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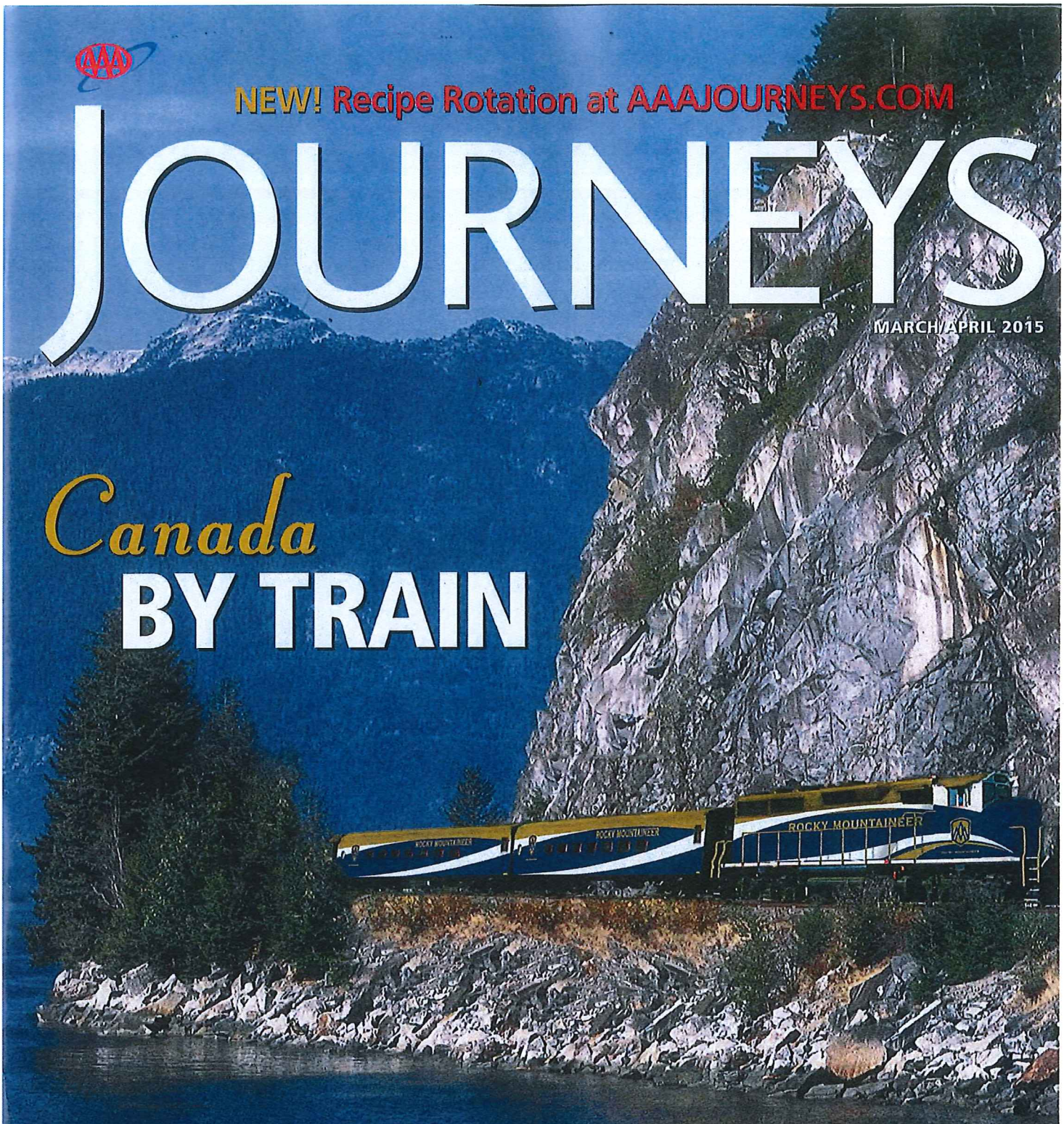


Canada BY TRAIN

BIRD-WATCHING BECKONS IN KANSAS

NEBRASKA'S SANDHILL CRANES

KANSAS EDITION

AAA JOURNEYS ON FACEBOOK

Cranes Calling

Take flight to Central Nebraska for the annual sandhill crane migration.

