

# NEBRASKA: PLATTE RIVER, SANDHILL CRANES & PRAIRIE GROUSE

MARCH 19-25, 2011

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*The magic of spring migration may mean different things to different birders, but nowhere is it more spectacular or more meaningful than on the northern Great Plains in March. The early spring spectacle of the first groups of waterfowl, raptors, field and marsh birds returning to northern latitudes, as winter stubbornly loosens its grip, has a special appeal all its own. And in mid-March along the Platte River in Nebraska, there is an annual and unique ornithological event of global significance: the massing of some half million Sandhill Cranes, approximately 80% of the world population, on their historic staging grounds.*

**March 19, Day 1: Arrival in Omaha.** Participants should plan to arrive in Omaha today, where a hotel room will be reserved in your name at our hotel in Carter Lake, Iowa (a suburb of Omaha, Nebraska). For those arriving early enough, we will meet in the hotel lobby at 3:00 p.m. for a trip to Lake Manawa and an early dinner in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Here we will scan the lake for waterfowl and other early spring migrants, watching especially for some of the less common diving ducks (e.g., Greater Scaup, Hooded and Red-breasted mergansers), Bald Eagles, and usually a few Franklin's Gulls, which frequently roost here for the night. At dusk the real highlight at Lake Manawa begins with the "peenting" of American Woodcocks, just before these curious shorebirds launch into their amazing aerial courtship flight. While we witness this unique display, it is sometimes possible to hear, or even see, an Eastern Screech-Owl in this same area.

For those unable to arrive by 3:00 p.m. for dinner and birding, a note will be left with some information on your dinner possibilities and on the next morning's departure. (Please note that in most years some of the birds we see at Lake Manawa – e.g., American Woodcock and Franklin's Gull – are not seen again later on the tour.)

NIGHT: La Quinta Inn & Suites, Carter Lake, Iowa

**March 20, Day 2: Missouri River Valley and Rainwater Basin.** After breakfast, we will spend at least part of the morning in the extensive wooded hillsides along the Missouri River, an important corridor for a wide range of migrants, as well as for resident species near the northern edge of their range. We should find a few Harris's Sparrows among the flocks of juncos and American Tree Sparrows, and we will check blackbird flocks for the possibility of migrant Rusty Blackbirds and, surprisingly, pioneering Great-tailed Grackles which are now resident here. Wild Turkeys also occur in fair numbers, and we might turn up Northern Bobwhite, Red-shouldered Hawk, Barred Owl, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, or other woods birds usually associated with locations farther south and east in the U.S. In some years, when local birding reports indicate, we forego birding along the Missouri River in favor of some woodlands and wetlands between Omaha and Lincoln.

In the afternoon, we will head west toward Grand Island through the so-called Rainwater Basin, where waterfowl can congregate by the countless thousands. Especially impressive some years have been the great flocks of Snow Geese. If the spring weather and migration are on schedule, these could even number in the hundreds of thousands! Greater White-fronted, Canada, and Cackling geese should also be present in large numbers, and we will certainly spend some time studying the Ross's Geese, which regularly travel this flyway

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in fair numbers and are not difficult to find. A good variety of ducks, of course, should also be seen in large flocks along with the geese, with nearly 20 species seen almost every year. (Note, however, long-term drought conditions have dried up several of these wetlands in recent years, and the waterfowl numbers have been less-than-overwhelming on some tours.) If it is an early spring, we might also see Cinnamon Teal, Eared or Horned grebe, American White Pelican, Long-billed Dowitcher, Baird's Sandpiper, Franklin's Gull, or Yellow-headed Blackbird in these same wetlands.

After checking into our hotel in Grand Island, we will postpone dinner until after dusk, in order to witness for the first time the spectacle of thousands of Sandhill Cranes settling in for the night on the sandbars of the Platte River, just a short distance from the hotel. The sights and sounds of this congregation promise to be nothing short of awe-inspiring, and we will have a total of three sunsets to spend with these masses of birds as they gather at their traditional roost sites.

