

Nebraska's Platte River | Trip Report

March 12-18, 2023 | by Kent Skaggs



Guides Kent Skaggs and Randy Skaggs, with nine participants: Anne, Bob, Cheryl, David & Flora, Joanne & Leo, Sheila and Susan



Sun., Mar. 12

Arrival in Lincoln | Embassy Suites & the Haymarket

Our journey began in Lincoln, which is the capital city of the 16th largest state in the United States. All of the participants arrived on this day, and after a few transfers from the Lincoln airport, folks got settled into their rooms at the Embassy Suites by Hilton. Located downtown, the hotel is within easy walking distance of the historic Haymarket District, which is where we were headed for dinner. The group gathered at 5:30 p.m. in the lobby of the hotel for quick introductions and then made the short walk to Lazlo's Brewery and Grill. After a very good meal, we returned to the hotel to rest up for an exciting week ahead.

Mon., Mar. 13

Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie | Travel to Kearney

Travel day! After the group ate breakfast, we loaded up into the vans to head for Kearney, but there would be a few stops along the way. The first was at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie, where Operations Manager Kevin



Poague visited with the group about the work being done by Audubon to protect and restore tallgrass prairie. After looking at the displays inside the visitor center, which is a strawbale structure, we headed outside to see what birds we could find. It was a brisk start to the day, with overcast conditions, but spring was in the air and birds were singing, including an Eastern Meadowlark. Some Gadwall, Ring-necked Ducks and Bufflehead were seen on a small pond near the center, and a flock of Snow Geese were seen flying north as well. A Northern Harrier cruised over the grass-covered hillsides looking for a meal, and a Killdeer alerted us of its presence. We returned inside to view a feeding station on the north side of the building where we were able to get great looks at some Harris's Sparrows and a Red-headed Woodpecker, which was unexpected. Kevin explained the woodpecker had apparently overwintered there as they had been seeing it for quite some time. The bird looked in good shape and was a bonus sighting for us. Then it was back on the road.

Our next stop would be for lunch at Chances R in York, which is a locally owned and operated restaurant that is known for middle America comfort food. Then it was on to the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center near Grand Island. Upon arrival we headed into a private room where we were treated to a program on crane behavior by Keanna Leonard. Keanna is a retired educator and used to work at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary where she was the Education Director. Her presentation highlighted behavior that we were likely to see in the coming days as well as how to differentiate between adult and juvenile cranes in the field. Afterwards the group had some time to look at the displays in the center as well as peruse the art gallery and gift shop. Then it was back in the vans and on to Kearney.

We arrived at the Hampton Inn in Kearney in the late afternoon. Folks checked in and got settled into their rooms where we would be staying the rest of the week. The group gathered again around 6:15 to head out for dinner at Joy's Table, which was a few blocks down the street from the hotel and offered several tasty pasta dishes and a wide selection of beverages. The group relaxed to enjoy a nice meal and begin to get to know one another a little more. Then back to the hotel to head to bed as we would have an early rise in the morning.

Tues., Mar. 14 Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary

The group loaded up into the vans at 5:30 a.m. for the 20-minute drive to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. Once there, we gathered with the rest of the folks that were there for the morning tour to listen to a brief orientation



and to find out what blind we would be going to and who would be leading us. Then we followed our guides in the darkness to the blind. The walk was about a quarter of a mile over relatively level ground, the winds were light and there was little sound other than the gravel moving under our feet. Once in the blind, people settled in front of the windows or took a seat on a bench in the back of the blind, waiting for it to get light enough to see what was on the river. Slowly, we began to hear a few cranes calling in the darkness and eventually we could see what appeared to be islands in the river. Some of those islands were exposed sandbars within the river channel, and those were covered with Sandhill Cranes. As it got closer to dawn, you could see more and more cranes in the distance standing in the river, with the occasional rise of thousands into the air closely followed by a distant roar of crane calls. Something was harassing the cranes, but the harasser remained out of view. Eventually, after a couple of large liftoffs and cranes finally deciding it was time to go out to feed in the adjacent cornfields and meadows, we saw a couple of Bald Eagles sitting on a sandbar in the middle of the river. The predator had finally been revealed.

While we were in the blind, there was a lot of other activity along the river. Large numbers of Snow Geese were flying overhead well before sunrise, and Northern Pintail could be seen in courtship flight over the river as well. Eventually our guides said it was time to go and the group headed back to the visitor center to warm up and to peruse the gift shop. Once the group was ready, we loaded back into the vans to head back to Kearney for brunch at Good Evans. After brunch the group had a little down time before heading back out in the early afternoon to look for more waterfowl and, of course, cranes. Our first stop was a sandpit owned and managed by the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, or PRRIP for short. As we pulled up to the sandpit, you could see thousands of Snow Geese resting on gravel spoil piles that had been reshaped by PRRIP as nesting habitat for Interior Least Terns and Piping Plovers. On the water there were several species of waterfowl including Gadwall, American Wigeon, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye and a pair of Trumpeter Swans. While we were checking out the ducks on the water, something (presumably a Bald Eagle) spooked the Snow Geese into the air. Thousands of geese were swirling around in front of us and at times they looked like a murmuration of starlings as their movements seemed to be evading a predator. Eventually they settled back to the place where they had been resting, but on high alert for whatever it was that had spooked them.