By Karen A. Avitabile

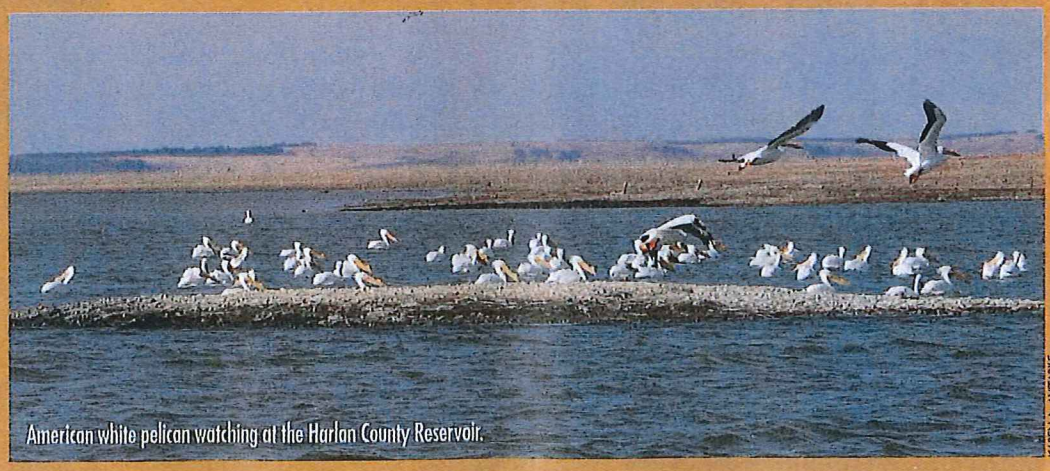
It is 6 a.m. in Kearney, Neb., and a crowd of people are waiting quietly – and patiently – for the sun to rise in the Central Platte River Valley. It's well below freezing and the blind that is supposed to provide protection from the wind isn't helping – it is not heated. No lights are allowed. No cameras can flash. Everyone must remain still and silent in the darkness.

From a distance, though, a guttural call can be heard. As the sun comes up and the cold begins to subside, the crescendo gets louder as Mother Nature reveals a seemingly endless number of river-wading sandhill cranes.

All night, the cranes have been wading on sandbars in the river and its outskirts, for refuge. But it is daybreak now, signaling the cranes short flight to nearby fields to eat corn leftover from last fall's harvest.

Beginning in mid-February through March, the cranes arrive from Texas, New Mexico and Mexico to spend up to four weeks bulking up in Central Nebraska. The cranes must gain up to 20 percent of their body weight before making the long journey to their spring breeding grounds – in Canada and Alaska, and some in Siberia. Annually, 80 percent of the world's half-million sandhill crane population roost on the islands in Central Platte River Valley. It is an impress sight to behold.

Rowe Sanctuary on the Platte River in Gibbon (an Audubon Society location) and the Crane Trust property near Grand Island are two of the best viewing spots for sandhill cranes during their annual spring migration. Rowe Sanctuary alone includes some 1,300 acres of river habitat and wetlands, and woodlands and mixed-grass prairie. Both places have



American white pelican watching at the Harlan County Reservoir.

KAREN A. AVITABILE

Blinds and sandhill crane viewing at Rowe Sanctuary.

KAREN A. AVITABILE

observation blinds for viewing the cranes early morning, as they leave the Platte River, and dusk, as they return for the night.

Daytime, passers-by stop on the roadside to watch the cranes feed in the fields. Fort Kearny State Historical Park (built in the mid-1800s along the Oregon Trail) has blinds set up in nearby fields for viewers to be close to the cranes as they are feeding.

Roughly a 90-mile stretch from Lexington to Chapman, the Central Platte River Valley is a key resting spot not only for the cranes but whooping cranes, Canada goose, eagles, ducks and other species



Numerous species of wildlife and waterfowl enjoy nature's abundance at Calamus Reservoir State Recreation Area near Burwell.

NEBRASKA TOURISM



The annual sandhill crane migration is a rare feathered phenomenon.

NEBRASKA TOURISM

during their migrations. This area, part of the Central Flyway, is one of four North American flyways: the other three are the Mississippi, the Atlantic and the Pacific flyways.

