



## **Platte River, Nebraska**

March 25-30, 2012

Ed and Sil Pembleton, Bob Faber guides

*A special departure for the TNC Legacy Club*

### **Sandy Dancing**

A Trip Report

By Sil Pembleton



As opposed to “Dirty Dancing,” this trip revealed the splendor of the prairie ecosystem, the Platte River, three spectacular avian species that are dynamic dancers – and the people who join forces in the restoration and conservation of these natural wonders.



#### **Sunday- March 25, 2012. *Arrival and Orientation***

Flames leap crimson and smoke billows then fades to gray layers of air. It’s spring burn time on the prairie. Our newly arrived Legacy members are headed by van to Nebraska Audubon’s Spring Creek Prairie on the outskirts of Lincoln -- and we can see smoke from three separate fires.



Arriving at Spring Creek, the trails beckon our legs weary of airplane seats. We walk through Big and Little Bluestem and Indian Grass as we follow the deep historic ruts made by pioneer wagons. When we reach the hilltop, in the distance we see the Nebraska State Capitol jutting into the smoky sky, and the prairie at our feet sports a black char of grass, burned earlier in the week. Within this black warming earth, green sprouts will appear within days. We learn that fires are a must for prairie preservation.

Later, with dinner at Vensenzo’s we toast “the prairies, rivers, birds – and the Nature Conservancy people who care about preserving them.” Everyone feasts on Italian food, begins making new friends and settles down to some after-dinner learning about Nature Conservancy programs and projects in Nebraska through a presentation by Jason Skold, program manager from Omaha.

#### **Monday, March 26, 2012. *Prairie Dwellers***

Leaving Lincoln we head for Sandhills country, a rolling land with low to high sand dunes that have been stabilized by a covering mantle of deep-rooted prairie grasses and forbs.

Along the way we discover a pasture with small volcano-shaped mounds harboring small but active rodents that sit bolt upright and yelp before diving below ground: A prairie dog colony. Soon a John Deere tractor is headed our way along the dirt side road where our vans are parked. The farmer is curious about the small crowd of people staring at his field through binoculars. Turns out he was born here and has returned to the homestead after living in California for years as a police officer. Nebraska is now home again and he welcomes us. After this brief encounter, the group decides *Nebraskans are friendly*. He bids us good viewing, invites us to tour his popcorn plant some day, and warns that it is “just a matter of time” before the prairie dogs will have to go. He claims that 250 dogs eat as much grass as a cow and her calf would consume.



Later, another rancher muses, “My cattle seem to prefer the fres grass growth around a prairie dog colony. They graze there a few days, then return often as the grass puts up new shoots.”



We arrive at Calamus Outfitters, settle in and take an exciting open-Jeep Safari Tour bouncing across the hills of the Switzer family’s Gracie Creek Ranch. As we enjoy the splendor of the Sandhills Prairie we also learn the realities of ranching (calves to tag, an orphan calf to bottle feed, a herd to round-up and take to the local auction barn.) Over the past few years the Switzer family has become a community leader and role-model with their collaboration for conservation with Nature Conservancy and local ranchers, helping

neighbors with prairie burns, establishing conservation easements and designation as an *Audubon Important Bird Area*, and maintaining habitat for the federally endangered prairie species, *Blowout Penstemon*. The



conservation program and new business ventures established by the younger generation of Switzers serves as a successful model for other landowners in the area.

Sitting in the open jeep for the tour, we find the 20-25mph gusts somewhat annoying but learn that wind is a vital part of this ecosystem for the plants and animals that live here – and for the people too. “*We like the wind. If it is calm for about 3 days the windmills sit idle and we have no water for the cattle,*” says Sarah our guide who has grown up on this land.



At days end, we share fellowship and a hardy farm dinner prepared by the ranch owners.

## Tuesday, March 27, 2012. *Guests at the Dance*



The dance starts early. It is cold and pitch black as we sit silently in the blind, straining to hear the first soft *wooo* of a Prairie Chicken creeping through the grass to assume center stage on the “dance floor.” This is actually an area of short grass on a knoll in front of the blind, more formally known as a lek. The pointed tail is raised to flash white in the pale morning light. The pennaes, long feathers on the bird’s head rise and the bright orange gular sacks expand along the chicken’s neck to “boom” and woo.

With much cackling and foot stomping, the music – and the dance has begun. In an old school bus converted to a bird blind, we have a comfortable front row seat for the drama. A hen, head held aloof, walks slowly across the lek ignoring the frantic dancing of the dozen males. It’s early in the season; this dance will be presented many more times before mating occurs. The Western meadowlarks are always eager to add a lovely chorus to the daily dance rituals.



We return to ranch headquarters for a hardy breakfast, before spending the day exploring the prairie hills and Calamus reservoir.

***Shrike One!*** We have spotted a Loggerhead Shrike, an auspicious way to start the birding. The graceful white pelicans perform an aerial dance as they swirl across the sky and numbers of turkeys running through the brush

astound us! A friendly Burwell city worker offers to lead us to a bluff where we can point our spotting scope directly into an eagle nest. He is proud to share this delightful sight with us.

Who would expect the small town of Burwell, population 1,200, to have a gourmet café, but we dine on delicious fare at the Sandstone Grill continue our birding exploits and everyone also has time to relax or hike before dinner and a presentation by Jim Luchsinger, Nature Conservancy Director for the Sandhills/Northwest Prairie Program. Jim details the conservation projects that have evolved between Nature Conservancy and area ranchers. Our hosts, members of the Switzer family, have led this grassroots conservation effort.



Wine and cheese on the deck overlooking the prairie vista relaxes everyone for an early bedtime. We will attend another early morning dance tomorrow.

