a half hour later we made another brief stop to look for Greater Prairie-Chickens, finding two with one putting on a show for whom we weren't quite sure.

Upon arriving at Harlan County Reservoir, we stopped briefly at the U.S. Corp of Engineers Visitor Center before heading west to Hunters Cove where we found several species of waterfowl, a Great Blue Heron rookery, a couple of Northern Harriers and a Bald Eagle that showed us the location of its nest in a stand of Eastern Cottonwood trees. From here we continued west towards Alma, stopping briefly at Methodist Cove to check out some waterfowl. Then it was into town to grab lunch to go and then make our way to the south side of the reservoir to the Alma Wastewater Treatment Ponds where we enjoyed our picnic lunch while watching a variety of ducks.

Then we started to backtrack our way to Kearney, with a few stops along the way. The first stop was at Methodist Cove again, this time getting out of the vans for a bit to see what we could find. It was a little quiet but we did have an Eastern Phoebe entertaining us while it gleaned insects from a grassy area and we had a flock of Sandhill Cranes making their way to the Platte River pass high overhead as well. Then it was back on the road for about a half hour before stopping again at Prairie Dog WPA. This time a lot of prairie dogs were out and about, so we took a little time to watch and listen to them as well. While doing so, another flock of Sandhill Cranes passed by high overhead, now within sight of the Platte River.

From here we headed west and then north to drive through Funk WPA, but the basin was mostly dry so we kept heading north towards Kearney. After we arrived back at the hotel, we had a little break before we gathered to make the short walk to the Coppermill Steakhouse for dinner and then retired a bit early as we would be getting up early one more time to watch the cranes in the morning.

## **Thursday, March 19      Last Morning with the Cranes | Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail**

Departure again was at 5:30 a.m. for our last visit to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary for the morning tour. First the orientation, then out to the blind. Unlike our first visit to the blind, it was a rather comfortable walk as the temperature was in the 40's with no wind. As the sun crept its way toward the horizon we enjoyed watching the cranes wake up, this time with the river free of ice. And because there was no ice there were more birds on the river. The sounds of the cranes gradually became louder as more birds contributed to the dawn chorus and their

calls became deafening when thousands took to the air after being harassed by Bald Eagles. The sight of tens of thousands of birds in the air and on the water combined with their calls is hard to describe; it must be experienced, and what a great experience it was.

Once most of the cranes had left the river to go out to the fields to feed, our guides led us back to the visitor center where we spent a little more time before going back to Kearney and getting some food for ourselves. After brunch, we returned to the hotel for a little rest before gathering again in the early afternoon to go back out to Rowe Sanctuary, this time to a site away from the river. We arrived at a pullout near a pond in a meadow that was surrounded by cranes. There are several areas similar to this along the Platte River that are referred to as 'loafing areas' as the cranes gather here to digest breakfast, preen, bathe and even take a nap. The temperature had soared into the 80's which was well above average for this date and all the cranes wanted to do was stay cool. Some did so by standing in the water with a few taking a bath, while most just stood still hoping for a breeze. Quite the change for the cranes; they were trying to stay warm a couple of days ago and now they were trying not to overheat.

We returned back to the hotel to freshen up a bit before gathering again for an early dinner at the Alley Rose. Since this would be our last meal together, the group offered up some of their favorite moments during the tour. The cranes were certainly the highlight but other sightings and experiences made a lasting impression as well. After dinner we returned to the hotel to gather our gear, as we were headed to the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail to watch the evening fly-in from the bridge that spans the south channel of the Platte River. Once we arrived we discovered that lots of people had the same idea as we were joined by over a hundred other crane enthusiasts. It was a beautiful evening and as the sun neared the western horizon, the cranes began to move back towards the river. Before the sun set, looking downstream provided golden hues projected from the fields of grass on the north side of the river and along the river banks. Once the sun had set and with intermittent cloud cover, the array of colors from orange to pink to blue displayed across the sky only added to the visuals. As we slowly walked from the bridge, cranes were flying over heading upstream into the fading light. It was a great finale.

## **Friday, March 20      Return to Lincoln**

The group ate breakfast at their leisure and with the trip essentially finished and some of the group departing earlier than others, we said our farewells and wished each other the best of luck on future adventures. Here's hoping we meet again on another adventure with Naturalist Journeys.

### **Favorite Bird/Experience**

Bill - Yellow-headed Blackbird & the morning liftoff of cranes

Dennis - Greater Prairie-Chicken experience

Janet - Greater Prairie-Chicken experience

John - Eastern Meadowlark

Kent - Sharing the entire experience with guests

Kristin - The morning liftoff of the cranes & the Nebraska landscape

Martha - The contrast between the two morning liftoffs of cranes & the Greater Prairie-Chickens

Mary - Harris's Sparrow & the cranes flying over after we were outside of the blind

Pam - All of it

Philip - The contrast between the two morning liftoffs of cranes & the Greater Prairie-Chickens

Rebecca - Greater Prairie-Chicken experience & the flyover of Snow Geese at Harlan County Reservoir  
Sue - The contrast between the two morning liftoffs of cranes & the Greater Prairie-Chickens  
Sue W. - Yellow-headed Blackbird, Northern Cardinal & the comedy of bird behavior (prairie-chickens in particular)

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