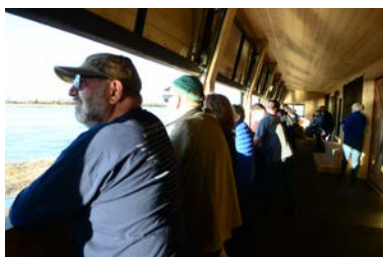


# Platte River Cranes | Trip Report

March 8 – 14, 2020 | Written by Ed Pembleton



With Guides Ed & Sil Pembleton and Sharon Gunther, and participants Dal, Dee, Drew, Jane, Leonard, Susie.





## Sun., March 8 Arrivals in Lincoln | Welcome Dinner

Good weather and clear skies greeted us as we assembled with our group at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Lincoln. The Covid-19 virus started spreading and caused several last-minute cancellations, so our group was smaller than anticipated with just six participants. A short refreshing walk from the hotel to our welcome dinner at Lazlo's in the Haymarket District got us ready for a delightful meal. Dal and Jane joined us late due to their flight schedule so that we had an extended time for introductions and opportunities to learn what everyone wanted to experience during the trip. At the top of everyone's list was seeing the large gathering of Sandhill Cranes and the opportunity of spotting a Whooping Crane.

That collective wish brought to mind a quote from Aldo Leopold's Marshland Elegy essay in ***A Sand County Almanac***, which Ed used to close the evening:

*"Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words."*



## Mon., March 9 Spring Creek Nature Center & Prairie | Kearney

With high spirits, we left the hotel and headed out to see the 650 acres of native prairie (never plowed) at Audubon Nebraska's Spring Creek Prairie. Traveling under totally overcast skies with the promise of rain our birding commenced with Red-tailed hawks as our first raptors for the trip. A male Kestrel gave even more spark to the morning as we headed out of Lincoln toward Spring Creek.

At the nature center feeders including a White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Northern Flicker and Black-capped Chickadee drew our attention. When we entered the center, Kevin promptly encouraged us to look out the south window where a pair of Ring-necked Pheasants was sparing along the trail. Apparently they were challenging one another for dominance as part of their breeding ritual. The contest continued for some time, until a third male joined and then they all flew off and dispersed into the tall grasses.





Light rain had commenced, so after an introduction from Kevin, we proceeded out onto the trail system through the prairie. Fortunately, the trails were open, and we could walk out to the area where the old 19<sup>th</sup> century military wagon road had crossed the property. Finding the old wagon ruts and seeing their extent compelled us to walk further up the hill despite the light rain falling. The subdued lighting and the added moisture enhanced and brightened the muted colors in the prairie and muffled the sounds. That evening Dee commented that she was inspired by the peaceful beauty of the prairie.

Returning to the visitor center, we explored the exhibits that gave valuable insights to the prairie ecosystem and what a large percentage of the prairie lies beneath the surface, with some grasses having roots that extend more than 15 feet into the soil.

We departed to the west and soon discovered our first Northern Harrier gracefully coursing over a restored prairie. The large female bird patiently searched for the unwary vole or mouse that could become a morning meal. We moved on to our own lunch in York, featuring old-time pan-fried chicken with all the fixings. Not a light meal, but one that was thoroughly enjoyed after a chilly morning.

With clearing skies, we headed west towards our first encounter with Sandhill Cranes. A special prize was offered to the first person that spotted cranes and Dal's sharp eyes seized upon a chevron of birds as we neared the I-80 exit for Grand Island. This was the start and as we headed further west the sightings and the numbers of birds on the ground and in the air increased with every mile. We abandoned the interstate at the Wood River exit and took gravel roads on the south side of the Platte where we could stop and watch cranes as they fed in corn fields and native pastures. It was obvious that large numbers of cranes had already arrived along the Platte, but less obvious was the fact that very few waterfowl remained.

We arrived in Kearney, checked into our hotel and had time to get refreshed before our dinner at the Aley Rose. Hopes of seeing the full moon (Worm Moon) were clouded out so we all turned in and prepared for tomorrow's early morning trip to see "crane rise," when the Sandhill Cranes leave their river roost.

