



Returning from gleaning nearby cornfields, the cranes congregate to sleep in the shallow waters of the Platte.

Nebraska is for the Birds

Story and Photos by Karen L. Kirsch

Maybe a mid-March trip to Nebraska isn't on your bucket list, but maybe it should be, especially if you are one of an estimated 47 million American "birders." March is when nearly 600,000 sandhill cranes— 80 percent of the entire world population — converge on Nebraska's historic Platte River. The majestic birds linger just a few weeks, resting and gaining weight before continuing to their breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia. From distant wintering grounds in northern Mexico, Texas and New Mexico, resting on the Platte during their epic journey of thousands of miles has occurred for millennia. Sandhill cranes are living dinosaurs. A Miocene crane fossil, thought to be about ten million years old, was found

in Nebraska and is structurally identical to the modern Sandhill crane, making it one of the oldest known bird species still surviving.

It's hard to imagine the spectacle that Dr. Jane Goodall calls "...one of the world's ten greatest migrations." The awesome event that inspired poet laureate Billy Collins to write *The Sandhill Cranes of Nebraska* is something you just have to experience in person.

Each spring, about 10 million birds including various breeds of ducks and geese migrate over the Platte but the area is also home to some rarely seen resident fowl such as piping plover, least tern, bobolink, whooping crane and Harris sparrow, to name just a few. The most dramatic display is undoubtedly the Sandhills cranes, but thanks to an unusual alliance between the

agricultural community and conservationists, avitourism thrives around Kearny, McCook and Grand Island. Tour costs can range from free to several thousand dollars.

Nebraska is serious farm country. Nearly all – 97 percent — of the land is privately owned and 92 percent of it is agriculture-related. Seemingly endless windswept plains are defined by vast fields of corn and soybeans. Angus and Hereford cattle outnumber humans and the Platte River (Pawnee for 'the flat') meanders 310 miles through the state.

For centuries the braided river provided a crossing for the Pawnee and later for settlers following the California, Oregon and Mormon trails on their great western migration. Settlers described the Platte as a mile wide and six inches deep.

They said it was too thick to drink and too thin to plow. Over the decades the river has been greatly compromised. Mid-20th century activities such as crop irrigation and water diversion to Colorado have reduced the Platte to a shadow of its earlier self, yet it remains more important now than ever before for migrating sandhill cranes since there is now even less water in this critical migratory place than ever before.

Dotted with countless islands and sandbars where the birds roost at night, and flanked by wet meadows that provide them with nutrients, the Platte is a critical thread in the Central Flyway. Keeping islands and sandbars open and clear involves intensive labor to remove trees and other encroaching vegetation. Cranes sleep standing in the shallow water to protect themselves from predators.

While farmers and conservationists are often odd bedfellows, the informal partnership both from an environmental perspective as well as from an economic one is mutually beneficial. The cranes gain 10 percent of their body weight in central Nebraska because 90 percent of their diet is corn. Days are spent gleaning the fields, which helps the farmers by cleaning up waste corn left from the fall harvest, and by eating bugs found in cow patties. The birds depart before spring planting begins.

Cranes aren't hunted in Nebraska, but in surrounding states they are classified as game birds although only the breast meat is consumed.

Even though cranes are not endangered as their population is currently stable, they are assigned the imperiled status in this region since the loss of riverine and wetland habitat threaten their existence. Spring staging areas along the Platte River in Nebraska are of special concern because of development pressures facing this region. Night noise, flashes from cameras and lights of any kind can be perceived by the birds as shotgun blasts, so restrictions are rigidly enforced in riverside



The barren sandbars are essential resting places. (Photo by Dawn Hewitt)

