

# **The Fort Worth Star Telegram Online**

## Follow the sandhill crane spring migration north to Nebraska

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There are just a few bedside lights flickering on in the small cities of central Nebraska. Most folks are still asleep in the predawn darkness, but I'm awake (although bleary-eyed), bundled up in many layers, gearing up to see an incredible sight.

Those in cars passing by on the interstate probably have no idea that there are a half-million winged creatures just a few miles away, stirring and getting ready for their day. Later in the day, drivers glancing at the cornfields on either side of the highway may have trouble recognizing them, as they'll be filled with majestic blue-gray cranes feasting on corn missed by the harvesting machines.



It's late March, and the cranes started to arrive mid-February. They'll be gone by mid-April, so the next few weeks constitute a very busy season, both for the birds and for those who flock to the region to view them.

This is the epicenter of the sandhill crane spring migration — about 500,000 stay here for six-week stretches each spring to fatten up on their way north to their summer homes in Canada, Siberia and Alaska. The Central Platte River Valley, a 75-mile stretch from Lexington to Chapman in south-central Nebraska, is where the four major flyways converge.

Eighty percent of the world's sandhill cranes come up from Mexico, Texas and New Mexico to enjoy the long respite of their ancient instinctive ritual. It is considered by many, including renowned animal behavior expert Jane Goodall, to be among the top 10 animal migration spectacles in the world.



Besides cranes, there are millions of ducks, geese, trumpeter and tundra swans, and other waterfowl and shorebirds migrating through this Central Flyway.

As Nebraska can be quite cold at this time of year, the website of the National Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary warns visitors to dress very warmly and in dark colors (so as to not distract the birds).

"You will be standing in an unheated observation blind for about two hours, so dress appropriately. It is better to wear too much than not enough!" it advises. "Wear the warmest coat, clothing and boots that you have."





I did all of that, and brought along thermal heat packets as well — but next time, I would wear even more. The more comfortable you are, the better you'll be able to fully appreciate the magnificent spectacle.

Rowe, near the small city of Kearney (with many accommodations and dining choices), includes 1,300 acres of river habitat and surrounding wetlands, as well as woodlands and mixed-grass prairie.

The cranes have been coming here for at least 10,000 years, scientists estimate, to breed and feast in the area of the North Platte River. Termed a “braided river,” because of its shallowness and the resulting twisted sandbars, the river offers protection from predators for the enormous cranes, which stand some 32-47 inches tall, yet only weigh about 7-14 pounds.

They're gray-blue, with a bright red spot on their heads and a wingspan that measures an impressive 5-6 feet across.

There are two riverside sanctuaries that offer the best views of the congregated cranes, along with some of the less-populous whooping cranes, as they rise up from their evening river havens in the early dawn, bound for their daily feasts in the surrounding cornfields.

At sunset, spectators come to watch the cranes' return — first in dribs and drabs, two or six or 10 at a time, then 20, 50 or more, beating their wings madly and, somehow, landing lightly onto the sandbar. There are also blinds (unobtrusive observation cabins) at nearby Fort Kearny State Historical Park that allow daytime viewers to watch the cranes feeding in the cornfields from a shorter distance.

## **Time for the show**

When we arrived at Rowe, we were led down a sandy half-mile path. The sound of the early morning cranes was entrancing — sort of a mix of cooing, trilling and purring. We entered the blind — a low, wooden, unheated structure with many open “windows” and benches to accommodate up to 32 people.

At about 7:15 a.m., the light started filtering in, and we each took a spot by an opening, listening and waiting for action to commence.

Tiny groups started to fly, to circle, to make ribbons in the air. They swirled and danced, some in lines, others heading in every direction. Before long, the sky was full, and still thousands remained on the sandbars — all of them creating a cacophony of cooing, trilling and purring.

It was mesmerizing — a sea of gray-blue wonder. Knowing that these monogamous creatures stay with their mates, and manage to keep track of them, fascinated me. To a human, they all look the same.



