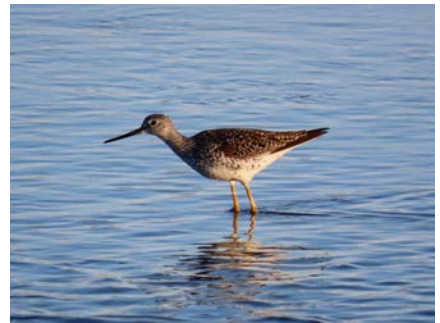


Nebraska's Platte River | March 17-23, 2024 Trip Report | by Kent Skaggs



Guides Kent Skaggs and Lena Moser, with nine participants: Nancy, Ed, Candy, Sally & Donald, Dave, Lynne & David and Mary (Beth)



Sun., Mar. 17

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. Just a couple of our guests needed a transfer from the Lincoln Airport on Sunday as several participants arrived a day early and had already done some exploring of the area. 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 enjoying a very good meal and good conversation, we returned to the hotel to rest up for an exciting week ahead.



Mon., Mar. 18 Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie | Travel to Kearney

Travel day! After the group ate breakfast, we loaded into the vans to start towards Kearney, with a few stops along the way. The first was Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, which is a strawbale structure, where we checked out the bird feeders on our way into the center. Once inside, we viewed the displays on tallgrass prairie and the wildlife that depend on it. Then we headed back outside to see what we could find. It was a beautiful start to the day as we had clear skies and light winds, but it was rather chilly as the temperatures were in the low 20's. We ventured out to a walking bridge that crossed over a section of a man-made pond constructed many years ago on the Spring Creek. Cattails surrounded the area around the bridge and a Muskrat had constructed a 'hut' with them nearby. Just up the bank from the water was a Wild Plum thicket that was hiding a couple of American Tree Sparrows. We then checked out a wooded area below the pond where we came across a Common Raccoon sleeping high up in a tree hollow. It heard the conversation below and decided to peek out to see what was going on. As we headed back to the center Lena spotted a Harris's Sparrow near the building. It was hopping in and out of some shrubs/small trees making it challenging to see, but eventually most of the group got a look at it. Then it was back on the road.

Less than an hour later we were in York where we had reservations for lunch at Chances 'R', which is a locally owned and operated restaurant that is known for middle America comfort food. While we enjoyed our lunch we continued to get to know each other better, before continuing on to the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center near Grand Island. We got off of Interstate 80 at the exit for the center, but before going there, we pulled in behind a gas station where there were several Sandhill Cranes resting in a field. Most were standing up preening while others had their head tucked under a wing and at least a couple were lying down on the ground taking a nap. We viewed the cranes through the spotting scope, pointing out juvenile cranes from the adults and discussed what the birds were doing at this location. We then continued on to the center which was just on the other side of the interstate. Once there we went inside to look at the educational displays in the center and perused 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. Temperatures were now in the low 50's with light winds and bright sunshine. We enjoyed the nice weather for a little longer before continuing towards Kearney. Back on the road, we drove about 20 minutes to the Gibbon exit where we took some county roads south of the Platte River that allowed us to slow down and take a longer look at large groups of cranes feeding in cornfields. This was a preview of what we could expect to see 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 a little before 6:00 in the lobby area to go over the species checklist for the day before departing for Joy's Table which was a few blocks down the street from the hotel. Travel finished for the day, we relaxed as we enjoyed a nice meal and continued to get to know one another a little more. Then it was back to the hotel to get some rest as we would have an early start come morning.

Tues., Mar. 19 Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary

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 clear, the winds were light and the cranes were beginning to wake up.

Once in the blind, people settled in front of the windows or took a seat on a bench in the back of the blind. Since there was no cloud cover, there was already enough light to see where the cranes were on the roost and they were close, very close. There were cranes filling the river channel for as far as you could see upstream of the blind and several thousand downstream as well. As we crept closer to sunrise, something spooked the cranes downstream of the blind and they took flight and the cranes immediately out in front of us took to the air too. Most of the cranes that were in the air circled back and landed again in the river, albeit in a different location. Upstream we were seeing similar rises of cranes with the same outcome. We eventually saw the cause of the disturbance. Bald Eagles were flushing the cranes off of the river to see if they could take advantage of any weak or injured birds. Small to mid-sized flocks of cranes had slowly been departing the river to go feed in the surrounding cornfields and meadows, but eventually the harassing eagles caused most of the cranes to depart the river for the day. Spectacular viewing for us, another morning on the Platte River for the cranes.

While in the viewing blind we also saw several other species of birds including Snow Geese, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal and Greater Yellowlegs. We even had a North American Beaver swim right by the blind before slipping 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. Back at the vans, we loaded up and headed 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 were surrounding the pond, most just resting but some were bathing too. While we watched the cranes, there were Western Meadowlarks singing nearby and a Killdeer announcing its displeasure with the crane watchers invading its territory. There was also a small flock of Snow Geese and a couple of Ross’s Geese on the pond that took flight and circled multiple times before settling back on the water. Another treat was a Northern Harrier cruising low over a meadow on the far side of the pond looking for a midday snack.

