Sunday, May 10, 2015

Travel

The News-Herald News-Herald.com

Countless Cranes



Photo by Jeff Frischkorn/correspondent

Each morning migrating sandhill cranes almost beyond number lift themselves from the broad, shallow waters of the Platte River to forage on the nearby picked grain fields. Viewing this daily ritual from early March to mid-April has become an uniquely Nebraskan birding adventure.

Sandhill cranes and other birds beyond number a Nebraska spring spectacle

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With a noise no less ancient than creation itself, the collected cacophony of an unimaginable number of awakening sandhill cranes was over-powering.

No wonder then that Bill Taddickten strongly suggested that while taking photographs of the massive crane assemblage welded along the banks of, and the shifting silt islands in, the Platte River, just as important was simply to cock one's ear to the species' eons-old tune.

"Remember, this is a listening experience as well as a visual one," Taddickten said.

Listening is never a problem. Not when the Platte River annually hosts the northward-spring migration of sandhill cranes.

We're not talking thousands of birds or even tens of thousands of birds. Oh, no, estimates as to the size of this crane congregation range from 400,000 to 600,000 individual adult sandhills. That makes this flock not only the largest concentration of cranes found anywhere but arguably the largest migration of any animal species of any kind anywhere on the planet.

And for countless centuries the cranes have thus stopped along the Platte, an almost homely looking stream that undulates out of Colorado's Rocky Mountains and which eventually pours into the Missouri River a few march-steps over 1,000 miles later.

While in Nebraska, the

See Cranes, Page H2

Cranes

From Page H1

North Platte side rail has always appealed to sandhills. Here the birds ply the waters and soft earth for protein-rich invertebrates while they fly out to and peck away in fields, gleaning whatever carbohydrate-infused corn kernels they can find that the mechanical harvesting combines didn't collect in autumn.

All of these birds are fattening up for two to three weeks before they make their final push to their summer breeding grounds all along the arctic frontier from Canada, west across Alaska and on into Russia's Siberia.

Taddickten – director of the Audubon Society's 1,115-acre Rowe Sanctuary in Gibben, Neb. (hard-pressed to Kearney, Neb.) – said the cranes were here long before settlement, loafing on the Platte and feeding on whatever the-then prairie provided. All with the same way-station needs in play that exists in the here and now.

Sandhills are highly adaptable and made the transition from native prairie food stuffs to cultivated ones without so much a single known case of indigestion.

And where you have untold thousands of birds arising from the Platte's too-thick-to-drink/too-thick-to-plow waters you're going to have humans gawking at the spectacle.

Rightfully so, too, which is why daily (and long, long before sunrise) from early March through a portion of April, birders of all calibers and photographers with their arsenals of heavy-duty camera gear flock to the Rowe Sanctuary, pay their $25 daily fee, walk a short ways to a 32-person viewing blind and watch a morning ritual of untold numbers of cranes lifting themselves from the Platte.

All the while the birds are protesting too much, allowing their almost prehistoric grunts to echo across the stream and between the cottonwood trees that cordon the Platte's banks.

Yet the Rowe Sanctuary isn't the Platte River's only guided viewing location. Downstream a piece is the Crane Trust and its Nature and Visitors' Center in Wood River (Grand Island), Neb.

The Trust either owns or manages about 10,000 acres of Platte River real estate, each acre a vital component in helping to ensure the sandhills will always find a respite in what's often called "the neck in the hourglass" of the Central Flyway bird-migration corridor.



Jeff Frischkorn

A male greater prairie chicken in full strut staked out his display area on a Nebraska ranching hilltop — called a "lek" — both to entice a female and threaten any other would-be suitor.

Here birders and photographers can see as well as listen to the sandhill cranes communicate with each in a way reminiscent of humans trying to talk above the din produced when everyone is trying to speak at once.

Quieter if only because of considerably smaller numbers is the booming of male greater prairie chickens. Their work is an effort to attract a seemingly indifferent female member of their kind.

To hear and to watch the incredibly intricate mating ritual of Nebraska's native prairie chicken one must abandon the Platte River bottomland and hike up into the central Nebraskan sandy and grit-heavy hills.