Pelicans and Prairie Chickens

To view the mating dances of prairie chickens (yep, you read correctly, dancing chickens), drive to Switzer Ranch and Nature Reserve, a contiguous area of 48,800 acres of largely intact Eastern Sandhills, in north central Nebraska, and the first privately owned ranch land designated as an Important Bird Area by Audubon Nebraska.



Attendees at the Nebraska Prairie Chicken Festival are treated to excursions to see the birds performing a mating ritual known as booming.

NEBRASKA TOURISM

Arrive while it's still dark and Calamus Outfitters (which operates the ranch) will drive you to blinds (yep, you guessed it – unheated) to see the prairie chicken courtship before sunrise. All the males in a grouse population meet each spring to establish territories and dominance ranks. One by one, the chickens jump up and down. Later, return to the ranch for breakfast and a question-answer about the prairie chickens.

Another migratory bird in Nebraska during March and April is the American white pelican on Harlan County Reservoir, Lake McConaughy and the Calamus Reservoir. After wintering along the Gulf Coast, April is the prime time to see the pelicans eating shad here. They breed in North Dakota, South Dakota and Canada. They will migrate again through Nebraska in the fall. Blue heron, geese and ducks make their home in Nebraska year-round. Bald eagles can be seen late fall through spring.



NEBRASKA TOURISM

Spanning across Interstate 80, the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument near Kearney delivers a one-of-a-kind interactive experience.



KAREN A. AVITABILE

Wright Morris Boyhood Home.



KAREN A. AVITABILE

Kensinger Service Station.



Editor's Pick:

You can view the American White Pelican Spring Migration at the Harlan County Reservoir on a free birding boat tour sponsored by the Harlan County Lake Association. For more information, call 1-800-762-5498 or visit www.harlantourism.org.

Beyond the Birds

The Great Platte River Road Archway commemorates the importance of the Platte River Valley – which joins the Missouri between Omaha and Nebraska City – in the settlement of the American West. The unique Archway resembling a covered bridge spans Interstate 80. Inside, 15 vignettes (exhibits) tell the story of 150 years of transportation along the Great Platte River Road, beginning with Fort Kearny in 1848 and ending with a circa-1960 Roadside Café.

Visit the **Boyhood Home of Wright Morris,** once regarded as one of the best American novelists, in Central City. He authored 19 novels, short stories and essays and also is admired for his photography. The home is on the National Register of Historic Places. In Red Cloud, visit **Willa Cather's childhood home.** She is known for her novels of American frontier life on the Great Plains.

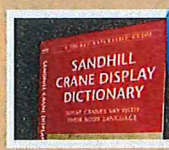
Grand Island's **Fonner Park** is the home of the Nebraska State Fair. Its Heartland Events Center is a thoroughbred race track (racing season runs February through May) exhibition building for trade shows and various livestock arenas.

Visit the original **Seedling Mile** in Grand Island, a historic piece of pavement, along the 3,400-mile Lincoln Highway. The national road, conceived in 1912, was the first automobile road across the country, passing through 13 states including Nebraska. The 1937 Kensinger service station, still in operation, is in front of the Seedling Mile.

Want to learn how to race? **MPH Motorsport Park Hastings** (in Hastings) operates a driving school for those who want to learn to race. The track also is open to motorcycle and truck enthusiasts. Go-cart rides can be arranged too. The 2.15-mile-long track is a road course rather than an oval.

The **Nebraska Wild Horse and Burro Facility** in Elm Creek is a resting facility for animals removed off the range in the West and are on their way to adoption.

Check out artwork by local artists at the **Museum of Nebraska Art** in Kearney.



Enter to Win a Free Sandhill Crane Display Dictionary at AAAJourneys.com/Prizes

Did You Know?

To view the crane cam at Rowe Sanctuary, go to: http://rowe.audubon.org/crane-cam.

Editor's Pick:

If time allows, pick up a pizza (Thursdays only) at the Danish Baker in Dannebrog. Bread, cookies and other baked goods also are made here.

To See and Hear Sandhills at Dusk, Visit AAAJourneys.com/Videos

Editor's Sandhill Crane Photos at AAAJourneys.com/SlideShow

Did You Know?

The Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer in Grand Island is one of the top living history museums in the United States.