

Platte River Cranes: A Migration Spectacular | Trip Report | March 6-12, 2022 | by Dave Krueper



With guides Dave Krueper & Paul Tebbel and participants Al, Barbara, Beverly, Carol, Daniel, Jan, Ken, Kit, Lee, Leslie, Robert, and Teresa.



A grand adventure for all participants on this tour. We had fantastic birds, a huge variety of weather and temperature fluctuations, tremendous concentrations of Sandhill Cranes, some special avian sightings, and also we learned a bit of the history of Nebraska and how it fit into the western migration of American immigrants. Oh, and then of course there was the food. We ate very well (maybe too much so), but it kept our core body temperatures toasty during the frigid early morning sessions at the crane blinds!

Sun., Mar. 6

Arrivals

The tour officially started at the Embassy Suites Happy Hour Social when we all got to meet each other and to chat about our upcoming adventure. After a briefing by Dave and Paul, we headed out to Lazlo's Brewery & Grill for dinner, where many of us enjoyed barbequed ribs or beef brisket and the like which Nebraska is so famous for. The weather was very cool and we had a few snowflakes on the walk back to the hotel. Harbinger of good times to come?



Mon., Mar. 7

Spring Creek Sanctuary | Woodland Birding

We had a light snowfall overnight (maybe 1" total), but it did not impact our schedule or driving conditions. After our breakfast at the hotel, we packed gear into the two vans and were ready to head west. Little did we previously know, and to our strategic advantage, was that several of the tour participants had driven their personal vehicles to Lincoln. At the conclusion of the tour they would be heading west toward home thus allowing us more storage and personal space in the vans as we headed toward Kearney, our home base for the tour. Our first stop was at the Spring Creek Sanctuary where we got out of the wind and learned a bit about the tallgrass prairie habitats in the area. A 1 ½ mile and two hour walk around the grasslands, lake and woodlands were fairly productive, with Wood Duck and Blue-winged Teal on the lake, male Northern Cardinals singing, and American Tree Sparrows along the creek. After we returned to the visitor's center and warmed up, it was off to Chances R in York for lunch where we enjoyed the soup and salad bar and a host of other meal options. On the road again for the final driving leg, we checked into the Hampton Inn in Kearney, and got organized. Due to the VERY cold temperatures predicted for the following morning, several of us went to Cabela's to pick up necessary items (boots, down jacket, etc.). Then to Alley Rose for our evening meal, which was very good and enjoyed by all. Back to the hotel and to bed to prepare for the very early departure the following morning.

Tues., Mar. 8

Rowe Sanctuary | Sandhill Cranes!

We were all up early to meet in the lobby at 4:15am and then departed immediately for the ½ hour drive to the Rowe Sanctuary. We got settled in and were briefed by the staff regarding the rules for the blind and viewing tips. And then we were off, using small red flashlights to walk along the path to the blind. Once in the blind, we tried to stay warm as the sky slowly brightened for the viewing experience. Heck, we were cold in the blind, so how did the Sandhill Cranes manage it while standing in the cold waters of the Platte, with ice flowing around them? Apparently they do OK in these conditions.... As the sun lightened the sky, the cacophony of crane calls was nearly overwhelming. The resonating calls of the males (deeper bugling) and the slightly less resonant call of the females were evident, and we all could hear the calling of the juveniles (a whistled twitter-type trill). With liftoff, thousands of cranes all vocalizing at once headed out to the adjacent fields for foraging on waste grains and corn as well as any invertebrate protein morsels that could be found. We returned to Kearney to have breakfast at Perkins, and then had a break for the afternoon. We re-convened at a local Holiday Inn to hear a



wonderful presentation by Paul on Sandhill Crane biology and behavioral nuances and then had dinner at the adjacent Joy's Table. Very good food, and then it was time to head back to the Hampton Inn and some rest!

Wed., Mar. 9 Crane Trust | Archway Museum

We had a bit more time this morning to sleep in and then had breakfast at our leisure. We all assembled for an 8:30am departure to the Crane Trust. We toured the wonderful interpretive exhibits and got some great information from local experts, and yes, took some walks in the "back 40" and spent time in the gift shop! Then some driving on the back roads to view geese and crane concentrations. Hoping for a super rare sighting of a reported Whooping Crane in the area, we did not find one but certainly enjoyed the driving and the warmth of the vans! In the afternoon, due to the continued challenging weather, we opted to visit the Archway Museum in Kearney. Yes, it is an "archway" museum located over the interstate! This was very interesting for all of the historical information and the narratives provided. Flo even took my coffee order near the end of the walking tour. After a quick break, we all enjoyed our dinner at Skeeter Barnes for dinner, and we enjoyed yet another BBQ spread.

Thurs., Mar. 10 Prairie Dog Wildlife Management Area | Johnson Waterfowl Production Area

With the snow still continuing to fall, we decided to spend the morning driving the back roads to the south of Kearney near Minden. We visited the Prairie Dog Wildlife Management Area and the Johnson Waterfowl Production Area to see what we could find. We scored with NINE Short-eared Owls flying around us for 20 minutes, and then several Rough-legged Hawks and one obliging Ferruginous Hawk. To round out the raptor spectacle we also found a Merlin, America's second smallest falcon species. We had lunch at Runza's in Minden (I had never even heard of this place previously) but we all enjoyed this Midwestern "pasty" (a meat handpie) for lunch. To facilitate our visit to the Crane Trust in the evening, we opted for a Subway sandwich to go so that we could eat in the blind around sunset rather than trying to come back for a late dinner before an early

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departure for the final crane sunrise visit the next day. The sunset was magnificent along the Platte River, and to see the tens of thousands of cranes arriving at the evening roost was very special.

