

Connect with Nature

By Celia Almeida



I WAS MORE than a thousand miles from home but looking at a familiar view: a grassy expanse in a bed of slowly flowing water. As a South Floridian, this landscape reminded me of countless wet hikes and bird walks I'd taken in Everglades National Park—only this time, I was gazing at the Platte River in Nebraska, about two and a half hours west of Omaha. Instead of the blistering heat and suffocating humidity of the Everglades, a blizzard raged. I watched the snow blow sideways from inside a heated wooden blind, a camouflaged shelter designed to hide me from the wildlife I was there to observe: sandhill cranes.

We have sandhill cranes back home, too, but they're residents who stay in Florida year-round. The birds that stood in front of me—some as tall as four feet—were stopping over on the long migration from their wintering grounds in Texas and Mexico to breeding areas in Canada and Alaska. During a roughly six-week period from early March to mid-April, more than a million sandhill cranes stop in the area to fill up on leftover corn kernels before continuing north. The phenomenon has existed

for millennia, but in recent years it has garnered interest outside the regional and birding spaces.

Although I was witnessing this spectacle for the first time, I was no stranger to migrating in search of nature's wonders. I began birding in 2018, initially in an effort to detach from a millennial slot-machine addiction to my phone. I thought learning about the species of birds around me might ground me in the present moment, and, as someone who copes with anxiety, that it might help me to slow down and meditate on my natural surroundings. Six years of experience (and a groundswell of recent mental health studies) have borne that out.

When you travel as a birder, you don't need to leave your hotel to see something new. I've watched great kiskadees perch on palm trees from a pool-side chaise longue in Mexico, listened to green parakeets squawk and flutter outside my window

Above: migrating sandhill cranes fly over Nebraska at sunset

Below: a bald eagle swoops
past a flock of sandhill cranes
stopped along the Platte River

in Costa Rica, and lost my ever-loving mind at the sight of a magpie in London. What started as passive observation has grown into the urge to follow migrating birds, like a hippie chasing the Grateful Dead's tour bus from city to city.

In Nebraska, I met up with Grand Island Tourism's executive director, Brad Mellema, who told me that every crane viewing is different. Some other nature experiences reveal their charms at first glance, but cranes are a slow burn. For him, the unpredictability is part of the appeal. "The Rocky Mountains are in-your-face loud—it's rock 'n' roll," Mellema said. "This is a symphony. It's loud, and it's quiet."

My second evening inside the Crane Trust's VIP heated blind proved his point. The nonprofit's range manager, Joshua Wiese, was supposed to give us a routine ride to the blind, but when I hopped in the shuttle, he and the other scientists were in a frenzy. There were whooping cranes in the area—an exceptional sight, as there are just 800 of them left in the world, with only about 600 living in the wild.

"I've never heard a whooping crane call before," Wiese told me, still in shock from having heard one on the ride over. I didn't know if my untrained ear would

be able to distinguish their call from the cacophony of thousands of squawking sandhill cranes.

I tried to keep my footsteps as quiet as possible as we entered the blind. We saw the whooping cranes—a couple and an unmated third wheel—through the plexiglass windows. Their white plumage popped amid a sea of dusty sandhill cranes. After a few minutes, the couple stood erect and projected a warning call in unison, as a bald eagle flew right over their heads. I turned to Wiese. He put his hand on his cheek, as if to stop himself from making a sound, and closed his eyes. He looked on the verge of tears. I felt a catch in my throat.

Over the next two hours, we saw a total of nine whooping cranes on the river—about 1 percent of the remaining global population. "Some people come here five or six times and never see that," Wiese told me.

In the distance, the setting sun spotlighted the silhouettes of sandhill cranes flying into the horizon.

They looked like waves of black confetti raining down after a concert. It wasn't rock 'n' roll, but I was starting to hear the music.

