

**NEBRASKA: PLATTE RIVER &
SANDHILL CRANES**

MARCH 24 – 28, 2010

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By Kim Eckert

The pace of our second Platte River & Sandhill Cranes tour, accommodating those who had been on the waiting list for the earlier trip, was decidedly more leisurely. Still, despite the fewer hours in the field (e.g., we were rained-out on most of Day Four), fewer pairs of eyes spotting things, and a predictably lower species list, there was no lack of special moments.

For example, we managed to come up with four species the first group was unable to find. One was the pair of Blue-winged Teal seen on the first day, a relatively late arrival which the earlier group missed for only the second time during our 22-tour history. Group One had also somehow not been able to turn up any Ring-necked Pheasants, a species which had never been missed before, but there was one crossing the road in front of Group Two on the first day. A Belted Kingfisher (like the teal, missed earlier for only the second time) and a Sharp-shinned Hawk had also eluded the first group but are included on this tour's list.

On the first day our second tour also witnessed a spectacle which unfortunately the first group never saw. Formations of Snow Geese dotted the deep-blue sky high over Branched Oak Lake near Lincoln as thousands of these waterfowl headed north. It was almost like sky-writing with white ink dotting a blue canvas: almost every letter in the alphabet and all the basic geometric shapes could be discerned at one moment or another.

It used to be an annual thing during this tour for us to watch such hordes of countless Snow Geese and other northbound waterfowl passing over and through the Rainwater Basin wetlands. Indeed, the sights and sounds of them all even rivaled the amazing Sandhill Crane show along the Platte River. But in recent years, even when most of the wetlands were still frozen, almost all the geese have been going through in late February and early March. So now when we arrive in mid-March, the spectacle we used to take for granted here during the 1990s is no longer there. Perhaps it's simplistic to attribute this to global warming, but I'm at a loss to explain this earlier, premature migration otherwise.

Speaking of geese, we saw all five species crowded together for side by side comparisons on a small pond near the curious Archway Monument. (This bizarre structure actually arches *over* busy Interstate 80 just east of Kearney—perhaps some year I'll go in to see what all the fuss is about.) This second group also found a group of at least 60 Wild Turkeys only a mile or so from our hotel in Grand Island, probably the largest single flock I had ever seen on this tour. Conversely, the earlier tour had only come across one individual.

Of course, the truly unique concentration of Sandhill Cranes is what this tour is all about, and in a way our experience in the observation blind at the Lillian Rowe Audubon Center was better than the first group's. For one thing, this time around many more cranes settled in closer to the blind, and they came in earlier during better light conditions. And at one point a helicopter happened by and temporarily scattered the roosting birds, and their trumpeting rattles were

deafening. Truly, this amazing annual spectacle along the Platte River is something all birders will want to see—but it is also something to *hear*.

ITINERARY:

March 24 – Meet in Lincoln for orientation dinner.

March 25 (24-55°, light NE winds) – Morning birding at the Pfizer pond & Oak L., Wilderness Park, and Branched Oak L. en route to lunch 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 26 (34-59°, wind SSE 16-30 mph, gusts to 39) – Dawn at Taylor Ranch prairie-chicken leks, and back roads to Nebraska Nature & Visitor Center; afternoon drive via Archway Monument pond to early dinner in Kearney; evening tour to crane blinds at Lillian Rowe Sanctuary.

March 27 (rain most of day with light NE winds, 39-46°) – Dawn at Alda bridge and rest of rainy morning in Hastings & vicinity; afternoon break at Stuhr Museum & early dinner in Grand Island; dusk at the Nine Bridge.

March 28 (28-59°, wind N 11-24 mph, gusts to 30) – Dawn return to Lincoln via Nine Bridge & vicinity, Alda bridge, a wetland & prairie dog town near Hastings, and Pintail Lake.

BIRD LIST

Greater White-fronted Goose
Snow Goose
Ross's Goose
Canada Goose
Cackling Goose
Wood Duck
Gadwall
American Wigeon
Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
Northern Shoveler
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Canvasback
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
(Common Goldeneye / leader-only)
Ring-necked Pheasant

(Sharp-tailed Grouse / leader-only)
Greater Prairie-Chicken
Wild Turkey
(Pied-billed Grebe / leader-only)
Great Blue Heron
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
American Kestrel
American Coot
Sandhill Crane
Killdeer
Greater Yellowlegs
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
(Mourning Dove / leader-only)
Belted Kingfisher
(Red-bellied Woodpecker / leader-only)
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Blue Jay
American Crow
Horned Lark
Black-capped Chickadee
White-breasted Nuthatch
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
European Starling
(Cedar Waxwing / leader-only)
American Tree Sparrow
(Song Sparrow / leader-only)
Harris's Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Western Meadowlark
(Rusty Blackbird / leader-only)
Common Grackle
Great-tailed Grackle
(Brown-headed Cowbird / leader-only)
(House Finch / leader-only)

American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Also seen/heard:

Eastern Fox Squirrel
Black-tailed Prairie Dog
White-tailed Deer
Chorus Frog (heard-only)