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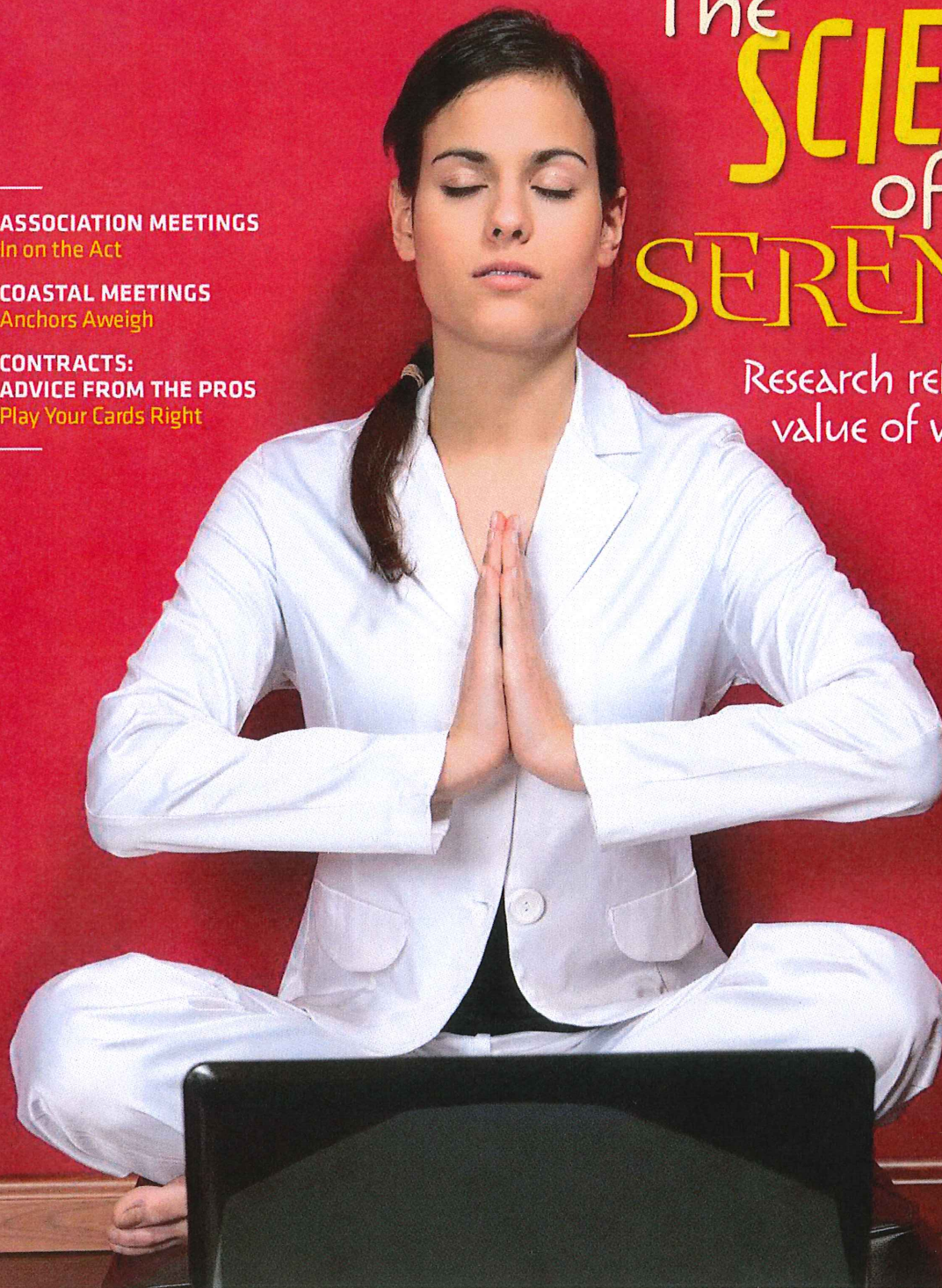
COASTAL MEETINGS

