

Nebraska's Platte River | March 10-16, 2024 | Trip Report | by Kent Skaggs



Guide Kent Skaggs, with six participants: Ellen, Betty & Bill, Sharon & Bob and Larry



Sun., Mar. 10 Arrival in Lincoln | Embassy Suites & the Haymarket

Our journey began in the capital city of Lincoln 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 to get better acquainted. After dining on some tasty entrees, Ellen and Larry stopped in to Ivanna Cone to sample some ice cream while the rest of the group made our way back to the hotel to rest up for an exciting week ahead.

Mon., Mar. 11 Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie | Travel to Kearney

Travel day! After the group ate breakfast, we loaded into the van to start towards Kearney, but there would be a few stops along the way. The first was Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, which is a strawbale structure,



where we checked out displays on tallgrass prairie and the wildlife that depend on it. Then we headed outside to see what birds we could find out on the prairie. It was a beautiful start to the day with temperatures in the low 40's with clear skies and light winds. Eastern Meadowlarks were singing, with one remaining perched long enough for the group to get looks at it through the scope. Male Red-winged Blackbirds were singing as well, with a few visible on their territories around a couple of ponds on the property. Also visible along the shoreline of one of the ponds was a Muskrat busy moving about near what appeared to be the entrance to its den. On the water there were a pair of Canada Geese, a pair of Blue-winged Teal and a single Snow Goose. We also checked out a woodlot near the visitor center where there were some American Robins and an Eastern Bluebird, before loading back into the van to continue down the road.

Less than an hour later we were in York where we would be eating lunch at Chances 'R', which is a locally owned and operated restaurant that is known for middle America comfort food. A Reuben or two was consumed along with a few other standards for this part of the state, before continuing on to the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center near Grand Island. Upon arrival we went inside to look at the educational displays in the center as well as peruse the art gallery and gift shop. The group eventually found its way outdoors onto a trail that led to a walking bridge across a small channel of the Platte River. A stiff wind was now blowing but the temperature was now in the low 70's reminding us spring was right around the corner. As we headed back to the center, Larry noticed some activity on the lawn and discovered that some Common Garter Snakes were emerging from the ground to enjoy the warm temperatures. Back in the van, we continued west on Interstate 80 to the Gibbon exit where we took some county roads south of the Platte River that allowed us to slow down and take a look at our first large groups of Sandhill Cranes feeding in cornfields. Just a sample of what was in store for us in the coming days.

We arrived at the Hampton Inn in Kearney in the late afternoon, checked in and then settled into our rooms where we would be staying for 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. The group relaxed as we enjoyed a nice meal and continued to get to know one another a little more before returning to the hotel to get some rest as we would have an early start come morning.

Tues., Mar. 12

Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary | PRRIP

The group loaded up into the van at 5:30 a.m. for the 20 minute drive to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. Once there, we checked in, found out what blind we would be going to and received a brief orientation. Then we



followed our guides in the darkness to the blind. The walk was about a half of a mile over relatively level ground, the skies were mostly cloudy, the winds were light and the cranes were beginning to stir.

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. As the light increased, the cranes became more vocal and eventually we could see individuals emerging from the darkness. As it got closer to dawn, you could see more and more cranes in the distance standing in the water and on exposed sandbars and the crane calls were becoming louder and louder. Occasionally there would be a small rise of cranes to the west who would settle back into the river or take the opportunity to go out to feed. The clouds were starting to thin out and as the sun crested the horizon in the east it lit up the cranes on the river in front of us. Small to mid-sized flocks were slowly departing the river to go feed in the surrounding cornfields and meadows. The cranes were having a very peaceful morning and we were soaking them in.

While in the viewing blind we also saw some Snow Geese flying overhead well before sunrise and small numbers of Northern Pintail both on the water and in flight. A few White-tailed Deer were also seen briefly on the far bank before disappearing out of sight. Our guides eventually said it was time to go so we filed out of the blind and back to the parking area. Once the group was ready, we loaded back into the van to head back to Kearney to have brunch at Good Evans, which would be our brunch stop for the week. After warming up and fueling up at Good Evans, the group had a little down time before heading back out in the early afternoon to observe what the cranes do when they are away from the river.

Early afternoon we returned to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary to a crane viewing pullout that is located next to a small pond. The pond is surrounded by meadow and is a common hangout for cranes from late morning to mid afternoon. Known as a 'loafing area', cranes utilize this area to bathe, preen, rest and digest whatever they consumed for breakfast. You will also see them take flight to ride thermals to great heights and then glide back down to where they had been or to another location nearby. Cranes surrounded the pond, most just resting but a few were taking a bath. Then a large group of cranes took flight from a nearby meadow and started to spiral up into the mostly clear blue sky above us. With little effort they easily gained altitude and a lot ultimately became specks to the naked eye. As the cranes entertained us there was another chorus being sung by Western Meadowlarks nearby.



