

Nebraska's Platte River | Trip Report

March 19 - 25, 2023 | by Kent Skaggs



Guides Kent Skaggs and Dave Krueper, with participants: Bruce, Claudine Deirdre, Donna, Ellen, Jim, Lil, Marcia, Terry & Wendy



Sun., Mar. 19 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. Just a few of our guests needed a transfer from the Lincoln Airport on Sunday as several participants arrived a day early and had already 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 5:00 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. 20 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 on the way into the visitor center we spotted a Red-headed Woodpecker. Not typically found at this time of year in the state, the bird apparently had overwintered, providing us with a bonus bird to start our trip. Once inside the center, 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. Eastern Meadowlarks were singing, along with Red-winged Blackbirds and a Northern Cardinal. Several species of waterfowl were seen on a small pond near the center including Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead. After a short walk we headed back inside to warm up a bit, 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 to 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. 21 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 and as we approached the blind there was very little sound, just a few murmurs of cranes in the distance.

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. 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.

While we were in the blind, several species of waterfowl were seen including Northern Pintail and some early shorebirds too as a couple of Greater Yellowlegs were on the river. 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. Several species of ducks that had already been seen by the group were on the water, but there were some new species of waterfowl as well including Northern Shoveler, Canvasback and Common Goldeneye. A pair of Belted Kingfishers gave us a flyby, and some lingering Snow Geese were seen meandering along the river.

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.



Arriving at the viewing area, we noticed that there were some cranes up close to the fence that served as a visual barrier hiding cars and people from the birds. The cranes were walking around the meadow probing the soil for invertebrates, which provide a much-needed source of protein. They continued to feed near the fence for quite some time allowing us to get close-up looks of juvenile cranes. A couple of Killdeer were just on the other side of the fence as well, probably hoping for all of us humans to get away from their potential nesting site. 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. 22 Sunrise on the Prairie | Evening with the Cranes

We hit the road at 6:00 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. Just as we were getting ready to leave, a female flew and landed directly in front of the bus. The males, who had started to lose interest in displaying, immediately returned to their places on the lek and turned things 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 slowly walked through the lek, sizing up the males who continued to try and attract her attention. Did one of them make the grade? Maybe, but that question would be answered later. She eventually moved to the far side of the lek, taking the male's attention with her and away from the bus. With the males distracted, we took this opportunity to sneak out and get back to the vans. It was a great start to a beautiful morning.



Then it was back to Kearney for brunch and an extended break for some rest. The group decided on some extra rest, so our next activity was eating an early dinner at Skeeter Barnes where the group enjoyed some fine barbeque. From there it was back to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary 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, then walked to the blind. The skies had turned gray as clouds had moved in from the west, but the temperature was very pleasant. While we waited for the cranes to return to the river, we listened to Red-winged Blackbirds and watched Green-winged Teal and Gadwall feeding in some shallow channels in the river. As the cranes started landing upstream of the blind, some White-tailed Deer came out from the north riverbank and proceeded to cross the river right in the midst of the cranes, who didn't seem to mind. As more cranes came in, some Bald Eagles started to appear as well. Some cranes became nervous and would get up only to return to the river after a short stint in the air. The eagles appeared to be interested in something other than cranes as they flew back and forth along the river, and eventually the cranes settled in for the evening. Soon it was time to go, so it was back to the vans and back to the hotel. It had been another memorable day and we still had a lot to see.

Thurs., Mar. 23 Prairie Dogs | Harlan County Reservoir

The group had the luxury of a later start on this day as departure wasn't until 9:00 a.m., which was much appreciated. After a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, we loaded up for our first destination of the day: Prairie Dog Waterfowl Production Area (WPA), which is in the western portion of the Rainwater Basin. Owned and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 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 was close enough to the road that the group got good looks with binoculars from inside the vans. The hawk was very cooperative, mainly because it had just caught breakfast, and was content with staying where it was. Needless to say, there weren't any prairie dogs visible near the hawk, but we did see some further away that felt safe enough to show themselves. We scanned the rest of the WPA for other birds, but nothing came into view, so we continued down the road towards our main destination for the day: Harlan County Reservoir.



