

**NEBRASKA: PLATTE RIVER &
SANDHILL CRANES**

MARCH 20 – 24, 2010

LEADER: KIM ECKERT

COMPILED BY: KIM ECKERT

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

NEBRASKA: PLATTE RIVER & SANDHILL CRANES I
March 20–24, 2010

By Kim Eckert

Although I had done this tour for twenty consecutive years, in some ways it was almost as if I had not led it for a while. For one thing, because of an event filling up all the hotels in Omaha, we met in Lincoln for the first time. But this worked well enough, with roosting Franklin's Gulls at Oak Lake and displaying woodcocks at Branched Oak Lake (to replace those at Lake Manawa in Council Bluffs, Iowa), and some decent woods birding in Lincoln's Wilderness Park (instead of at Fontenelle Forest near Omaha).

Then it was on to Grand Island, still our convenient base for witnessing the Sandhill Crane phenomenon, but what had always been a Holiday Inn had now morphed into a Quality Inn. Fortunately, only the name had changed, and the meadows adjacent to the hotel still hosted lots of birds, including some cranes, a few yellowlegs, and our only Baird's Sandpiper.

This tour has always involved much more than cranes, with the Greater Prairie-Chickens displaying on their Taylor Ranch lek near Grand Island one of the highlights. Years ago, a Sharp-tailed Grouse or two had shared this lek, but none had been here in the past decade. So it was a definite surprise when a lone grouse reappeared among the prairie-chickens, as if we were back in the 1990s.

Our post-lek tradition had always involved breakfast at Harriet's Danish Kitchen in nearby Dannebrog, but it was inevitable that Harriet would soon retire, and she will be missed. To offset this loss, however, at least we were able to visit the Nebraska Nature and Visitor Center that morning, which had just reopened after being closed the past few years. Here we turned up our first Harris's Sparrows, always one of this tour's sought-after birds.

This year's real highlight was certainly the Whooping Crane which turned up the week before within just a few miles of our hotel, and a tip that it had reappeared led us to the site in time before it moved on. This was only the fourth time this endangered species had been recorded on this tour, with our previous sighting ten years ago.

Other highlights included both Eastern and Western meadowlarks singing side by side at Pioneers Park in Lincoln, a few dozen Bald Eagles congregating the same day at Branched Oak Lake, a nice study the following day of a Rusty Blackbird along the Platte River, and a quiet but responsive Eastern Screech-Owl posing in the open before dawn just a mile from the hotel on our final morning.

But at least some things remained pretty much the same as usual. As always, the unique Sandhill Crane spectacle defies easy description, with the sights and sounds of countless cranes coming to roost at dusk in the Platte River just outside our observation blind particularly memorable. Equally impressive and less predictable, though, was the flock we saw from a hilltop the last day en route back to Lincoln. Concentrated in a single cornfield was a panorama of gray at least a half-mile long, and I figured as many as 10,000 cranes were spread out below us.

ITINERARY:

March 20 (high 33°, wind N 16-28 mph, gusts to 32) – Late afternoon birding in Lincoln at the Pfizer pond & Oak L., early dinner, and evening woodcocks at Branched Oak L.

March 21 (15-53°, light WSW winds) – Morning return to the Pfizer pond & Oak L., Wilderness & Pioneers Parks in Lincoln, Branched Oak L. & the Cornhuskers Hwy. en route to late lunch at Chances R in York (!); drive to Grand Island via Springer WPA & Deep Well WMA; late afternoon/evening along back roads to Alda Bridge crane viewing platform.

March 22 (29-72°, wind S 12-24 mph, gusts to 29) – Dawn return to the Alda Bridge, west along back roads to late breakfast in Kearney, Cottonmill Park, the Hike & Bike Trail, and Lillian Rowe Sanctuary; late afternoon return to early dinner in Kearney via Wood River Road's Whooping Crane, and evening tour to Rowe Sanctuary's crane blinds.

March 23 (38-52°, wind N 15-23 mph, gusts to 31) – Dawn at the Taylor Ranch prairie-chicken leks, the Stolley Park Rd. cemetery, Wood River Rd, to Nebraska Nature & Visitor Center, back roads to Hastings, Ayr L., the prairie dog town, Meat Animal Research Center pastures, Clay Center, Harvard WPA, early dinner in Grand Island, and dusk at Nine Bridge.

March 24 (low 34°, wind N 14-22 mph, gusts to 31) – Dawn return to Nine Bridge & vicinity, and return drive to Lincoln via Deep Well WMA, Springer WPA, and Pawnee L.

BIRD LIST

Greater White-fronted Goose
Snow Goose
Ross's Goose
Canada Goose
Cackling Goose
Wood Duck
Gadwall
American Wigeon
Mallard
Northern Shoveler
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Canvasback
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Greater Scaup
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Common Merganser

Red-breasted Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Sharp-tailed Grouse
Greater Prairie-Chicken
Wild Turkey
Pied-billed Grebe
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
American Kestrel
Merlin
American Coot
Sandhill Crane
Whooping Crane
Killdeer
Greater Yellowlegs
Baird's Sandpiper
American Woodcock
Franklin's Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
Mourning Dove
Eastern Screech-Owl
Great Horned Owl
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Blue Jay
American Crow
Horned Lark
Black-capped Chickadee
White-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
American Tree Sparrow
Song Sparrow

Harris's Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Rusty Blackbird
Common Grackle
Great-tailed Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
House Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Also seen/heard:

Eastern Cottontail
Eastern Fox Squirrel
Black-tailed Prairie Dog
Muskrat
River Otter
White-tailed Deer
Coyote (heard-only)
Chorus Frog (heard-only)