

# NEBRASKA: SANDHILL CRANES & PRAIRIE GROUSE

MARCH 10-17, 2018

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*The great herds of bison are gone, and the Passenger Pigeon is no more—but springtime on the Great Plains is still witness to one of the greatest migration spectacles in the world, when untold numbers of waterfowl and half a million cranes gather along the winding, braided Platte River. On the nearby prairies of Nebraska's vast Sandhills, another drama plays out: the ancient and moving courtship dances of Sharp-tailed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chickens.*

*Set in the very middle of the Great Plains and the North American continent, Nebraska features an avifauna that famously combines east and west, north and south. The deciduous forests lining the Missouri River are home to such Carolinian specialties as Eastern Gray Squirrel and Red-bellied Woodpecker, while the tall grass of the state's southeast is home to Western Meadowlark and Franklin's Ground Squirrel. The West truly begins in central Nebraska, where Mule Deer and Ferruginous Hawks live among the short grass and yuccas. With two days in the Nebraska Sandhills, one of America's great surviving wild lands, we will come to appreciate the tremendous biodiversity and unique human heritage of what too many travelers think of as just "flyover" country.*

**March 10, Day 1: Arrival in Omaha.** Participants should plan to arrive in Omaha by 1:30 p.m. today (Omaha Airport code is OMA). A room will be reserved in your name at our hotel near the airport in Carter Lake, which geographic accident has placed politically in Iowa. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 2:00 p.m. for a trip across the Missouri River to Lake Manawa and an early dinner in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Here we will scan the lake for waterfowl and other early migrants, watching especially for such less common diving ducks as Greater Scaup and Hooded Mergansers, Bald Eagles, and the hordes of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls that stream in to roost for the night. At dusk we'll listen for the amazing courtship flights of American Woodcocks, their buzzing sometimes accompanied by the hoots of a Barred Owl. In most years, we hear (and usually see) woodcocks only here at Lake Manawa.

NIGHT: Country Inn and Suites, Carter Lake, Iowa

**March 11, Day 2: Missouri River Valley and West to Kearney.** After breakfast at our hotel, we will spend the morning exploring the wooded bluffs and floodplain of the Missouri River, an important corridor for a wide range of migrants and home to several resident species near the northwestern edge of their range. We should find a few Harris's Sparrows among the juncos and American Tree Sparrows, and we will check blackbird flocks for wintering or migrant Rusty Blackbirds. Wild Turkeys occur in good numbers, and we might turn up Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, or other woodland birds more typical of areas farther south and east in the U.S. We often find a few Red-headed Woodpeckers on the ridges; their numbers explode dramatically in years with good acorn crops. If any notable rarities are present within an hour or so of Omaha, we will leave the Missouri Valley to have a look. After lunch, we will make the three-hour drive west to Kearney, arriving in time for an early supper and our first experience with the Sandhill Cranes as they mass to roost on the Platte River.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn and Suites, Kearney, Nebraska

**March 12, Day 3: The Central Platte Valley.** After breakfast in our hotel, we will visit another nearby crane roost, arriving just before sunrise to watch the birds leave the river and spread out over sixty miles of fields and wetlands. The rest of the day will be devoted to an exploration of back roads in search of waterfowl, raptors, and sparrows. If water conditions are favorable, we may dip south into the western Rainwater Basin, where northbound waterfowl sometimes congregate in the thousands. In some years, the Snow Goose flock here totals hundreds of thousands, and Greater White-fronted, Canada, and Cackling geese are also present in large numbers. Ross's Geese can be fairly common in the flocks, and we will take the opportunity to study them wherever they appear. If the spring is an early one, we might also see Eared or Horned grebes, American White Pelican, Long-billed Dowitcher, Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, or Franklin's Gull. Dusk will again find us on the banks of the Platte River, as endless lines of cranes descend onto their traditional sandbar roosts and settle noisily in for the night. We will have dinner in Kearney, then retire with the spectacular sights and sounds of the crane flight still filling our eyes, ears, and imaginations.

