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Nature lovers flock to watch cranes

By Robin Soslow, For the Express-News

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Photo By Courtesy photo / Kearney Visitors Bureau

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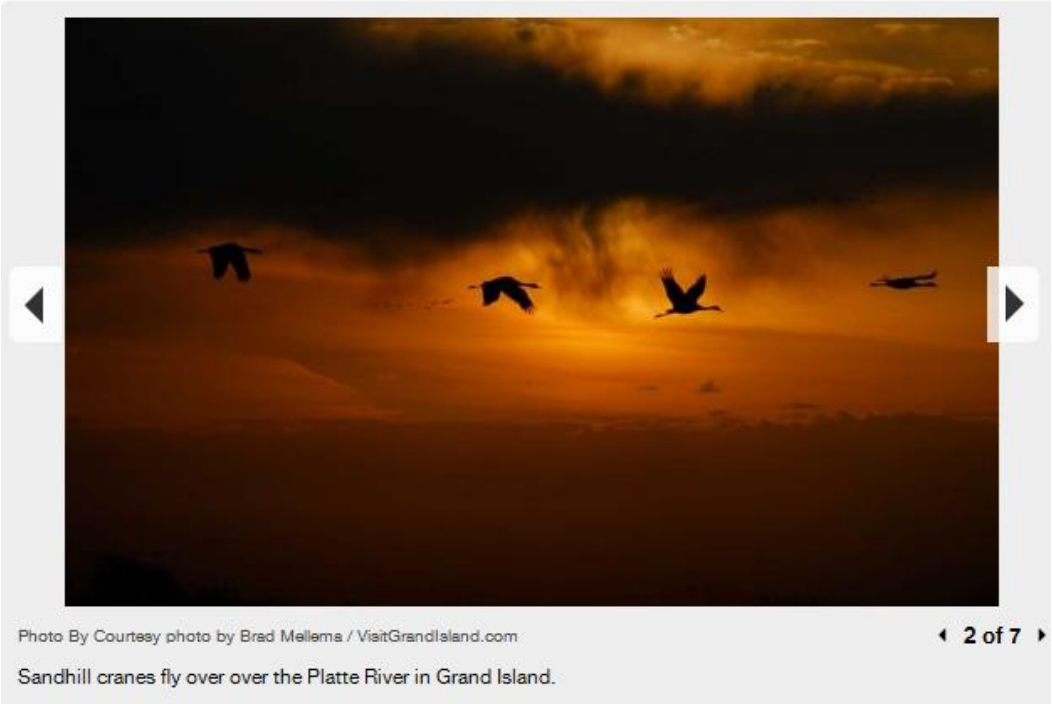
Sandhill cranes stop in Nebraska areas such as Kearney during their annual migration.

You don't have to travel all the way to Africa to witness one of the most astonishing annual animal migrations.

In central Nebraska's Platte River Valley, sandhill cranes make rest stops late February through early April to refuel during their 6,000- to 7,000-mile journey that takes them as far north as

Siberia. Other birds travel the Central Flyway as well, from swans to bald eagles. The spectacle draws birdwatchers and nature lovers from around the world. I was among last season's flock.

The sandhill crane is no stranger to Texas. Like whooping cranes, these graceful avians winter in locations such as Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and have been seen foraging in fields not far from San Antonio.



Sandhill cranes stand 3 to 4 feet tall, have broad 6-foot wingspans, appear gray with crimson-capped heads and mate for life. This spring's migration population in the Central Nebraska Flyway is estimated at 650,000.

Two Platte River Valley sites provide terrific settings for dawn and dusk viewing of these tall, elegant birds as they gather, drink, feed and socialize.



Photo By Courtesy photo / Kearney Visitors Bureau 3 of 7

Cranes rest and feed in Nebraska's Platte River Valley during their annual migration to places as far north as Siberia.

One freezing morning well before dawn in Rowe Sanctuary, an Audubon center in the wetlands-woodland-prairie habitat of a town called Gibbon, we gathered in unheated observation blinds. These blinds are not used for hunting, which is not allowed here. On this crisp, sub-freezing morning, about 30 birdwatchers aimed binoculars and camera lenses through small windows facing the river.

Those of us with digital cameras placed tape over light-emitting controls and Post-it notes over LED screens so that the light wouldn't distract the cranes who gather before morning's first rays. We set the cameras to silent mode -- and refrained from continuous-shot mode -- to minimize noise. After all, we learn from guides and longtime migration fans, crane associate such sounds with hunters.



