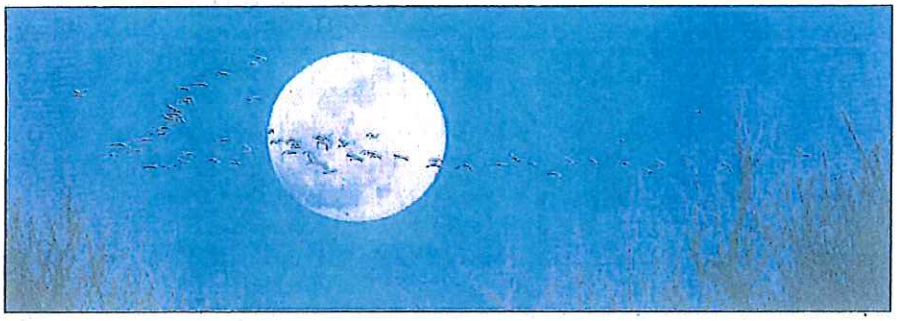
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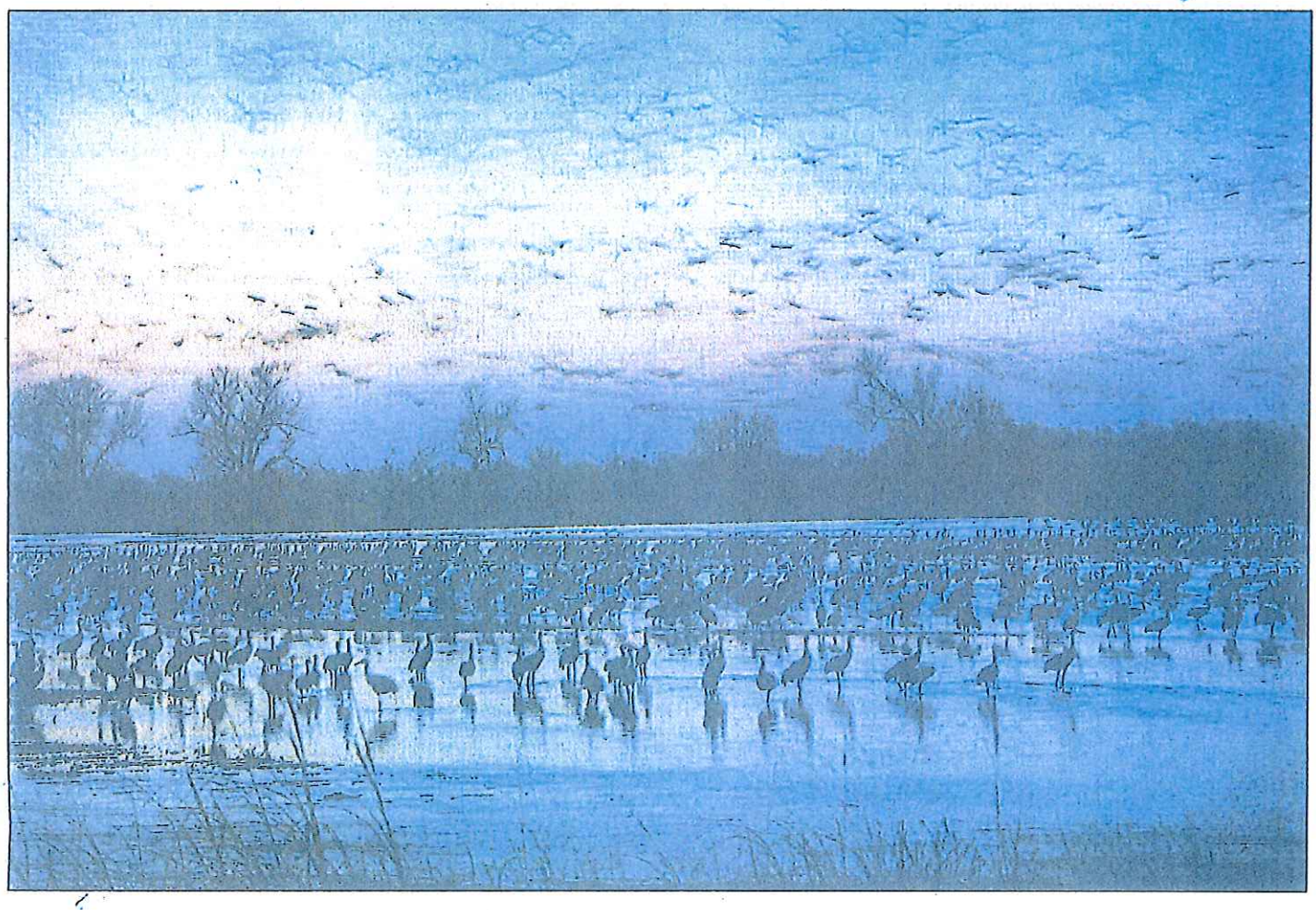
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Great Plains spectacle

Sandhill cranes flock to Nebraska before migrating north



By Mary Ann Anderson
McClatchy Newspapers

KEARNEY, Neb. — Just before sunrise in the hourglass heart of the North American continent, the temperature has dipped to 15 degrees on the Platte River.

I'm shivering in a wooden blind, even with layers of fleece and foot warmers to ward off frostbite. It's March, and it shouldn't be this cold, not even for Nebraska's Great Plains. Across the frozen landscape, the sun begins its ascent into a blush-colored sky, and slowly on the river dark shapes begin to stand and stretch and flap.

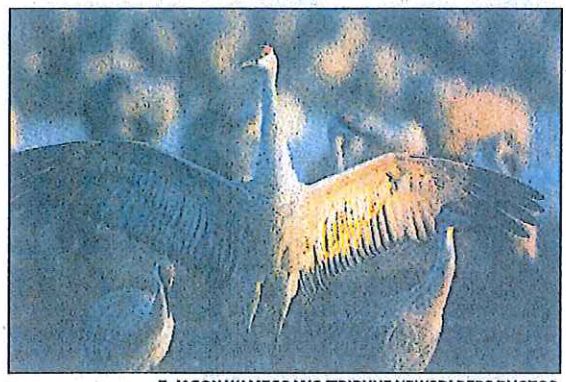
An ancient, natural avian spectacle is about to happen here at the Rowe Sanctuary, near Kearney. Here the sandhill cranes are awakening, untold thousands of them, their silhouettes barely visible in the bitter predawn cold. From the mist, a cacophony of cackles, calls and coos rises with each passing minute, the cadence increasing with daylight.