## **Tues., March 10 Crane Rise at Rowe Sanctuary | Local Birding**

Up early we arrived at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary in time for the 6 a.m. briefing before walking out to the viewing blind on the edge of the Platte River. Audubon's cautious protection and management of the river



roosting sites, including explicit instructions that make sure participants do not disturb the cranes, has insured that increasing numbers of birds continue to use this stretch of the river.

Their success has allowed Audubon to accommodate more visitors and make improvements over the last 50 years, including the spectacular new viewing blinds that we will be using for the first time. We reached the blinds well before there is much light and we can see even less due to the fog that is building. Slowly the light levels increased, but most of the birds did not leave the river—presumably due to the fog.

A few (several hundred) birds upstream finally flew out to the fields across the river but the majority (tens of thousands) stayed at their chosen roost. Some birds became quite active—dancing, displaying, unison calling and moving about on the submerged sandbars, but not flying. We were all transfixed by the avian theater that performed on the river stage in front of us.

Without a word, the volunteer guides for Rowe Sanctuary quietly started into action and set up a spotting scope on the west end of the blind. Out in the mist of the fog and in the midst of thousands of Sandhill Cranes, they had found a large white spot. When checked with the scope it proved to be a single WHOOPING CRANE! They very quietly spread the word through the blind to all the participants and made sure that everyone got an opportunity to look at the bird. Having seen the bird through the scope, it was easier to find it with binoculars and camera, but still not close enough for quality photos. A lot of “bucket list” wishes were fulfilled, and the morning had suddenly accelerated past exciting.





Light levels increased and the fog cleared enough that the cranes departed. First as family groups of two, three, four or five; then a few small groups with tens of birds and then finally in spectacular flights with hundreds to thousand of birds lifting off at once. The sounds of cranes calling and wings beating filled the air and inspired our awe. Sometime after 8 a.m. we commenced our walk back to the visitor center--filled with joy.

Warmed with cups of coffee or cocoa, we checked out the feeding station and almost immediately found two splendid sparrows, White-crowned and Harris' that added new checks on some life lists. The subtler, and very elegant American Tree Sparrow was a special treat and life bird for Susie. American Goldfinches consumed sunflower seed at a rapid rate and a few early arriving Red-winged Blackbirds competed for the seed. In the background a Downy Woodpecker seemed to play "peak-a-boo" as it came to the suet feeder.

Leaving the Rowe visitor center, we headed west and stopped almost immediately at a small pond to watch Shovelers and a Redhead feeding. Another couple of miles west, we arrived at a larger wetland/pond owned by Rowe that hosted American Widgeon, Buffleheads, Mallards, and Gadwall. Continuing west, we watch Sandhill Cranes foraging in corn stubble and on native or restored prairies, where they search for invertebrates and other sources of protein.

Arriving at Ft. Kearny State Historical Park, we are greeted by Blue Jays raiding the bird feeder and generally sounding alarms. The historical tales and artifacts from this place give a sense of how the river valley has changed over the last two centuries.

After lunch in Kearney, part of the group opted for some rest. Susie, Hal, Jane and Ed headed out to see if we could find Bald Eagles, which seem to have departed early with the large numbers of waterfowl. Before leaving Kearney, we checked a couple of local sand pit mines, and discovered a few Cackling Geese in among the larger Canada residing there.

Searching the Platte River west of Kearney we soon found a Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk that provided us with outstanding views as it moved from power pole to power pole. We found several large flocks of Sandhill Cranes



further west than in past years, but Bald Eagles were either absent or actively avoiding our search. Eastern Meadowlarks provided Susie with several photographic opportunities. We were rewarded with several more Red-tailed Hawks, including a pale Krider's morph.

Clouds closed in and appetites insisted on being satisfied so we returned to Kearney, picked up the other participants and enjoyed dinner.

### **Wed., March 11 Crane Trust Visitor Center | Crane Set at Rowe**

After a good night's rest, we departed east toward Grand Island using back roads with a plan to watch crane behavior along the way. Fog soon became too thick to see birds out in the fields, so we switched to I-80 and drove directly to the Crane Trust Visitor Center. We discovered an extensive and impressive display of photographs, most by local talents.

