

**NEBRASKA:
PLATTE RIVER & SANDHILL
CRANES**

MARCH 17 – 21, 2007

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Leaders: Kim Eckert

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

Summary

No, there wasn't even a hint of any raging blizzard like there was last year, the likes of which was locally unprecedented and which grounded spectacular numbers of birds concentrated along the roadsides. Actually, the weather this year was pretty mellow, with Day One our only cold day with temperatures in the 40s. Sure, it was a bit too windy on a couple of days, but that's entirely normal on the Great Plains, and it was even pleasantly warm and calm during our first two crane-watching evenings.

This year we were left with but one meteorological highlight: the chronic drought conditions which continue to deplete the water levels in the so-called Rainwater Basin. (Not even last March's record snowfall seemed to have made any difference.) Once again, with such former famous wetlands as Pintail Lake and Funk Lagoon no longer wet, the hordes of migrant geese and other waterfowl which used to concentrate so spectacularly here had again mostly gone north towards the tundra before we arrived. (I suppose good ol' Global Warming must have had something to do with it, too.)

But the Sandhill Cranes don't seem to care at all about the ups and downs of weather and waterfowl, and, after all, aren't the cranes what this tour is all about? Indeed, in some ways they may have been more impressive overall than ever before! First, there was our pleasantly warm evening on Day Two, as we had fields full of cranes all to ourselves along a back road as the sun set. On the equally warm afternoon of Day Three, kettles of cranes riding thermals overhead decided to gradually descend into a field next to the van. Then it seemed like there were more cranes than ever at the traditional roost in the Platte River by the Alda Bridge the next evening; the endless flights passing by seemed larger and more continuous than in years past, and there were places in the river which I'm sure had never previously supported roosting cranes.

Perhaps most amazing to me, though, was our last morning with fields of cranes east of Grand Island where I have never before spent any time. Credible and recent—but sporadic—reports of a Whooping Crane were coming from that area, and we had a bit of time to look before returning to Omaha. No, of course, we never did spot the Whooper, but talk about the proverbial needle in a haystack! A cliché never seemed more apt, as the stacked-up quantity of Sandhill Cranes was as large as anything west of Grand Island within the core of their concentration. These section roads I had never driven in the past were supposedly too far east to have any significant numbers of cranes, but significant doesn't adequately describe those flocks.

To be sure, there were other memorable non-crane highlights. One especially territorial woodcock by Lake Manawa confronted my recorder by staring in my direction, uttering its

curious and electric-like alarm notes, and flying at and around my head. While waterfowl numbers may have been down, it was encouraging to see more shrikes and bluebirds than usual. We even found a few unexpected rarities: the early Eared Grebes at Lake Manawa and Least Sandpipers along the Platte had only been found once before on 18 previous tours, while the beautiful adult male Merlin at Schramm Park and that mockingbird in the motel parking lot were just 3rd tour records.

Finally, it was nice to return to my two favorite—and unique—restaurants, which last year's blizzard kept us away from: that amazing Sunday brunch at Chances R in York, and the authentic Danish breakfast at Harriett's in Dannebrog.

Itinerary

March 17 – late afternoon and evening option to Lake Manawa in Council Bluffs, including the woodcock leks just south of the lake.

March 18 – morning at Fontenelle Forest and Branched Oak Lake; late lunch at Chances R in York (!), drive to Grand Island via dried-up Pintail Lake, and evening crane watching along Momon Island Road, near the Nine-Mile Bridge, and on a side road off Platte River Road at sunset.

March 19 – dawn at Alda Bridge crane roost, rest of morning at Crane Meadows Nature Center, west along Shoemaker Island & Denham roads, and drive under the Archway Monument (!?) for lunch in Kearney; afternoon in the Hike & Bike Trail / Lillian Rowe Sanctuary area, and evening at the Nine-Mile Bridge.

March 20 – dawn at Taylor Ranch for prairie-chickens, late breakfast at Harriett's in Dannebrog (!), south to Doniphan, Hastings, the prairie dog colony / abandoned bunkers / Meat Animal Research area, Clay Center, and Harvard Marsh; evening at the Alda Bridge.

March 21 – Return drive to Omaha via “new” crane fields east of Grand Island, Schramm Park, and Lake Manawa.

Bird List

Greater White-fronted Goose (most seen at Harvard Marsh, but fewer than normal)

Snow Goose (largest group in the Meat Animal area)

Ross's Goose (closest views by the Archway!)

Canada Goose (a.k.a. “Honkers”)

Cackling Goose (outnumbered the Honkers)

Wood Duck

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mallard

Blue-winged Teal (finally at Lake Manawa on Wednesday)

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal
Canvasback
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Greater Scaup (Saturday at Lake Manawa)
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Common Merganser
Red-breasted Merganser
Ruddy Duck (best looks at Harvard Marsh)
Ring-necked Pheasant
Greater Prairie-Chicken (still displaying – distantly – at Taylor Ranch)
Wild Turkey
(Northern Bobwhite / leader-only, heard-only)
Pied-billed Grebe (only one at Harvard Marsh)
Eared Grebe (Wednesday at Lake Manawa; only seen once previously)
American White Pelican (Branched Oak Lake)
Double-crested Cormorant (ditto)
Great Blue Heron (Wednesday at Lake Manawa)
Bald Eagle (only at Lake Manawa & Schramm Park)
Northern Harrier
Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk (including dark-morphs)
Rough-legged Hawk (Alda Bridge)
American Kestrel
Merlin (adult *richardsoni* male at Schramm Park; the 3rd time seen on this tour)
American Coot
Sandhill Crane (probably more than any previous tour?!)
Killdeer
Greater Yellowlegs
Least Sandpiper (only seen once previously)
Baird's Sandpiper (Harvard Marsh)
Wilson's Snipe (6 in the mud at Alda Bridge)
American Woodcock (very close & responsive on the ground at Lake Manawa!)
Franklin's Gull (Saturday at Lake Manawa)
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove (along the Hastings by-pass)
Mourning Dove
Belted Kingfisher
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker

Eastern Phoebe
Loggerhead Shrike (more than usual: seen at 3 locations)
Blue Jay
American Crow
Horned Lark
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
White-breasted Nuthatch
Eastern Bluebird (more common than usual)
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird (a surprise at the Holiday Inn; the 3rd time seen on this tour)
European Starling
American Tree Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow (Harvard Marsh)
Fox Sparrow (briefly at Fontenelle Forest)
Song Sparrow
Harris's Sparrow (best looks at Branched Oak)
White-crowned Sparrow (Lillian Rowe Sanctuary)
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark (singing at Branched Oak)
Western Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird (brief view of a male at Harvard Marsh)
Rusty Blackbird (close looks at 2 singing males)
Common Grackle
Great-tailed Grackle (Doniphan & Hastings)
Brown-headed Cowbird
House Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Also found:

Eastern Cottontail
Black-tailed/White-tailed(?) Jackrabbit
Eastern Fox Squirrel
Black-tailed Prairie Dog (still alive & well near the abandoned buildings & bunkers)
probable Mink (Fontenelle Forest)
Red Fox (seen by Glenn & Mabel near the Hollywood Diner)
White-tailed Deer (too many deer – and deer-watchers – at Lake Manawa)
chorus frog, sp? (heard-only at Harvard Marsh)
turtle, sp?
[AND the resident “tire-eating” dog near the Holiday Inn (heard-only)]