

NEBRASKA: SANDHILL CRANES & PRAIRIE GROUSE

MARCH 10–17, 2018



Sandhill Cranes, Gibbon Bridge © Rick Wright

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By Rick Wright



Sandhill Cranes, Gibbon Bridge, March 13. Photo: Rick Wright

Birders are often accused of being obsessed with the singular, the unusual, the rare. Our short March week in Nebraska offered us plenty of that. Most notable, perhaps, was an early-arriving Whooping Crane, which we were fortunate enough to see not once but twice, first on a field with its gray cousins on our arrival along the central Platte River on the second day of the tour, and then, thanks to Danny's eagle eye, at roost on our last day among the tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes in the shallows of the river just

upstream from the famous Alda Bridge.



An early Whooping Crane among Sandhill Cranes, near Doniphan, March 11. Photo: Rick Wright

Nearly as exciting by regional standards was the adult Lesser Black-backed Gull in the massive gull roost at Lake Manawa on our first evening together, and the three dramatically dark Harlan's Hawks we found on our way west later in the week were desirable birds by anyone's measure, as was the spectacular dark-morph Ferruginous Hawk that let us clamber out of our van to enjoy amazing close-range scope views of this scarce prairie buteo.



Dark-morph Ferruginous Hawk near Mullen, March 15. Photo: Rick Wright

Occupying an even more restricted range on its southern Great Plains wintering grounds, dashing Harris's Sparrows also performed well this year, with one at a Carter Lake feeder among the very first birds we saw; the shelterbelts along the saline marshes of the Ceresco Flats offered good views of a half dozen or more, and the single adult we found in the town of Mullen was a real rarity at that westerly location.

Two other species, though each globally abundant, occupied the pinnacle of rarity for this tour: both the three Mountain Bluebirds we saw in the lower reaches of Cottonwood Canyon and the startling seven Common Redpolls in the Hyannis Cemetery were entirely new for the tour's now quite lengthy cumulative list.



Mountain Bluebird, Cottonwood Canyon, March 16. Photo: Rick Wright

The redpolls, feeding at close range in dense grass beneath eastern red cedars, were the first I had seen in decades in Nebraska; even in “invasion” years, this species is typically gone from the state by the end of February, and to see them in shirt-sleeve weather on a calm mid-March day was a double treat.



Common Redpoll, Hyannis, March 16. Photo: Rick Wright

These and our other rarities and surprises provided a good dose of spice to our birding days. But this springtime tour is ultimately less about scarcity than abundance—and there is nowhere else in the inland United States that so many birds can be seen in such massive flocks as we enjoy every year on the central Platte. There truly are no words to describe the congregations of northward migrants in this part of the world in March: even such extreme adjectives as sublime, overwhelming, otherworldly fail to capture the experience of watching hundreds of thousands of cranes and waterfowl in the air and on the water, a phenomenon that can only be felt, not named.



Snow and Ross's Geese, Lake Wanahoo, March 11. Photo: Rick Wright

Thanks to a stubbornly late spring to our north, the great flocks of Snow Geese were still staging in eastern and central Nebraska, waiting impatiently (and noisily) for the waters to open closer to their arctic breeding grounds. The huge gatherings of these birds, with plenty of Blue and Ross's geese among them, were literally innumerable, but certainly there were days when we saw more than a quarter million birds in the air, on the water, and on the fields.

The *Branta* geese were much less abundant this year. Many of the Canada Geese we saw were likely local breeders, and Cackling Geese—almost as common earlier in the season as Snow Geese—were lingering in just small numbers, with daily counts only in the low hundreds. What we might have missed in abundance, though, we made up for in outstandingly good views, especially at North Platte.



Cackling Goose, North Platte, March 15. Photo: Rick Wright

I think we all came away with a much better sense of how to look for this delightful little goose even in areas where it is less common.

Inevitably, all of those sights and experiences would pale in comparison to the great flocks of Sandhill Cranes, which were everywhere on the central Platte River between Grand Island and Elm Creek.