Many participants were new to birding, so the exhibit of taxidermy waterfowl provided an opportunity to review some of the key identification features found in ducks and geese, and to compare the size difference between Sandhill and Whooping Cranes.

The bird feeders were filled, but not hosting many birds except for a persistent Downy Woodpecker and a few American Gold Finches. When we walked down to the Platte, we discovered a local cat had taken up residence next to the building near the feeders—hence few birds. The resident bison remained at the far end of their pasture, but were still an impressive site. The river channel showed signs of recent high water, even some evidence from the huge flood last July.

With some strategic questions we learned that a Whooping Crane had been seen in this area. So, we returned to the parking lot, elected to raid the snack boxes and forego lunch for the opportunity to see if we could find that whooper and bird along the back roads on our return to Kearney. Our search did not turn up a Whooping Crane, but we did find a Bald Eagle near Denman—a special present for Leonard's birthday. All along the way, Sandhill cranes fed and displayed, always maintaining a safe distance from our vehicle. In many flocks, almost all of the birds continued eating while only one or two stood "sentinel" and kept watching us—indicating they were likely new arrivals anxious to feed.



Upon return to Kearney, Sharon Guenther from Caligo Ventures joined our group. After a delicious dinner (with a little celebration of Leonard's birthday), we departed to Rowe for an evening in viewing blinds. Clouds had cleared, wind had ceased and after the normal briefing we proceeded to the blind. We did not have a long wait until cranes started arriving at their staging areas along the river. It was apparent that many more birds had arrived as the numbers coming to land in the river increased. We watched and searched the landing birds to see if the Whooping Crane had returned, but never located the bird if it was there. The whole scene was enhanced by an amazing classic Nebraska golden sunset.

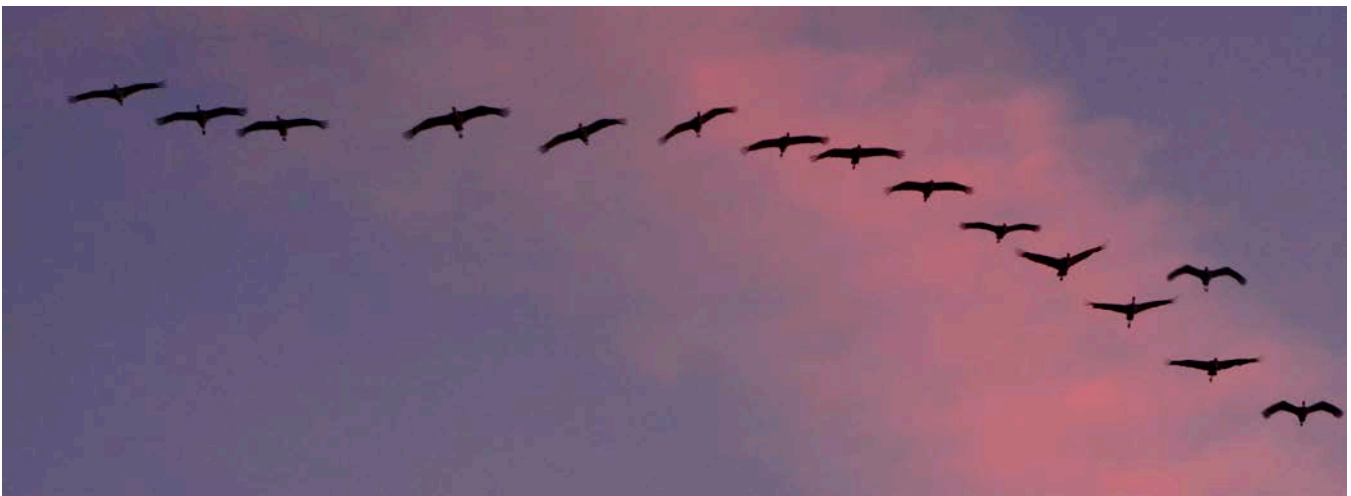
We lingered in the blinds until dark had taken over the landscape and revealed a sky full of stars when we left the blind. As we walked back to the visitor center, Drew and I fell to the back of the line with Rowe's volunteer guide, when we heard the "whinny" call of a Screech Owl. We paused to let others move on, listened and again the owl began and repeated its call several times before we too proceeded to the visitor center.

