

## **Platte River & Sandhill Cranes**

**March 19-23, 2005**

**Leaders: Kim Eckert and Marshall Iliff**

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.**

### **Summary**

For those looking to change careers, forming your own nature tour company might be a good idea – with one important caveat. Don't put too many tours on your schedule which focus on bird migration. Not only are you and the migrants you seek at the mercy of the weather during your tour, but just as important is what the weather was like prior to it.

As case in point: Nebraska in March. How can you prepare your participants for the weather when anything from 80 degrees one day to a full-fledged blizzard the next is possible? While this year's tour focused on Sandhill Cranes along the Platte River did not experience those extremes, it was difficult enough dealing with strong cold winds blowing rain and/or snow in your face (and in van windows) during the two most important days of the tour. A long-term drought in this part of the country had also been drying up most of the wetlands of the Rainwater Basin, where hordes of geese and ducks would normally congregate. But with so little habitat, and given some premature warm temperatures earlier, the impressive flocks of Snow Geese and other waterfowl had mostly departed for Dakota before we arrived.

Certainly, though, the cranes did not disappoint, even though the cold and wet winds made observing them a challenge much of the time. At the bridge crossing south of Alda, it certainly appeared that there were more cranes roosting there than ever before. In addition, those less overwhelming numbers of cranes roosting by the Nine-Mile Bridge near our hotel were even more impressive in their own way. For one thing, the birds were a bit closer to us, and we literally had them and the bridge all to ourselves. And it certainly enhanced our evening experience there as the wind and precipitation had finally let up – indeed, it was essentially calm and almost clear at sunrise on our last day at "our" bridge.

Another highlight of this tour is definitely the prairie-chicken display we view each year not far from Grand Island. Though the lek is not as close to the road as it was a few years ago, it is not hard to see the erect pinnae and the inflated orange air sacs of the strutting males, and their low-pitched sounds emanating from these sacs is quite audible when the wind abates. One of the nature centers now is now beginning to establish observation blinds on the leks, and these should be available to us as an option on future tours.

Despite the weather, or perhaps because of it, this year's tour actually tallied our highest species total since this tour began in 1990. No fewer than 98 species were listed (plus five

other "leader-only" birds), and these included four species never recorded on this tour before: American Golden-Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, Lesser Black-backed Gull, and Pileated Woodpecker. The two early shorebirds were the result of low water levels at Harvard Marsh. Marshall located the gull for us among the thousands of gulls roosting at Lake Manawa (and his California Gull there would also have been a first, except it was impossible to show the group as dusk grew). And that Pileated at the extreme edge of its range at Fontenelle Forest might have been the only one in all of Nebraska.

Other highlights included: an adult Peregrine Falcon watching the waterfowl at the power plant pond south of Council Bluffs (only the second record for this tour); a Red-breasted Nuthatch at a feeder at Branched Oak Recreation Area (a third tour record); and the male "Cinnamon" Teal by the Alda bridge, an apparent hybrid showing some muted Blue-winged Teal characters. This species had only been recorded twice before on this tour, including last year at the same place, and it will be interesting to see if it returns in 2006.

### **Itinerary**

March 19 - late afternoon option into Iowa with "all" present (after 3 participants had to cancel, 2 that day because of flight cancellations/delays): Carter Lake, the power plant pond, and Lake Manawa (for gulls, woodcock & screech-owls) (weather: 60, light winds).

March 20 - morning at Fontenelle Forest and Branched Oak Lake; after lunch (Chances R in York), drive to Grand Island via Harvard Marsh; crane viewing at dusk at the Alda bridge (weather: 50s, strong SE winds).

March 21 - rainy dawn return to the Alda bridge, west along the river to Kearney, Fort Kearney woods & Lillian Rowe Nature Center, and return to Doniphan (for geese); afternoon at the Grand Island cemetery, Crane Meadows Nature Center, and dusk return to Alda bridge (weather: 40s, all-day rain with strong E winds)

March 22 - dawn at Taylor Ranch for prairie-chickens, followed by breakfast at Harriet's Danish Kitchen in Dannebrog, then return to Grand Island (for grackles), drive to Hastings' prairie dog town, return to Harvard Marsh, meat animal research grasslands (and bunkers), "lunch" in Clay Center, Massie WPA, and return to the dog town; dusk at the Nine-Mile Bridge (weather: 30s, rain/snow mix much of day, strong N winds).

March 23 - final morning option at the Nine-Mile Bridge; return drive to the Omaha airport via a wooded I-80 rest stop (weather: 50s, light winds).