Photo By Courtesy photo by Don Brockmeier / VisitGrandIsland.com

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Bird-lovers come from all over the world to watch sandhill cranes stop along Nebraska's Platte River during their annual migration.

Since cranes need every ounce of energy for their long commutes, we don't want to do anything to cause them to waste energy or endure stress. According to guides at the sanctuary, the cranes fly up to 50 miles per hour, depending on wind speed, and 350 or more miles per day. They navigate largely by vision, so they don't fly at night. Parents teach offspring the migratory route going south, then the young follow their parents back up north. After that, they're on their own.

Before sunrise, distinctive bugle calls and throaty trills heralded the cranes' arrival for breakfast. As dawn's light crept upward, thousands of cranes gathered on the banks and small isles on the river. Natural grass feeders, they also eat unharvested grain and waste corn discarded in the area. After sun-up, they took flight -- not all at once, but in small groups -- filling the sky with their streamlined figures.

We returned for their equally impressive sunset massings.



Photo By Courtesy photo by Brad Mellema / VisitGrandIsland.com

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Sunrise and sunset are the best times to watch sandhill cranes in Nebraska's Platte River Valley.

The next morning, we traveled to another key birdwatching spot, Crane Trust Nature Center, in Wood River. Crane Trust belongs to a nonprofit dedicated to protecting habitat and river flow critical for migratory birds. This time, we watch the spectacle in the relative comfort of this facility's warmer high-tech blind with plexiglass portholes.

Crane Trust guided viewing-blind tours begin very early morning, while thousands of cranes roost along the river before leaving to feed, and in the evening, when the birds return to the river to retire for the night. The tours, which last two to three hours, cost $25 per person. Evening guided footbridge tours last about two hours and cost $15 per person. Rowe Sanctuary's morning and sunset field viewings cost $25 per person.



Photo By Dee Watson / For the Express-News

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Other birds can be seen during crane migration season, such as prairie chickens. They hop and flutter during their mating dances.

To witness the next migration, make plans now, as area hotel rooms and inns do get booked up. The 2015 spring migration is expected to take place early March through early April. This part of central Nebraska, too often considered fly-over country, offers other attractions well-worth visiting. Birders call the region one of the best in the world for birdwatching. Millions of ducks and geese pass through the Platte River Valley. There's prairie habitat where, early morning, you can watch for a type of grouse nicknamed "prairie chickens" engaging in mating dances.

Also be sure to stop for a grand multi-media tour through frontier history at Great Platte River Road Archway, a building spanning the highway in Kearney.



Photo By Robin Soslow / For the Express-News

Nebraska galleries and other venues, such as Tru Cafe in Kearney, display original paintings of cranes and other wildlife. 7 of 7

Good food can be found in charming historic downtown neighborhoods. Kearney offers several options. Tru Cafe supports regional organic growers and serves healthful, tasty dishes -- the lentil-corn soup is especially good at banishing the chill. The Alley Rose prepares creative fare such as a delectable portabella mushroom dish. The Cellar serves generous platters of comfort food. Over in the town of York, the legendary comfort food and pie stop is Chances R.

In Dannebrog, the Danish Baker is an outpost where Tom Schroeder crafts deep-crust pizza with thick housemade tomato sauce and unexpected ingredients like homemade sauerkraut. Authentic ethnic hotspots await in the city of Grand Island. Craving Thai or Vietnamese? Go to Ventiane. Mexican? Head over to Azteca Market.

As the cranes know, this flyover state is worth visiting. The Platte River Valley's natural areas preserve vital habitats required by many species. Thankfully we don't need a passport and long hours of flying ourselves to witness one of the world's great migrations.

More Information

If you go:

Getting there: Flights from San Antonio to Grand Island take about four hours. Roads in this part of the Great Plains are peaceful and easy to drive.

Kearney area hotels and other visitor information:http://visitkearney.org

Grand Island hotels and other visitor information:http://visitgrandisland.com

Free digital or print travel guide: http://www.visitnebraska.com

Sandhill crane migration charts: https://www.savingcranes.org/maps-on-sandhill-crane.html

Crane Trust Nature Center:http://www.nebraskanature.org

Rowe Sanctuary:http://rowe.audubon.org

The Audubon's 45th Annual Nebraska Crane Festival: http://nebraskacranefestival.org

Great Platte River Road Archway:http://archway.org

Museum of Nebraska Art: http://mona.unk.edu

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