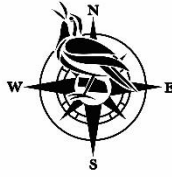


# Nebraska Geographic

*with ALAN J. BARTELS*

100ThingsSandhills@gmail.com



**March 6, 2024**

## March of the Cranes

In Nebraska, March and April are Sandhill Crane season.

Of course the birds don't know that – they regularly begin arriving in the Platte Valley around Valentines Day, hit peak numbers by St. Patrick's Day, and are mostly gone by Earth Day in April. But some years a few cranes arrive much earlier, and now, sandhill cranes are nesting in Nebraska again after an absence of nearly a century. But most of the big grey birds spend about a month in Nebraska bulking up for their continued journey to northern climes, which takes some of them as far away as Siberia, to nest.

Along with the massive hedge of cranes that migrates to Nebraska each spring comes a human flock of visitors from around the world hoping to see them. Over the last two decades, the number of sandhill cranes in Nebraska's spring migration has grown from 600,000 to more than 1 million. Our crane congregation is the largest on earth of any crane species. No wonder the birdwatchers migrate here, too.

Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary near Gibbon and The Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center are the two most popular crane watching attractions in Nebraska. Both destinations provide guided tours to see the birds. This is not the same as seeing the cranes feeding in corn fields while driving dirt roads or down I-80. Not even close.

In the morning, Rowe and Crane Trust tours sneak into viewing blinds along the river before sunrise. As the first light of the day creases the horizon, the birds begin to stir. A loud noise, camera flash, or a solitary bald eagle taking to the air is enough to send a mass eruption of cranes skyward. The first time I experienced it I could feel the calls and wingbeats of thousands of birds resonating within me. I looked at a woman next to be in the blind and tears were rolling down her cheeks.

After a day spent feeding in wet meadows and farm fields, and resting, the cranes return to the safety of the shallow river for their nighttime roost. The evening tours are often punctuated with sunsets of amber and pink streaked across a canvas of western sky as strings of cranes begin gathering on sandbars. The evening tours are probably my favorite and often a little warmer.

There are other sandhill crane viewing options. The Nature Conservancy offers riverside tours for sandhill crane viewing along the Platte River. And the Central Platte Natural Resources District manages several crane viewing decks between Grand Island and Gibbon where no fee is charged. Fort Kearney State Historical Park on the south side of the Platte River between Gibbon and Kearney was among the first entities to cater to crane watchers decades ago.

The park's many amenities includes a trail leading to the Platte River. The historic bridge there is a popular destination for crane watchers. A Nebraska Park Entry Permit is required on each vehicle entering the park.

Along with the numbers of cranes increasing, they have begun reclaiming some of their historic habitat upstream along the upper Platte and North Platte rivers.

Dusty Trails is an ecotourism outfitter in North Platte that has started providing guided crane experiences in recent years. And further west at Lewellen, The Most Unlikely Place is a seasonal café and art gallery that caters to birders there for a much smaller migration experience of a few tens of thousands of birds. That's a far cry from the hundreds of thousands around Grand Island and Kearney, but there is a lot less traffic, and fewer people, too.

No matter where they gather in the Cornhusker State, birds of a feather attract a human following – at least when it comes to the annual springtime march of sandhill cranes to Nebraska's Platte River Valley.

- Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center, Wood River, (308) 382-1820
- Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary, Gibbon, (308) 468-5282
- Fort Kearney State Historical Park, Kearney, (308) 865-5305
- The Nature Conservancy (Nebraska) (402) 722-4440
- Central Platte NRD, Grand Island, (308) 385-6282
- Dusty Trails, North Platte, (308) 530-0048
- The Most Unlikely Place, Lewellen, (308) 778-9557