Sandhill Cranes, Gibbon Bridge, March 12. Photo: Rick Wright

The sight and the sound of these ancient birds returning each evening to the river, as they have for thousands, even millions of years, is among the most moving outdoor experiences a birder—or for that matter, a non-birder—can have. We watched the morning and evening flights from the Gibbon Bridge, the Alda Bridge, and Fort Kearny, each site offering a unique perspective and background against which to marvel at the sheer numbers of cranes. Corn stubble and pastures were full of birds all day long, in densely packed flocks and small parties lining the country roads.



Sandhill Cranes, Fort Kearny, March 13. Photo: Rick Wright

Virtually never out of sight, the cranes soon became less a part of the landscape than a landscape themselves, especially when the evening flocks formed vast feathered continents reaching nearly bank to bank across the Platte.

Finally tearing ourselves away from the river spectacle, we drove north and west into the Sandhills, nearly 20,000 square miles of grassed dunes. Some of the large marshes here were covered with waterfowl, including large numbers of Redheads and scattered pairs of Trumpeter Swans. Our goal, though, was to see the springtime rituals of the Sharp-tailed Grouse and the Greater Prairie-Chicken, two of the most romantically characteristic birds of the Great Plains.



Grouse blind near Seneca. Photo: Rick Wright

Our cozy schoolbus blinds put us right on the leks of both species. We spent our first morning watching the crazy gyrations of cackling Sharp-tails, only briefly distracted by a beautiful female Richardson's Merlin and the Western Meadowlark singing beneath the windows.



Sharp-tailed Grouse near Mullen, March 14. Photo: Rick Wright

With eleven males on the lek, the show was especially good this year; Sharp-tail leks are often used by barely half that many displaying birds. Prairie-chickens gather in larger gangs, and on the morning after visiting the Sharp-tailed Grouse, we saw no fewer than thirty-two Greater Prairie-chickens booming on their own dancing grounds.



Greater Prairie-Chickens near Seneca, March 15. Photo: Rick Wright

Those were early mornings, but well worth it when the sun rose on the hooting, cackling, and stamping of these original inhabitants of the Plains.

It is hard to imagine a more evocative way to experience the prairies, and harder to imagine a more pleasant way than in the good company of this year's group. I look forward to our next birding adventures together—hard-pressed as we may be to equal the excitement of this one.



Greater Prairie-chicken near Seneca, March 12. Photo: Rick Wright

ITINERARY

March 10: assemble at 2:00. Carter Lake, Lake Manawa; early supper 4:00-5:30 at La Mesa in Council Bluffs. Return to Lake Manawa for gulls and woodcock, 5:35-7:10 pm. Warm, in the 40s, with the afternoon's breeze weakening considerably as the evening advanced. Back at hotel 7:30 pm.

March 11: breakfast in hotel. Left Carter Lake 7:20 am; light snow, icy roads, temperature 34F. Arrived Lake Wanahoo 8:15; 30 degrees, brisk north wind, cloudy. Ceresco Flats 9:40-10:40. Lunch 12:45-2:00 in Grand Island. South to Doniphan area; arrived at Kearney hotel 4:35. Clouds lifted, wind dropped considerably, temperature rose to 39F. Supper in Kearney 5:15 to

6:00 pm. South and east along river to Gibbon Bridge. Gibbon Bridge 6:30 to 8:00 pm. Clear, 30F.

March 12: breakfast in hotel. Left Kearney 7:00 am; clear, light winds, 17F. Gibbon Bridge 7:20-9:00. Brunch in Kearney. Harlan County Lake, Funk Lagoon, Prairie Dog Lagoon. Return to hotel 4:20 pm. Dinner in Kearney 5:00-6:30 pm. Left Kearney 7:00 pm; Fort Kearny 7:15-8:35 pm. Light breeze much of the day, clear until late afternoon, high temperature 46F.