While the morning stillness and approaching dawn are peaceful, we preferred the sunset observation that day, when we returned to Rowe. It was intriguing to see the empty sandbars fill up steadily with the incoming cranes, sometimes just in couples, others in large groups. The sunset oranges and peaches dappled the water with reflections and the resulting scene was truly spectacular. We hated to leave, but by 8:30 p.m., the light was gone.

The next day, in the pre-dawn, we visited the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center, located about 40 minutes from Kearney in Wood River. The Crane Trust is a nonprofit organization founded to increase awareness of the Platte River ecosystem.

We toured the visitor center's well-done exhibits and attended an excellent presentation about sandhill cranes, then took a guided blind tour that involved a 10-minute walk to the blind. At Crane Trust, the new blinds have plexiglass with small openings for cameras. They break the wind and offer superb visibility of the birds and their activity.

In these parts, it's not all about sandhill cranes. There is also an opportunity to view great white pelicans en masse at Harlan County Reservoir in Republican City.

One morning, we drove about an hour, straight from crane viewing, to the North Shore Marina for a complimentary pontoon boat tour to see these enormous, gorgeous birds. These are the largest of eight pelican species, distinctively marked in all white with black wing tips, bright yellow bills and orange feeding pouches. A few hundred migrate to Nebraska in spring and fall.

As one of the largest bodies of water along the Central Flyway, the Harlan County Reservoir attracts many pelicans from early March to early April.

## **More to see and do**

Beyond the views of multitudes of mesmerizing birds, we found plenty of other things to do in this area.

Kearney and Grand Island have, between them, about 85,000 human residents. Many are lifelong denizens, but the population also includes large numbers of immigrants from countries like Mexico, Somalia, Sudan, Cuba and El Salvador who have been attracted by jobs in the region's meat-packing plants and agricultural venues. The diversity has resulted in a great many ethnic restaurants.

Some nice finds in Grand Island: the lively Hispanic market/cafe at Azteca, which offers delectable, authentic Mexican and Central American dishes, and Vientiane, specializing in Laotian and Vietnamese offerings. Of course, there's also that renowned Nebraska steak. We sampled it at Uncle Ed's Steakhouse and were not disappointed.

A don't-miss tourist attraction is the Great Platte River Road Archway, a \$60 million welcome center/monument on Interstate 80 (off exit 275). It creatively tells the story of 170 years of history in the valley. (Fees charged. 308-237-1000; <http://archway.org>).

If you go

**Getting there:** If you fly into Denver, it's about a five-hour drive. From Omaha, it's about four hours.

**Rowe Sanctuary:** Reservations are recommended. \$25, pre-payment required. Field trip times are 5 or 6 a.m., and at 5 and 6 p.m., depending on daylight saving time. Cameras are welcome but cannot be set in continuous mode, as it detracts from the experience. No flashes, flashlights or video cameras are permitted.

Blinds offer excellent panoramic views of large flocks of cranes but may not provide good opportunities for close-up photographs. For the serious nature photographer or enthusiast, overnight photo blinds are set up near major crane roosts on the river. Photography opportunities should be excellent for both still or video cameras. Blinds are available for \$200 per night (plus tax) with a maximum capacity of two people. 308-468-5282; <http://reservations.rowesanctuary.org>.

**Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center, Wood River:** Bird-blind tours are offered in March, \$25; reservations highly recommended. Three-hour open-air footbridge tours are Thursday-Sunday evenings in March; \$15, and children must be at least 12.

Private photo blinds, requiring an overnight stay, cost \$300 and are available during a one-week period in March.

Crane Trust does not allow flash photography or flashlights, but does allow video cameras and tripods. The website features a very good video of sandhill cranes. 308-382-1820; <http://nebraskanature.org>.

**Audubon's Nebraska Crane Festival:** As one of the nation's longest-running wildlife festivals, this event focuses on wildlife and environmental education. It will be held March 19-22, and the featured speaker will be author and naturalist Scott Weidensaul. <http://nebraskacranefestival.org>.

**More info:** <http://visitnebraska.com>

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