We moved on to look for cranes out in the fields to see if we could see any of the behaviors we had learned about the day before. We eventually ended up back at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary at a viewing area near a pond where the cranes like to hang out during the midday hours. Known as a "loafing area," these locations are typically in meadows that have some water nearby. Cranes often are seen lying on the ground with their heads



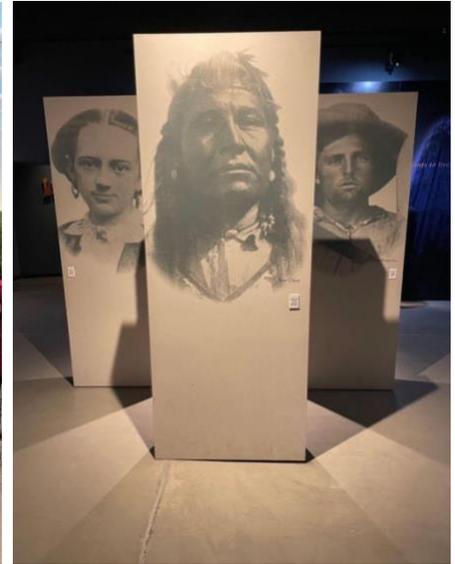
tucked, getting some rest and digesting breakfast. You will see preening and bathing (where there is water) occurring at loafing areas and cranes that have been riding thermals often glide back down to these areas when they have had enough fun on the wing. We saw all of this and some of the behavior we were looking for too. The wind was a bit breezy out of the south and this caused some of the cranes to lean into it exhibiting pre-flight behavior, but for the most part it turned into a lot of dancing, which is always fun to watch. From here it was back to Kearney to get freshened up a bit and take a short walk to dinner at the Coppermill Steakhouse. Then it was off to bed as we had another early start in the morning.

Wed., Mar. 15 Sunrise on the Prairie | Evening with the Cranes

We hit the road at 6:15 a.m. as we had a 45-minute drive to our destination this morning. Located a few miles northwest of the town of Ravenna is a small (in number) Greater Prairie-Chicken lek, and on it, an old school bus that serves as a viewing blind. Although it was getting lighter in the eastern sky when we arrived, we still made it into the bus well before any of the prairie-chickens showed up. Eventually we heard some cackling and then some movement as a male came onto the lek. He was joined by another male, then another. The three males found their territories on the lek and proceeded to vocalize to let any females that might be hiding out nearby know they were ready for inspection. The three males continued to display, occasionally taking time to run to the edge of their territory to spar with their neighbor, before returning to where they had come from. Eventually a female appeared near the lek, and the males turned it up a notch. The “booming” increased in intensity, the “cackling” became louder, and a “whine” was added to the end of the cackle in case the female hadn’t noticed them yet. And if that didn’t get her attention, then a “whoop” was added, and the finale was a “flutter jump.” The female surely had to see them! But was she interested in any of them? It was a little early in the breeding season to know as her selecting a male to mate with was still a few weeks away.

The female stuck around for quite a while and the males continued to try and attract her attention, but to no avail. She eventually moved on and so did we, but it was a great start to a beautiful morning. On the way back to Kearney, we stopped briefly at a small wetland south of Ravenna along the South Loup River to scope out some waterfowl. Better looks at some ducks that we had already seen, plus an American Coot, which was a new bird for the trip. On to Kearney for brunch and then a little break for some rest before heading back out to take advantage of the nice weather we had on this day.

In the early afternoon, we took a stroll on the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail before heading back into Kearney for an early dinner at Skeeter Barnes where the group enjoyed some fine barbeque. From there it was back to the



Crane Trust for an evening tour to see the cranes return to the river. We arrived a little before 6:00 p.m. for orientation and guide assignment, before caravanning to a location near the river where we would have a short walk to the blind. It was a beautiful evening, and the cranes certainly didn't disappoint -- spoiler alert, they never do! They started landing well before sundown and continued coming in as we watched the river fill in with cranes. Clouds were forming in the west as a weather system was on its way, but there was enough sun peeking through that it gave the gray cranes a bronzy appearance in this light. The sun set and the light was fading as we walked out of the blind and back to our vehicles. It was a great ending to a wonderful day and the weather was a big part of that. That was about to change.