After about an hour we moved on to look for more waterfowl at a sandpit owned and managed by the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program or PRRIP for short. The gravel spoil piles of the sandpit have been reshaped by PRRIP as nesting habitat for Interior Least Terns and Piping Plovers, but migrating waterfowl like to rest on the shoreline and divers and dabbling ducks apparently find some food in the water as well. We found Gadwall, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead. 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. 13 Sunrise on the Prairie | Evening with the Cranes

A little later start to this morning as we hit the road at 6:00 a.m. for a 45 minute drive to a Greater Prairie-Chicken lek near the town of Ravenna. With overcast skies, it was still very dark when we arrived, so we took our time walking on an old two track 'road' that serves as a path to the blind. Once we got to the blind which was an old school bus, we quietly made our way in and positioned ourselves in front of the windows. Despite the cloud cover, the landscape in front of us slowly came into view with each passing minute. It had been 15-20 minutes since we had entered the bus and there was no sign of the prairie-chickens. But then there was a sound and several birds flew in and landed on the lek, five males in total. They immediately found their individual territory on the lek and commenced with trying to attract a female or two to the lek. This is done by producing several vocalizations, one of which was a low booming sound that can carry for some distance.

It didn't take long before a female materialized from some grassy vegetation on the right side of the lek. With the female present, the males seemed to turn everything up a notch in order to gain her attention. The males further away would jump into the air or 'flutter jump' to increase their visibility to the female. They would also 'whoop' and 'whine' essentially saying 'hey, over here'! With the peak of breeding season still a month away, this was just a cursory visit from the female and she departed before the males could strut their best stuff. Undeterred, the males continued their booming hoping for another chance to impress a prospective mate. Time passed and no more females showed so the males began to lose interest in displaying and started looking for a little breakfast. This was our cue to quietly exit the blind and return to Kearney for a little food for ourselves.

On the way back to Kearney we stopped briefly at a small wetland south of Ravenna along the South Loup River where we had good looks at Gadwall and Green-winged Teal along with some Mallards and a pair of Blue-winged Teal. On to Kearney for brunch again at Good Evans and then a little break before heading back out to see what other bird life we could find nearby.



In the early afternoon, we visited Cottonmill Park on the west edge of Kearney. The wind had picked up a little and the park has a healthy population of Eastern Red Cedar trees that provide some shelter from said wind for human and bird alike. With the abundance of cedar trees comes cedar berries which are a favorite food item for American Robins and Cedar Waxwings which were not in short supply. Other species encountered included Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, White and Red-breasted Nuthatches and some domesticated jungle fowl near the Nature Barn. When we finished up at Cottonmill, we made our way to Skeeter Barnes where we would be having an early dinner of barbeque and all of the fixins that come with it.

From there it was back to the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center for an evening tour to one of their blinds to watch the cranes return to the river. We arrived a little before 6:00 p.m. for orientation at the center before caravanning to a location near the river where we would have a short walk to a blind. Overcast skies were still present and the winds remained steady out of the north as a weather system was on its way. Once inside the blind we scanned the fields on the south side of the river as large numbers of cranes were feeding there. While we watched the cranes, one of our guides pointed out a Bald Eagle downstream of the blind, then another. They eventually flew past the blind going upstream out of sight. As sunset approached, the cranes were starting to mill about but they were staying in the fields, possibly sensing the approaching weather system and choosing to feed longer. Also, Bald Eagles continued to hang out nearby which always makes the cranes a bit hesitant to return to the roost. We did have a flock of American White Pelicans fly by heading downstream, cruising just above the surface of the water. Eventually, as the light was fading, cranes started to settle in the river quite a ways downstream of the blind. There were thousands in the air now but their silhouettes were now blending with the night sky, leaving us with just their calls to escort us as we walked from the blind back to the van. It was another unique experience with the cranes on the river and there was still more yet to come.

Thurs., Mar. 14

Harlan County Reservoir | The Archway

An 8:00 a.m. start this morning was a welcome change for the group, especially after a late evening the night before. The first destination for the day was Harlan County Reservoir which was about an hour southwest of Kearney. Our main objective was to see what other bird species were in the area during mid March. Unfortunately, the weather system that arrived overnight brought thunderstorms and it was still raining when we departed the hotel. Undaunted, we set out hoping there would be enough breaks in the rain to allow us to get out of the van to explore a bit.