### **Wednesday, March 28, 2012. *Sharp-tail and River dancers***

Coffee is on at 6:00am and quick snacks are out on the table. The bus leaves at 6:15am for the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. Again we sit in a dark bus, ringside waiting for the amazing sounds of snapping tail feathers, stamping feet and wild cackling. The tails are up and flashing white, the wings are spread as the birds stamp and whirl, head feathers bright yellow, glow above the birds' eyes; throat pouches swollen with a fuchsia glow emit the wooing sounds accompanied by cackles. In this dance we see the inspiration for native prairie powwow dancers. Beautiful sights and sounds to behold in the pre-dawn.

But barely after dawn an owl swoops low and the dancers scatter. We wait on the edge of our seats hoping the grouse will return. As the dance resumes we witness more drama on the stage. Who among us can forget the fat coyote that leaps across the stage, and then stands empty-mouthed glaring at us through the tall grass on the edge of the dance floor?



*Fire on the hill!* After another hearty ranch breakfast, we pack up and head southward toward the Platte River. A phone call alerts us to the opportunity to experience a prescribed prairie burn being conducted by a Nature Conservancy fire team. We arrive in time to see the team, dressed in their yellow fire-resistant garb, as they spray water to create a fire-break on the mowed ring of grass surrounding the area to be burned, then a member of the crew walks rapidly around the edge of the tall grass carrying a torch that drips flame. Everyone stands watchful as the wind carries the conflagration! The black earth will offer up the nutrient-rich ash to produce lush grass that will nourish the cattle that will graze this property leased to a neighbor.

After a light picnic of cheese, crackers, summer sausage and chocolates, we head for our Kearney motel, a quick check-in, an early delicious dinner at the appropriately named, Legacy Restaurant, we are off to an appointment at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. We stand silent in the blind on the riverbank as thousands and thousands of sandhill cranes fly in at sunset to roost on the sandbars near us. At times the skies are dark with countless numbers of flying cranes. As they land, the birds drink, preen, dance and talk among themselves as we all enjoy the moment and wait for darkness. The night is black and the cranes settle, then we walk silently back to the vans and head for the motel. Sunrise comes early and we will be back in the blinds for crane-rise!



### **Thursday, March 29, 2012. *Fog on the River***

This morning we creep silently through the dark and settle into the river blind at Rowe again, anticipating the dawn and crane-rise. But a surprise awaits us -- a rare opportunity to experience a fog on the river. Not just any fog, but a fog so thick it grounds the cranes. The birds are uncharacteristically quiet and drift in and out of view in wafts of fog. Dr.



Paul Johnsgard, eminent ornithologist, our guest in the blind is enchanted and declares this a rare morning! A wild mink in the marsh adds a new element of surprise as it catches a frog for breakfast. Better than breakfast at Tiffany's! Finally, near 9 am, the fog starts to dissipate and cranes slowly begin to leave the river.



After leaving the blind we have a lecture in the sanctuary barn as Rowe staff highlight the conservation efforts along the Platte River and Dr. Johnsgard unravels some of the mysteries of sandhill crane migration. Members of the Legacy tour are pleased to meet and hear the author of the *Sandhill and Whooping Cranes* book they received earlier in the trip.

After time to watch for birds at the Audubon feeders (a Harris's Sparrow is a lifer for one member of our group) and peruse the gift shop, we head to downtown Kearney and the delightful Alley Rose Restaurant for our noontime meal.



We stroll down the brick street to the Museum of Nebraska Art with its eclectic collection of western and wildlife art, including John James Audubon and an innovative exhibit of folded paper cranes.



Dinner at the charming White Farmhouse Inn Bed and Breakfast is relaxing and afterwards participants have the option of returning to the motel or enjoying the cranes and river from the Ft. Kearny Bike and Hike Trail. The beautiful sunset, the fresh evening breeze, the river and the crane-song is a perfect ending to this day.

### Friday, March 30, 2012

After several days of early rising, this is our morning to sleep in. A leisurely breakfast and then we head south toward the Rainwater Basin. Dry pools yield little opportunity for birding, but we enjoy a fun meal at Mookie's in Minden, a small farm town of less than 3,000 residents – but with a great deal of community pride. A tour of the historic Minden Opera House brings a chorus of *ooohs* and *aaahs*. A mural on the ceiling tells the history of the town. When the lights go down, stars twinkle on the dark ceiling and shooting stars flash across the



black theatre sky.



Leaving town we bounce along dirt roads observing sandhill crane behavior and carry on a search (ultimately, futile) for the elusive whooping crane. In the feeding flocks of sandhills we notice dancing pairs and family groups of three or four cranes. The mated pairs will soon abandon their young "colts" as they head for the nesting grounds in the far north. It is interesting to note that with the unusually warm weather cranes have been in the area longer and seem to forage further from the river in areas not traditionally used.

Our journey ends at Derr House, the Nature Conservancy headquarters on the Platte River. There is time to enjoy the warm sunny day, hike a trail, explore the restoration area along the river and share a catered meal. We celebrate the birthday of one of our group with wine and chocolate.



As the day draws to an end, we head to the Conservancy blind on the river for one last viewing of the cranes. A quiet time on the river offers the opportunity for members of our group to reflect on their life experiences that make conservation and support of the Nature Conservancy important to them. After dark we head back to the motel.

**Saturday, March 31, 2012**



After a quick breakfast, we hastily pack and head east toward Lincoln. For the first few miles we silently bid the cranes feeding in the fields along the highway a “Thank you and good bye.” At the airport we tell our friends good-bye and hurriedly share memories before everyone heads for home.

*Photos © Ed Pembleton*

