

NEBRASKA: PRAIRIE GROUSE AND CRANES

with Rick Wright
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The only thing better than birding is birding with friends, and I would have been hard pressed to come up with a more congenial set of companions. In five short and bird-filled days, we covered nearly a thousand miles, exploring many of the habitats that make Nebraska such a rewarding destination at any time of year.

We began in eastern Nebraska, with a brief visit to a bit of remnant tallgrass prairie that rang with the sweet, simple songs of newly returned Eastern Meadowlarks while a couple of Tree Swallows did their best to make it a spring. Our first full day's birding took us to one of the state's true natural jewels, the 1,600 acres of Fontenelle Forest. Scarce this year after a light acorn crop, a Red-headed Woodpecker was a good find in the lowlands, where we also watched the first of the tour's Eastern Bluebirds investigating a cavity. The bluff-top oak forest produced a pair of Carolina Wrens, skittish at first but soon giving patient observers spectacular up-close views.

After our first Runza lunch, we headed south on an increasingly cloudy afternoon to check sandpits, lakes, and marshes on the Missouri River floodplain. Reclusive Red Fox Sparrows eventually showed themselves well, and big, boisterous Harris's Sparrows sang from the thickets. The afternoon's biggest surprise was an immature Golden Eagle moving north; this is a rare bird in eastern Nebraska.

Supper at Bellevue's best Mexican restaurant was followed by an evening at Lake Manawa, an ancient oxbow of the Missouri now on the Iowa side of the river, where three American Woodcock buzzed and twittered and chipped in the chilly dusk.



The next morning found us headed west and into what was at first better weather. The first of many thousands of Sandhill Cranes greeted us just east of Grand Island, and by carefully checking the fields south of the Platte River between that city and Kearney, we had good looks at Ross's and Richardson's Cackling Geese, large numbers of arriving Blue-winged Teal, and a Harlan's Hawk.



A Turkey Vulture was a new bird for the tour, but the highlight of the day was standing on the banks of the Platte in the evening, watching and listening to the endless stream of Sandhill Cranes coming in to their river roost. A good meal in Kearney capped a day of very exciting birding.



We were up early the next morning to visit Fort Kearny. The weather had changed for the worse, and it was cold and windy as we stood watching the cranes in their thousands move off the river and into the fields. The Dark-eyed Junco flock, here as elsewhere heavily dominated by Slate-colored Juncos, also contained single Oregon and Cassiar Juncos. After another search through the cranes, we pointed the vans northwest to the Nebraska Sandhills.

The 20,000 square miles of grassy dunes are one of the most evocative landscapes in North America—and the site of one of the continent’s oddest features, the Nebraska National Forest, an entirely artificial woodland of conifers planted in the 1930s. Over the years, the area has been colonized by a number of surprising pioneers, and in spite of the wind and chill, we found Downy Woodpecker, White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches, and a single Townsend’s Solitaire during our brief visit.



Another hour's drive found us in Mullen, the largest (and the only) town in Hooker County. With 491 souls, Mullen accounts for 60% of the county's population, which exceeds the county's square mileage by 72. We checked in to the neat, modern motel, then piled in to the shuttle bus for the ride out to our big yellow blind on the edge of the dancing grounds of the Greater Prairie-Chickens.



Dozens of birds were feeding on the edges of the lek when we arrived, and the dance began in earnest not long thereafter. The howling wind deprived us of most of the auditory portion of the display, but even so there is nothing like the sight of the shoebox-shaped males, extravagant ear tufts blowing in the breeze and bright orange neck pouches a-bulge.



Supper at Big Red's was followed by the shortest night of the tour; our 5:15 morning departure was made only a little more humane by the fact that we had "gained" an hour by crossing into the Mountain time zone.



It was dark when we climbed into the schoolbus blind, but it wasn't long before we heard the wild gobbling of Sharp-tailed Grouse just outside. There were nine males on the lek, their bright white undertails visible even before sunrise; happily, the wind was calm and the birds close, so this time we were able not just to watch their insane gyrations but also to hear the rattles of their central tail feathers and the drumming of their feet.



By 7:20 the birds had tired, and their watchers were ready for a hearty breakfast in Mullen. The drive back to town was interrupted by an enormous Wild Turkey, but not even he could keep us from pancakes and waffles and omelets.

The drive back to Bellevue and the Missouri River was uneventful, but by the time we stopped at Walnut Creek for another Eastern Meadowlark “fix,” there was definitely something in the air. And when we left supper a couple of hours later, it was on the ground and on the rooftops, too; we could only be grateful that this late-season snow had held off as long as it did.



The next morning found a good four inches piled on top of the vans, but not even that could deter us from a final visit to Fontenelle Forest, which was even more beautiful in the snow. Swamp and Red Fox Sparrows lurked along the stream. A visually “Eastern” Towhee giving only Spotted Towhee calls was a reminder that even on the eastern border of the state we were still on the edge of the Great Plains, and the songs of Eastern Phoebes and the rattling wingbeats of an American Woodcock flushed from the trail assured us that even in the snow it was still spring.

Thanks to all the participants for their great company and generous good nature—I can’t wait until next time!

- Rick Wright, April 2011

Birds Seen or Heard

Snow Goose
Ross’s Goose
Cackling Goose
Canada Goose
Wood Duck
Gadwall
American Wigeon

Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
Northern Shoveler
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Canvasback
Redhead

Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Ruddy Duck

Ring-necked Pheasant
Sharp-tailed Grouse
Greater Prairie-Chicken
Wild Turkey

Pied-billed Grebe
Eared Grebe

Double-crested Cormorant

Great Blue Heron

Turkey Vulture
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Rough-legged Hawk
Golden Eagle

American Kestrel
Merlin

American Coot

Sandhill Crane

Killdeer

Greater Yellowlegs
American Woodcock

Ring-billed Gull
Franklin's Gull

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
Mourning Dove

Great Horned Owl

Belted Kingfisher

Red-headed Woodpecker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker

Eastern Phoebe

Blue Jay
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow

Horned Lark

Tree Swallow

Black-capped Chickadee

Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch

Brown Creeper

Carolina Wren

Eastern Bluebird
Hermit Thrush
American Robin

European Starling

Cedar Waxwing

Eastern Towhee
Eastern x Spotted Towhee
American Tree Sparrow
Red Fox Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
Harris's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco

Northern Cardinal

Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Western Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird

Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird

House Finch
American Goldfinch

House Sparrow

Mammals

Eastern Cottontail
Eastern Gray Squirrel
Eastern Fox Squirrel
Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel
White-tailed Deer
Mule Deer

