

Platte River Cranes: A Migration Spectacular | Species List

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Compiled by Kent Skaggs

Nature enthusiasts from Arizona, Georgia, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania and Washington traveled to southcentral Nebraska to witness one of the last great wildlife migrations on the planet. The annual spring staging of migrating Sandhill Cranes along the Platte River near Kearney, Nebraska, has truly become a destination for not only bird watchers, but nature lovers in general.

While Sandhill Cranes are the primary focus of this tour, there are plenty of other bird species that can be seen when the cranes stage along the Platte River during the month of March. South of the Platte River lies the Rainwater Basin, which is characterized by shallow playa wetlands that become wet when there is adequate snow melt and spring rains. These seasonal wetlands can host millions of waterfowl during the spring migration, including three to six million Snow Geese (large numbers of Ross's Geese migrate with the Snow Geese as well), four million Mallards, 900,000 Greater White-fronted Geese and 900,000 Northern Pintail. There are at least an additional 20 species of waterfowl that can be seen in southcentral Nebraska during March.

In addition to the waterfowl, there are several other species that can be found without too much difficulty. Harris's Sparrow is often the most sought-after bird for visitors from the east and west coasts, as this species typically winters on the central and southern plains. American White Pelicans can be found at Harlan County Reservoir along the southern border of the state, as well as at Calamus Reservoir which is on the eastern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills. Bald Eagles follow the waterfowl migration through the state and can be found near most bodies of water, and Red-tailed Hawks winter in large numbers in the southern portion of the state.

Being in the right place at the right time usually determines whether we get to see some of the rarer species (this applies to more common species too) such as Whooping Cranes. All of the Whooping Cranes that migrate in the Central Flyway come through Nebraska during the spring. What makes them hard to see, besides the fact that there are so few of them, is that they don't stage in Nebraska during the spring to fatten up. So when they do stop, it's typically for a day or two before continuing their journey. Here today and gone tomorrow is often the theme during migration as birds are often waiting for headwinds to turn into tailwinds.

During our visit to southcentral Nebraska, we did see (and hear) Sandhill Cranes - tens of thousands of them. We also tallied 22 species of waterfowl (this was an exceptional March in terms of numbers for waterfowl), an "old coot," a bird that yells its name, a sandpiper with yellow legs, a rusty hawk, a woodpecker that forgot to migrate, a chickadee-dee-dee-dee, a sparrow with dark eyes and a beautiful red bird. Seventy-one species in all. For the detailed list, continue reading.

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

(I)=introduced

BIRDS (71 species recorded, of which 2 were heard only):

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: Anatidae (22)

Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens*—(5) Seen at multiple locations and in large numbers along and near the Platte River. At the beginning of the month of March, an estimated three million Snow Geese were staying at Harlan County Reservoir and large numbers continued to be seen in southcentral Nebraska well into the third week of March. This is not typical and was a wonderful bonus during our visit.

Ross's Goose *Anser rossii*—(4) Seen at multiple locations. This diminutive goose often gets overlooked in the large flocks of Snow Geese as it looks almost identical to its larger cousin.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*—(4) A few seen and heard from the viewing blind at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*—(1) One male seen from the viewing blind at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors*—(1) Three seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*—(2) Seen at Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP) sandpit, the Alma Waste Treatment Ponds (WTP) and several locations around Harlan County Reservoir (HCR).

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

American Wigeon *Mareca americana*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*—(5) Seen at multiple locations with larger numbers occurring at HCR.

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria*—(1) One seen on PRRIP sandpit.

Redhead *Aythya americana*—(3) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and on PRRIP sandpit.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*—(2) Seen on PRRIP sandpit and Alma WTP.

Hooded Merganser *Lophodytes cucullatus*—(1) A single male was seen from the dam at HCR.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*—(1) Good numbers seen at HCR.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*—(1) A few seen from the dam at HCR.

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*—(1) Several seen at the Alma WTP.

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS AND ALLIES: Phasianidae (3)

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*—(1) HO, one bird heard gobbling at Methodist Cove at HCR.

Greater Prairie-Chicken *Tympanuchus cupido*—(2) Three males and one female were seen on a lek near the town of Ravenna.