Once we were several miles south of Prairie Dog WPA, the terrain changed from a mostly flat landscape to one of rolling hills and long draws. The vegetation changed as well, from almost entirely cropland to a significant amount of pastureland. We were entering into the Republican River Valley, which is in a different watershed than the Platte River. The combination of rolling hills and grass meant we were in prairie-chicken country once again and we ended up getting a flyby from a Greater Prairie-Chicken while we were traveling down the road. Several Western Meadowlarks and Red-tailed Hawks were seen along the way as well.

The plan when we got to Harlan, which is owned and managed by the U.S. Corp of Engineers, was to check several locations on the north side of the reservoir. The first stop was a woodlot next to the entry road that took us to the Corp headquarters and ultimately across the dam. In this woodlot was a nest, and in the nest was an adult Great Horned Owl, and upon closer inspection, at least one downy owlet, probably more. A spotting scope was set up and everyone got good looks at the adult. With smiles on everyone's faces, we got back into the vans and headed to the Corp office, which was also a visitor center. After a short visit, we drove across the dam and stopped at a parking area next to the spillway. Scopes were set up and we scanned for waterbirds. New bird species for the trip that were seen from the dam were Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, a lone Herring Gull and 165 American White Pelicans. We also had a flock of about 25 American Pipits fly by us while we were there, which was new as well. It was rapidly approaching noon, so we decided to drive to Alma and grab lunch on the go at Subway, then find a place close to the reservoir where we could eat and bird at the same time. We found a small picnic area on the south side of town where some of the group ate at picnic tables while the rest chose to stay in the relative comfort of the van.

Once we had finished eating, our next stop was at the Alma Waste Treatment Ponds south of town, a must for any birder. Two new species, Ruddy Duck and Cooper's Hawk, were added to our trip list here with the latter taking a pass at four Northern Flickers that were hanging out together in a tree.



Then it was on to Methodist Cove where there were lots of waterfowl to scan through with the scopes. No new waterfowl species, but we did get good looks at a couple of Bald Eagles. While we were looking at the waterfowl, we did have five Mourning Doves fly over, and we heard a Wild Turkey gobble and a Carolina Wren sing, all new for the trip. Another thing that did not go unnoticed from this location was the constant roar of honking Snow Geese coming from the center of the reservoir. At least a mile away from us, you could see a white strip of birds on the water that easily numbered in the tens of thousands. A far cry from the estimated three million that were here earlier in the month, but still impressive.

Our last stop at Harlan was at Hunter Cove where we saw more waterfowl and another Great Horned Owl. It was time to start heading back towards Kearney, but the brief break from cranes was a rewarding one and it showed off a little more of Nebraska to the group. On the way back we did a quick drive through Funk WPA where there were a few ducks, but otherwise relatively quiet. Then it was back to the hotel for a brief rest and on 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. 24 Last morning with the Cranes | Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail

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. Some cranes could be heard as we entered the blind, and as it became light enough to see them on the river you could see that there were thousands upstream. The cranes seemed a little subdued this morning as there were no large liftoffs, just small to midsize flocks departing the river to go feed. Maybe they sensed that their visit to the Platte River was coming to an end soon, just like ours, or more likely the Bald Eagles that usually harass them decided to sleep in. Once we returned to the visitor center, it was one last spin through the gift shop before saying so long to this wonderful place. Then it was back to Kearney for brunch.

After a brief rest back at the hotel following brunch, we took a short drive back towards the river and the Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail. From the parking area, it was a short stroll to the bridge that crossed the south channel of the Platte River. Once we were on the bridge, we took advantage of the pleasant spring weather and listened to not only the birds singing, but the sound of the water passing beneath us. It was extremely peaceful and relaxing and yet rejuvenating. That is what immersing yourself in nature does. 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 on the platform, all to see what we were fortunate to experience up close and in depth for the better part of a week. The sun having set, the cranes started landing upstream of the bridge. The cranes were just silhouettes now, 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. 25 Return to Lincoln

Departure times were scattered for most of the group, so for the most part, goodbyes were said the night before. Then it was back on I-80 and on to Lincoln. 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, Group at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie, Restaurant Sign, Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary, Sandhill Cranes, Birds in flight, Greater Prairie Chickens, Ferruginous Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Group Birding, Sandhill Cranes in Flight