After a little over 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. There were Gadwall, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead on the water and another Northern Harrier cruising about. From here it was back to Kearney to get freshened up a bit, do the checklist and then 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. 20 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 mostly clear skies, it was already getting light when we arrived, so we moved as quickly as we could 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. The prairie-chickens were already there and were in full display. The previous evening the group had been given a quick tutorial on the sounds they would probably hear on the lek. We heard it all. There was ‘cackling’ and ‘booming’ and a ‘whoop’ and a ‘whine’. The males would also ‘flutter jump’ from time to time. All of this is done to impress a female, but there were none visible. Maybe they were watching just out of sight from the taller grass surrounding the lek. As we watched the males continue with their display, the closest bird to the bus began moving closer. It took a jump into the air and then another. Then a third jump into the air resulted with the bird landing on top of the bus. It continued with its display, first by rapidly stomping its feet immediately followed by the booming. It cackled as well. We all just smiled at one another and enjoyed the



bravado of this little 'chicken'. The male eventually returned to its place on the lek and the activity eventually waned as no females showed themselves. We departed the bus having seen a great show.

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 through the spotting scopes at several species of waterfowl we had previously seen, plus our first Northern Shoveler and Wood Ducks. 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 Fort Kearny State Recreation Area and took a walk on the Hike-Bike Trail. The skies were clear but it was a bit breezy and the wooded areas along the trail provided some protection from the wind. It was a bit quiet along the trail, but we eventually heard a White-breasted Nuthatch and saw a Yellow-rumped Warbler along with several American Robins. We continued up to the south channel of the Platte River and were looking at some displays along the trail when a couple of large white objects were spotted upstream. All binoculars went up and a spotting scope was focused on what appeared to be a pair of Whooping Cranes along the north edge of the river bank about a half mile upstream. We couldn't believe our luck, but the longer we looked something didn't quite seem right about the 'birds' we were seeing. We had been studying the 'birds' for a few minutes and one of them had not moved. The other appeared to be feeding and photos taken of the 'birds' showed that one of them was moving. After closer inspection we came to the conclusion that we were looking at a decoy of a Whooping Crane that attracted a live Whooping Crane. Later we found out that both were decoys deployed by a conservation organization that monitors Whooping Cranes to test spotters who fly the river doing Whooping Crane counts during migration. As to the 'bird' that was moving, it was a type of decoy that the wind could move making it look more life-like. Oh well.

We returned back to south Kearney for an early dinner at Skeeter Barnes where we enjoyed some tasty barbeque before we returned 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. The skies were partly cloudy but there was a lot of sunshine when we arrived at the blind. Some ducks could be seen downstream, too distant to identify, along with some Common Mergansers closer to the blind. The closest cranes were in a meadow on the other side of the river over a half mile away. While we waited on the cranes, we enjoyed how the early evening light made the vegetation along the river appear a golden brown. This along with the contrast of the blue sky and the intermittent grayish white clouds provided a beautiful backdrop prior



to sunset. Cranes were starting to move and were landing in a meadow on the other side of the river. As the sun set cranes were starting to land in the river downstream of the blind and from there it was a steady stream of cranes for at least a half hour rolling by us to join the others on the water. We watched in amazement as there seemed to be no end to the birds that were in the sky. They just kept coming. As light was fading some cranes landed in front of the blind and their numbers started to build. As we walked out they were still landing. A very nice way to end a very good day.

Thurs., Mar. 21

Prairie Dogs | Harlan County Reservoir

After a late evening the night before, the group could sleep in this day as departure wasn't until 8:30 a.m., which was much appreciated. After a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, we headed for our first destination of the day - Clark Waterfowl Production Area (WPA), which is located in the western portion of the Rainwater Basin. Owned and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this WPA has a sizable population of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs. A Ferruginous Hawk had recently been reported here and we were hoping to get a look at it while we watched the prairie dogs. As we were getting out of the vans, the Ferruginous Hawk was spotted on the ground on the far side of the prairie dog town. We got the bird in the scopes so folks could get a better look. It seemed to be enjoying the morning sun as were the prairie dogs. As we scanned the area for other wildlife, several Western Meadowlarks were singing nearby adding to the peaceful setting in front of us. We then got back in the vans to continue on to our next destination - Harlan County Reservoir.