Ring-necked Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (I)—(3) Seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae (3)

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* (I)—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (I)—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*—(1) Seen at a couple of locations around HCR.

RAILS, COOTS AND ALLIES: Rallidae (1)

American Coot *Fulica americana*—(1) Seen at a couple of locations around HCR.

CRANES: Gruidae (1)

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis*—(5) Seen at multiple locations with an approximate overall total of 70,000.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae (1)

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: Scolopacidae (1)

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*—(3) Seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary and from the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail bridge.

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae (2)

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*—(1) One seen from the dam at HCR.

CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae (1)

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*—(4) Seen along the Platte River near Kearney and at HCR.

PELICANS: Pelecanidae (1)

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*—(1) Seen at HCR.

HERONS AND EGRETS: Ardeidae (1)

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*—(2) Seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary and from the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail.

HAWKS, KITES AND EAGLES: Accipitridae (7)

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*—(1) One seen en route to HCR.

Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii*—(1) One seen making a pass at some birds in a tree at the Alma WTP.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*—(3) Seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary and at HCR.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus*—(1) One seen en route to York shortly after leaving Audubon's Spring Creek.

Ferruginous Hawk *Buteo regalis*—(2) One seen en route to York shortly after leaving Audubon's Spring Creek and a single bird seen at Prairie Dog Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) south of Axtell.

OWLS: Strigidae (1)

Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*—(1) One adult seen in a nest near the dam at HCR. At least one fluffy white owlet was seen in the nest as well.

KINGFISHERS: Alcedinidae (1)

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*—(3) Seen at PRRIP sandpit and from the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail bridge.

WOODPECKERS: Picidae (4)

Red-headed Woodpecker *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*—(1) An unexpected find was a single adult at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie. Typically, this species would not arrive at this location until late April, but this individual apparently overwintered.

Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*—(2) Seen at the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center and heard on the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail.

Downy Woodpecker *Dryobates pubescens*—(3) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie, HCR and at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*—(3) Seen at multiple locations around HCR, the Alma WTP and at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae (1)

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*—(2) One seen at pond viewing area at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary and en route to HCR.

CROWS AND JAYS: Corvidae (2)

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

LARKS: Alaudidae (1)

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*—(1) Seen en route back to Kearney from Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

TITS AND CHICKADEES: Paridae (1)

Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus*—(2) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and at HCR.

NUTHATCHES: Sittidae (2)

Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*—(2) One seen at the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center and one heard outside of the U.S. Corp of Engineers Visitor Center at HCR.

White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*—(3) Seen and heard at multiple locations.

WRENS: Troglodytidae (1)

Carolina Wren *Thryothorus ludovicianus*—(1) HO, one heard singing at Methodist Cove at HCR.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae (1)

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (I)—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

THRUSHES: Turdidae (1)

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS: Passeridae (1)

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (I)—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

FINCHES AND EUPHONIAS: Fringillidae (2)

House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis*—(3) Several seen at the feeders at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary and on the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail.

NEW WORLD SPARROWS: Passerellidae (3)

American Tree Sparrow *Spizelloides arborea*—(2) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and Rowe Sanctuary.

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*—(2) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail.

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*—(3) Seen and heard at multiple locations.

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS AND ORIOLES: Icteridae (4)

Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta*—(5) Seen and heard at multiple locations.

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*—(2) Seen and heard at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and heard only at HCR.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*—(2) Seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

CARDINALS, GROSBEAKS AND ALLIES: Cardinalidae (1)

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*—(4) Seen and heard at multiple locations.

Mammals (5 species)

White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus*—(3) Seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary and from the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail bridge.

Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*—(1) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie.

Black-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys ludovicianus*—(1) Seen at Prairie Dog WPA and at HCR.
Virginia Opossum *Didelphis virginiana*—(1) One seen en route to the prairie-chicken lek.
Eastern Cottontail *Sylvilagus virginianus*—(1) One seen at Audubon’s Spring Creek Prairie.
Fox Squirrel *Sciurus niger*—(1) Only one observed, which was a surprise.

Reptiles (1 Species)

Painted Turtle *Chrysemys picta*—(1) Seen at PRRIP sandpit.