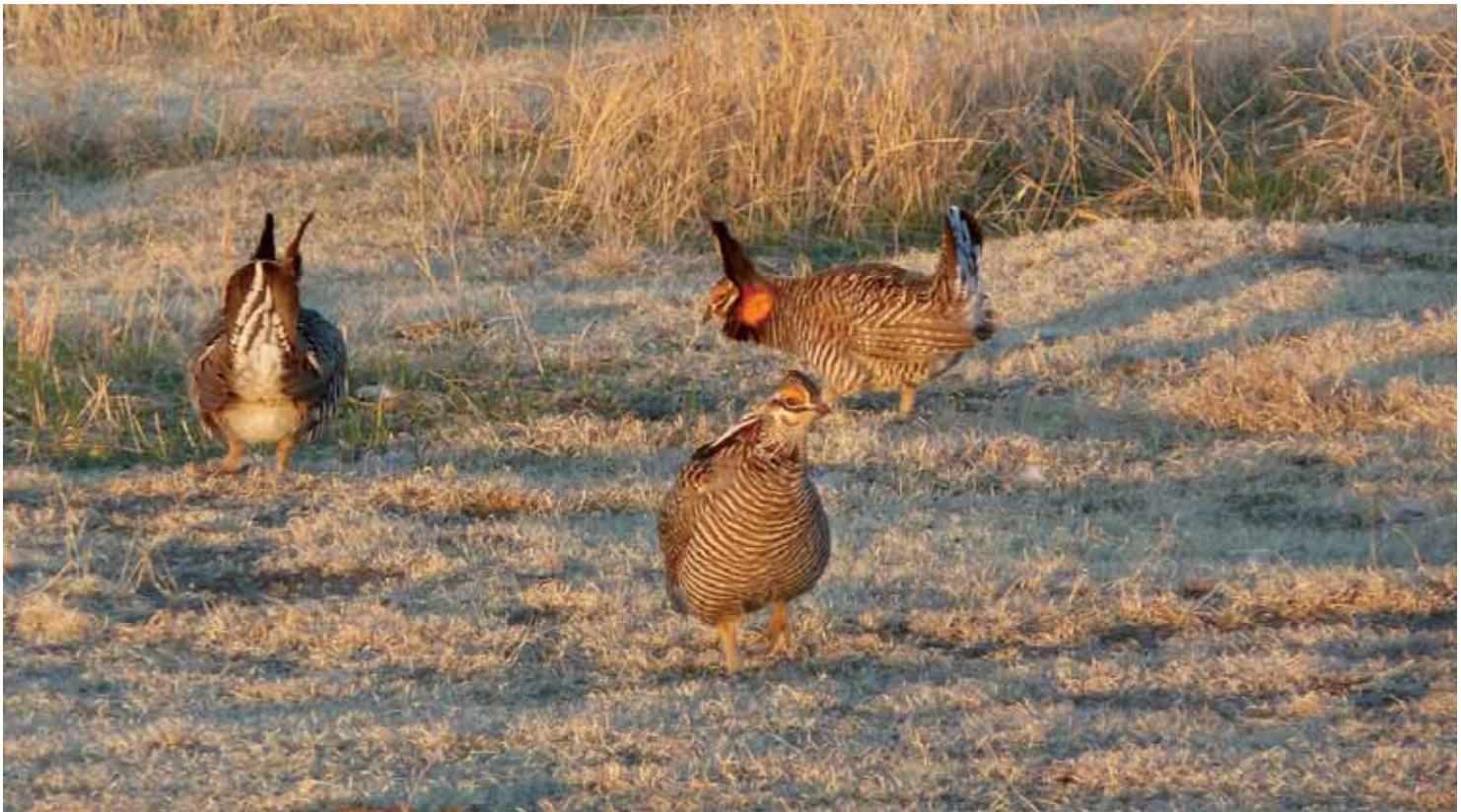


blinds at Rowe Sanctuary and at the Crane Trust, both of which offer exclusive crane-viewing opportunities. An alarm call from just one bird can incite panic within the entire flock, resulting in power line collisions that are bad for birds and humans alike.

Sandhill cranes are spectacular creatures, standing nearly four feet tall with wingspans of six feet. With a flying speed of 38 mph, they travel an astounding 170-

450 miles per day. Seeing the skies darken as literally thousands of these elegant birds settle down to roost on the barren sandbars and islands can be, for a bird-lover, a life-changing experience. The sound is unforgettable. Ornithologists say cranes purr like cats, but the cries of thousands flying in or off the river will not sound much like purring.

