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Majestic Journey

Sandhill crane migration is a natural spectacle that brings bird lovers from across the globe to central Nebraska.

By Ashley Spratt

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They approach with the intimidating force of military aircraft. As the sun retreats below the western horizon, the symphony of clattering voices grows louder. This night, they have kept their audience waiting, dancing above the cornfields in aerial displays of transforming patterns and shapes before settling in the river below.

Carl Wolfe, a volunteer at the Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary leads a silent crowd of bird watchers back to the main building after another dusk viewing of sandhill cranes in one of the straw bale blinds along the Platte River in central Nebraska.

More than 10,000 avid birders, conservationists, tourists, and nature enthusiasts from around the world visit the small town of Kearney, Nebraska to witness what locals are proud to call one of the Seven Wonders of the World. But according to Wolfe, "The cranes are our most important visitors."

For three to six weeks in early spring, the Platte River hosts more than 500,000 sandhill cranes on their annual journey north. They fly up to 500 miles per day from the southwest United States and Mexico to refuel before charging on to their breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. The Platte River and its surrounding croplands provide a safe-haven for the birds to rest, gain energy, and perform their mating ritual dances, all in front of an audience of thousands.

"They're not the prettiest things God ever made, that's for sure," says Leta Johnson who works at Kearney's Visitor Center, "But they're a kill, I love 'em to death." During last year's crane season, Kearney welcomed visitors from across the country and world.

"I've heard it time and time again, people spend more money on birding, than on professional sports," says Roger Jasnoch, Director of Kearney Visitors Bureau.

Bird Watchers Digest Editor Bill Thompson recalls how his first sighting of a snowy owl as a young child sealed his fate as a life-long birder.

"I went to grab my parent's bird book to see what it was, and discovered all these other birds I didn't even know existed," Thompson says. His fascination and appreciation for birding grew.

"I'd skip school Fridays to go out bird watching with my mother," he says. Now Thompson makes his livelihood scouring for birds in every part of the world. After a trip to South Africa to see the lilac-breasted roller among other exotic species, he and his wife voyaged to Rowe Sanctuary to see the more than 60,000 sandhill cranes along the Platte this March.

Sandhills are omnivores, meaning they eat practically anything they can find. Eighty percent of their diet during their stay on the Platte is made up of corn, primarily because it is readily available in the surrounding croplands. But they need more than just high fructose carbohydrates to survive the journey north. During high water periods in the spring the wet meadows surrounding the river are extremely rich in invertebrates, providing food sources high in protein. Crayfish and snails also provide the cranes with additional nutrients like calcium and phosphorus.

"They're not very good fishermen, but they try," says Kent Scaggs, habitat manager of Rowe Sanctuary.

West of the 100th Meridian, water is precious and the battle for ownership of water rights is ongoing. This invisible line divides central Nebraska, and the narrowing of the Platte River over time provides evidence of sparse water resources in the west.

Historically, the Platte River in central Nebraska was surrounded by tall grass prairie that was trampled by buffalo and burned by natural fires, which helped to create wet meadow areas adjacent to the river—ideal habitat for a range of migratory and native species. The wet meadows were controlled by the high flows of the river during the spring season. But over time the river channel narrowed due to damming of the river, and woody

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vegetation developed along the banks and sandbars. Today, during wet climatic periods, the wet meadows are maintained by sub-irrigation of shallow ground water.

"If you control water, you control a lot of issues," says Service biologist Rick Hansen. Growing up in Illinois, Hansen never thought water was something to fight over. But in the west, where water flows from rivers like the Colorado are decreasing and where arid conditions make irrigation a necessity, it is a vital commodity.

In 2007, the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program employed an agreement to manage limited water resources between the states of Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska; the Department of the Interior; water users; and conservation groups. The program aims to manage land and water resources by retiming river flows during certain times of the year to help restore a semblance of the natural hydrograph and support the Platte River ecosystem. The program also includes clearing vegetation from many of the river's islands and sandbars, and returning sand accumulated in the islands to the active channel to offset ongoing erosion and narrowing of the river.

"It's like cleaning out a blockage in your artery," Wolfe says.

The program also monitors the use of the Platte River by endangered species, like the sandhill crane's close relative, the whooping crane.

Standing nearly 5 feet tall with a wingspan of 7.5 feet, whooping cranes are the tallest birds in North America. But despite their large size, they are rarely sighted.

"Currently, there are just over 500 whoopers in existence, and about a fourth of those are in captivity," says Martha Tacha, a Service biologist in Grand Island, Nebraska. At one time these birds ranged throughout mid-western North America, but declined due to hunting and detrimental habitat loss. By 1941, the number of whooping cranes had declined to only 15 birds, but the wild population that migrates through Nebraska slowly increased to 266 birds in 2007.

Tacha is the coordinator for the Cooperative Whooping Crane Tracking Project, which collects information on sightings of migrating whooping cranes from a network of federal and state agencies throughout the central flyway. Whooper Watch, a system of volunteers, also helps document sightings of whooping cranes in Nebraska. The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program will begin conducting aerial surveys of the Whooping cranes along the Platte River in mid-March.

The waterfowl spring migration and Platte River recovery efforts are among the Service's top wildlife resource priorities in central Nebraska. Another major challenge for the agency is reducing migratory bird mortality caused by collision with power lines.

"Reducing bird mortality from powerline collisions is a big challenge," Tacha says. According to the Service, transmission line collisions account for up to 170 million bird deaths each year. In the summer of 2007 reflective, glow-in-the-dark devices called "fireflies" were installed along transmission lines near and crossing the Platte River in central Nebraska to alert cranes and other birds flying near the lines. According to Tacha, the fireflies will likely reduce avian collisions. If the fireflies prove successful in reducing bird mortality, additional fireflies will likely be installed in the central flyway.

The sandhill crane migration is a spectacle of nature that brings together the local community of Kearney and attracts bird lovers from across the globe. During the months of March and April, the sights and sounds of the Platte River make it one of the most awe-inspiring landscapes on earth. The cranes themselves provide more than half a million reasons to preserve this unique part of central Nebraska. Each evening for a few weeks this spring, the cranes will perform on their Platte River stage; each flock's flight-pattern mimicking the braided waterways of the river below, as their audience watches in admiration. □

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