

Platte River Cranes | Species List

March 8-14, 2020 | Compiled by Ed & Sil Pembleton



Naturalist Journeys Guides Ed & Sil Pembleton

Participants: Leonard, Dolores, Susie, Drew, Dan & Jane

(HO)= Distinctive enough to be counted as heard only

(I)=introduced

Summary: A spectacular year for viewing cranes, as always – the massive numbers of Sandhill Cranes was magical. And, the bonus of great views of an adult Whooping Crane was a thrill for all. We found extremely low numbers of waterfowl this year. This was likely due to a very early thaw and extremely dry conditions—even the larger Rainwater Basins were dry. Consequently, waterfowl had already migrated through or deviated from their usual migratory route. New for the trip list this year were two species, Eastern Screech Owl and Red-headed Woodpecker. Leonard's birthday Bald Eagle sighting was nice, as were Eastern Bluebirds – an early sign of spring.

BIRDS (55 species recorded, of which 2 was heard only):

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: Anatidae (14)

Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens*—Most years the numbers are in the millions, this year they came really early and left really, really early—we finally found a small flock of 1,500± birds at Johnson Waterfowl Production Area (WPA).

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*—Small flock discovered at Johnson WPA.

Cackling Goose *Branta hutchinsii*—Mixed in with a few larger Canadas, these birds were utilizing a sand pit that was converted to a housing development with an urban “lake.”

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*—Urban areas hosted many and a few were seen roosting on the Platte River with the Sandhill Cranes. Most migrants had moved on north.

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*—Early returning birds were spotted in a wooded pond near Denman, NE.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*—small numbers found on ponds along the road to Rowe Sanctuary, and several hundred at the Johnson WPA.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*—Spotted in ponds and wetland areas and at Johnson WPA with Northern Shovelers and American Wigeon.

American Wigeon *Mareca americana*—Several pair found in a pond on Rowe Sanctuary about 2 miles west of the visitor center, then large numbers at Johnson WPA.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*—Most small ponds hosted one or more pairs of Mallards.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*—Several hundred, with several courting flights observed at Johnson WPA.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*—Found in a wetland area near Wood River, NE.

Redhead *Aythya americana*—A few birds in the flock on Rowe Sanctuary and at Johnson WPA.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*—Several pair at Johnson WPA.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*—Male bird on the Platte River during evening blind visit.

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS AND ALLIES: Phasianidae (1)

Ring-necked Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (1)—Our first sighting involved two roosters sparring for territory at Spring Creek Prairie. A third joined the jousting and then they all flew into the tallgrass prairie. Just west of the Rowe visitor center, on a foggy morning, a large flock of (30+) birds was feeding in a grain field and then did a spectacular flight across the road in front of us.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae (3)

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* (1)—Lincoln, Kearney and Grand Island all harbored large numbers.

Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (1)—Having spread across the state, we saw and/or heard this species every day.

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*—Still common, but likely declining in numbers, we found this species around most grain fields.

CRANES: Gruidae (2)

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis*—The main feature of this trip, and they were spectacular! The early thaw and open river brought the birds to the Platte early in the season. The numbers kept growing and were near peak when we arrived—well over 400,000 birds. Prevailing north winds kept the birds from moving on and provided some of the best viewing opportunities we had seen in years.

Whooping Crane *Grus americana*—A bird on all the participants “bucket list,” and one was spotted in the middle of a large roosting flock of Sandhill Cranes in the Platte River on the first morning that we went to the viewing blinds at Rowe. The Rowe volunteer got the Whooper in the spotting scope so that everyone got to see it standing tall among the Sandhills. Great start!

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae (1)

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*—heard calling, but not seen.

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae (1)

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*—Wetland areas around Lincoln airport harbored a few birds.

CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae (1)

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*—a single bird observed at a sand quarry in Kearney.

HAWKS, KITES AND EAGLES: Accipitridae (4)

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*—Both male and female birds seen as they hunted over native prairies and/or restored grasslands.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*—On a farm road near Denman, we finally spotted a Bald Eagle sitting majestically in a large cottonwood tree. A special treat for Leonard’s birthday.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*—Seen daily on the trip. Both Harlan’s and Kridler’s phase seen a mile or so apart west of Kearney.

Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus*—Found a single individual soaring above the Platte River.

OWLS: Strigidae (1)

Eastern Screech Owl *Otis asio*—A new species for this trip. Ed, Drew and the Rowe volunteer guide heard a Screech Owl give it's "whinny" call repeatedly as we walked back along under the cottonwood trees returning to the visitor center after our evening trip to the blind.

KINGFISHERS: Alcedinidae (1)

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*—Spotted feeding downstream of the Bike Hike Trail bridge over the Platte.

WOODPECKERS: Picidae (4)

Red-headed Woodpecker *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*—A new species for this trip. We found it in a copse of trees near Spring Creek Prairie.

Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*—Feeders at Rowe visitor center.

Downy Woodpecker *Dryobates pubescens*—Feeders at Crane Trust visitor center.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*—Fairly common along riparian trees and feeding on ground at Ft. Kearny.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae (1)

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*—Spotted one outside Lincoln on the way to Spring Creek Prairie.

CROWS AND JAYS: Corvidae (2)

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*—Commonly observed at feeders (Ft. Kearny & Rowe) and in city settings.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*—seen all days and in most places. Like the road sign said: "Cranes next 7 miles, crows, every mile."

LARKS: Alaudidae (1)

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*—On our quest to see Prairie Dogs and look for Burrowing Owls, we found a very cooperative Horned Lark on the edge of the road.

TITS AND CHICKADEES: Paridae (1)

Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus*—feeders at Spring Creek Prairie visitor center.

NUTHATCHES: Sittidae (1)

White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*—Feeder station at Rowe visitor center.

THRUSHES: Turdidae (2)

Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*—Cottonwood trees near the Crane Trust visitor center and near the Alda bridge.

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*—Most lawns, and especially Ft. Kearny, supported a large flock.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae (1)

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (1)—Seen every day of the trip in both urban and rural settings.

FINCHES AND EUPHONIAS: Fringillidae (2)

House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*—Feeding near the Spring Creek visitor center.

American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis*—Feeding stations at Spring Creek, Rowe and the Crane Trust.

NEW WORLD SPARROWS: Passerellidae (6)

American Tree Sparrow *Spizelloides arborea*—Seen most days in brush along gravel roads and a delightful life lister for a couple of participants.

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*—All the feeding stations and lots of flocks along grain fields.

White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*—One of the stars at the Rowe feeding station.

Harris's Sparrow *Zonotrichia querula*—A life bird for several people when it showed up at Rowe feeder.

White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*—Active at Rowe feeder.

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*—In roadside brush east of Kearney.

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS AND ORIOLES: Icteridae (3)

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*—Although they were not singing, all of the meadowlarks we photographed or observed closely were Eastern.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*—Mostly male birds, with a few early returning females.

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*—A few in Lincoln and at feed lots.

CARDINALS, GROSBEAKS AND ALLIES: Cardinalidae (1)

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*—Cardinals have become rather common and found at most feeding stations.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS: Passeridae (1)

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (1)—Mostly urban settings and not as common as previous years.

Mammals (2 species)

Fox Squirrel *Sciurus niger*—a curious and handsome mammal for some of the participants who have only known Eastern Gray Squirrels.

White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus*—we watched 13 across from the viewing blind one evening.