March 13: breakfast in hotel. Left Kearny 7:00 am; clear, calm, 23 F. Fort Kearny 7:15-8:30. Return to hotel. Left hotel 9:40 am. Ravenna Marsh. Buffalo County Lake. Broken Bow sewage ponds. Lunch in Broken Bow. Purdum Road. Arrive Mullen 3:20 pm. Walk in town. Dinner 5:30-7:00 pm. Clear, very light breeze, 53 F.

March 14: clear, calm, 30F. Left hotel 5:30 am. Sh-tailed grouse lek 5:46-9:05 am. Back at hotel 9:25. Breakfast in Mullen 9:40 to 10:50. Quick grocery shopping. Break in hotel until 12:25. Clear, breezy, 56 F. West on Hwy 2 to marshes and Hyannis cemetery. 68F. Return to hotel 5:20. Dinner 5:50-7:15 pm.

March 15: clear, slight breeze, 35F. Left hotel 5:30 am. Prairie chickens 6:00 to 8:20 am. Back at hotel 8:45 am. Breakfast in Mullen 8:55 to 10:15 am. Left hotel 10:55 am. South to North Platte. Cody Park 1:15 to 1:50. Lunch at Subway 1:55 to 2:30. Cottonwood Canyon. 68F, windy. Arrive Grand Island hotel 4:55 pm. Supper in hotel 5:30 to 7:00. Leave hotel 7:15 pm. Cranes at Alda Road. Windy, mostly clear. Return to hotel 8:30 pm.

March 16: breakfast in hotel 6:15. Left hotel 7:15. 40F, windy. Alda Bridge. 37F, windy, occasional light sprinkles. Crane Trust. Back at hotel 9:40. Left hotel 10:15. Mormon Island, Stuhr Museum moat, Alda sewage ponds, Alda gravel pit. Windy, 35 F. Arrive Gretna 1:00 pm. Runza lunch. Schram State Park and nature trail; windy, 37 F, cloudy with occasional light sprinkles. Springfield gravel pit. Arrive hotel in Carter Lake 4:00 pm. Windy, cloudy, thunderstorm with pea-sized hail. Left for dinner 5:15 pm. Rain, breezy, had to drive around Omaha because of traffic. Return to hotel 7:35 pm; rain, breezy.



With Mitch Glidden after breakfast at the Meadowlark Café, Mullen. Photo: Rick Wright

BIRDS

Waterfowl

Greater White-fronted Goose, *Anser albifrons*: small numbers at scattered sites, total less than 100 for the tour; a very common migrant in early spring, the vast majority had already passed north.

Snow Goose, *Chen caerulescens*: incredibly abundant this year, with flocks of tens of thousands on lakes, sandpits, and fields, enormous numbers passing overhead. Many Blue Geese in the flocks, with excellent views of that morph at close range our first afternoon at Lake Manawa. Impossible to guess how many, but a total of half a million is a plausible, if imprecise, guess.

Ross's Goose, *Chen rossii*: common throughout, with every large goose flock containing anywhere from one to a dozen.

Cackling Goose, *Branta hutchinsii*: a fine opportunity to get to know this bird, which is uncommon to the east of Nebraska. Small numbers everywhere, the largest flocks on the pond in Cody Park, North Platte, where we had approximately 120 for close study.

Canada Goose, *Branta canadensis*: pairs or small gatherings present on nearly every wetland. Most were probably of the breeding race *maxima*, which is native to the Nebraska Sandhills and widely introduced elsewhere; smaller, shorter-billed birds represented migrants of the *moffiti* type.



Trumpeter Swan, *Cygnus buccinator*: one pair on Ravenna Marsh and a single, probably winged bird at Cody Park. Three or four pairs on the big Sandhills marshes, including one neck-collared bird. Nearly extinct a hundred years ago, this species is once again an uncommon winterer across Nebraska and a common breeder in the Sandhills.

Wood Duck, *Aix sponsa*: small numbers in eastern Nebraska, the bulk apparently yet to arrive this spring. Threatened with extinction just eighty years ago, this species is now common in appropriate habitat across Nebraska, and is the most abundant breeding duck in the lowland forests of the Missouri River.