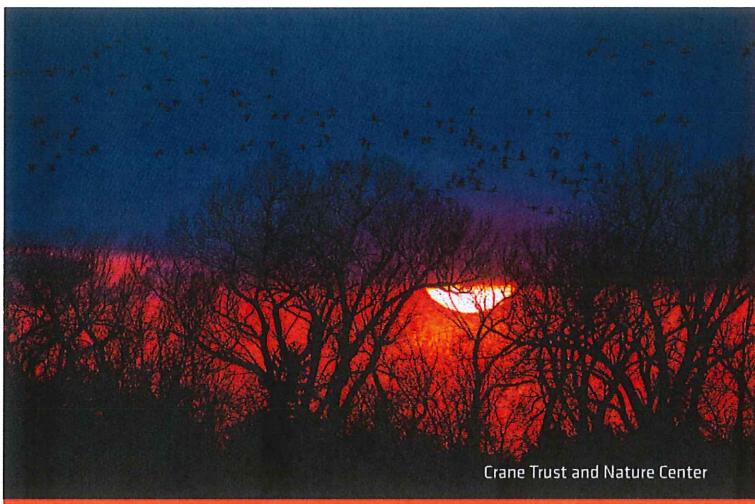
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Play Your Cards Right





Crane Trust and Nature Center



Pioneers Park Nature Center, Lincoln

Naturally, Nebraska

Alluring parks and gardens blanket the Cornhusker State

BY MARIA LENHART

With its prime position in the migratory waterfowl flyway and its abundant preserves and sanctuaries, Nebraska offers ample opportunities for groups to break out of the meeting room and enjoy rejuvenating nature experiences. In addition, its major cities also boast outstanding zoological and pioneer-era attractions, many with engaging outdoor settings for events.

"People from out of state are often surprised at the amount of wildlife and natural areas we offer," says Brad Mellema, executive director of the Grand Island CVB. "Whether it's the Platte River or the Sandhills, Nebraska has many unique and vibrant landscapes."

Here are some ideas for events and activities that showcase Nebraska's bucolic side.

Fontenelle Forest www.fontenelleforest.org

Just outside downtown Omaha in Bellevue, Fontenelle Forest is one of the nation's largest private nature reserves, a place where 19 miles of hiking trails meander through ecosystems that include deciduous forest, oak savanna and wetlands along the Missouri River and Loess Hills. Among the most popular options for groups is the 60- to 90-minute walk along the History Trail at the Fontenelle Nature Center, which explores the remains of ancient glaciers as well as Native American and pioneer history.

While especially popular during the summer and fall, winter and early spring are prime times for wildlife viewing because of the reduced foliage, according to Brad Watkins, director of communications and development. Among the dozens of bird species commonly encountered are ospreys, egrets, cuckoos, kingfishers, ruby-throated hummingbirds, pileated woodpeckers and great blue herons.

Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium www.omahazoo.com

Nebraska's most visited attraction, the Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium in Omaha, is also one of its most flexible and varied sites for meetings and events. Its features include the Lied Jungle, the world's largest indoor rainforest habitat; Desert Dome, a geodesic



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dome covering the world's largest indoor desert exhibit; and Kingdoms of the Night, the world's largest nocturnal animal exhibit.

Among the zoo's event sites is the Suzanne and Walter Scott Aquarium and Education Center, a meeting facility for up to 350 people. Its unique features include a 10-foot coral reef tropical fish aquarium in the foyer and a window into a 10,000-gallon reef exhibit.

Sites for cocktail receptions include the Butterfly Pavilion and Gorilla Valley.

The park also has a meeting facility, Malinovskis Auditorium, which seats up to 80 people and can host training seminars, lectures, workshops and other events. It also offers a catering kitchen and deck overlooking a pond and elk herd.

Crane Trust and Nature Center

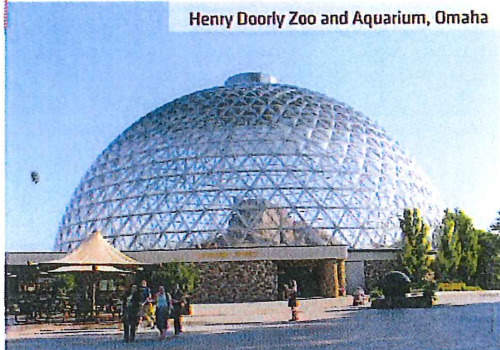
www.cranetrust.org

From late February into early April, the Platte River Valley in south-central Nebras-

ka is home to an estimated 500,000 sandhill cranes who stop to feed in the dormant cornfields on their way to their nesting grounds in Alaska, Canada and Siberia. For groups, the Crane Trust near Grand Island offers opportunities to view the migration spectacle in private blinds on the Platte River.