Advocates for the Platte exert considerable political clout. Groups like



the Rowe Audubon Sanctuary, the Crane Trust, the Platte River Trust and others have stopped proposed water diversions, collected and planted native seeds, restored 10,000 acres of wet meadows and preserved four miles of river habitat, among other accomplishments.

Some of the conservation land is leased to farmers for grazing, which generates funding while promoting habitat biodiversity. Recently a herd of genetically pure bison was installed within a pristine prairie of native grasses to give visitors a glimpse of what settlers might have encountered, but also to study bison impact on plant communities that benefit migrating birds.

As if the crane migration were not reason enough to consider a spring trip, central Nebraska hosts other rarely seen birds including prairie chickens. These ground foragers faced near-extinction in the 1930s due to over-hunting and habitat loss, primarily native grasslands, but managed restoration schemes have revived populations. Each March the elusive cockerels perform

When dawn breaks on the lek, prairie chickens begin a performance that lasts for hours. Unless chosen by a hen, dozens of the cockerels depart en masse.

The upright pinnea feathers and colorful inflated air sacs transform the otherwise-ordinary birds into splashy showmen.





Sunset on the Platte River is spectacular. (Photo by Dawn Hewitt)

striking mating dances which until recently had been witnessed by few, but can now be observed from strategically placed blinds. This rarely seen event happens on a *lek*. Several dozen prairie roosters dance and boom, hoping that a hen will happen past and choose to mate with one of them. Only a few males are chosen, but hope springs eternal and the army of contenders presents an incredible show well worth the pre-dawn excursion.

Prairie chickens return to the same *lek* each year. Hens nest in tall grass in early May. Summer cattle grazing benefits the grassland until fall, when the land is left undisturbed pending the birds' March return. In 2012, a few McCook ranchers set up blinds and began offering limited tours.

While they are classified as game birds, few are killed because of their elusive nature and because *lek* landowners are extremely protective. Rustic blinds allow birders to watch and photograph undetected as the roosters dance with enthusiastic foot stomping, leaping, posturing and booming (a low moan); all intended to attract a discriminating hen.

The males, which resemble

grouse, undergo a colorful transformation during the dance. Pinnea feather tufts on their neck backs stand upright, looking much like rabbit ears. Air sacs on either side of the neck inflate to a showy bright orange and amplify the booming.

Many other rare and endangered avian species attract birders to Nebraska, but certainly the sandhill cranes and the prairie chickens get the most attention. Perhaps the birds' most important roles are as ecological ambassadors. Many who come to view the migration or mating displays become aware of complex environmental issues such as loss of habitat.

Undoubtedly, the Cornhusker State is worth consideration. Don't be put off by the weather. March can be uncomfortably cold, especially in the pre-dawn hours or early evening when you will be heading for the viewing blinds, so pack warm clothes and dress in layers. Bring binoculars or a spotting scope, camera and a field guide (available at Rowe Sanctuary or the Crane Trust) and enjoy what central Nebraska has to offer.

And while in Nebraska, don't miss the Museum of Nebraska Art, Hastings

Museum and, for history buffs, the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer and the Great Platte River Road Archway. The small towns are friendly, lodging is plentiful and varied, and there are restaurants for every appetite. So, whether you're a novice birder or a veteran working on a life list, think about adding Nebraska to your bucket list. It's worth the trip.

For crane and prairie chicken viewing opportunities:

www.CraneTrust.org

www.rowe.audubon.org

www.prairiechickendancetours.com

Karen Kirsch is a freelance writer with a lifetime involvement in animal and environmental issues. She has contributed to numerous publications including *Carriage Driving Magazine* (UK), *Draft Horse Journal*, *Mother Earth News*, *The Chronicle of the Horse*, *Country Living*, *Das Zugpferd* (GR), *The Old Farmer's Almanac* and *Bee Culture*. She resides in Louisville, Ohio.