For the cranes, waking from a cold night on the silent, swiftly running river, sunrise brings feeding time, where as many as half a million birds will rise and fatten up on the waste corn, most of it left over from autumn harvest months earlier, in the vast acreage of fields, open landscapes and pastures of rich, sweet grass before returning to the river at sunset to slumber again.

During that time the cranes will look for a mate, striking poses, bending and preening for a few moments of passion on the prairie, sandhill-style. For the nosy bird-watcher — that would be me — it's worth a 15-degree morning just for that spectacle as they search for a mate for life.

I'm in Nebraska to see the annual migration of the cranes passing through the Platte River Valley from their wintering grounds in Texas and Mexico as they glide farther north to Canada and Siberia for the breeding season. I'm in the blind, a shed really, anticipating the massive breakfast liftoff that will soon occur.





E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTOS

Sandhill cranes linger along the Platte River in Nebraska, where they stop each year to fatten up for their migration north. For a video and more photos, go to chicagotribune.com/sandhill.

That surreal moment comes sooner than I expect. A pair of scalawag eagles have caused havoc among the birds, and suddenly in seconds seemingly impenetrable synchronized clouds of blue-gray cranes lift to the skies in a furious attempt to escape becoming the predator's next meal.

The eagles dive into the mass of birds, with flocks of cranes going every which way. The bright early morning sun was occluded by the wing tracks of thousands of birds.

And just like that, they are gone for the day, only to return late in the evening, long stretches of V-shaped columns of birds just keep coming and coming like a never-ending freight train.

About 70,000 cranes zip through the Rowe-Kearney area each night during migration along the Central Flyway, one of four routes across the United States that waterfowl like ducks and geese and more than 300 other bird species, including the stately heron, follow annually.

The birds stay in the Platte River Valley for about three or four weeks, consuming enough calories to bulk up their body weight by about an additional 20 percent for the lengthy flights north.

Earlier in the day, a ghostly field of snow geese, probably a bit of a nuisance to the Midwesterner, is a magical occurrence to a Southerner like me not used to such a natural avian circus. The sight of so many geese just adds to my glee.

The migration is amazing. The cranes are huge, standing up to 5 feet tall, with gray plumage, a sporty red cap and some serious attitude. Their wingspan easily reaches 6 feet, so they are big enough to put up a fight and give you a scratch or two with their claws should one get hold of you. Not to worry. You can't come within a country mile of one of these skittish babies.

Sometimes the whooping cranes come, that rarest and most beautiful bird, as they follow the migration route too. In another early morning jaunt to see the birds at the Crane Trust, jumbled into the racket of sandhills is that of a single-engine airplane.

As it comes into sight, Brad Mellema, once director of the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center, speaks in a low whisper as to not disturb the jittery birds. "If it circles, that means they've sighted a whooping crane."

Watching the plane intently and hoping it would circle back, I was a bit disappointed as it puttered on westward, signaling the whoopers were nowhere to be found.

All in all, the sandhill cranes gave a five-star performance.

"Cranes have been moving up and down this highway for centuries," said renowned nature photographer and author Michael Forsberg as he spoke of the migration. "They've seen the rise and fall of civilizations."

Bird-watchers flock from all over the world to climb aboard the crane train that begins in that window of time possibly in late February and that lasts until April. Peak times, though, are around the last two weeks in March.

"It's a place where you have to linger," Forsberg said. "The more you stay here, the more you want to stay. It's not just a great gathering of birds but a great gathering of people."

The Rowe Sanctuary can arrange it all for you, but you have to be up at the crack of dawn again, as the early prairie chicken bird gets the corn.

To see this wondrous crane occurrence that National Geographic calls the greatest wildlife phenomenon in the United States is just remarkable. I'm not a bird expert, by a long shot, only a lifelong admirer of all winged creatures, great and small.

Perhaps, like me, you'll come away from the migration all insane for cranes.

More information

- The Crane Trust, **cranetrust.org**
- Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary, **rowesanctuary.org**
- Nebraska Tourism Commission, **visitnebraska.com**
- Grand Island Hall County Convention and Visitors Bureau, **visitgrandisland.com**
- Kearney Visitors Bureau, **visitkearney.org**.

MISSING JET

Oil slicks spotted in hunt for jet with 239 aboard

WORLD ■ PAGE 7A



UKRAINE

Russia reinforces military presence in Crimea

WORLD ■ PAGE 6A

SUNDAY
March 9, 2014

The Sentinel-Record

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Omaha, Neb.: Home run of the Midwest



Rebecca McCormick

Travel

Omaha came at me like an outside curve on a 3-2 pitch.

First of all, it was already the middle of December, and I had just spent a week traipsing around the snow in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"What's one more week of snow?" my friend asked with the slightest spin of sarcasm, "Unless you just didn't pack right, in which case, it would make sense why you're uncomfortably cold."

Secondly, when I tried to think of anything, anything at all that would make we want to visit Omaha (tourism and advertising folks refer to this as "branding"), all I could think about was Omaha Steaks. And I don't eat red meat.

But when I called home from my hotel room that night, Myron — who played college baseball — reminded me Omaha hosts the NCAA College World Series. Well, of course, I thought, knocking my forehead like "I coulda had a V8."

And finally, in my mind, Omaha was a million miles from Arkansas.

"Actually, it's virtually the same distance and drive time from Hot Springs to Omaha as it is from Hot Springs to Destin, Fla.," said my knuckleballing friend, coaxing me to swing wide for the Omaha pitch before I headed home for the holidays.

A few days later, I was unpacking in my roomy new digs at the Embassy Suites Omaha/La Vista, where a kind soul at the front desk told me the city was named after an American Indian tribe whose name means "going against the wind or current."

Actually, Fort Omaha is best known for its role in the 1879 landmark trial of Ponca chief Standing Bear, who had been arrested while trying to bury his son near the tribe's homeland along the Niobrara River. At the trial, Civil War general George Crook spoke on behalf of the Ponca chief. In response, the court ruled in favor of Standing Bear in a landmark case recognizing an Indian as a person under the law for the first time.

Omaha is also the home of Boys Town, a national treasure and historic children's home founded in 1917 by Father Flanagan whose work was made famous by the 1938 biographical film drama starring Spencer Tracy. Boys Town locations around the country now assist more than 400,000 children and youths each year.

