

**NEBRASKA: PLATTE RIVER &
SANDHILL CRANES**

MARCH 21 – 25, 2009

LEADER: KIM ECKERT

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

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Leader: Kim Eckert

Summary

You'd think that after leading this tour along the Platte River of Nebraska for 20 years, I'd be pretty good at predicting how a year's tour would turn out. But it's not that easy; every year is different, and it all depends on the vagaries of weather. Had it been too dry or wet enough in the past year to affect the water levels and waterfowl numbers in the wetlands? Had the first half of March been warmer than normal, driving the waterfowl flocks prematurely north and prompting the early arrival of other migrants? Or, conversely, would there still be half-frozen wetlands full of geese and a delayed migration? And what's the forecast while we're there: too windy for efficient birding, sunny and 80 degrees, or a full-blown blizzard and temperatures below freezing?

This tour has seen it all over the past couple of decades—and so have the Sandhill Cranes, for that matter. But the cranes' experience is measured by millennia, not merely by decades, and no matter what the other migrants are doing, the cranes are still there. They may arrive earlier in February or depart later in April depending on the conditions, but a half-million-plus are always there in all kinds of weather, massing along the Platte when our mid-March tour arrives.

Of course, the cranes get top billing on this tour, and the sights and sounds we experience pretty much defy verbal description. It is certainly worth mentioning, though, that two of our experiences were especially memorable. One was our vigil at dusk in the Rowe Audubon Sanctuary's blind, as tens of thousands of cranes settled in for the night along the river in front of us, many less than 100 yards from our position. In a different way, another impressive sight was the group of cranes on the river along busy Highway 281 less than a mile from our hotel, outlined in red by a prairie sunset.

But this tour involves much more than the Sandhill Crane, which this time was just one of the 97 species we somehow managed to find. Surprisingly, this was our second-best total ever, just one shy of our record of 98, even though the birding conditions were far from ideal. During the three full days of the tour, sustained winds were 20 m.p.h. or higher, often over 30, with gusts between 40 and 60 m.p.h.! It was even windy enough one afternoon to close busy I-80 at two locations near us: once due to dense smoke from an advancing grass fire, and later because a semi on the interstate was blown over. At least it was around 70° on two of these windy days, but wind-chill was a definite factor on the third day when the high temperature fell to 38°, more than 30 degrees colder than the days before.

Despite our lofty species total, the number of geese and other waterfowl was perhaps the lowest I'd ever seen here. The water levels were healthy in the so-called Rainwater Basin near the Platte River, but the geese had mostly headed north from there for the Dakotas prior to the tour in

response to strong warm fronts. On the other hand, that premature warmth brought in other migrants which usually aren't yet present, and our species count was accordingly enhanced. For example, the Common Loons, Tree Swallows, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet all represented species recorded only once before in the tour's 20-year history, a Chipping Sparrow was the first ever, and the shorebirds came in early: we saw no fewer than eight species (four is normal), including Lesser Yellowlegs (4th record), Least Sandpiper (3rd record), and Long-billed Dowitcher (5th record).

In addition, there were other highlights with no clear meteorological connections. A handsome male Cinnamon Teal (4th tour record) graced a roadside puddle, and a surprising Merlin (another 4th record) posed in the scopes by one of our crane-watching bridges. On cue, a pair of Barred Owls flew in by day as they had done last year at Fontenelle Forest. The displaying Greater Prairie-Chickens on the leks north of Grand Island were especially visible and cooperative, with 25 individuals about the best showing here in years. A quite unexpected and first-tour-record Glaucous Gull appeared just before dusk among the roosting gulls at Lake Manawa. And that same evening by Lake Manawa, after last year's absence, the American Woodcocks again launched into their curious and impressive display flights, with one eventually posing in the spotlight on the ground next to us.

Itinerary

March 21 (high 71°, light SE wind) – All participants arrive in time for late afternoon and evening birding at Lake Manawa and the power plant ponds in Council Bluffs (early dinner at La Mesa).

March 22 (high 69°, wind SE 20-30 mph, gusts to 39) – Morning birding at Fontenelle Forest, Branched Oak Lake, and Utica (briefly) en route to late lunch at Chances R in York (!); drive to Grand Island via brief stops at Pintail Lake and Springer WPA; late afternoon/evening at Mormon Island, Nine Mile Bridge area, Platte River Rd., and the Alda Bridge crane viewing platform.