Gadwall, *Anas strepera*: common throughout, especially on the largest lakes and marshes. A common Sandhills breeder.

American Wigeon, *Anas americana*: this very uncommon Sandhills breeder is a slightly later arrival than some of the other dabbling ducks. We found scattered singles and pairs on several roadside ponds and marshes, for a total of less than 30.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*: moderate or small numbers throughout, with the trip total somewhat more than 200 individuals. This is a common and widespread migrant, winterer, and breeder in Nebraska.

Blue-winged Teal, *Anas discors*: latest of the puddle ducks to arrive, we finally saw three birds at the Alda Bridge on March 15, and a couple more in Grand Island that same day. Once they are in in the spring, Blue-winged Teal are among the state's most abundant breeding ducks.

Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*: common throughout, total well more than 500. A common Sandhills breeder.

Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*: peak spring counts can be extremely high, but most are gone from Nebraska by the beginning of March. This year we found birds at nearly every stop on

the Platte River, with courting parties nearly constantly overhead; very good looks at some of the smaller lakes and marshes throughout. A fairly common Sandhills breeder.

Green-winged Teal, *Anas crecca*: common throughout in small flocks, with about 250 on the shores of Harlan County Lake. An uncommon breeder across the state, but especially frequent in the Sandhills.

Redhead *Aythya americana*: very good numbers throughout, especially at Harlan County Lake, where it was by far the most abundant of the diving ducks. A common breeder in the Sandhills.

Canvasback, *Aythya valisineria*: small numbers at Harlan County Lake and in the Sandhills; the largest numbers, approaching 70 individuals, were on Whitman Lake in the Sandhills, where it is an uncommon breeder.

Ring-necked Duck, *Aythya collaris*: small numbers throughout, most common on the big Sandhills marshes but even there no more than a couple score. A very common migrant and rare breeder in Nebraska.

Greater Scaup, *Aythya marila*: one male on Springfield sandpit March 16. Uncommon to scarce in the spring, occurring between February and May.

Lesser Scaup, *Aythya marila*: small numbers at most sites, but some lakes had flocks of 60 or more; highest counts on the Sandhills marshes, where this very abundant spring migrant breeds in small numbers.

Bufflehead, *Bucephala albeola*: small numbers throughout, total ca. 100 individuals. A common spring migrant, numbers usually peaking the first of April.

Common Goldeneye, *Bucephala clangula*: surprisingly large numbers on virtually all larger bodies of water, with a trip total of more than 100. A common winter resident and uncommon spring migrant along the rivers and on large lakes and sandpits, but often most are gone by early March.



Hooded Merganser, *Lophodytes cucullatus*: small numbers in eastern Nebraska and Iowa, with a trip total of less than 60; recent years have seen higher counts on the tour. Uncommon as a spring migrant in eastern Nebraska, very much so in the Sandhills; there are a very few breeding records.

Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser*: large numbers at Lake Manawa, Harlan County Lake, and other large bodies of water, including the Sandhills marshes. Total probably approaching 1500 individuals. A common winterer and very common spring migrant across the state.

Ruddy Duck, *Oxyura jamaicensis*: very small numbers at a couple of sites, with a trip total of about 15. An entirely white-headed individual at Avocet WMA in the Sandhills was a good find by Danny. A common Sandhills breeder, with most arriving in late March or early April.

Pheasants and Grouse

Ring-necked Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*: a dozen near Rowe Sanctuary. This introduced bird is variably common in grasslands and on brushy edges in eastern Nebraska and the Sandhills.

Wild Turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*: startlingly low numbers, with no more than a dozen all week. Extinct in Nebraska by the turn of the twentieth century, Eastern Turkeys are now expected over much of the state, including some western areas where they probably did not occur historically; totals in the low hundreds are expected in the course of a week's birding.

Sharp-tailed Grouse, *Tympanuchus phasianellus*: eleven males on the lek gave breathtakingly close views as they whirled and hooted. A common resident of the Sandhills and Pine Ridge grasslands, less common in southwest Nebraska.