This is the spirit of Omaha: connection.

Nicknamed "Gateway to the West," the town was a jumping off point for the Oregon Trail, the Mormon Trail and other roads west.

The Transcontinental Railroad connected the east and west coasts through Omaha.

During World War II, U.S. soldiers traveling between coasts connected at Omaha's historic Union Station, now The Durham Museum — a meticulously preserved Art Deco train station housing permanent and traveling exhibits depicting history of the region. We spent hours here, exploring passenger train cars, grabbing a seat in an old-time school house and ordering shakes and malts from an old-fashioned phosphate bar.

In the 20th century, Omaha became a hub for the beef industry, out of which came Omaha Steaks. Until I went there, I didn't know the 93-year-old family-owned business is now the nation's largest direct marketer of high-quality steak and frozen gourmet products.

Today's Omaha is more diverse, but still an important commercial center.

Fortune 500 companies like Union Pacific, ConAgra Foods, Mutual of Omaha and Berkshire Hathaway are headquartered here on a geographical grid as symmetrical as a baseball fence. And corporate wealth has endowed important cultural institutions like the Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, named in honor of the publisher of the *Omaha World-Herald* and chairman of the World Publishing Co.

When you go, plan at least half a day for the zoo experience. Then schedule another half day to browse the outstanding collections at the city's art museums.

The Joslyn Museum of Art, for instance, is an imposing structure built of Georgia Pink marble. Opened in 1931, the museum was presented as a gift from Sarah Joslyn in memory of her husband, George, who had accumulated the largest fortune in Nebraska. The collection here is the only one in Nebraska which includes both European and American works. Impressive.

Outdoors, the Joslyn comprises a sculpture garden divided into distinct galleries that are full of ornamental grasses, flowers, shrubs and trees, in addition to monumental sculptures like Sioux Warrior, a 15-foot tall, 5,000-pound bronze piece that anchors the Riverscape section of the gardens.

Nearby, the Old Market area has converted warehouses and packing plants into one of the most vibrant shopping and dining areas in the Midwest.

Today, Omaha is an important American city: a blend of Midwest rural and 21st century progressive and international values. "Omahans" and visitors alike benefit from a high quality cultural attractions, made possible by heavy investments from the private sector.

The Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts displays remarkable works by new talent and seasoned artists in an airy, studio-like, artist-in-residence atmosphere.

Ruth Sokolof Theater is an intimate, art house cinema that features first-run independents, foreign films and documentaries.

Hot Shops Art Center brags it is "home of all that is molten." This thriving, ultra-hip art hub is home to more than 80 studio artists.

Saddle Creek Records, one of the hottest Indie rock recording labels in the country, distributes what has now become known as the "Omaha" sound.

Of course, all this running around in the cold takes caloric fuel. New restaurants emphasizing local foods, new flavors, homemade pastas and meats, smaller plates, lighter fare and locally brewed beers are appearing around town.

Foodies will want to check out The Grey Plume in Midtown Crossings. If you're downtown, head over to La Buvette, The Boiler Room and Storz Trophy Grill. In Old Market, try Le Bouillon.

With a population of just over 427,000, Omaha jumps in at the 42nd largest city in the U.S., so there's plenty more to see and to do. But if you're thinking about baseball, tickets for the NCAA World Series go on sale April 12 for the 2014 tournament, scheduled June 13-25.

It will be warm by then.

A travel journalist and photographer, Rebecca McCormick also served as marketing director for the convention facilities in Monroe, La. She was a veteran business columnist in 2002 when she published her first travel article and photograph about the Caribbean golf courses on which her husband played during their honeymoon. That same year, the couple moved to Hot Springs when Myron accepted a management position with Weyerhaeuser Co. Rebecca still travels and Myron still plays golf. Together, they have three married sons and three grandchildren. Email your travel questions to McCormick, rebecca.mccormick-travel@gmail.com.



Submitted photo

BATTER UP: Home of the NCAA College World Series, Omaha's TD Ameritrade Park is a new $126 million stadium with 24,000 seats, 26 suites and an expansive Fan Fest area. It is within walking distance of CenturyLink Center Omaha, the Bob Kerry Pedestrian Bridge and the Old Market entertainment district. (Photos are courtesy of Omaha Convention and Visitors Bureau.)

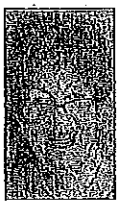
Planning a trip?
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Omaha, NE 68102
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THE EDMOND SUN

Brownville: Where retirees go to work

I firmly believe that if retirees don't find meaningful activities, they do not flourish. It's the same with little towns — stay active or die. Brownville, Neb., could have done that. Thanks to some brilliant and committed folks creating second careers, Brownville now is making a comeback.

Located on the banks of the Missouri River, Brownville, born in 1854 with the opening of the Nebraska Territory, became an important port on the river — a gateway for pioneers streaming into the new territory. Its importance dwindled with the coming of the railroad and, eventually, the small community, with its feet in the muddy Missouri, was left high and dry.



Elaine Warner

On Travel

The town faced financial difficulties — at one point even being auctioned off. Fortunately, something about the little historic community drew in a group of people with experience and vision.

Attractions today include several attractive historic houses, a variety of small museums, several bookstores and galleries, a concert series, a winery and the oldest repertory theater in the state.

A number of the businesses are week-end operations. Probably the two biggest weekends are the spring and fall flea markets.

And what about the retirees? Larry Peterson, a retired school teacher, drives a horse-drawn trolley through town, pointing out sites of interest and stopping and dropping guests along the route.

I stopped off at an 1884 Prairie-Gothic-style church. Inside I found George Neubert in the midst of pieces of lumber, saws, hammers and sawhorses. He was, and is, in the process of building his own art museum — the Flatwater Folk Art Museum. His background includes working as curator or director at the Sheldon Museum of Art at the University of Nebraska, the Oakland Museum in California, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the San Antonio Museum of Art. He hopes to have his collection, which ranges from a cigar store Indian to a Mark di Suevo sculpture, open later this year.

Up on a hill in the old Brownville School, Tom Rudloff, once a Redemptorist monk, presides over 150,000 used and rare books. "We don't specialize in anything except generalities;" he says, "the act of browsing is part of the love of books."