## **Thurs., March 12 Rainwater Basin | Prairie Dogs | Crane Set-Bike Hike**

After a restful night, we had a leisurely start to our day and departed for an arc of wetlands about 15-20 miles south of the Platte River known as the Rainwater Basins. At approximately ten percent of their historical coverage, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) manage most as habitat for nesting and migratory waterfowl.

We spotted Red-tailed hawks, Northern Harriers and a couple of unidentified raptors that may have been late season Rough-legged Hawks as we zigzagged across the checkerboard pattern of gravel section roads. Eastern Meadowlarks flew up from restored grasslands and cornfields, and male Red-winged Blackbirds flushed from stands of cattails as we approached the Fish and Wildlife headquarters at Funk Basin. Staff there explained that almost all basins are dry due to the drought and lack of FWS funding to pump water, and that only the Johnson Waterfowl Production Area has enough water to attract ducks and geese.





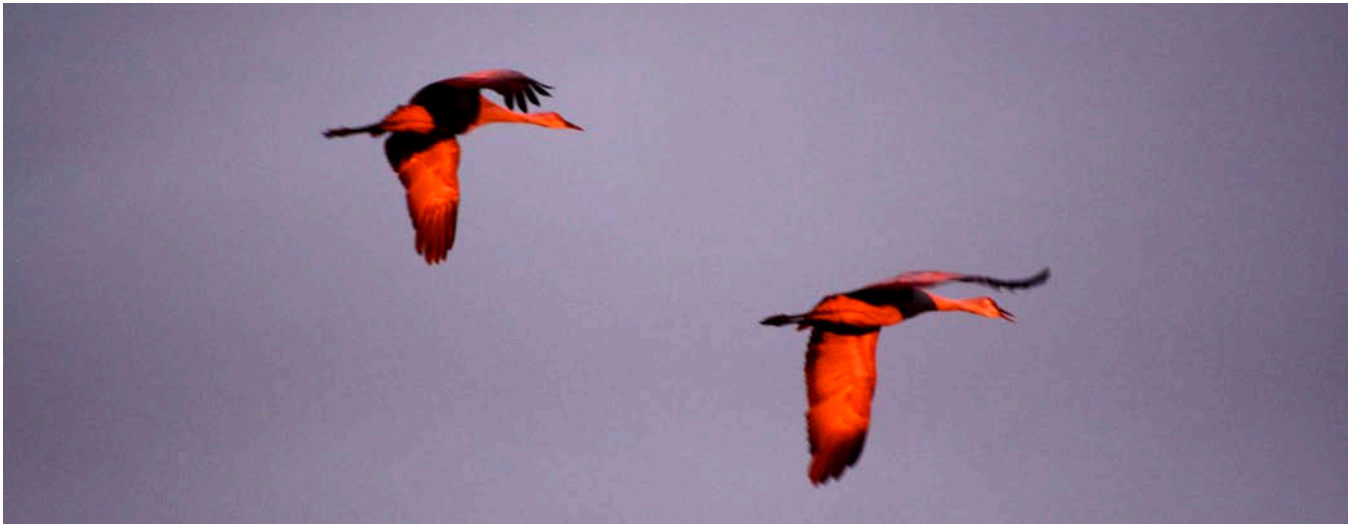
With that information we changed our route and headed northwest to the Johnson WPA. Increasing winds made viewing a bit challenging and somewhat cooler than comfortable. Our attention was grabbed by the courting flights of Pintails: a solitary female flying a contorted pattern and being pursued by multiple males as she courses back and forth over the wetlands. Sometimes we witnessed several of these flight groups at one time.