It is here — and at the same time when the cranes are making noisy guests of themselves — that the male prairie chickens are carving out tiny strutting zones, called "leks."

Of Swedish in origin, the word "lek" is referenced both as a courtship location as well as an assemblage of male birds primed for attracting females.

"You will hear them before you see them," a whispering Angus Garey said a shade or two before the sun's first rays mellowed the rancher's property.

On Garey's spread sits a lek, chosen by male prairie chickens for reasons known only to them. This lek does include the requisite bare ground for courtship display purposes but also is adjacent to buffalo grass, used as escape cover should a predatory hawk or coyote cue in on the activity.

It is on these leks where the males come just before sunrise, their tell-tale "booming" sound being heard and contributed by the resonating of orange-colored skin air sacks on either side of the necks.

Males also perform their own version of a chicken dance, their wings splayed, two spikes of neck feathers called "pinnaes" that thrust themselves bad-cow-lick fashion above the bird's heads, and a flared rump of white feathers.

All as a display to both entice a female prairie chicken and as well become a visual warning to potential rival suitors.

Should no female come calling the males "all get tired and go home" before returning the next morning, Garey said from an observation blind jerry-rigged out of a converted horse trailer.

Then again, should a birder want to turn the volume down a bit, central Nebraska can accommodate on that one as well.

From about March 1st to April 15, up to 1,000 migrating white pelicans gather at 13,250-acre Harlan Lake in south-central Nebraska.

White pelicans are the larger cousins of the salt-water-only brown pelicans, and roam the Gulf Coast in the winter but rally within the prairie county of the U.S. and Canada during the species' breeding season.

Local Harlan County businesses and tourism associates have hit on the "Hey: don't forget us" white pelican theme as a mechanism to draw birders and other visitors to Nebraska's midsection that is hard-pressed to Kansas.

As such, free birding boat tours are available at Harlan Lake, allowing visitors to cruise the lake's shoreline and get surprisingly close to the migrating white pelicans.

Or like one local tourism official said about the lake's seasonal avian attraction: "You know, I've never heard of anyone who has been here, seen the white pelicans and then said "what's all the fuss about?' "

Between cranes bellowing, prairie chickens booming and white pelicans bobbing, Nebraska continues to astound and never disappoints.

Travelers' Check

Grand Island and Kearney, Nebraska are about 966 miles and 1,002 miles, respectively, from Mentor. Each is located off Interstate 80, which also comprises the Ohio Turnpike along with Interstate 90. Thus, driving makes the most practical sense. Omaha, Neb. has the nearest all-purpose major airport that services various airline clients such as Delta.

The greater prairie chicken birding opportunity is with Prairie Chicken Dance Tours, McCook, Neb. Contact for tour information, motels and other amenities: www.Prairie ChickenDanceTours.com and also McCook/Red Willow County Tourism, 308-345-1200, ext. 318 or visit@GoToMcCook.com.

For the sandhill crane watching activities at the National Audubon Society's lain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary in Gibbob/Kearney, Neb., call 308-468-5282, visit www.rowe.audubon.org or www.rowesanctuary.org. For general travel, lodging, meal and additional birding information in the Gibbon area, contact the Kearney Visitors Bureau at 800-652-9435 or visit www.visitkearney.org.

Sandhill Crane viewing and related educational profiling is also available at the The Crane Trust Nature and Visitors Center, Wood River/Grand Island, Neb. Call 308-384-4633 or see its website at www.cranetrust.org. Information about the area's other general travel, accommodation, other attraction activities is available through the Grand Island-Hall County Convention and Visitors Bureau at 308-382-4400 or by visiting www.visitgrandisland.com.

For the white pelican birding opportunities at Harlan Lake, call Harlan County Tourism at 800-762-5498 or visit its website at www.harlancountytourism.com. Other pelican-watching assistance is available through North Shore Marina, Republican City, Neb., by calling 308-799-2315 or visiting www.harlanlake.com/northshore.

General Nebraska tourism information and referral help is available by contacting the Nebraska Tourism Commission at www.visitnebraska.com or by calling 402-471-3796.

For specific and general questions and information regarding Nebraska's resident and migrating wild fowl and other animals, contact the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641 or visit the agency's website at www.outdoornebraska.ne.gov.