A highlight of my trip was staying at the River Inn Resort. Retired banker Randel Smith and his wife Jane have taken part of an old Sioux City casino and turned it into a delightful riverboat-style bed and breakfast. Jane says, "When I first saw it, it was so ugly I cried all the way home."

What a transformation! Spiffed up and sitting right on the water, the River Inn's decks, nicely provided with deck chairs, make an ideal spot to watch the water and the wildlife. My room, although compact, couldn't have been nicer and I slept like a baby with the slight swish of the river going by. And my excellent breakfast was cooked by the former president of the Omaha Stockyards.

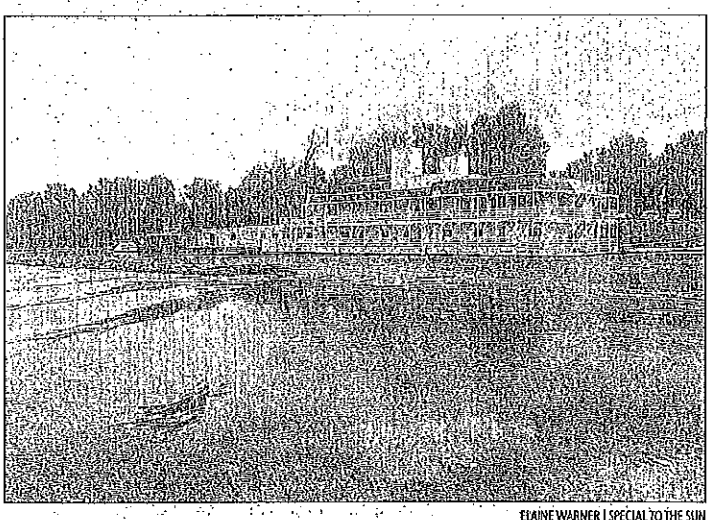
This is a spot I can't wait to revisit. Driving time from Edmond is about five and a half hours — perfectly doable for a long weekend. For more information, check www.brownville-ne.com.

ELAINE WARNER is an Edmond-based travel writer.



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Historic Captain Bailey House was moved brick by brick from its original riverside location in 1877. Open mid-May through mid-October or by appointment.



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Looking like a proper riverboat, the River Inn Resort is a floating boutique bed and breakfast.

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A Syndicate of Talent

A Visit to Nebraska Yields Connections with History

By Kathryn Lemmon

How is American folk legend Wild Bill Hickock connected to the modern-day space shuttle? What national program signed into law by Abraham Lincoln is commemorated in Nebraska? The answers to these and other questions can be found in surprising Nebraska.

Rock Creek Station near Fairbury, Neb., holds a unique place in history as a crossroads of the California and Oregon trails and the short-lived Pony Express mail service. It was at Rock Creek that a young man named James Butler Hickok (later Wild Bill) and his accomplices killed three men. It can be tough to separate fact from fiction regarding Wild Bill, but Rock Creek is considered the place where his larger-than-life legend began.

His saga continues into the Kansas territory, where he switched sides and became a lawman. True to his name, Wild Bill was not destined for old age. He was shot in Deadwood, S.D., at age 39 during a poker game. He held black aces and eights, still famously known as the Dead Man's Hand.

Thanks to an old photograph found in the state archives in Sacramento, Calif., we know precisely how Rock Creek Station looked back in the day. Stations such as Rock Creek were the highway rest stops of the time. Animals needed food since travelers couldn't carry all the feed required for the journey, and the stations provided a much-needed break on the road west. Without them, early homesteaders and pioneers might never have reached their destination.

Development of the area as a state historical park began in 1980. The station still welcomes travelers, although few arrive in covered wagons. Rock Creek is still remote, open and quiet. The Sacramento image shows the log structures, a stagecoach and a man on horseback. The visitors center has a film and displays to view. Outside, well-worn wagon ruts made by oxen, horses and prairie schooners are still visible and thought-provoking.

Interestingly, the first man shot by Wild Bill at Rock Creek Station was David McCanles. His great-great-grandson is retired NASA astronaut Bruce McCandless II. (The spelling was altered.) As a space traveler he's a colorful character in his own right.

Wild Bill and two others were tried and acquitted in the small town of Beatrice, currently home to the Black Crow restaurant that offers a diverse lunch and dinner menu. One of their specialties is the best bread pudding I've ever tasted. The pressed-tin ceiling, once hidden and now restored, reveals the heritage of the building.

Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act in 1862, and it continued in effect until Ronald Reagan was president. The last person officially awarded a land grant was Kenneth Deardorff for his property in Alaska.

He received the paperwork in 1988.

Nebraska is home to the national monument since the first homestead claims were filed there just after midnight on Jan. 1, 1863. The Heritage Center opened in May 2007. Their film, "Land of Dreams," is an excellent introduction to homesteading that includes the Native American perspective.

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In a nutshell, the act provided free land in exchange for "proving up" the property. Settlers were required to build a dwelling and clear the land, among other things.

The dream of ownership brought people from around the world for a chance to stake a claim, but in the end a large percentage of homesteaders were unsuccessful. Poor-quality land for farming, harsh weather conditions and even grasshoppers were to blame.

Homesteading was not limited to the far western areas. Florida, Alaska and Michigan were part of the program. Thirty of the 50 states had homestead lands at some point during the time from 1863 to 1986.

In addition to the Homestead Monument and Rock Creek Station, history-lovers can visit the Lewis and Clark Center, also in the far southeastern corner of Nebraska, near Nebraska City. I've encountered Lewis and Clark from Illinois to Oregon. I'm no expert, but I am beginning to feel as if these gentlemen are distant relatives or long-lost friends. Nebraska offered another opportunity to delve into Bill and Meriweather's Excellent Adventure.

"Incredible" is too mild a word to describe their expedition. The phrase "you can't make this stuff up" comes to mind. It took a Native American woman, Sacagawea, to assure their success, and she had a baby to tend at the same time.

On a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, the Lewis and Clark Center focuses on the scientific discoveries made during the journey. Here visitors can contemplate the size of a keelboat sitting on the grounds. Small boats set against very big rivers — enough said. A map on the lower level highlights the enormity of their task. Maybe it was a good thing they didn't know exactly what lay ahead for them. Their ability to adapt and persevere never ceases to amaze.

