

PLATTE RIVER CRANES TOUR

Species List 2019



March 9 - 15, 2019

Platte River Cranes

A Migration Spectacular

With Ed and Sil Pembleton, guides, Sharon Guenther, tour host and 11 participants: Brenda, Holly, Tom, Ihor, Vera, Karen, Rita, Ruth, Myrna, Ron, and Michal

Compiled by Ed and Sil Pembleton

A hearty and adventurous group explored the prairies, wetlands and the Platte River to witness the spectacular spring migration of Sandhill Cranes and waterfowl. A Kingfisher rattled a welcome at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie. Where our first Meadowlarks flitted away as we traced the snow covered wagon ruts of the historic military wagon trail. Horned Larks fed on the bare edges of the roads and exploded into the air as we drove back to the interstate and headed west.

This was an excitingly different year for weather phenomenon. A very late thaw and north winds had delayed northward migration by a week or more. South winds brought large squadrons of Sandhill Cranes, Snow Geese, Canada Geese and a few White-fronted Geese. Numbers of geese and cranes were building all the time we toured the area, but ducks were scarcely seen. Arriving birds found their wetlands, ponds and the Platte River still frozen over with little or no open water. Geese and cranes fed late and then changed their roosting sites to large open fields or wide frozen stretches of the river. A strategy apparently less suitable for ducks... Coyotes serenaded on both banks of the river as we left the viewing blinds in the dark.

Each day the South winds grew stronger, cranes and geese arrive in droves. Snow Geese accumulated in cornfields and rose up from the ground in giant clouds. Canada and White-fronted Geese shared the corn and flew late into the night.

And then, we began to experience most all the kinds of weather that Nebraska could supply. First warm air caused thick evening fog. Then came mostly sunny day filled with even more large flocks of Sandhill cranes and geese. A Prairie Falcon punctuated our morning with an exclamatory stop on a power pole in front of our vehicles. A large flock of Ring-necked Pheasants brought us to a stop as they flew from feeding field to cover. By late afternoon, clouds closed the sky, winds began to accelerate, cranes and geese fed voraciously. We retreated to dinner and learned that a major cyclonic front was developing.

Known as a "Bomb Cyclone," the storm developed some snow, very high winds and record drops in barometric pressure throughout the night and into the next day. Even the birds remained grounded for

most of the day. We were rewarded on our final day. Snow Geese in uncountable (almost unimaginable) numbers were streaming west overhead as we headed east to the Lincoln airport.

(HO)= Distinctive enough to be counted as heard only

(I)=introduced

(#)= Number of species in the family

(#) = Number of days of the trip seen when in the species line

BIRDS (54 species recorded)

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: Anatidae (14)

Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens*—(7) Exceptionally large numbers of snows seen every day along the Platte. On the 15th, we saw amazing numbers migrating west over the interstate. Millions would be a good “guesstimate.”

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*—(2) Mixed in with Canada geese and sometimes with Snow geese. Often heard calling as they flew over at night.

Cackling Goose *Branta hutchinsii*—(2) Seen and heard from Rowe Sanctuary viewing blind as they flew over with a flock of Canada geese. Identifiable in some fields where they fed with *B. canadensis*.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*—(7) Non-migratory birds near Lincoln, but large numbers migrating along the Platte. Greater numbers than usual, because the Rainwater Basin Wetlands were still frozen.

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*—Usually a treat on this tour, but winter hung on so lack of open water kept early “woodies” and many other early migrating ducks south of Nebraska.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*—(1) Ponds and small areas of open water and one hosted a single pair.

American Wigeon *Mareca americana*—Flowing drainage return to the Platte.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*—(6) Flying over the Platte and on any open water.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*—(4) Several flights passed over the viewing blinds.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*—(1) Small pond on Bike Hike trail near the Platte with a mixed flock of ducks.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*—(1) Usually numerous, but this year, a single individual in the mixed flock above.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*—(1) Single bird, species most likely lesser scaup.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*—(1) Small mixed flock of ducks included two Buffleheads

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*—(1) same flock as above

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*—one pair in with above flock.

NEW WORLD QUAIL: Odontophoridae (1)

Northern Bobwhite *Colinus virginianus*—(1) What a wonderful surprise when a covey of eight came to the Crane Trust feeders

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS AND ALLIES: Phasianidae (2)

Ring-necked Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (I)—(2) One of the exciting treats was a large flock of 40-50 pheasants (with lots of roosters) flying in front of the van from their feeding area at Rowe to tallgrass prairie. It was a wished for bird by several and a lifer for a couple of participants.

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*—(3) A flock of approximately 40 turkeys feeding in the corn among the Sandhill cranes made quite a contrast.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae (3)

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* (1)—(7) From Lincoln to Kearney and back, we encountered Rock Doves.

Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (1)—(6) This species is spreading rapidly in Nebraska and was found in almost all habitats.

Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*—(6) Mourning doves were seen in almost every habitat, but it seems in smaller numbers than Eurasian Collared-Doves.

CRANES: Gruidae (1)

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis*—(7) They bring grace to Nebraska every spring, including this one, when they showed up just a couple of days before the tour due to north winds and frozen rivers. Nevertheless, they filled the air with their calls and blessed the skies with long chevrons as they settled on the roosts on the icy frozen Platte River. South winds prevailed and the number of cranes swelled as the river began to dissolve away its icy cover.

Whooping Crane *Grus americana*—There were no early arriving Whoopers this year.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae (1)

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*—(1) Single bird seen and heard as it flew over us. Usually a common species on this trip.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: Scolopacidae (0)

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*—One was heard on the Rowe Crane Cam the day prior to this trip.