Thurs., Mar. 16 The Archway | Waiting on the Wind

According to the itinerary, Thursday was to be the day for a visit to Harlan County Reservoir and some wetlands in the Rainwater Basin. The weather forecast was calling for snow through the early morning hours and high winds making travel not recommended. The snow didn't really pan out, but the winds were pretty strong, so we opted to visit The Archway instead. Worthy of a visit even when the weather is nice, The Archway steps back in time to when the west was being settled and brings us all the way to when the interstate system was built across the country. Kearney sat in the heart of it all.

After the visit to The Archway, it was time for lunch, so we headed to Thunderhead Brewing for some pizza, really good soft pretzels, beverages and conversation. The weather was looking better at this point, so after lunch we headed back out for a short while to see if we could add some new bird species to our trip list. Cottonmill Park, on the west side of Kearney, was our main destination where we saw a good variety of waterfowl including several Cackling Geese and a couple of Cooper's Hawks, both new for the trip. From there we drove west on U.S. Highway 30 (previously called the Lincoln Highway) to the town of Odessa and headed south to the Platte River. After crossing the river, we headed back east paralleling the river looking for whatever we might come across. What we encountered were several flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese that appeared to be migrating into a very stiff northwest wind. Despite the headwind, the geese seemed to be making good headway. Then it was back to the hotel for a brief rest and then to dinner at Cunningham's Journal On The Lake. It would be an early start the next morning, so hitting the hay early was in order after dinner.



Fri., Mar. 17 Last morning with the Cranes | Prairie Dog Town

The group was ready to depart again at 5:30 a.m. for our last visit to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary for the morning tour. Orientation, guide assignment and out to the blind. The cranes seemed to be more vocal this morning as we entered the blind. As it began to get light enough to see the cranes on the river, it became evident that there were more birds on the river than our previous visit just three days earlier. South winds earlier in the week had clearly brought more cranes to the area, and at the same time trimmed down the waterfowl numbers, which was expected. Bald Eagles were still in the area and large rises of cranes could be seen upstream. Eventually those waves of birds harassed by the eagles made it downstream towards our blind, filling the sky as the calls of cranes became deafening.

The light reflecting off the cranes this morning had them appearing a bronzy red.

It certainly was a spectacular morning on the river and a great way to end our last visit to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. Our time with the cranes on the river was not done, however, as we would have one last opportunity later in the day. But before then, it was back to Kearney for brunch, a brief rest back at the hotel and then a quick trip to a location that we had hoped to visit the day before.

Our destination was a couple of wetlands in the Rainwater Basin south of Kearney. The first stop was at Prairie Dog Waterfowl Production Area (WPA). This WPA is known for its rather large population of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs and is a known breeding location for Burrowing Owls. We were a bit early for the owls but found another raptor that is often associated with prairie dogs: a Ferruginous Hawk. The bird provided ample opportunities for good views on the ground and in the air with the aid of spotting scopes and binoculars. We then headed to Funk WPA where we saw good numbers of Northern Pintail, American Wigeon and Green-winged Teal and several Northern Harriers. Then it was back to Kearney for an early dinner at The Alley Rose. Since this would be our last meal together, we had a private room reserved where we could discuss everyone's highlights of the week and just enjoy each other's company one last time. Great food and great company. But the day wasn't over yet.

After dinner, most of the group went to a public viewing platform next to the Gibbon bridge on the south channel. There were a lot of people when we arrived just before sundown, but with temperatures dropping and the winds blowing, most of the people departed before the show really started. Well after the sun had set, the cranes started landing just upstream of the bridge. All one could see were silhouettes, which were spectacular in their own right, but there is always the sound of the cranes that completes the experience. A great ending to a great week.



Sat., Mar. 18 Return to Lincoln

Most of the departures for the group were scheduled for midafternoon, so a portion of the group took a slight detour on our way back to Lincoln. Turning off Interstate 80 at the Alda exit, we drove a route south of the river looking for Whooping Cranes. None were spotted, but we did get a last look at lots of Sandhill Cranes. Then it was back on I-80 and onto the Lincoln airport. Although the trip was over, new friends had been made and memories were created that will last a lifetime. Here's hoping we meet again on another adventure with Naturalist Journeys!

Photos by Kent Skaggs: Sandhill Cranes / Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary; Group Photo; Greater Prairie Chicken; Female Greater Prairie Chicken; Sandhill Cranes; Sandhill Cranes; Spring Creek Prairie courtesy of Sharon Loudon at Spring Creek Prairie, Group at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie; Group at Audubon Rowe Sanctuary; Sandhill Cranes; Cranes in the sunlight, The Archway x3; Cranes in flight; Hybrid Grouse; Sandhill Crane silhouettes