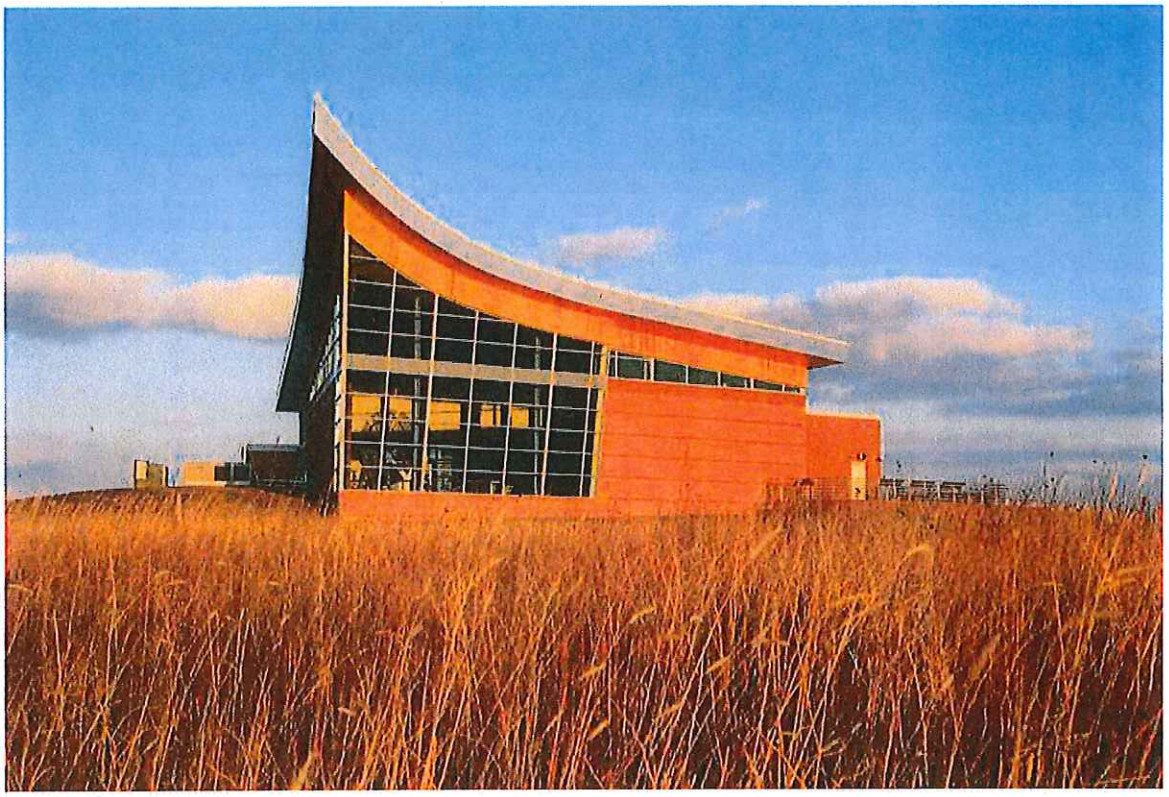
WHEN YOU GO

For more information, visit www.visitnebraska.gov.

Kathryn Lemmon is a freelance travel writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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A Syndicate of Talent

Good Times, Good Deeds at Arbor Day Farm

By Glenda Winders

It's too bad the Disney parks have laid claim to the phrase "happiest place on Earth" because I would make the argument that the title rightfully belongs to Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, Neb.

This is where the Arbor Day commemoration took root, and it's also where those tiny trees in plastic tubes come from when people make donations to the cause of reforestation — the Arbor Day Foundation's No. 1 goal. There's a cheerful, wholesome feeling around the farm that seems to begin with the employees. From the engineer who runs the heating system at the lodge to the tractor driver in the orchards and the guides who teach visitors about the trees, there is a sense that people really do — to borrow from Disney again — whistle while they work.

"Our vision is to be a leader in recognizing how trees are a solution to climate change," said Doug Farrar, vice president of the farm. "It's beautiful and peaceful here. I love my job."

Today the 260-acre farm in the hills of the Missouri River Valley is a bustling hive of agricultural research and visitors coming to explore the forest. But it began more simply when J. Sterling Morton, who would eventually become President Grover Cleveland's secretary of agriculture, staked a claim in the essentially treeless Nebraska Territory in the mid 1800s. He and his wife, Carrie, built a modest home that would grow as their success did. Then they began populating the prairie with trees. While Morton worked as editor of the local newspaper, his passion was to teach people about agriculture and forestry. Eventually he founded Arbor Day, which was first celebrated on April 10, 1872, and continues to the present on the last Friday of April — this year the 25th.

While the 52-room mansion, modeled after the White House and called Arbor Lodge, is a separate property, it is easily accessible from the farm. Tours are available on summer and fall weekends.

The two hubs of activity on the actual farm are Lied Lodge (more about that later) and the Tree Adventure attraction, which is where the fun happens. It begins at the Woodland Pavilion, where visitors of all ages can watch an entertaining movie about the role trees have played in major motion pictures and learn more at interactive educational kiosks.

From there they can hike deep into the woods on a series of connected trails, play in the 50-feet-high Canopy Tree House or examine a bee hive, animal bones, and leaf and seed collections at the Nature Explore Club Cabin. During Arbor Day weekend and Nebraska City's Applejack Festival in September (this year the 19th and 20th) they can also climb trees in the safety of a harness. And guests are always welcome to visit the greenhouse where a quarter of a million seedlings are grown and prepared for shipping each year.

At the Discovery Ride Depot, they climb aboard a tractor-drawn wagon to ride through the orchards and fields and learn about a variety of conservation practices. A stop at the Preservation Orchard yields samples of heirloom apples, wine-tasting, apple-tasting and caramel apples, and the farm's signature apple cider slushies wait at the Apple House Market and Pie Garden Cafe.

"It's edu-tainment for ages 4 to 84," Farrar said. "We want people to take action, to think and act differently."

Groups of visitors who come for meetings, retreats or reunions can prearrange vineyard tours, wine-tasting, a tree-identification tour, apple- or cherry-picking (in season), a hayride or private bonfire complete with s'mores.

They can also plan commemorative tree plantings for special occasions. The original Morton Barns have been restored to accommodate weddings and other special events.

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Guests are also welcome to observe the experimental areas of the farm. Currently there is a 16-acre hazelnut field, where researchers are working to combine the best characteristics of several species to produce a strain suitable to many environments. The nuts are nutritious for both humans and animals, and the goal is to grow them in less-than-ideal climates, thus making them an alternative to traditional row crops.