### **Bird List**

Greater White-fronted Goose

Snow Goose (no big flocks this year; most had already headed north)

Ross's Goose (best look just west of Doniphan; also several fly-bys, especially over Nine-Mile Bridge)  
Canada Goose  
Cackling Goose (these probably outnumber Canadas here in migration)  
Wood Duck  
Gadwall  
American Wigeon  
Mallard  
Blue-winged Teal  
**(Cinnamon Teal** / an apparent hybrid male at the Alda bridge dimly showing some Blue-winged Teal features)  
Northern Shoveler  
Northern Pintail (impressive flock near Massie WPA)  
Green-winged Teal  
Canvasback  
Redhead  
Ring-necked Duck  
Greater Scaup (Lake Manawa only)  
Lesser Scaup  
Bufflehead  
Common Goldeneye  
Hooded Merganser (Carter Lake)  
Common Merganser  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Ruddy Duck  
Ring-necked Pheasant  
**Greater Prairie-Chicken** (decent but distant views, with pinnae and orange air sacs visible)  
Wild Turkey  
Northern Bobwhite (brief view of a flock the last morning)  
Pied-billed Grebe  
Horned Grebe (Lake Manawa)  
Double-crested Cormorant  
Great Blue Heron  
Turkey Vulture (migrant along I-80 the last day)  
Bald Eagle (only one?!)  
Northern Harrier  
Sharp-shinned Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk (including Harlan's and dark-morph types)  
American Kestrel  
**Peregrine Falcon** (the adult at the power plant ponds was only the second ever for this tour)  
American Coot  
Sandhill Crane (best experience for most this year at the Nine-Mile Bridge, but the numbers roosting at the Alda bridge seemed the most ever)  
American Golden-Plover (distant view at Harvard Marsh, but a first for this tour)

Killdeer  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Baird's Sandpiper  
Pectoral Sandpiper (2 at Harvard Marsh; another first tour record)  
Wilson's Snipe  
**American Woodcock** (always a highlight at Lake Manawa, but the one grounded at the cemetery was especially odd)  
Franklin's Gull (roosting at Lake Manawa)  
Ring-billed Gull  
Herring Gull  
**Lesser Black-backed Gull** (first-winter bird in the gull flock at Lake Manawa; you guessed it – another tour first)  
(California Gull / leader-only)  
Rock Pigeon  
Mourning Dove  
Eurasian Collared-Dove  
Eastern Screech-Owl (a "mixed" pair again at L. Manawa – one rufous and one gray)  
Great Horned Owl (one on a nest)  
Barred Owl (at the I-80 rest stop en route back to Omaha)  
(Belted Kingfisher / leader-only)  
Red-headed Woodpecker (Fontenelle Forest)  
Red-bellied Woodpecker  
Downy Woodpecker  
Hairy Woodpecker  
Northern Flicker (including some yellow/red-shafted integrades)  
**Pileated Woodpecker** (close fly-bys at Fontenelle, possibly the only spot in all of Nebraska for this species; yet another first for this tour)  
Eastern Phoebe (heard-only)  
Loggerhead Shrike (nice look near Branched Oak)  
Blue Jay  
American Crow  
Horned Lark  
Black-capped Chickadee  
Tufted Titmouse (Fontenelle Forest)  
Red-breasted Nuthatch (Branched Oak; only the third ever for this tour)  
White-breasted Nuthatch  
Brown Creeper  
Carolina Wren  
Golden-crowned Kinglet (heard-only)  
(Ruby-crowned Kinglet / leader-only)  
Eastern Bluebird  
American Robin  
European Starling  
Cedar Waxwing  
American Tree Sparrow  
(Swamp Sparrow / leader-only)

Song Sparrow  
Harris's Sparrow (best view at Branched Oak)  
White-crowned Sparrow  
Dark-eyed Junco (incl. at least one "Pink-sided" junco)  
Northern Cardinal  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Eastern Meadowlark (singing at the Holiday Inn the last morning)  
Western Meadowlark  
(Rusty Blackbird / leader-only)  
Common Grackle  
Great-tailed Grackle (flock on the north edge of Grand Island)  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Purple Finch (unexpected in the meat animal research area)  
House Finch  
Pine Siskin  
American Goldfinch  
House Sparrow

Also seen: White-tailed Deer, Mink, Opossum, Black-tailed Prairie Dog (on the second try), Muskrat, Eastern Cottontail, and Fox Squirrel. . . plus a tire-eating 35-mph dog!