Fri., Mar. 11

Morning Roost | Fort Kearny Historic Site

Our last full day and last viewing at the morning roost site at Rowe Sanctuary. It was cold (10 degrees F at 3:30 am), but we bundled up, made the drive and got the introduction again. Then we were off to the blind by 5:45 am in a slight wind but clear skies. The cranes this morning were fairly distant but very vocal. We admired the thousands assembled on the Platte River, and then watched them depart to the agricultural fields to the south and west. We returned to Kearney for a warm breakfast at Perkins, and then we all took a break. In the afternoon we decided to drive around some of the back roads to see what we could find, and to also visit the Fort Kearny Historic Site. In the late afternoon, we explored more back roads and then made our appointed time at Burchell's White Hill Farmhouse Restaurant where we dined on home-cooked meat options in a large family-style setting. Then off to the Kearney Hike & Bike Trail Bridge for the final sunset viewing over the Platte. What a grand sendoff, with cranes and geese flying over, the beautiful sunset, and chatter between and amongst new friends on the tour.

Sat., Mar. 12

Departures

With the tour conclusion, many participants drove their personal vehicles to the west toward home, while Paul and Dave drove the vans back to Lincoln to drop off participants at the LKN airport for return flights. All arranged, the flights were on time, and the participants did not forget any luggage in the vans! A SUPER tour overall, and one that I (Dave) really enjoyed. For Paul, Peg (Naturalist Journeys) and myself, we thank you for your trust and camaraderie. Hope to see you all on another Naturalist Journeys tour soon!

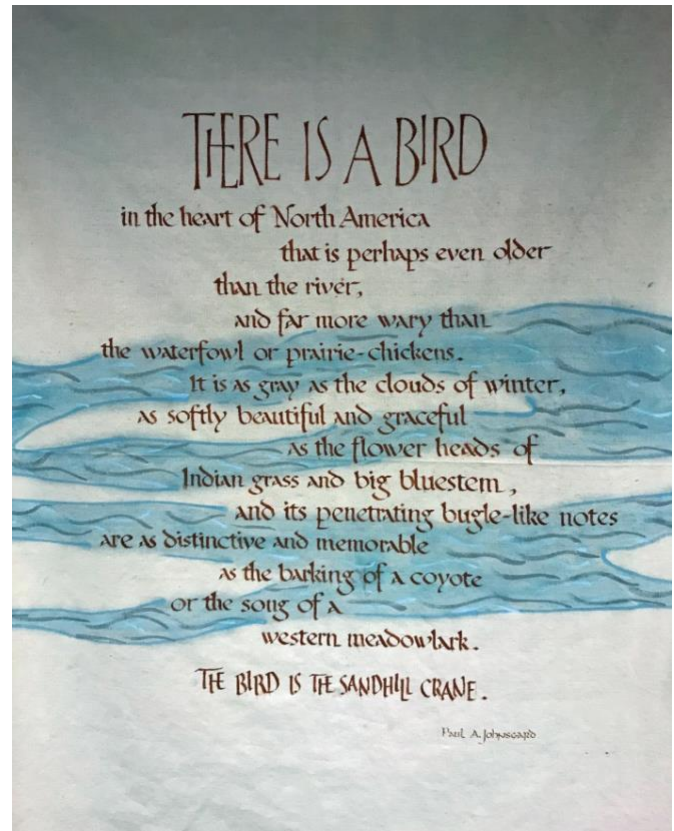
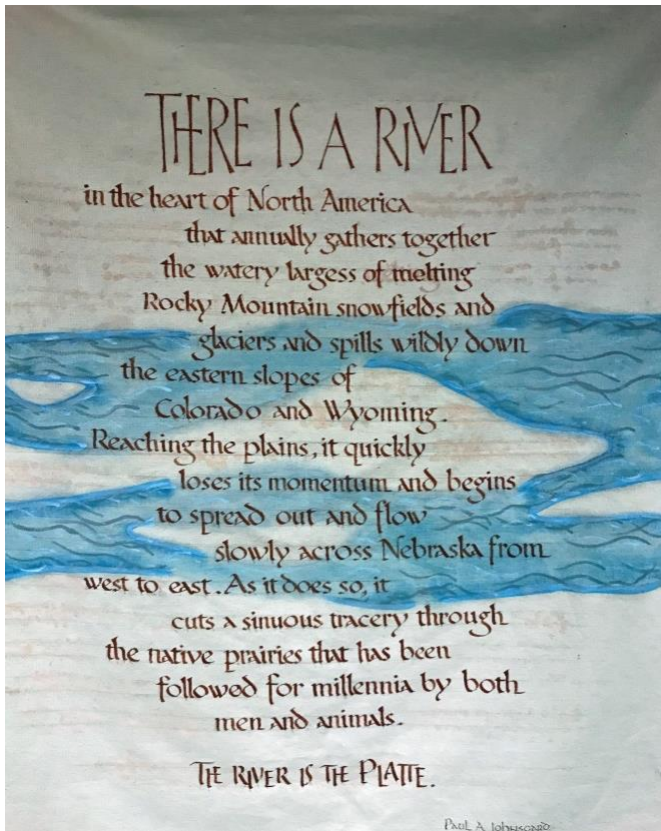


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