March 23 (high 72°, wind S 30-44 mph, gusts to 58) – Dawn return to the Alda Bridge, first visit to prairie-chicken leks at Taylor Ranch, west along the Platte River to Lillian Rowe Sanctuary and early lunch in Kearney; afternoon at the Archway Monument pond, Mormon Island, Elm Island Road, and early dinner at Runza's (!); evening tour to crane blinds at Rowe Sanctuary.

March 24 (snow showers, high 38°, wind NW 22-37 mph, gusts to 47) – Dawn return to Taylor Ranch leks and late breakfast at Harriett Nielsen's in Dannebrog (!); rest of morning and afternoon at Grand Island's cemetery, the prairie dog town, Meat Animal Research grasslands and bunkers, Harvard Marsh, return to Mormon Island, and sunset crane roosts at Nine Mile Bridge and Hwy. 281 (early dinner at Whiskey Creek).

March 25 (low 24°, wind W 13-24 mph, gusts to 32) – Dawn return to Nine Mile Bridge, and return drive to Omaha via Deep Well WMA, Springer WPA, Hwy. 31 / Schramm State Park, and a grebe-less Carter Lake.

Bird List

Greater White-fronted Goose (very few: almost all had flown north)
Snow Goose (ditto; largest flock at Mormon Island)
Ross's Goose (closest and most cooperative near the Archway Memorial)
Canada Goose
Cackling Goose (also far fewer than normal)
Wood Duck
Gadwall
American Wigeon
Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
Cinnamon Teal (handsome male just north of Clay Center)
Northern Shoveler
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Canvasback
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Common Merganser
Red-breasted Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Ring-necked Pheasant
Greater Prairie-Chicken (about 25 visible this year at Taylor Ranch: more than usual)
Wild Turkey
Common Loon (two at Branched Oak: only the 2nd time ever on this tour)
Horned Grebe (not seen most years – but, alas, no Pied-billed!)
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Turkey Vulture
Bald Eagle (Lake Manawa and the Alda Bridge)
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk (including dark-morphs)
American Kestrel
Merlin (Nine Mile Bridge: a 4th record for this tour)
American Coot
Sandhill Crane (best sights and sounds at the Rowe Sanctuary's blind)
Killdeer
Greater Yellowlegs (more than usual)
Lesser Yellowlegs (a 4th record for this tour)

Least Sandpiper (the puddle at Taylor Ranch: the 3rd time ever on this tour)
Baird's Sandpiper (more sites than usual)
Long-billed Dowitcher (also at Taylor Ranch: a 5th tour record)
Wilson's Snipe (the fifth species in that Taylor Ranch puddle!)
American Woodcock (still present and amazing at Lake Manawa)
Franklin's Gull (Lake Manawa)
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Glaucous Gull (Lake Manawa at dusk: a first record for this tour)
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove (still increasing)
Mourning Dove
Barred Owl (responsive and vocalizing pair again at Fontenelle Forest)
Belted Kingfisher
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker (along Hwy 31: species #97 for the trip)
Northern Flicker
Eastern Phoebe
Blue Jay
American Crow
Horned Lark
Tree Swallow (only the 2nd time ever on this tour)
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse (heard-only at two places)
White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren (heard-only at Fontenelle Forest)
Ruby-crowned Kinglet (another 2nd record for this tour)
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
American Tree Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow (another first record for this tour)
Savannah Sparrow
Fox Sparrow (singing at Fontenelle Forest)
Song Sparrow
Harris's Sparrow (especially in the brush pile near Nine Mile Bridge)
White-crowned Sparrow (Lillian Rowe's feeders)
Dark-eyed Junco (incl. an Oregon type)
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark (one singing at Branched Oak Lake)
Western Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird (Nine Mile Bridge)
Common Grackle

Great-tailed Grackle (more than usual, especially in that flock north of Grand Island)
Brown-headed Cowbird
Purple Finch (female on Hwy. 31)
House Finch
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Also seen:

vole, sp.
Eastern Cottontail
Eastern Fox Squirrel (incl. dark morphs)
Black-tailed Prairie Dog (only a few visible in the colony this year)
White-tailed Deer
Chorus Frog (heard-only)
....and the Tire-eating Dog (!)