Greater Prairie-Chicken, *Tympanuchus cupido*: two males displaying adjacent to Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, one of which approached the Sharp-tails closely before being driven off. The next day saw 32 males on a lek north of Mullen, very actively displaying; it is possible that two or three hens were visting the lek, which would account for the level of frenzy. Now very uncommon in southeastern Nebraska, this charismatic bird is common in the Sandhills and the northeast, locally so elsewhere in the state.



Pigeons

Rock Pigeon, *Columba livia*: common throughout in towns and around grain elevators. Introduced.

Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*: two in Council Bluffs on our first evening; common in small towns everywhere west of Omaha. This introduced species is now common in towns and around grain elevators everywhere in the state.

Mourning Dove, *Zenaida macroura*: notably scarce this year, with one or two seen south of Grand Island March 12. Abundant across the state as a breeder, but most arrive at the very end of March; winter numbers vary, but were obviously very low this year.

Rails

American Coot, *Fulica americana*: numbers increased each day, beginning with just a few at Lake Manawa to flocks of several dozen on the larger Sandhills marshes. An abundant April migrant and, especially in the Sandhills, breeder.

Cranes

Sandhill Crane, *Grus canadensis*: many thousands on fields from Grand Island west, gathering into roosts of tens of thousands each evening. We watched the morning and evening movements from three different sites, each time seeing massive flocks low overhead as the birds flew to and from their daytime feeding grounds on the fields.



Whooping Crane, *Grus americana*: surely the same individual, one at close range near Doniphan on March 11 and then at the Alda Bridge roost March 16. This species is very rare in March, most moving through in early April, but occasionally a bird will winter away from the main Aransas flock and start its migration early with the Sandhill Cranes.

Plovers

Killdeer, *Charadrius vociferus*: scattered singles and pairs, with a total for the trip of about a dozen. An abundant breeder and migrant, just beginning to arrive in mid-March.

Sandpipers

American Woodcock, *Philohela minor*: an oddly subdued performance at Lake Manawa March 10, with only three or four birds buzzing and only one seen moderately well in flight display. Common in spring along the Missouri, lower Platte, and Republican Rivers.

Greater Yellowlegs, *Tringa melanoleuca*: total of five individuals on the central Platte; in some years we see more, in other years none at all of this early migrant. A very common migrant across the state, most abundant in April.

Gulls

Franklin's Gull, *Leucophaeus pipixcan*: very good numbers this year at Lake Manawa and at Harlan County Lake, with about a dozen at the former and two or three at the latter

location. Hugely abundant in April and October, but usually scarce or absent this early in the spring; there are a few winter records of this long-distance neotropical migrant.



Ring-billed Gull, *Larus delawarensis*: common to abundant over almost every body of water, with a roost of several thousand forming at Lake Manawa. A very common migrant throughout the state.

Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*: one at Lake Manawa, two at Harlan County Lake, and a surprising two on the loafing bar at Cody Park at North Platte. An uncommon spring migrant, much scarcer in the west.

Lesser Black-backed Gull, *Larus fuscus*: an adult at Lake Manawa our first evening. Still scarce but increasing in the area, truly unexpected nowhere.

Cormorants

Double-crested Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax auritus*: just arriving, with the bulk to pass through in early April. We saw two or three at Harlan County Lake and one at Springfield sandpit. Abundant migrant and locally common breeder throughout the state.

Pelicans

American White Pelican, *Pelecanus erythrorhynchus*: a total of about 60 on Harlan County Lake, in the air and on the water. An abundant April migrant and non-breeding summerer across Nebraska.

Hérons

Great Blue Heron, *Ardea herodias*: one at Lake Manawa, three at Harlan County Lake, one at Cody Park. Common as a breeder across the state, with typical arrivals in mid-March.

Hawks

Bald Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*: common throughout, and rarely out of sight at large wetlands and on rivers; several could be counted on to soar over any large crane roost. Extirpated as a breeder by the early twentieth century, this is now once again a very common migrant, locally abundant winterer, and locally common breeder across the state—and often the most common raptor in mid-March.