Fortunately, other waterfowl although not close, were clustered where we could watch them with the spotting scope. “I’m doing it!” Jane exclaimed as she began picking up the details of duck identification. We soon found a remaining flock of approximately 1,500 Snow Geese of both color phases, a handful of Greater White-fronted Geese—which migrate even earlier than snows and were a bonus for this year. By scanning the pond, we found six species of ducks: Mallards, American Widgeon, Green-winged teal, Gadwall, Bufflehead, and Northern Shoveler. After everyone got an opportunity to see waterfowl, we reviewed key characteristics of various species, and then it was time to depart for lunch at the Cozy Corner Café in Minden.

A great lunch followed by delicious deserts including Butterscotch Pie—a first (i.e. life list) pie for Drew and Ed (there were only two pieces left). We went across the square to visit their famous Opera House that has become central to Minden social life.

The group then split with Ed and Dal going to search for Burrowing Owls in a prairie dog town and the others went to the Archway that spans I-80 and chronicles the European pioneers westward migration and development along the Great Platte River Road. Dal and Ed thoroughly searched the Prairie Dog WPA—located





many prairie dogs, but no Burrowing Owls. They then checked a couple of additional wetlands and were fortunate to find a very cooperative Horned Lark that continued feeding on the roadside and provided excellent views.

We gathered back in Kearney for dinner and then an evening trip to the Bike Hike Bridge to watch the Sandhill Cranes come back to their roosts in the Platte. We joined many others who came to see and photograph this spectacular event standing over the center of the river on this old converted railroad bridge. The sky had mostly cleared with just enough high altitude clouds to indicate we could enjoy another beautiful sunset with cranes streaming into the river. Many of our fellow observers grew chilled and elected to leave, but not us. As Leonard quipped, "The cold doesn't bother me, I'm a Nebraskan now." So, we stayed and were rewarded with evening crescendos of calling cranes crossing a multi-colored cirrus clouded sky. We stayed until the last, when incoming cranes were blurred into angle like apparitions.

### **Fri., March 13 Crane Rise at Rowe | Back to Lincoln**

The wakeup call seemed earlier than usual after the late night, but the anticipation of our last morning to see cranes leave their river roost was a great motivator and everyone showed up on time. We arrived at Rowe, got the obligatory introduction and proceeded quietly to the viewing blind, listening to the soft purr of crane music coming from the river. It was dark, really dark, and the soft glow of the red LED lights on the floor of the blinds was a welcome guide.

Light levels slowly increased. The sky turned soft pink and the water turned lavender with large, really large, gray sandbars. It was obvious that the numbers of Sandhill Cranes had dramatically increased and roosts filled



the river in both directions. Spooked or hungry after their recent arrival, large numbers of birds start flying before there is adequate light to photograph, but many birds remain in the river. Light kept increasing as the sun cleared the horizon and peaked underneath low hanging stratus clouds. For a few brief moments there are scarlet highlights being cast as birds return to and depart from the river. Some of the birds that left their roost now return and “parachute” down into the river with precise landings among their companions. Birds begin to interact. Some display aggression, but many show signs of serious courtship—bowing and calling in unison. We stay and enjoy a long and leisurely last morning in the viewing blind.

The Rowe visitor center is buzzing with conversations as we spend some time watching birds at the feeder and making selections from the gift shop. We bird our way back to Kearney watching crane behaviors as they feed in corn and native grass fields along the road.

Back in Kearney we refresh, check the weather and decide that we should change our itinerary to avoid a predicted snowstorm coming from the west. We make arrangements to check out of the hotel, have lunch downtown at the Tru Café, and depart for Lincoln, arriving in time for dinner.

## **Sat., March 14 Goodbyes & Departures**

With an overnight in Lincoln just a few miles from the airport we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. The predicted storm failed to reach this far east and only light precipitation was falling so that everyone’s flight was on schedule.

### **Photo Credits:**

Crane landing, Susie Russenberger (SR); Susie and Ed in the field, SR; Haymarket Sign, SR; Covered Wagon, SR; Meadowlark, SR. All other photos provided by Ed Pembleton.