

Sandhill Cranes Provide a Special Experience

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By Bryce Arens, Nebraska Tourism Commission

The rise is met with a drop. The drop elicits little sound, if it did few among the eight other spectators gathered close together would notice. Their focus is on the roar. From late February through early April the Platte River Valley is home to the migration of hundreds of thousands of Sandhill Cranes, each spending two to three weeks there as they have done for thousands of years. The Wall Street Journal calls it one of the world's greatest natural spectacles. In Nebraska when the cranes rise, jaws drop, the roar of thousands of birds drowning out all else.

When I first heard about the Sandhill Crane migration I didn't get it. I grew up in Omaha through high school and went to college in Lincoln, admittedly oblivious to much that happened west of there, especially what was going on along the Platte River. I likely would have continued to be oblivious if I had not gotten a job at the Nebraska Tourism Commission, my first out of college. Soon I was traveling to, and gaining insight in, parts of the state I had not seen before, but I still had not seen the much hyped cranes and consequently still didn't get people's amazement with them. Pretty photos sure, impressive numbers absolutely, but they're just birds right?

It's 6:00 a.m. and I'm sitting in a viewing blind owned by the Crane Trust in Alda. In the blind with me are eight University of Nebraska-Lincoln hospitality majors. We are on a trip to showcase what college students can do in Nebraska and we have come to see the cranes, this blind being our first stop. We are cold; the temperature is likely below freezing, with many layers, stocking caps, gloves and much coffee fighting to keep us warm. It is completely dark out; our guide had to lead us to the blind by flashlight. As I sit, the warmth and restful sleep of my usual morning pull at my mind as I take stock of my surroundings.

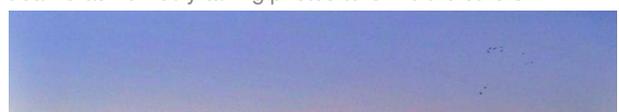
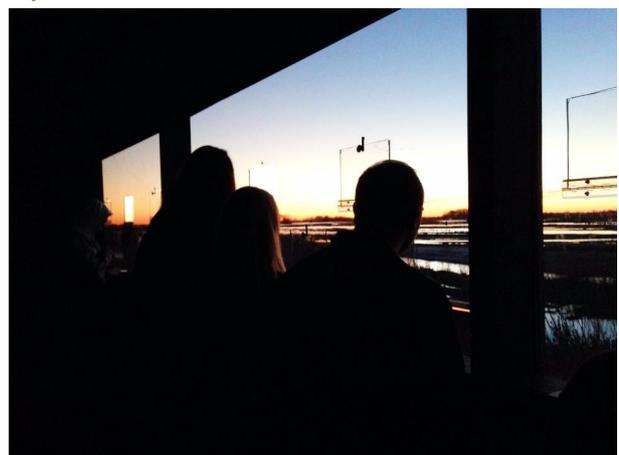
It's quiet within the blind, a wooden structure which is about 40 feet long and 5 to 6 feet deep, with benches that run its length. A dozen or so squares, each covered by clear plastic windows to be opened, are cut into the front about five feet high. Through them we can tell we are several hundred feet from the bank of a portion of the Platte River. When the sun rises these windows will be our windows to our much anticipated crane viewing, but right now we see only black, save for what appear to be a few small islands or sandbars outlined by the moon reflecting off the water. By sight alone it would seem there is nothing to see here, but our ears make it clear that is not the case. A steady mixture of sound, undeniably the call of many, many birds, has not ceased since we left our van a half hour before. My attention has no doubt been piqued, but still they're just birds right?

The sun has now begun to rise and I am surprised to see what I thought were islands or sandbars were actually groups of hundreds, maybe thousands of birds sitting on the water. Just on the section of the river in front of us there are ten or more groups. The windows are now open, cameras operating just behind them soundlessly and without flash to not scare the birds. Within an hour of the sunrise, photos catch small groups of one or two cranes, sometimes a few more taking flight against the natural backdrop of the morning sky. Through binoculars you can see up close the large groups gathered on the water, each with the sandhill crane's distinctive red forehead that extends to their beak. At this point I am astounded by the sheer number of them, but am not prepared for what is coming from down the river. A rise, a roar, a drop, and forever a memory.

When I first heard the roar it took me back to the many times I had watched football games in Nebraska's Memorial Stadium. A player breaks into the open field. The sound rises on one end of the stadium, the volume increasing as it moves across the rest. By the time the player reaches the end zone you are enveloped in the roar. As I sat in the blind that familiar roar again hit me, the cold, the lack of sleep and the waiting forgotten in that moment.

It starts as a murmur far down the river, a wall of black dots silhouetted by the sun, all rising in unison. As they fly closer the wall widens, flock upon flock rising from the river, a crescendo of sound accompanying them. By the time they are overhead, you are within the roar of thousands of cranes calling to each other, their wings steady in their rhythm. As I watch them I understand what the hype is about, something my agape mouth can attest to. The eight cameras hurriedly taking photos tells me the others understand too.

If you are like me, your jaw is not dropped by things often; it takes something truly awing to elicit that response. Something that is



unique and entertaining. The strips of land along the Platte River in Central Nebraska provide that experience. The kind of experience that has drawn visitors from all 50 states and over 50 countries this year, according to the two prominent conservation and crane viewing operations in Nebraska, the Crane Trust and the Ian Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary outside of Gibbon. If you want that experience I encourage you to visit the Crane Trust or Rowe Sanctuary, both offer daily guided tours in the blinds in the morning and evening. Other viewing opportunities also exist, which are detailed on the [Crane Trust](#) and [Rowe Sanctuary](#) websites.



Soon the cranes will move on from Nebraska, their migration taking them north. While they are here, this year or in the future, join them for a morning or evening. All you will need is a warm coat, a camera and the understanding that when they rise, your jaw may drop.

Contact the Nebraska Tourism Commission for more information on Sandhill Crane Viewing opportunities at 402-471-3796 or on our website at VisitNebraska.com.