Northern Harrier, *Circus cyaneus*: total of six, including three silver males. Common migrant and breeder across the state.

Cooper's Hawk, *Accipiter cooperii*: total of three, including one in slow display flight over the Platte at Gibbon Bridge. A common and probably increasing breeder and resident across the state.

Red-tailed Hawk, *Buteo jamaicensis*: common throughout.

Harlan's Hawk, *Buteo [jamaicensis] harlani*: a total of three, all dark individuals, between Kearney and Mullen. This extremely range-restricted bird (species?) winters in good numbers over much of Nebraska, but densities are always low, and it is easy to miss without careful searching.

Rough-legged Hawk, *Buteo lagopus*: three or four in the Sandhills, all light-morph birds. Common in winter in the Sandhills and western Nebraska, less so in the eastern parts of the state.

Ferruginous Hawk, *Buteo regalis*: a stunning dark bird perched north of Mullen March 15 allowed us to get out of the van and scope it—not a frequent occurrence with this rare and declining prairie resident. Widespread over the western half of the state in migration and winter, Ferruginous Hawks breed in the Nebraska panhandle and very locally in the Sandhills.

Owls

Great Horned Owl, *Bubo virginianus*: an adult with at least one chick on a nest at Funk Lagoon. A common resident in Nebraska.

Kingfishers

Belted Kingfisher, *Megasceryle alcyon*: nearly missed; Jonathan located one at Schramm on our last day. Common as a breeder and migrant across the state, with a few wintering on open water.

Woodpeckers

Red-bellied Woodpecker, *Melanerpes carolinus*: one or two at Lake Manawa and at Schramm were expected, but the female in the town of Mullen was notably far west in the Sandhills. A very common resident in southeastern Nebraska, with small numbers following the Platte west to the Colorado and Wyoming borders.

Hairy Woodpecker, *Picoides villosus*: one in Mullen March 15; the generously white-spotted wing coverts indicated the expected nominate race. Common throughout Nebraska.

Downy Woodpecker, *Picoides pubescens*: common in woodlots and thickets throughout. Common throughout Nebraska.

Northern Flicker, *Colaptes auratus*: small numbers of **Yellow-shafted Flickers** throughout, with at least two **Red-shafted Flickers** in Mullen. Very common as a migrant and breeder across the state, with lower numbers in winter. In eastern Nebraska, all or nearly all summer birds are Yellow-shafted Flickers; Red-shafted Flickers and intergrades occur across the state in winter, and breed over the western half of the state.

Falcons

American Kestrel, *Falco sparverius*: scattered pairs and singles, with the total perhaps 20. A common winterer and common breeder across the state.

Merlin, *Falco columbarius*: a distant but dashing female Richardson's Merlin seen feeding on the ground from our Sharp-tailed Grouse blind March 14. This pale prairie Merlin breeds, or once bred, in northwestern Nebraska and is an uncommon migrant and winterer over most of the western portion of the state; in years past we have seen dark *columbarius* Merlins on occasion, but this was our first tour record of this Great Plains specialty.

Crows and Jays

Blue Jay, *Cyanocitta cristata*: at Lake Manawa and in Mullen. Common across the state wherever there are trees, though numbers remain relatively low after this species' encounter with West Nile virus.

American Crow, *Corvus brachyrhynchus*: a scattered few at several sites, with a couple of Sandhills flocks of 50 or so. Fairly common across the state as a breeder, winterer, and migrant, apparently still recovering from the losses caused by West Nile virus.

Larks

Horned Lark, *Eremophila alpestris*: small numbers throughout, especially in the Sandhills. Probably Nebraska's most abundant breeding bird, and often found in great swirling, swooping flocks in winter and early spring; by mid-March, most birds present are local breeders, and are much less conspicuous than the rest of the year.

Chickadees

Black-capped Chickadee, *Poecile atricapillus*: Lake Manawa and Mullen only. Fairly common across the state, apparently still recovering from the losses caused by West Nile virus.