Promoting the growth of shade-grown coffee in Central and South America is another project in which farm researchers are involved. In this way they can help save rainforests that would otherwise be cut down to make way for sunshine. The achievement of this goal would maintain the habitats of rainforest wildlife and the source of many medicinal plants.

But back to Lied Lodge. Staying right on the property is part of the fun, and being at this "hotel" has a camplike feel despite creature comforts such as a spa, Olympic-size indoor swimming pool and nearby 18-hole Arborlinks golf course. The types of wood in the different rooms are identified — the Timber Dining Room, for example, is built from butternut and the Upper Lobby of pecan. Guests are invited to curl up by a fireplace in the Library Lounge, perhaps with a glass of wine and a book they've chosen from the nature-related library.

The lodge was built of timbers from forests that utilize Forest Stewardship management plans, and the windows, lighting and plumbing systems are all designed to be energy- and water-efficient. In the dining room, the chef cooks with locally grown produce and serves wines from the property. At the conference center office supplies are all environment-friendly. Every guest room has a set of recycling bins, and even the room keys are made from recycled PVC. The whole place is kept cool in the summer and warm in the winter by a biomass heating and cooling plant that utilizes wood chips sourced from old wooden shipping pallets. Visitors are encouraged to take a self-guided tour of the plant, which is open until 7 p.m. every day.

The learning and fun that go on here are worth the trip, but it's also nice to know that every dime travelers spend goes toward the foundation's mission of planting, nurturing and celebrating trees. Not all the trees they grow are here, of course. The foundation funds forests across the nation from which trees are transported to reforest areas devastated by natural disasters such as fires and tornadoes.

As an added bonus, every person who visits goes home with a tree to plant. Not bad to go on vacation and come home with a way to help save the world!

WHEN YOU GO

Visitors to Arbor Day Farm fly into Omaha and then make a 45-minute drive south. The farm is an easy addition to an Omaha trip or a visit to Lincoln, the state capital. Nebraska City is small but has a surprising number of museums and art galleries that are worth a look.

The farm is located at 2611 Arbor Ave., Nebraska City, Neb. The lodge is open all the time, and summer hours for the Tree Adventure are Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is $7 for adults and $5 for children 3-12. The Discovery Ride has an additional charge of $4 for adults and $3 for children.

For more information about joining the foundation or visiting the farm: www.arbordayfarm.org.

Glenda Winders is a freelance writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

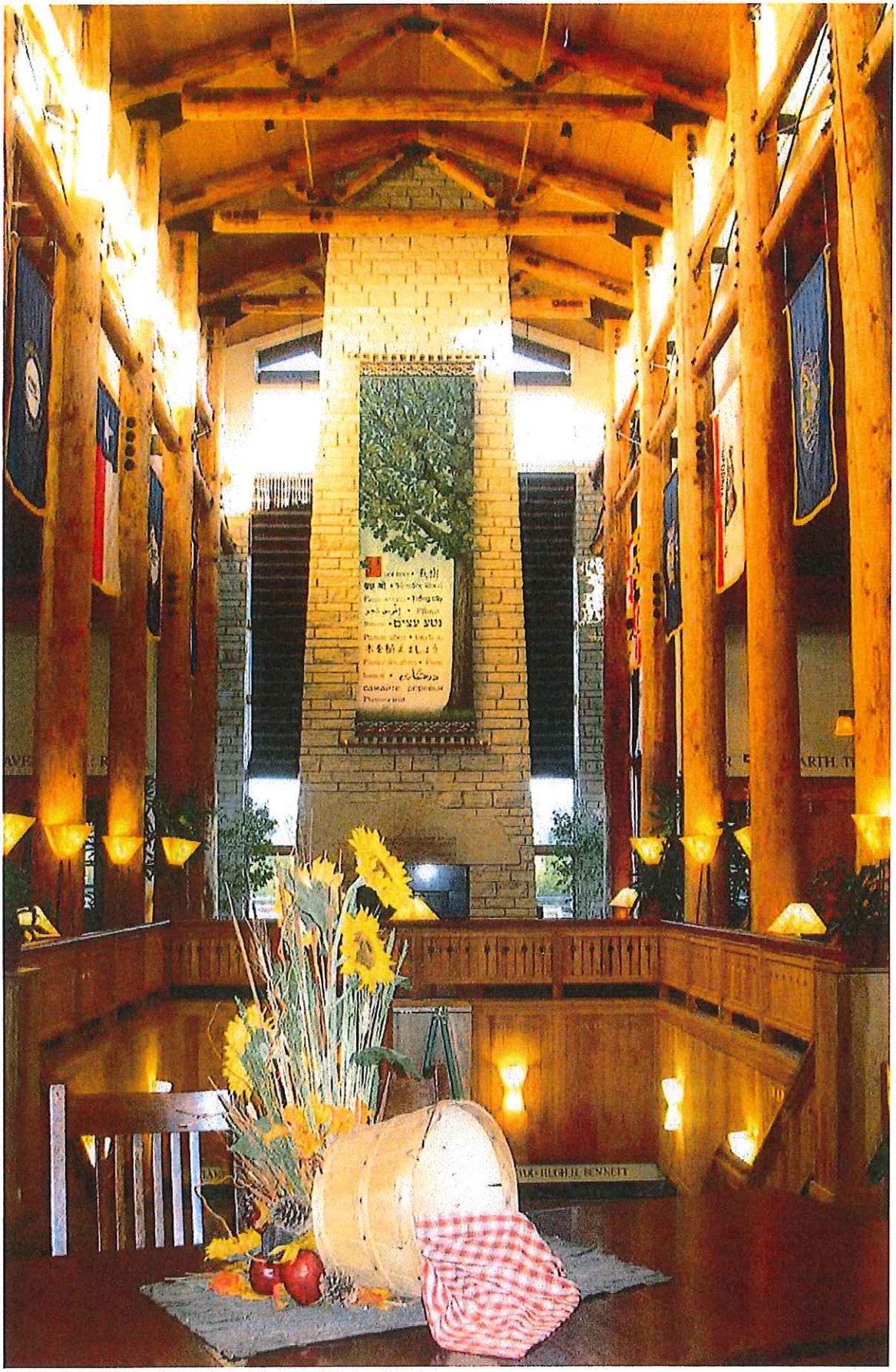
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The Eau Claire Leader Telegram Online

Going insane for cranes on the Great Plains



The pre-dawn skies over the Platte River fill with thousands of sandhill cranes during the annual migration from Texas and Mexico to Canada and Siberia for the mating season. (Mary Ann Anderson/MCT) Top: The pre-dawn skies over the Platte River fill with thousands of sandhill cranes during the annual migration from Texas and Mexico to Canada and Siberia for the mating season. Above: Crane watching on the hiking and biking bridge at Ft. Kearney State Park. Each year, great numbers of bird watchers flock to the Platte River Valley for the annual migration of sandhill cranes.