NIGHT: Fairfield Inn and Suites, Kearney, Nebraska

**March 13, Day 4: North into the Sandhills.** The Platte River at dawn affords a spectacle unlike any on earth. As the sky brightens, what seemed at first islands resolve into vast flocks of cranes crowding the shallow water and sandbars; the low murmur of the roosting birds turns to an unearthly rattling howl when the odd eagle or coyote passes. Soon the cranes swarm across the sky, spreading out onto the nearby fields and wetlands to feed, their prehistoric trumpeting drowning out all other sounds. After witnessing this moving sight, we'll leave the Platte and its many thousands of cranes behind to enter the 19,000 square miles of the wild Nebraska Sandhills. As we move slowly north and west, we should run across more waterfowl and a good selection of raptors, sometimes including Ferruginous Hawk or Prairie Falcon among the common Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, and American Kestrels. Greater Prairie-chickens are often seen flying across the road, but we can hope for far better views of that species and of Sharp-tailed Grouse to come. We will have lunch in Broken Bow or another of the traditional Sandhills ranching communities, then arrive in Mullen, the county seat and largest city (pop. 509) of Hooker County (pop. 738), in the late afternoon. After checking-in to our motel, we will have dinner in town.

NIGHT: Sandhills Motel, Mullen, Nebraska

**March 14, Day 5: Dancing Grouse I and the Western Sandhills.** We will rise before dawn to be driven across the wide prairies by our local guide to the dancing grounds of either Sharp-tailed Grouse or Greater Prairie-Chickens, where we will take our places in a school bus blind as the males perform their oddly captivating primeval courtship displays just a few feet away. If the morning is warm and bright, Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks will also be singing from the ground and the fence posts or in the prairie sky. Mule Deer and Pronghorn often pick their way across the lek; the grouse react more vehemently if a coyote or one of the local Ferruginous Hawks appears. After a good breakfast in Mullen, we will set off into the wilds of the Sandhills in search of prairie specialties such as Trumpeter Swan, Northern Shrike and the dramatically declining Black-billed Magpie. We will be back in Mullen in time for a rest before dinner.

NIGHT: Sandhills Motel, Mullen, Nebraska

**March 15, Day 6: Dancing Grouse II and the Return to the Platte.** We'll spend another early morning in a big yellow blind, watching and wondering at whichever of the prairie grouse species we did not visit the day before. Prairie-chicken leks in the Hills can be very large, with more than 20 males dancing at a time; Sharp-tailed Grouse are less obsessively social in their displays, but the spinning, whirling, hooting, and cackling of even half a dozen courting males makes their dancing grounds at least as frenetic. We will eat breakfast in Mullen, then bid farewell to our local guide and drive south to North Platte, where we will stop for a snack or a sandwich before continuing east to Grand Island, where we will have an early supper in our hotel before paying a final evening visit to the cranes.

NIGHT: Quality Inn and Conference Center, Grand Island, Nebraska

**March 16, Day 7: The Lower Platte and Return to the East.** The migration of the Whooping Crane through central Nebraska typically begins in early April, but recent years have seen one or two birds appearing in the Grand Island area as early as mid-March. If one of these birds—or an even rarer Common Crane, an annually occurring needle in the big gray feathered haystack—has been reported, we will spend the morning in search of the rarity; otherwise, after breakfast, we will make the two-hour drive back to the Omaha area, with a stop at one of the most productive birding sites on the lower Platte River, Schramm State Park. Outstanding views of Harris's Sparrows and a good variety of junco "flavors" can usually be had here, and if the winter has been warm or the spring early, we have a chance at finding a Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, or Myrtle Warbler around the ponds or in the steep, heavily wooded ravines. We plan to arrive in Omaha in time for a break before our final meal together.

NIGHT: Country Inn and Suites, Carter Lake, Iowa

**March 17, Day 8: Departure for Home.** Our hotel provides free transportation to the nearby Omaha airport. Participants may plan to return home at any time today.

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour is limited to 7 participants.