NIGHT: Quality Inn & Conference Center, Grand Island, Nebraska

**March 21-22, Days 3-4: Platte River.** The Platte River at dawn will be equally spectacular as countless numbers of Sandhill Cranes crowd the river's sandbars. As it gets lighter, the cranes will swarm through the sky, dispersing to nearby fields and wetlands to feed—their constant, trumpeting calls vaguely prehistoric and certainly unforgettable. As we follow the Platte west, Sandhill Cranes will literally never be far from view. By the time our trip is over, we will probably have seen something on the order of a hundred thousand cranes! It will also become evident how crucial the water levels of the Platte are for the survival of these cranes and how the river has changed during recent decades.

There is also a real possibility of finding an earlier-than-normal Whooping Crane among the Sandhills; we have been fortunate a few times over the years in finding one of these individuals, which normally pass through Nebraska in April. On one recent tour we were even able to observe some Common Cranes, a North American stray from Siberia which is detected along the Platte every few years.

On one of these days, there will be time to schedule a dawn visit to a tract of unplowed grasslands where we will witness the display of Greater Prairie-Chickens on a traditional sandhills lek. Although the current lek site is about a half mile from the road and sometimes obscured by prairie grasses, we should be able to greatly improve our views of these and Sharp-tailed Grouse on Day 6.

Later on these mornings and into the afternoon we will check still more grasslands, wetlands, and wooded thickets in the region around Grand Island. On these days we usually find a Rough-legged Hawk or two among the many Red-taileds. In the fields, Horned Larks will be paired up and starting to nest and Lapland Longspurs might be migrating overhead. There is also a chance of encountering Short-eared Owl, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Red-headed Woodpecker, Northern or Loggerhead shrike, and Black-billed Magpie during our explorations of these Great Plains.

NIGHT: Quality Inn & Conference Center, Grand Island, Nebraska

**March 23, Day 5: Final Morning on the Platte River; Travel to Calamus Outfitters.** After one final morning on the Platte River watching Sandhill Cranes massed together on their staging grounds, as they have for centuries, our more temporal schedule calls for us to travel northwest to some real Sandhills country in north central Nebraska. In these vast and rolling grasslands, we will especially hope to find some of the prairie birds which tend to be hard to find and typically missed near Grand Island: e.g., Ferruginous and Rough-legged hawks, Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon, Short-eared Owl, Loggerhead or Northern shrike, Black-billed Magpie, Mountain Bluebird, American Pipit, and Lapland Longspur. In the evening, we may also get a head start on trying to find Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens, which often display at dusk as well as at dawn.

NIGHT: Calamus Outfitters, Burwell, Nebraska\*  
(\*single occupancy is not guaranteed)

**March 24, Day 6: Grouse and Prairie-Chicken Observation Blinds.** The highlight this morning will certainly be a pre-dawn visit to the Calamus blinds to observe Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens at close range. As the males perform their impressive and respective displays, some females will also be seen standing off to the side, pretending to be indifferent to the strutting males. Horned Larks and both Eastern and Western meadowlarks should also be vocalizing, their songs punctuating the curious sounds emanating from the grouse and prairie-chickens.

In the afternoon, we will make the return drive to Carter Lake, Iowa for the conclusion of the tour and a farewell dinner.

NIGHT: La Quinta Inn & Suites, Carter Lake, Iowa

**March 25, Day 7: Departure for Home.** The La Quinta provides complimentary transportation to the nearby Omaha airport, and participants may plan to return home at any time today.

**EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS:** Should you wish to make arrangements to extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least **two months** prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 7 participants.