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By Mary Ann Anderson McClatchy-Tribune News Service

KEARNEY, Neb. - Just before sunrise, in the hourglass heart of the North American continent, the temperature has dipped to 15 degrees on the Platte River.

I'm shivering in a wooden blind, even with layers of fleece and foot warmers to ward off frostbite.

It's late March and it shouldn't be this cold, not even for Nebraska's Great Plains.

Across the frozen landscape, the sun begins its ascent into a blush-colored sky, and slowly on the river dark shapes begin to stand and stretch and flap.

An ancient, natural avian spectacle is about to happen here at the Rowe Sanctuary near Kearney.

Here, the sandhill cranes are awakening, untold thousands of them, their silhouettes barely visible in the bitter predawn cold. From the mist, a cacophony of cackles, calls and coos rises with each passing minute, the cadence increasing with daylight.

For the cranes, waking from a cold night on the silent, swiftly running river, sunrise brings feeding time, where up to a half-million birds will rise and fatten up on the waste corn, most of it leftover from autumn

harvest months earlier, in the vast acreage of fields, open landscapes and pastures of rich, sweet grass before returning back to the river at sunset to slumber again.

During that time, the cranes will look for a mate, striking poses, bending and preening for a few moments of passion on the prairie, sandhill-style. For the nosey birdwatcher - that would be me - it's worth a 15-degree morning just for that spectacle as they search for a mate for life.

I'm in Nebraska to see the annual migration of the cranes passing through the Platte River Valley from their wintering grounds in Texas and Mexico as they glide farther north to Canada and Siberia for the breeding season.

I'm in the blind, a shed really, anticipating the massive breakfast liftoff that will soon occur.

That surreal moment comes sooner than I expect. A pair of scalawag eagles have caused havoc among the birds, and suddenly in seconds seemingly impenetrable synchronized clouds of blue-gray cranes lift to the skies in a furious attempt to escape becoming the predator's next meal.

The eagles dive into the mass of birds, with flocks of cranes going every which way.

The bright early morning sun was occluded by the wing tracks of thousands of birds.

And just like that, they are gone for the day, only to return late in the evening, long stretches of v-shaped columns of birds just keep coming and coming like a never-ending freight train.

About 70,000 cranes zip through the Rowe-Kearney area each night during migration along the Central Flyway, one of four routes across the United States that most birds, waterfowl like ducks, geese, and more than 300 other bird species including the stately heron, follow annually.

The birds stay in the Platte River Valley for about three or four weeks, consuming enough calories to bulk up about 20 percent of their body weight for the lengthy flights north.

Earlier in the day, a ghostly field of snow geese, probably a bit of a nuisance to the Midwesterner, is a magical occurrence to a Southerner like me not used to such a natural avian circus. The sight of so many geese just adds to my glee.

The migration is amazing. The cranes are huge, standing up to 5 feet tall of gray plumage, sporty red cap, and some serious attitude.

Their wingspan easily reaches 6 feet in circumference, enough to give you a scratch or two should one get hold of you. Not to worry. You can't come within a country mile of one of these skittish babies.

Sometimes the whooping cranes come, that rarest and most beautiful bird, as they follow the migration route, too. In another early morning jaunt to see the birds at the Crane Trust, jumbled into the racket of sandhills is that of a single-engine airplane.

As it comes into sight, Brad Mellema, once director of the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center, speaks in a low whisper as to not disturb the jittery birds. "If it circles, that means they've sighted a whooping crane."

Watching the plane intently and hoping it would circle back, I was a bit disappointed as it puttered on westward, signaling the whoopers were nowhere to be found.

All in all, the sandhill cranes gave a five-star performance.

"Cranes have been moving up and down this highway for centuries," says renowned nature photographer and author Michael Forsberg as he speaks of the migration. "They've seen the rise and fall of civilizations."

Birdwatchers flock from all over the world to climb aboard the crane train that begins in that window of time from late February until April. Peak times, though, are about the last two weeks in March.

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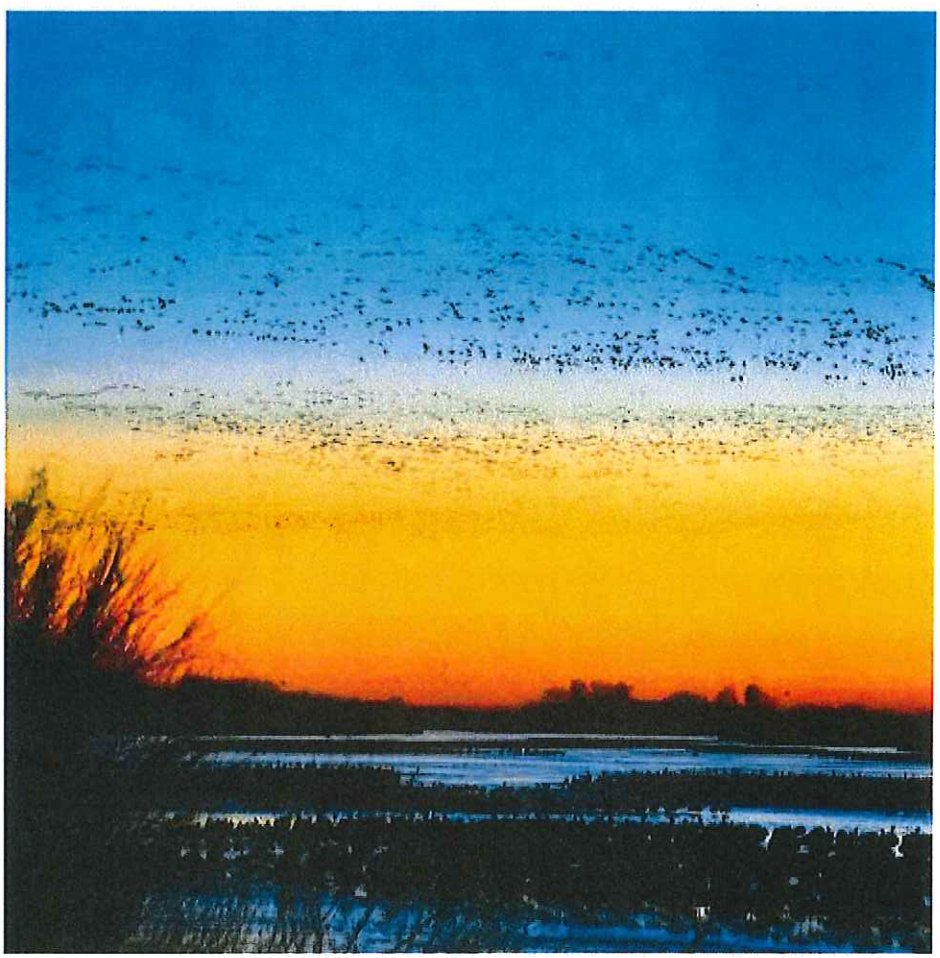
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TALLAHASSEE MAGAZINE ONLINE

