

# **PLATTE RIVER AND SANDHILL CRANES**

**MARCH 18 – 22, 2006**

**LEADERS:  
KIM ECKERT  
BRENNAN MULROONEY**

**COMPILED BY:  
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**Leaders: Kim Eckert and Brennan Mulrooney**

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.**

### **Summary**

So, what is it like to bird during the greatest snowstorm ever recorded along this stretch of the Platte River at Grand Island? It was quite memorable, to say the least, as nearly 22 inches of wind-driven snow piled up outside our hotel from Saturday afternoon through Monday night. (In Greeley, just two counties to the north, 30 inches were officially measured.) Both the all-time 24-hour (17.8 inches) and 48-hour (20.7 inches) snowfall records for any date were broken at Grand Island, with the old 24-hour record of a mere 13 inches dating way back to 1917.

High winds on Sunday and Monday produced roof-high drifts at many places, and some cars at our hotel parking lot were completely hidden under drifts. At the same time, these winds blew some roads partly clear of snow, so we could at least drive and bird along these. Still, I-80 was entirely shut down to all traffic for over 24 hours from Monday afternoon until late Tuesday afternoon, and there were several birding areas (not to mention my two favorite restaurants!) which we were unable to reach. And needless to say it was cold, with temperatures Sunday through Tuesday stuck in the 20s, when normally it should reach the low 50s.

As might be expected, the weather conditions made some birds harder to find; we nearly missed species we had found on every previous tour: Redhead, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, and Eastern Bluebird. But we still managed to turn up a surprising 89 species, which was the third-highest total ever for this tour.

All those cranes were still very much in evidence, as were good numbers of water birds, although most of the so-called Rainwater Basin wetlands have been dry due to a long-term drought (perhaps all that snow will replenish some of them). We also were able to watch a few prairie-chickens displaying at dusk (the road that morning was impassable), even though their lek was snow-covered. Other highlights included six species of shorebirds probing in a mix of mud and slush,

close spotlighted views of American Woodcock and Eastern Screech-Owl at Lake Manawa, a surprising and foolish (and probably now deceased) Purple Martin, a Loggerhead Shrike consuming a bird near a bird feeder, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds at that same feeder.

But the real highlight of the tour involved the impressive concentrations of birds forced by the blizzard into and along the road as they searched for food. We saw dozens, if not hundreds, of Killdeers, Horned Larks, American Robins, sparrows (including good numbers of Harris's Sparrows), Lapland Longspurs (!), and Western Meadowlarks. The snow also produced American Pipit (a first ever for this tour) and Lincoln's Sparrow (a second tour record) along the road. Those longspurs, though, were especially memorable, since many were handsome males in nearly full plumage, and since the few previous tours which listed this species had only recorded them as hard-to-see individuals migrating high overhead.

Certainly, never before had the weather even come close to being this bad on the tour. Yet, at the same time and in many ways, the birding was perhaps more interesting than on any previous Platte River tour. Not despite the weather, but because of it. I could almost be persuaded to hope for an even bigger and better blizzard next year.

## **Itinerary**

March 18 - late afternoon option (with all present) into Iowa: Carter Lake and Lake Manawa (including woodcock & screech-owl at dusk); cloudy, but no snow or wind – yet!

March 19 – snowy morning drive on I-80 to Grand Island, plus some birding along side roads to Crane Meadows Nature Center; windy and snowy afternoon/dusk drive to the Alda Bridge.

March 20 – slow morning drive and return to Crane Meadows Nature Center to view videos, feeders, and the gift shop; even slower return to the hotel for lunch (just before I-80 closed); impossible to go anywhere in the afternoon.

March 21 – snow and high winds finally over, as we bird roads that were either plowed or blown clear of snow: especially east to Locust St., and south and west on Rosedale, Alda, and Platte River roads; late afternoon/dusk drive to Taylor Ranch for prairie-chickens.

March 22 - final morning option to the Alda Bridge; return drive (partly in sunshine) to the Omaha airport via brief birding stops at an I-80 rest stop and on Highway 31.

## **Bird List**

Greater White-fronted Goose  
Snow Goose  
Ross's Goose (especially seen in flight)  
Canada Goose  
Cackling Goose (these outnumber Canadas here)  
Trumpeter Swan (lone adult at Lake Manawa)  
Wood Duck  
Gadwall  
American Wigeon  
Mallard  
Blue-winged Teal  
Northern Shoveler  
Northern Pintail  
Green-winged Teal  
Canvasback  
Redhead  
Ring-necked Duck  
Greater Scaup (leader-only at Lake Manawa)  
Lesser Scaup  
Bufflehead  
Hooded Merganser  
Common Merganser  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Ruddy Duck  
Ring-necked Pheasant  
Greater Prairie-Chicken (evening display at Taylor Ranch)  
Wild Turkey (only 2 seen)  
Northern Bobwhite (more visible than normal)  
Pied-billed Grebe  
Horned Grebe (leader-only at Lake Manawa)  
Great Blue Heron  
Turkey Vulture (seen by Jackie along I-80)  
Bald Eagle

Northern Harrier  
Cooper's Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk (including dark-morphs)  
American Kestrel  
American Coot  
Sandhill Crane (even a record-breaking blizzard can't stop them)  
Killdeer  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Lesser Yellowlegs  
Long-billed Dowitcher  
Wilson's Snipe (yellowlegs, dowitcher, and snipe all at Alda Bridge)  
American Woodcock (in the spotlight on the ground at Lake Manawa)  
Franklin's Gull (Lake Manawa)  
Ring-billed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Rock Pigeon  
Eurasian Collared-Dove (scouted out by Bob & Jackie at Doniphan)  
Mourning Dove  
Eastern Screech-Owl (very responsive and visible at Lake Manawa)  
Great Horned Owl  
Belted Kingfisher  
Red-bellied Woodpecker  
Downy Woodpecker  
Hairy Woodpecker  
Northern Flicker  
Eastern Phoebe  
Loggerhead Shrike (eating an unidentified bird at Crane Meadows)  
Blue Jay  
American Crow  
Horned Lark (many along roadsides)  
Purple Martin (lone male at Lake Manawa; a first for this tour)  
Black-capped Chickadee (heard-only)  
White-breasted Nuthatch  
Carolina Wren  
Golden-crowned Kinglet  
Eastern Bluebird  
American Robin (many along roadsides)  
European Starling  
American Pipit (also along the road; another first for this tour)  
American Tree Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow  
Fox Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
Lincoln's Sparrow (early)  
Harris's Sparrow (the most ever on this tour)  
White-crowned Sparrow  
Dark-eyed Junco (incl. "Pink-sided" and "Oregon" forms)  
Lapland Longspur (100s, perhaps 1000s, grounded along roadsides)  
Northern Cardinal  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Western Meadowlark (100s feeding along roadsides)  
Yellow-headed Blackbird (at the nature center feeders)  
Rusty Blackbird  
Common Grackle  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
House Finch  
American Goldfinch  
House Sparrow