



GREAT BIRDING PROJECTS



An approach to bird-related editing, education, tourism, and marketing

23 March 2012

Birds over Nebraska

Lessons from the cranes and much more

There is, perhaps, nothing quite as impressive among bird-sights in North America as the vision of Sandhill Cranes covering the skies in central Nebraska along the route of the Platte River. Every March, and leading into April, the skies and the fields in Nebraska, roughly from the towns of Grand Island to Kearney, can fill with these cranes numbering into the hundreds of thousands, accompanied by a cacophony of their loud and impressive rattling calls.

Depending on seasonal timing, the impression can be enhanced by the added view of hundreds of thousands of geese - mostly Canada, Snow, and Greater White-fronted - all in the area at the same time.

The experience has been appreciated for decades, and the locals in Nebraska have now become accustomed to hosting avitourists and ecotourists from near and far. Indeed, the whole "festival" scene is almost blended in central Nebraska, with formal and informal events, tours, art shows, speakers, and interpretation occurring throughout the "crane season." There are ongoing events every day. The cranes are the main draw, whether one drives through the area during the day watching the flocks feeding on the farm fields, attends the spectacle of a morning rising in a blind, or simply visits a bridge across the Platte at sunset to watch the gathering of a huge crane roosting.



Sandhill Cranes from the Gibbon Bridge

I have visited this area many times, and having just returned from a trip just a couple of days ago, I am continually impressed with the human response as well as the wildlife spectacle. The events, as just indicated, seem to flow continually. A visitor can pick and choose the tour, the site, the interpretation, the talk, the experience. The local hotels, restaurants, and gas stations are now used to us avitourists. The participants, moreover, need not be "dedicated birders," but simply the curious and very casual bird watcher.

The visitors are overwhelmingly friendly and mutually helpful, willing to assist fellow crane-watchers with clue and tips on where to go and how to take advantage of options as yet untried.

These opportunities are now spreading. Details on three parallel activities, beyond the cranes, are readily available.

First, there are offers to go visit different Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-chicken leks in the Sandhills area of Nebraska, about two or three hours north of Kearney. These grassland dancing grounds continue to draw birders and wildlife photographers aplenty who wish to experience the amazing performances.

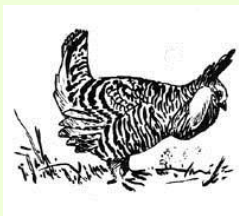
Second, there are temptations to visit the Harlan County Dam and Reservoir one hour to the south of Kearney to view a number of American White Pelicans, to watch Bald Eagles, and to see migrating waterfowl. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers operates a local visitor center there, and the town welcomes birders.

Third, for an area closer to the Grand Island to Kearney corridor, the Rainwater Basin (and the associated Rainwater Basin Joint Venture partnership), boasts a fascinating mosaic of wetland and grassland habitats to attract all sorts of waterfowl, shorebirds, and songbirds. These individual sites may be state WMAs (Waterfowl Management Areas), federal WPAs (Waterfowl Production Areas, secured by Duck Stamp dollars), and some private properties open to the public (or certainly visible from the public roads).

All these experiences add up to a sophisticated avitourism experience. They also reflect years of experience, of trial and error, and of learning. And to this you can add pleasant surroundings, food, history, and culture.

Still, with all the crane and bird exposure in central Nebraska, I am surprised over residents who have never taken the time to view the cranes, let alone the other birds. Two residents of Grand Island, including one hotel staffer, admitted to me during my visit that they had "heard about the cranes but have never visited or seen them." There is, clearly, much yet to be accomplished.

A Bob Hines Biography:



Bob Hines (1912-1994) was an extraordinary wildlife artist. Without formal training, he first used his artistic talents for the Ohio Division of Conservation and Natural Resources, starting in 1939, and then joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1948 as their artist-illustrator in residence. He was asked to draw the 1946-1947 Migratory Bird Hunting [Duck] Stamp; he fully illustrated Rachel Carson's *The Edge of the Sea*, and he drew birds, mammals, fish, and other wildlife that even today is available as free clip-art. His dedication to the "Duck Stamp" led to a formal selection process with judges, standards, and clear rules for the art contest, starting in the early 1950s.

If there are small pieces of artwork in this GBP bulletin, such as the two bird species on the masthead or the Greater-Prairie-chicken pictured above, they are invariably art that Bob Hines drew.

A biography on the life of Bob Hines has recently been published. It is highly recommended:

Bob Hines: National Wildlife Artist

by John D. Juriga

Beaver's Pond Press

\$18.00

ISBN: 978-1-59298-440-4

Words to Consider:

"I thought of my friends who never take walks in Oklahoma 'for there was nothing to see.' I was amazed and grieved at their blindness. I longed to open their eyes to the wonders around them, to persuade people to love and cherish nature."

- Margaret Morse Nice, *Research is a Passion with Me* (1979)

For contact and more information:

If you wish, you can contact me concerning your avitourism interests, site and trail/byway evaluations, and group presentations. (A list of my standard 2012 talks can be sent to you on request.)

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