"The Crane Trust can easily host up to 150 people for a dinner or meeting at the Nature Center," says Brad Mellema of the

Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, Omaha



Lincoln Children's Zoo

www.lincolnzoo.org

Not just for kids, the Lincoln Children's Zoo is a popular site in Lincoln for receptions, lunches and behind-the-scenes tours for meeting groups. The 10-acre zoo is home to such intriguing species as Humboldt penguins, Amur leopards, tree kangaroos, pygmy marmosets, red pandas and more.

"We do a lot of corporate events here—and adults are just as enchanted as the children are," says John Chapo, president and CEO of the zoo. "You can have a reception where we can arrange for experiences with the animals. We can bring out a bobcat, penguin or a reindeer. We've even had a giant sloth to greet guests."

Along with outdoor locations that can accommodate up to 2,000 people, the zoo offers indoor spaces such as the Rainforest Room, which seats up to 75 people, and the Animal Kingdom Building for larger groups.

Pioneers Park Nature Center

www.lincoln.ne.gov

Lincoln's Pioneers Park Nature Center is both a wildlife sanctuary and environmental education center, encompassing 668 acres of tallgrass prairie, woodlands, wetlands and gardens. Eight miles of hiking trails wind through various habitats, taking visitors past habitats for raptors, bison, elk and whitetail deer.

LATEST & GREATEST

LINCOLN

- **The Cornhusker, A Marriott Hotel** (www.marriott.com). Lincoln's major downtown convention hotel, recently completed a property-wide renovation that followed a new affiliation with Marriott. The refurbishment of the 90-year-old property included an upgrade of its 297 guest rooms and 45,600 square feet of meeting space.

NEBRASKA CITY

- **The Lied Lodge and Conference Center** (www.liedlodge.org) recently put the finishing touches on a nearly \$9 million renovation of the guest rooms, lobby, dining room and pool. The property offers 140 guest rooms and 14,000 square feet of meeting space.

OMAHA

- **The Capitol District Marriott Hotel** (www.marriott.com), a 333-room property across from the CenturyLink Arena & Convention Center, is set to open in spring 2017 with over 20,000 square feet of meeting space.
- The former Executive Suites reopened as the 179-room **DoubleTree by Hilton Omaha Southwest** (www.hilton.com), following a multimillion-dollar refurbishing.

Grand Island CVB. "There are also nice hiking trails through the prairie areas where you can see a herd of bison."

Rowe Sanctuary & Iain Nicholson Audubon Center

www.rowesanctuary.org

At the Rowe Sanctuary, near Kearney, groups can arrange for private crane viewing activities during the migratory season and also enjoy hikes and nature walks along the river at other times of year. Its Iain Nicholson Audubon Center offers a meeting room with audiovisual capabilities for up to 50 people.

"The Rowe Sanctuary is very popular with groups meeting in Kearney at any time of year," says Sarah Focke, marketing and convention sales manager at the Kearney Visitors Bureau, adding that planners interested in a crane viewing should reserve a blind several months in advance.

Calumus Outfitters/Switzer Ranch and Nature Preserve

www.calumusoutfitters.com

The wildlife and landscape of the Sandhills in north-central Nebraska is the focus of Calumus Outfitters, which owns the Swit-

zer Ranch in the Calumus River Basin near Burwell. Small groups can book lodges and cabins at the ranch.

During the spring mating season, Calumus Outfitters offers early-morning excursions to observe prairie chickens and sharp-tail grouse doing their remarkable courting dances. Other activities include canoe tours along the Calumus River and Sandhill Jeep Safari Tours to view wildlife.

Riverside Discovery Center

www.riversidediscoverycenter.org

Dedicated to threatened or endangered wildlife, the Riverside Discovery Center in Scotts Bluff is home to a zoo with animals representing over 60 species, as well as a natural history museum and park area. Groups also can arrange for behind-the-scenes tours and events in a gazebo. 

MARIA LENHART is a former features editor for Meetings Focus.



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