Nuthatches

Red-breasted Nuthatch, *Sitta canadensis*: at least two in Mullen, flying from feeder to tree to stash sunflower seeds. In some years an abundant fall migrant across Nebraska, this species is almost always uncommon by late winter even in invasion years; it breeds in northwestern Nebraska, Nebraska National Forest, and irregularly at other sites in northern Nebraska.

White-breasted Nuthatch, *Sitta carolinensis*: seen and heard at feeders and in farmyards throughout, including Mullen; those seen well were Eastern White-breasted Nuthatches, as expected.

Thrushes

Eastern Bluebird, *Sialia sialis*: small numbers in eastern Nebraska. A common breeder and migrant across the state, with a few wintering around open water.

Mountain Bluebird, *Sialia currucoides*: three in the mouth of Cottonwood Canyon south of Maxwell were the first ever recorded on this tour. This species is a common breeder in northwestern Nebraska and a locally common winterer in cedar stands in the western half of the state, but can be hard to find “on demand.”

Townsend’s Solitaire, *Myadestes townsendi*: one in Hyannis cemetery, at first characteristically elusive, then perched atop a gravestone for several minutes. Locally common in the western half of the state in winter.

American Robin, *Turdus migratorius*: common throughout, in flocks overhead and on lawns; obvious migration underway. An abundant migrant and breeder, with good numbers wintering most years in cedar-filled draws.

Starlings

European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*: common throughout. Common wherever there are large trees and woodpeckers, this species first reached Nebraska in the 1940s.

Waxwings

Cedar Waxwing, *Bombycilla cedrorum*: delightful looks at a small flock feeding on cedar “berries” and bathing in a roadside puddle at Mullen. Fairly common in winter, irregularly abundant in spring and fall, and locally common as a breeder across the state.

Old World Sparrows

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*: small numbers throughout. Reaching Nebraska in the 1880s, this is now a fairly common resident of towns and grain elevators.

Finches

House Finch, *Haemorhous mexicanus*: small numbers throughout, especially at feeders, with a trip total of no more than a couple of dozen. This species colonized the state from the east and from the west, the two populations meeting in the early 1980s. It is now a fairly common breeder, migrant, and winterer across Nebraska wherever there are trees.

Common Redpoll, *Acanthis flammea*: probably the surprise of the entire tour was a flock of seven feeding quietly in the grasses beneath the cedars of the Hyannis cemetery. Common in most of Nebraska only once a decade or so, this irruptive species usually withdraws from the state by early March even in years with large incursions.

Pine Siskin, *Spinus pinus*: four feeding and drinking in Mullen were also a surprise. This is an abundant but very irregular winterer in Nebraska, numbers varying widely from year to

year; it is a common breeder on the Pine Ridge and in the Wildcat Hills, and in invasion years lingers to breed over much of the state.



American Goldfinch, *Spinus tristis*: small numbers throughout, with a flock of twenty or more at Rowe Sanctuary. An abundant breeder, variably common winterer, and common migrant across the state.

Longspurs

Lapland Longspur, *Calcarius lapponicus*: hundreds or even thousands seen in flight on March 11, but only a single bird lingered on the ground long enough for all of us to get excellent close looks. The experience was typical: this is a hugely common bird in the state from October to late March, but usually seen well only by luck, otherwise encountered only in loosely structured darting flocks over bare fields and along country roads.



Wood Warblers

Myrtle Warbler, *Setophaga coronata*: one heard but not seen at Schramm March 16, now a more or less regular wintering locality for this hardy species.

New World Sparrows

American Tree Sparrow, *Spizelloides arborea*: common throughout in roadside thickets and ditches, with flocks of up to 30 birds seen several times. Tree sparrows are abundant winterers, but migration is apparent by early March, and it is not unusual in March and April to have days when the species is missed entirely before another large wave arrives.

Song Sparrow, *Melospiza meolida*: common at several localities, with flocks containing ten birds or more frequent. All Nebraska birds are of the eastern and northern “chocolate” type; the single specimen of southwestern *fallax* attributed to the state is almost certainly mislabeled.

