

**NEBRASKA: PLATTE RIVER &
SANDHILL CRANES**

MARCH 15 – 19, 2008

LEADER: KIM ECKERT

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Leader: Kim Eckert

Summary

The migration had been so different in recent years, compared to what it used to be in the 1990s, that revised wording was called for in this tour's itinerary. No, this had nothing to do with Sandhill Cranes. They were certainly still there, massing in countless and always-impressive numbers along Nebraska's Platte River as they had always been. But the formerly massive migration of Snow Geese and other waterfowl through the Rainwater Basin's wetlands near the Platte almost seemed to be a thing of the past.

Long-term drought conditions were one of the reasons we weren't seeing the amazing numbers of geese like we used to. With numerous wetlands dried up since the 1990s, there were few places for them to linger before continuing north. Our former estimates of Snow Geese in the hundreds of thousands had become merely in the thousands since the turn of this century. Global warming/climate change, which of course has now become the root of all evil, was certainly at fault as well: the geese mostly seemed to have already gone north before this tour took place.

Thus, it was both refreshing and surprising this year to see the Snow Geese flocks back in force like they used to be. Water levels at several wetlands were back to normal, with some areas holding water for the first time in several years. Perhaps the best example was at York WPA along I-80, which had been completely dry for years—this time around there was not only water, but also an estimated 45,000 Snow Geese in this single wetland.

The weather must have had something to do with this as well. It seemed more like winter than summer for a change, with ice still present in places, and if anything the migration was behind schedule. The woodcock, for example, still weren't back and displaying on territory, and it was disappointing to miss this species for the first time in 20 years. It was also strange to find hardly any flickers or grackles around—usually these are routinely seen in good numbers on this tour.

But enough about drought and climate change and geese. The spectacle of the Sandhill Crane migration is what this tour is primarily about, and cranes don't seem to care about the weather. As reliable as they are, though, every tour's experience with them seems to be different. Most memorable this year were our views of them standing in the fields along the Platte: in view all at once in just one expanse of meadow were an estimated 30,000 cranes! Impressive and unique as well was a group of several thousand cranes still standing in the river until nearly noon—normally they are gone from their roosts on the shallows and sandbars before 9:00 am.

Another attraction on this tour are the Greater Prairie-Chickens displaying on their leks near Grand Island, and, like the Snow Geese, they put on one of their best showings in recent years.

They seemed more visible than usual, and, with light winds at the time, they were easily heard as they harmonized beautifully with the bubbling songs of Western Meadowlarks. In this same area, a Northern Shrike, for only the seventh time out of 20 tours, put in an appearance.

Also seventh records for this tour were both the unexpected Purple Finch and Pine Siskin at Branched Oak Lake Recreation Area; even less expected here was a Red-breasted Nuthatch, only the fourth record on this tour. And there was yet another species which appeared for only the fourth time out of 20 years. Even though it was broad daylight on our first morning along the Missouri River south of Omaha, a pair of Barred Owls not only vocalized at length for us, but they eventually copulated in full view of our amazed group.

Itinerary

March 15 – All participants arrive in time for late afternoon and evening birding at Lake Manawa in Council Bluffs.

March 16 – morning at Fontenelle Forest and Branched Oak Lake, late lunch at Chances R in York, drive to Grand Island via York WPA, and late afternoon/evening crane watching along Platte River Road and at the Alda Bridge.

March 17 – rainy & cold dawn at the Alda Bridge crane roost, west along the Platte River to Lillian Rowe Sanctuary and lunch in Kearney; late afternoon return to Rowe Sanctuary (with two participants at the crane blinds) and a prairie-chickenless field near Minden.

March 18 – dawn at Taylor Ranch's more reliable prairie-chicken leks, late breakfast at Harriett's in Dannebrog, south to Hastings, the prairie dog colony / abandoned bunkers / Meat Animal Research area, Clay Center, Harvard Marsh, and Doniphan; final evening at the Alda Bridge.

March 19 – Dawn at the Nine Mile Bridge crane roost, and return drive to Omaha via brief stop at York WPA.

Bird List

Greater White-fronted Goose (relatively few this year)

Snow Goose (especially impressive numbers this year – especially at York!)

Ross's Goose

Canada Goose

Cackling Goose (fewer than normal)

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mallard

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback (Lake Manawa)
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser (Lake Manawa)
Common Merganser
(Red-breasted Merganser / leader-only at Lake Manawa)
Ruddy Duck (Lake Manawa)
Ring-necked Pheasant
Greater Prairie-Chicken (best display in years at Taylor Ranch!)
Wild Turkey
Great Blue Heron
Bald Eagle (including a pair at a prospective nest)
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk (including dark-morphs & at least one Harlan's)
American Kestrel
American Coot
Sandhill Crane (including an estimated 30,000 in one field!)
Killdeer
Greater Yellowlegs
Baird's Sandpiper (Alda Bridge)
Wilson's Snipe (also at Alda Bridge)
Franklin's Gull (nice view at Lake Manawa)
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove (best looks in Doniphan)
Mourning Dove
Barred Owl (copulating pair at Fontenelle Forest; only the 4th record for this tour)
Belted Kingfisher
Red-headed Woodpecker (one at Fontenelle Forest)
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker (heard-only – why so few?)
Northern Shrike (posing cooperatively at Taylor Ranch)
Blue Jay
American Crow
Horned Lark (Taylor Ranch)
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse (heard-only)
Red-breasted Nuthatch (Branched Oak Lake: only the 4th record for this tour)
White-breasted Nuthatch

Carolina Wren (Fontenelle Forest)
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
European Starling
American Tree Sparrow
Fox Sparrow (Branched Oak Lake)
Song Sparrow (especially conspicuous by its scarcity)
Harris's Sparrow (several close looks)
White-crowned Sparrow (Lillian Rowe's feeders)
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark (nice study near Branched Oak Lake)
Western Meadowlark (impressive morning chorus with the prairie-chickens)
Rusty Blackbird (young singing male near the Alda Bridge)
Common Grackle (also noticeably scarce this year)
Great-tailed Grackle (brief fly-by in Grand Island)
Brown-headed Cowbird
Purple Finch (several unexpectedly at Branched Oak Lake)
House Finch
Pine Siskin (also unexpected at Branched Oak)
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Also seen:

Eastern Cottontail
Eastern Fox Squirrel
Black-tailed Prairie Dog (still alive & well near the abandoned buildings/bunkers)
White-tailed Deer (especially at Lake Manawa)