**TOUR LEADER:** Kim Eckert

**Kim Eckert**, with over 40 years of birding experience throughout the U.S. and Canada, has now been guiding birders or teaching bird identification classes for more than 25 of those years. Since the 1980s, he has annually led VENT tours to Newfoundland, Churchill, various locations in the Great Lakes and Great Plains, and to Texas—a favorite and frequent winter destination. He has authored four editions of *A Birder's Guide to Minnesota*, and has written numerous articles, notes, and seasonal reports for the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union journal, *The Loon*, and other publications such as *Birding* and *North American Birds*. Kim also operates the Minnesota Birding Weekends program of birding tours, has been a member for three decades of Minnesota's Records Committee, and for 20 years served as Naturalist at Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve in Duluth. A Minnesota resident since the 1960s, he has resided in Duluth since 1977—winters included.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$1,895** per person in double occupancy from Omaha. This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 6, all lodging for six nights during the tour, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leader. It does not include airfare from your home to Omaha and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$240**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

\*Single occupancy is not guaranteed at Calamus Outfitters as we will be staying in cabins. This has been taken into account when establishing the price for the single supplement.

**TOUR REGISTRATION:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$300** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$150** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$50** per person. If cancellation is made between 120 and 90 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.***

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| <u>If you cancel:</u>                    | <u>Your refund will be:</u>  |
| 120 days or more before departure date   | Your deposit minus \$150*  |
| Between 120 and 90 days before departure | No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded |
| Fewer than 90 days before departure date | No refund available  |

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$50 per person.

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE:** A brochure and application form for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. **We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. VENT recommends Travel Insured International as our preferred insurance provider.** Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. **Contact Travel Insured International prior to registration for details.** Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than Travel Insured International, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

**IMPORTANT NOTE: Please read your itinerary carefully to see whether or not your tour/cruise requires MANDATORY Medical Insurance which covers you for emergency evacuation/repatriation during the trip.** This coverage is included in the Worldwide Trip Protector plan offered by Travel Insured International. If you do not choose to purchase the insurance through Travel Insured International, you will need to do so through another insurance provider. A good website for information and acquisition of emergency evacuation/repatriation insurance is: [www.insuremytrip.com](http://www.insuremytrip.com).

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.**

**AIR INFORMATION:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

**BAGGAGE:** Please limit your baggage to one piece of luggage and one smaller carry-on or day pack.

**CLOTHING:** There is probably nowhere else where the weather is as unpredictable as on the Great Plains in early spring. Although we may be fortunate enough to have sunny days in the 60s or even the 70s, we could just as easily encounter strong cold winds, temperatures below freezing, and even a snowstorm. Therefore, participants should plan on dressing for winter weather, with a warm coat, insulated boots (if not snow, there will be mud), hat, gloves, and thermal underwear. A sweater or two, plus a rain coat/jacket are also recommended.

**OTHER ITEMS:** Bring your binoculars and favorite field guide. We recommend either National Geographic's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* or *The Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Sibley. For those who prefer the smaller regional Sibley field guides (2003), the Eastern guide covers Nebraska. If you have a spotting scope and wish to bring it, please do so, although the leader will also bring his. Also bring an alarm clock. Both hotels have an indoor swimming pool, so some may want to bring a swimsuit.

**HEALTH:** If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line 800-CDC-INFO or you can check their website at [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel). Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html) (click on travel health).

**SUGGESTED READING:** Our website at [www.ventbird.com](http://www.ventbird.com) offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from the store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You might also want to visit such other online stores as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) or [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com), which specializes in ornithology books.

Forsberg, Michael. *On Ancient Wings: The Sandhill Cranes of North America*. Michael Forsberg Photography, 2004.

Johnsgard, Paul. *The Platte: Channels in Time*. University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

Johnsgard, Paul. *Crane Music: A Natural History of American Cranes*. Smithsonian Institution, 1991.

Lingle, Gary. *Birding Crane River: Nebraska's Platte*. Harrier Publishing, 1994.

**TIPPING:** As noted in our itineraries, tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of

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defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its Agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on July 15, 2010 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.