Harris’s Sparrow, *Zonotrichia querula*: a good performance this year, beginning with great close views at a Carter Lake feeder and continuing the next day with half a dozen or more in a mixed sparrow flock at the Ceresco Flats. One of this trip’s most notable sightings was of an adult in a yard at Mullen, quite a ways west of the usual range in the state. A very common migrant and winterer in eastern Nebraska, lingering most years into mid-May.

White-crowned Sparrow, *Zonotrichia leucophrys*: three at Harlan County Lake March 1; the two seen well were Gambel’s Sparrows, the expected subspecies at the location and the season.

Dark-eyed Junco, *Junco hyemalis*: good numbers of **Slate-colored Juncos** throughout, but the only **Oregon Juncos** seen this year were a couple of birds in Mullen. Most wintering

juncos appear to leave eastern Nebraska in mid- or late March, with waves of migrants passing through in early and mid-April.



Northern Cardinal, *Cardinalis cardinalis*: common throughout in thickets and at feeders, including two at Mullen, where the species is still somewhat uncommon. Very common over most of the state, absent in the southwest, and uncommon to scarce above the forks of the Platte.

Icterids

Red-winged Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*: large migrant flocks throughout, overwhelmingly comprising the earlier-arriving males. Very abundant as a breeder and migrant, with most arriving in late March and April. The type locality of the race *fortis* is in eastern Nebraska.

Western Meadowlark, *Sturnella neglecta*: small numbers throughout, with a total of less than 100; obviously this species was just beginning to move north. An abundant and conspicuous breeder and spring migrant, with flocks of hundreds frequently seen in early April; widespread but generally less common in winter.

Common Grackle, *Quiscalus quiscula*: one at Lake Manawa March 10, one at Mormon Island March 16; on the last morning of the tour, several parties of singing males were in the parking lot of our hotel in Carter Lake. An abundant breeder and migrant in appropriate habitats across the state, arriving in mid- or late March in the east, slightly later in the west; very uncommon to scarce or absent in winter.

Great-tailed Grackle, *Quiscalus mexicanus*: notable numbers this year, with a flock of about 150 on 84th Street in Lincoln and a flock of approximately 300 at the Alda exit of I-80; record counts for the state are in the range of 500 birds. One in Grant County was slightly early as a Sandhills arrival. Present since the early 1970s, this species is now fairly common as a breeder and summer resident in wetlands and at filling stations and fast food places in eastern Nebraska; it is also common in some of the larger Sandhills marshes, arriving in late March and April. Wintering is infrequent anywhere in the state.

Brown-headed Cowbird, *Molothrus ater*: eight or nine in a Red-winged Blackbird flock south of Grand Island on March 11. Common as a breeder across the state, arriving in March in eastern Nebraska and April in the west.

MAMMALS

Virginia Opossum, *Didelphus virginiana* ‡

Eastern Fox Squirrel, *Sciurus niger*: common throughout, most the bright “foxy” morph but a couple of black-morph individuals at Lake Manawa.

Black-tailed Prairie-dog, *Cynomys ludovicianus*: dozens at Harlan County Lake and at the well-named Prairie Dog WPA.

Ord’s Kangaroo Rat, *Dipodomys ordii*: half a dozen on the early morning drive to the Greater Prairie-chicken lek.

Pocket Gopher sp., *Geomys/Thomomys* sp.: abundant mounds, but no animals seen.

Eastern Cottontail, *Sylvilagus floridanus*: only two or three seen all week.

Coyote, *Canis latrans*: one casually hunting a distant fenceline at the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek.

Striped Skunk, *Mephitis mephitis* ‡

Northern Raccoon, *Procyon lotor* ‡

White-tailed Deer, *Odocoileus virginianus*: small numbers throughout.

Mule Deer, *Odocoileus hemionus*: a total of about 25 on March 14 and 15.

Pronghorn, *Antilocapra americana*: seen twice from the road, March 14 and 15, with a total of less than 10.