

Platte River Cranes: A Migration Spectacular | Species List

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Compiled by Kent Skaggs

Nature enthusiasts from Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada, New York and Pennsylvania 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 18 species of waterfowl (this was an exceptional March in terms of numbers for waterfowl), an "old coot," a bird that yells its name, a rusty hawk, a woodpecker that forgot to migrate, a chickadee-dee-dee-dee, a sparrow with dark eyes, a bird with a yellow head and a beautiful red bird. Fifty-seven species in all. For the detailed list, continue reading.

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

(I)=introduced

BIRDS (57 species recorded, of which 1 was heard only):

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: Anatidae (18)

Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens*—(5) Seen at multiple locations and in large numbers along and near the Platte River. At the beginning 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) Seen at multiple locations. On March 16th, several flocks were seen flying along the Platte River, evidently migrating, albeit into a stiff, northwest wind.

Cackling Goose *Branta hutchinsii*—(1) Sixteen were seen at Cottonmill Park west of Kearney.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*—(6) Seen at multiple locations.

Trumpeter Swan *Cygnus buccinator*—(1) A pair were seen on March 14 on a sandpit owned and managed by the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (PRRIP).

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*—(4) Seen at multiple locations with the largest numbers seen at Funk Waterfowl Production Area (WPA).

American Wigeon *Mareca americana*—(3) Seen at multiple locations with the largest numbers seen at Funk WPA.

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

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*—(3) Seen primarily along the Platte River and at Funk WPA, which had the largest numbers.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*—(3) Seen at multiple locations with the largest numbers occurring at Funk WPA.

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria*—(2) Small numbers seen on a wetland along the South Loup River near Ravenna and at Cottonmill Park west of Kearney.

Redhead *Aythya americana*—(4) Seen at multiple locations and in good numbers.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*—(4) Seen at multiple locations and in good numbers.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*—(4) Seen at multiple locations and in good numbers.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*—(5) Seen at multiple locations and in good numbers.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*—(1) A single bird seen on PRRIP sandpit.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*—(1) A pair were seen on a sandpit near the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail.

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS AND ALLIES: Phasianidae (3)

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*—(2) At least one heard gobbling from the prairie-chicken lek blind and then a small group was seen en route to the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail.

Greater Prairie-Chicken *Tympanuchus cupido*—(1) Three males and one female were seen on a lek near the town of Ravenna. One of the males had purplish air sacs indicating possible hybridization with a Sharp-tailed Grouse.

Ring-necked Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (1)—(1) Seen and heard at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae (2)

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* (1)—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (1)—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

RAILS, COOTS AND ALLIES: Rallidae (1)

American Coot *Fulica americana*—(1) Single bird seen on a small wetland along the South Loup River near Ravenna.

CRANES: Gruidae (1)

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis*—(5) Seen at multiple locations with an approximate total for the week being 75,000-100,000.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae (1)

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

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae (1)

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*—(6) Seen at multiple locations.

CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae (1)

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*—(2) Seen en route along the Platte River near Kearney.

HERONS AND EGRETS: Ardeidae (1)

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*—(2) One seen flying along the South Loup River near Ravenna and another one seen flying along the Platte River near Kearney.

HAWKS, KITES AND EAGLES: Accipitridae (5)

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*—(3) Single birds seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and the Crane Trust, and five were seen at Funk WPA.

Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii*—(2) Two were seen at Cottonmill Park west of Kearney, and another was seen en route near Kearney.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*—(3) Small numbers seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary where there is an active nest. Despite large numbers of waterfowl in the area, most migrants had already passed through.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*—(5) Seen at multiple locations, including one Harlan's at the prairie-chicken lek.

Ferruginous Hawk *Buteo regalis*—(1) Single bird seen at Prairie Dog Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) south of Axtell.

KINGFISHERS: Alcedinidae (1)

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*—(1) A pair were seen along the Platte River from the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail bridge.

WOODPECKERS: Picidae (4)

Red-headed Woodpecker *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*—(1) An unexpected find was an 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*—(3) Single birds seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and Rowe Sanctuary.

Downy Woodpecker *Dryobates pubescens*—(1) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*—(3) A single bird was seen at Cottonmill Park west of Kearney.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae (1)

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*—(1) A single bird seen en route near Kearney.

CROWS AND JAYS: Corvidae (2)

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*—(1) Seen at the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*—(5) Seen at multiple locations.

LARKS: Alaudidae (1)

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*—(1) Seen en route to Kearney after morning crane viewing at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

TITS AND CHICKADEES: Paridae (1)

Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus*—(1) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae (1)

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (I)—(5) 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)—(3) Seen at multiple locations.

FINCHES AND EUPHONIAS: Fringillidae (1)

American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis*—(2) Several seen at the feeders at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

NEW WORLD SPARROWS: Passerellidae (3)

American Tree Sparrow *Spizelloides arborea*—(3) Seen at multiple locations.

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Harris's Sparrow *Zonotrichia querula*—(2) Seen at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie and Rowe Sanctuary.

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS AND ORIOLES: Icteridae (5)

Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*—(2) Seen from the Crane Trust viewing blind and at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta*—(4) Seen and heard at multiple locations.

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*—(1) HO, at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*—(4) Seen at multiple locations.

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*—(1) Seen at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

CARDINALS, GROSBEAKS AND ALLIES: Cardinalidae (1)

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

Mammals (4 species)

White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus*—(2) Seen from Crane Trust viewing blind and at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

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

Black-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys ludovicianus*—(1) Seen at Prairie Dog WPA.

Fox Squirrel *Sciurus niger*—(1) Seen along Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail and Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.