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae (1)

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*—(1) Single bird flew over a pond with open water.

HAWKS, KITES AND EAGLES: Accipitridae (5)

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*—(1) Female Harrier hunted over tallgrass prairie restoration area near the Hike Bike Trail.

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*—(1)

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*—(5) Bald Eagles were common along the Platte River with four or five seen at one time. One group of four consisting of two adults and two juveniles was on the ground and appeared to be feeding on a carcass.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*—(6) Telephone and power poles, and fence posts were frequently decorated by Red-tails in various color phases.

Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus*—(2) Watchful eyes picked through the Red-tails and sorted out Rough-legged Hawks on two different days.

KINGFISHERS: Alcedinidae (1)

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*—Spotted our first outing on Spring Creek Prairie in the stream below the spring.

WOODPECKERS: Picidae (3)

Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*—(4) Seen at Spring Creek Prairie and near feeders at Rowe Sanctuary and the Crane Trust.

Downy Woodpecker *Dryobates pubescens*—(3) Another “feeder” bird, but also seen on the Bike Hike trail.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*—(4) Flickers were spotted around feeders and on dead snags at Ft. Kearney.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae (1)**Prairie Falcon** *Falco mexicanus*—(1) A first sighting for this tour. A large bird, likely a female, landed on a power pole near the van, flew behind us and then flew toward the east. One of participant managed to get a photo

CROWS AND JAYS: Corvidae (2)

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*—(4) Seen around feeders and farmsteads in limited numbers.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*—(6) Crows were common around livestock operations and in urban areas.

LARKS: Alaudidae (1)

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*—(2) Spotted along the road edge and nearby fields on the way to Spring Creek Prairie and then again on country roads between Kearney and Grand Island. Usually present in numbers too great to count, this species had not returned in large numbers due to the snow cover and frozen landscape.

TITS AND CHICKADEES: Paridae (1)

Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus*—(3) Feeders at Rowe, the Crane Trust and Fort Kearney all hosted small flocks of Chickadees.

THRUSHES: Turdidae (2)

Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*—(1) The open stream and riparian woods at Spring Creek Prairie apparently offered everything needed for these birds to hang on until spring.

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*—(3) These hardy birds seem to appear in any places where they could find open water—a limited resource during this trip.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae (1)

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* (1)—(6) Every urban, suburban and rural landscape had flocks and some gatherings large enough to form murmurations.

FINCHES AND EUPHONIAS: Fringillidae (2)

House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus*—Feeding stations at Rowe Sanctuary and the Crane Trust hosted feeding House Finches.

American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis*—They greeted us at Spring Creek Prairie and then at all the feeding stations we visited.

NEW WORLD SPARROWS: Passerellidae (5)

American Tree Sparrow *Spizelloides arborea*—(3) One of the most numerous sparrows, especially at feeding stations.

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*—(3) Most brushy habitats and feeding stations contained a small flock of Juncos. One “Pink sided” morph was spotted at Rowe.

Harris's Sparrow *Zonotrichia querula*—(1) A perennial favorite on this trip and a lifer for many, we finally found several birds at the Crane Trust feeding station. A fan club assembled at the window and enjoyed these boldly patterned birds.

White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*—(1) Not as common as usual, but we found several at the feeders.

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*—(2) Mixed in with the Harris's and White-throated, they darted about in the shrubs at both Rowe and the Crane Trust feeders.

NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS AND ORIOLES: Icteridae (5)

Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta*—(4) Seen and heard singing on a gravel road near Rowe Sanctuary.

Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*—(4) First seen at Spring Creek and then in many fields between Grand Island and Kearney. Both species are present here and some were assumed to be Eastern

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*—(7) From Lincoln to Kearney and back, flocks of RWBs were common, but numbers were not as large as would be expected. A few females were spotted at feeders and males seemed only vaguely interested in setting up territories.

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*—(1) Mixed flocks of blackbirds in several locations.

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*—(1) Single individual in a mixed flock just east of Lincoln.

CARDINALS, GROSBEAKS AND ALLIES: Cardinalidae (1)

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*—(6) Cardinals continue to increase in numbers and were a daily bright spot—especially when fog encircled the landscape.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS: Passeridae (1)

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (5)—Parking lots and bird feeders consistently maintained a few, but large flocks seem to be rare now.

Mammals (6 species)

Opossum *Didelphis virginiana* —(1) Another new addition to the species list. Spotted roadside as we returned from an evening trip to the Rowe viewing blinds, it was an exciting find for those from further north who had never seen one in the wild.

Fox Squirrel *Sciurus niger*— (1) Cold and windy weather kept this species out of sight most of the trip, but one did favor us and this was a “lifer” for one participant.

Eastern Cottontail *Sylvilagus virginianus*—Spring Creek Prairie near the visitor's center.

White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus*—(1) A large herd (15-20) was found in the campground at the Ft. Kearney Recreation area.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*—(1) Evidence from scat at Spring Creek Prairie.

Coyote *Canis latrans*—(1 – HO) New addition to the species list Coyote choir serenaded up and down river banks as we left the viewing blinds at Rowe Sanctuary.

Mink *Neovison vison* – (1) A new and seldom seen mammal for the list. First we saw tracks in the snow leading to the open water, and then we got a quick sighting of a very large weasel bounding through the cattails at Spring Creek Prairie. Initially we thought it might even be River Otter. However, the lack of an otter-like slide in the tracks, and a check with the naturalists at Spring Creek led to the conclusion that it was a mink.