As we continued south towards Harlan, 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 with native grasses like Little and Big Bluestem providing some warm colors to a late winter landscape. We were also entering into the Republican River Valley which is in a different watershed than the Platte River. As we neared the lake we made a brief stop to check out a nest high up in a tree in a woodlot. In the nest you could see a couple of ear tufts and the top of the head of a Great Horned Owl. We got it in the scopes for better views before continuing on to the U.S. Corp of Engineers visitor center for a bathroom break and to check out their displays. After a short visit, we drove across the dam where we saw a few American White Pelicans out on the water and some Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye closer to the dam. We then worked our way along the north side of the lake towards Alma. It was rapidly approaching noon, so we decided to grab lunch to go at Subway and head to the south side of the lake to check out the Alma Wastewater Treatment Ponds for more waterfowl. Northern Shovelers were the most numerous species here with at least a couple of hundred on the water, followed by Lesser Scaup and Ruddy Ducks, the latter being new for the trip.



It was time to start heading back towards Kearney. On the way back we stopped at Funk WPA where there were more ducks on some distant water. We set up the scopes to find lots of Green-winged Teal with Gadwall, American Wigeon and Northern Pintail mixed in. In front of the ducks along the shore were a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds that kept flushing from the ground to be briefly airborne before returning to the ground out of sight. In the midst of all the red-wings was a single male Yellow-headed Blackbird that could be briefly seen while in flight. We attempted to get looks at it but it proved to be like looking for a needle in a haystack so we moved on. Maybe tomorrow.

From here it was back to the hotel to rest a bit and freshen up. Nancy had to leave the group early as she had another commitment she had to return home for so we said our goodbyes and wished her well. The remainder of the group then took a short walk to dinner at Cunningham's Journal On The Lake. We would be having our last early rendezvous with the cranes in the morning, so after having another satisfying dinner it was off to bed.

Fri., Mar. 22 Last morning with the Cranes | Ft. Kearny Hike-Bike Trail

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 chilly start to the day with temperatures in the mid 30's with stiff north winds. It was a little darker this morning due to mostly cloudy skies but once we entered the blind, we saw that the cranes were again in close like they were on Tuesday morning. The windy conditions already had the cranes wide awake and they were pretty vocal too. As the light increased, we could see that the river upstream was once again chock-full of cranes and they weren't in much of a hurry to go out to feed either. The Bald Eagles were still hanging around so we would see the occasional rise of cranes to avoid the harassing eagles. Eventually thousands of cranes took to the air upstream and headed our way. As they got closer the sound became deafening. They circled overhead in front of the blind looking for a place to settle back into the river. As they continued to fly back and forth some eventually landed again while others had had enough and decided to go out to the fields to feed. As we departed the blind there were still cranes on the river. It had been another spectacular morning with the cranes, but our time with them was not quite finished. Now it was time to head back to Kearney for brunch at Good Evans and then back to the hotel for a little rest.

When we gathered again in the early afternoon, the wind was blowing pretty strong out of the north, so we decided to visit the Archway just a few miles away from the hotel. The Archway steps back in time to chronicle



the westward journey of early pioneers along the Great Platte River Road and beyond and how transportation changed over time for travelers. Once the group had finished the tour, it was back to the hotel for a brief rest and then downtown for an early dinner at The Alley Rose. Since this would be our last dinner together, we had a private room reserved where we could enjoy our meal in peace and quiet and recount the highlights from the week. It had been a great week, but the week wasn't over quite yet.

After dinner, we headed to the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail and positioned ourselves on the bridge that spanned the river channel. The skies had cleared and the winds had died down some, making it cool but comfortable. As we waited for the cranes to return to the river, we watched a pair of Mallards and some Blue-winged teal feeding close to the bridge. There were American Wigeon and Green-winged Teal further downstream and we could see some Northern Harriers flying over a meadow on the north side of the river channel. Near sunset, the cranes started to appear near the river. Some were flying downstream towards Rowe Sanctuary and others were gathering in a meadow upstream of the bridge. With the sun now down behind the horizon, some cranes took flight upstream and were silhouetted against the red-orange sky before they landed back in the meadow. Light was rapidly fading and the wind had picked up again so we headed back to the vans. 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. 23 Return to Lincoln

Lena and Beth hit the road early this morning with the rest of the group leaving mid morning. For the later group 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), Group birding (KS), Common Raccoon (KS), View from the Spring Creek Prairie (KS), Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center (KS), Sandhill Cranes (Ed Chu - EC), Sandhill Cranes (EC), North American Beaver (KS), Bird blind x2 (KS), Sandhill Cranes and Bald Eagle at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary (KS), Snow and Ross's Geese at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary (KS), Greater Prairie Chickens (KS), Greater Prairie-Chicken viewing bus (KS), Viewing Greater Prairie-Chickens (KS), Great Horned Owl on nest (KS), Crane Trust (KS), Sandhill Cranes at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary (KS), Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail, Blue-winged Teal (KS), Sunset from the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail (KS), Sandhill Cranes from the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike Trail (KS), Crane Trust Blind (EC)