Most of the World's Sandhill Cranes Make a Pit Stop in Nebraska

Cranes On the Plain

JOHN MOOSHIE



At 6:30 a.m. in Kearney, Neb., the temperature is well below freezing. An almost-full moon has cast light over the Platte River, and I can barely make out what appear to be a number of large islands in the river. I'm standing in a fully enclosed viewing blind with 30 other photojournalists, waiting. The blind protects us from the elements but is not heated. Nebraska in March is cold ... very cold.

I had been invited to Central Nebraska to experience one of the great migration stories on earth ... that of the Sandhill Cranes. We have approached the river under the cover of darkness to prevent spooking the cranes. With cameras (no flash), scopes and binoculars in hand, and dressed in dark clothing to help us blend in walking to and from the blinds, we waited for dawn to arrive.

Shhhhhhh ... no talking. Whispers only. Otherwise, we might startle the birds into a panicked and potentially disastrous departure. Also, part of the experience is listening to their sounds. Cranes are noted for their exceptional bugling calls, made possible by their especially long windpipe, sometimes heard up to three miles away.

Nearly 600,000 cranes, representing about 80 percent of the world's population, descend and depend upon the Platte River somewhere around mid-February as their spring staging area for travel up north. They'll reach peak numbers around mid-March and depart by April 15. The Platte Valley is ideally located along the Central Flyway migration route that takes the cranes from their wintering residences in the southern United States and Mexico to their breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska and even Siberia. A few of the endangered whooping cranes as well as eagles, ducks, snow geese and shorebirds are among the other wildlife that migrate along this same route.



Sandhill Cranes are living dinosaurs. Fossils of wing bones have been discovered in this part of Nebraska. The species has survived because of its complex social behaviors, long-term care of its young and adaptability. Cranes have been around for 60 million years, the longest successful tenure on earth. In fact, the Sandhill Crane is the oldest living bird species and has remained virtually unchanged for the last nine million years.

The Platte River Basin is the only ecosystem along the migration route that fulfills all the requirements for roosting, resting and restoration. So the stopover is necessary for them to build up fat reserves necessary to sustain the cranes as they make their way through the strenuous nesting season up north. Each crane will add some 18 to 20 percent to its body weight by feeding on waste corn in the surrounding fields. Estimates have it that they will eat over 80 percent, or up to 1,600 tons of waste corn as the main part of their diet. The other 20 percent is found in the meadows in the form of seeds, grubs, worms, snails, small reptiles and rodents adjacent to the river.

As the dawn broke and my eyes adjusted to the grayness, I realized we were not alone. What I thought were islands in the river were, in fact, upward of 50,000 cranes. They spend each night "roosting" on the shallow sandbars in the open channels of the river protected from possible predators like coyotes. The channels will normally be 500 feet wide with water depths of 6 inches or less. We're told not to attempt to approach the birds on their roosts as one alarm call from a bird can send the entire flock into panicked flight, using up precious energy reserves and exposing the birds to hazards such as power lines ... not to mention ruining the viewing experience of the many other visitors. At this time of the morning, the cranes shuffle up and down the river waiting for the sun to rise. Then, as the sun appeared over the horizon, the cranes began their day's journey to feed and loaf in the surrounding fields. They lift off in waves, a systematic departure that really caught my attention. It was almost like a designated leader of a specific company of cranes would give the command to leave. Then, in roughly five-minute increments, other such groups would receive their "signal" and lift off for the fields located within a three to eight mile radius of the river.

During the day when they are not feeding, the cranes "dance" to relieve the stress of migration and strengthen their pair bonds. Cranes are monogamous and tend to pair when they are 3 to 6 years old. They have an elaborate courtship to

help synchronize breeding readiness. Considered to be the most accomplished dancers in the animal kingdom, their moves include head bobbing, bowing, arching, jumping as high as 5 feet, wing flapping, running and twig tossing.

Once the birds left the river, we drove along the countryside to view the cranes as they surveyed the fields for food. Even though it was a sunny and clear day, the sky appeared to have black cloudlike formations — actually thousands of birds seeking their field destination. Seeing those "dark clouds" made me think of what the French and Germans must have felt during the Normandy invasion in 1944 as the allied planes made their way across Europe. The cranes travel an average of six miles per day and spend the day feeding, dancing, loafing and, on calm clear days, they'll also ride the air currents.

The cranes migrating along the Central Flyway can fly up to 3,700 miles one way to the Bering Straits and up to 5,000 miles one way to Eastern Siberia. They are not large birds, and to conserve energy for their long migration they use the thermals to gain altitude and soar with the currents until they find another thermal to lift them up again. Most will fly at an average of 3,000 to 6,000 feet but have been known to reach 13,000 feet. During their migration they'll fly between 200-400 miles per day at about 38 miles per hour depending on the wind and weather conditions.

As sunset approached, we returned to the blinds to see the cranes return to the Platte River to roost. And in thousands of groups ranging from three to 300, they made their way back to the day's starting point with such intense bugling, the sound has been indelibly etched in my mind forever.

It's now 6:30 p.m., a full 12 hours from when we started. There is no question: The arrival of the cranes on the Platte River and the millions of other migratory birds that visit this area each year is one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on the continent. This witness to one of the world's great migrations has been an experience I will never forget.