On the way to Harlan, we drove through Prairie Dog Waterfowl Production Area hoping to see some of the Black-tailed Prairie Dogs that the site is named after. There was still a light rain and a pretty good breeze blowing so the prairie dogs were still hunkered down in their burrows. We did see a half a dozen female Ring-necked Pheasants cross the road in front of us as we drove by, but with the gravel roads being rather soft we kept moving. When we arrived at Harlan we stopped at the U.S. Corp of Engineers visitor center at the lake for a bathroom break and to check out several nice displays. As we departed, the rain continued limiting our birding to what we could see from the van. We drove across the dam, then along the north side of the lake to Alma and on to the Alma Wastewater Treatment Ponds where we saw a good variety of waterfowl including Northern Shoveler, Canvasback, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye and Ruddy Duck. We then went into Alma to grab some lunch and then headed back towards Kearney.

Once back in Kearney, we took a little break and with the weather still not cooperating, most of the group went to the Archway. 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 present day. Once the group had finished the tour, it was back to the hotel for a brief rest and then a short walk to dinner at Cunningham's Journal On The Lake. Then back to the hotel to turn in early as we had our last early date with cranes in the morning.

Fri., Mar. 15 Last morning with the Cranes | Prairie Dog Town

Departure again was at 5:30 a.m. for our last visit to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary for the morning tour. Orientation, then out to the blind. It was a little brisk this morning but the skies were clear assuring we would have good light to view the cranes as they left the river. As it began to get light and we could see further upstream from the blind, it appeared that the density of cranes on the river was more than what we saw on Tuesday morning. The usual morning routine was taking place as the cranes were slowly waking up, preening, stretching their wings and becoming more vocal. Small groups were now beginning to leave to go feed with the occasional rise of larger groups, being harassed by Bald Eagles, that would then swing out of the way of the eagles and land back in the river. This activity occurred for a while until virtually all of the cranes that could be seen from the blind took flight and milled around in the air in front of us. The sky was absolutely full of cranes and all you could hear was their calls. Astounding, amazing, magnificent...pick your adjective. A lot of the cranes chose this moment to head out to the neighboring fields to feed while some returned to the river. We eventually left the blind, continuing to soak in the sights and sounds as we walked back to the parking area.

It had been a spectacular morning on the river and a great ending to our last visit to Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. But our time with the cranes on the river was not done, as we would have one last opportunity later in the day.



But now, we had one last date for brunch at Good Evans, a brief rest back at the hotel and then a quick trip to a location south of town in the early afternoon.

Our destination in the afternoon was Clark Waterfowl Production Area where there is another sizable population of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs. A Ferruginous Hawk had been recently reported here too, so when we arrived we were keeping an eye to the sky as well as on the ground. We first saw a couple of Red-tailed Hawks soaring nearby and as we were unloading from the van near the prairie dog town, another raptor took flight and it was the Ferruginous Hawk. The bird started soaring on a thermal and then it noticed a Bald Eagle passing through and started diving on the eagle trying to get it to vacate its hunting territory. We continued to watch the hawk in the air and the prairie dogs on the ground. Predator soaring above its prey, but apparently not hungry at that moment. We eventually worked our way back to Kearney and had an early dinner at The Alley Rose. While we ate we recounted some of the highlights of the week, but the week wasn't over yet.

After dinner, we headed to the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail and positioned ourselves on the bridge that spanned the river channel. The sky was still clear and the winds were slight as we waited for the cranes to return to the river. Slowly the cranes started to appear near the river as the sun was setting. It was relatively quiet compared to what we had experienced in the morning, but just as beautiful. A great way to end a great week.

Sat., Mar. 16 Return to Lincoln

Betty and Bill had driven their own vehicle out to Kearney so we said our goodbyes after breakfast so they could hit the road for home. The rest of us took our time packing as those scheduled for flights this day weren't until mid afternoon. There was a brief stop in York for some food before continuing on to Lincoln. The week had passed quickly but it was a very memorable one to say the least. With the trip over, we wished each other farewell and best of luck on future adventures. Here's hoping we meet again on another adventure with Naturalist Journeys.

Photos: Sandhill Cranes (Kent Skaggs - KS), Greater Prairie Chicken (KS), Greater Yellowlegs (KS), Watching the cranes (KS), Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center (KS), Killdeer (Lawrence Zoller - LZ), Sandhill Cranes (LZ), Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center (KS), Sandhill Cranes at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary (KS), Sandhill Cranes in flight (KS), More cranes! (KS), Cottonmill Park (KS), Ferruginous Hawk (KS), Northern Flicker (LZ), Sandhill Cranes at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary (KS), Scenic (LZ), Sunset from the Fort Kearny Hike (KS), Fort Kearny Hike (KS), Moon (KS)