**TOUR LEADER:** Rick Wright

**Rick Wright**, a native of southeast Nebraska, studied French, German, philosophy, and life sciences at the University of Nebraska, where he worked in the bird collections of the State Museum and served as teaching assistant to Paul Johnsgard. After a detour to Harvard Law School, Rick took the M.A. and Ph.D. in German at Princeton University. His years as an academic included appointments as assistant professor of German at the University of Illinois, reader/scholar at Princeton University's Index of Christian Art, and associate professor of medieval studies at Fordham University. Among his scholarly publications are two books on the Latin and German animal literature of the late Middle Ages. He is also the author of the American Birding Association's field guides to birds of New Jersey and of Arizona, and of the Peterson Reference Guide to North American sparrows. A prolific contributor to the birding literature and a sought-after lecturer, Rick lives with his wife, Alison Beringer, and their chocolate lab, Gellert, in Bloomfield, New Jersey, where he is an appointed member of the environmental commission.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the tour is **\$2,495** per person in double occupancy from Omaha. This includes all food from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 8, all lodging and ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leader/s. It does not include airfare from your home to Omaha and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$325**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The initial deposit for this tour is **\$300** per person. If you would like to pay your initial deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay the initial deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard, Visa, or American Express at the time of registration. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at [www.ventbird.com](http://www.ventbird.com)) should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** Initial tour deposits may be made by MasterCard, Visa, American Express, check, money order, or bank transfer. All other tour payments, including second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc., must be made by check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$150** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$50** per person. If cancellation is made between 120 and 90 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.***

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$150*
Between 120 and 90 days before departure	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded
Fewer than 90 days before departure date	No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$50 per person.

Upon cancellation of the transportation or travel services, where you, the customer, are not at fault and have not cancelled in violation of the terms and conditions of any of the contract for transportation or travel services, all sums paid to VENT for services not received by you will be promptly refunded by VENT to you unless you otherwise advise VENT in writing.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

**TRIP INSURANCE:** We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. VENT recommends Travel Insured International as our preferred insurance provider. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may already have under other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. **Contact Travel Insured International (800-243-3174 or [www.travelinsured.com](http://www.travelinsured.com)) before registration for details.** Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than Travel Insured International, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult—if not impossible—to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based on the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**AIR INFORMATION:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and a wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

**BAGGAGE:** Please limit your baggage to one piece of luggage and one smaller carry-on or day pack. Hard suitcases are not recommended; softer bags and bags with wheels are preferred. As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, other valuables, a warm change of clothing, toiletry items, medications, and travel documents in your carry-on bag.

**CLOTHING:** We will hope for a warm early spring, but participants should plan on dressing for winter weather, with a warm coat, insulated boots (if not snow, there will be mud), hat, gloves, and thermal underwear. A sweater or two and a rain coat/jacket are also recommended. The grouse blinds will be cold in the mornings. Consider bringing a small blanket or thick towel from home to sit on. Some participants place chemical hand warmers in their gloves and boots the night before our visits to the blinds, and hotel hair dryers were created for nothing if not to warm woolen socks in the early morning. Informal dress is the rule throughout the tour.

**FOOTWEAR:** Bring a broken-in pair of insulated hiking boots or heavy trail shoes, ideally waterproof, for our time afield; snow or mud can be encountered anywhere on this trip. Normal walking shoes or tennis shoes will be fine for evenings.

**EQUIPMENT:** We recommend a pair of binoculars in good condition and a camera for capturing memorable moments. Feel free to bring a spotting scope, though the leader will also have his. Sunglasses, sunscreen, and lip balm are highly recommended as protection against sun and, especially, wind. A bottle for carrying water in the field is a good idea, though we will always have bottled water and other drinks available in the van. An alarm clock will be helpful for our early morning visits to the grouse blinds. A belt pack or day pack will be handy for books, sunscreen, extra clothing layers, field guides, etc. We recommend National Geographic's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* or *The Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Sibley.

**CLIMATE AND WEATHER:** March weather varies wildly on the Great Plains. In a "typical" season, highs on the central Platte River will be in the upper 40s and lows in the low 30s F; temperatures are often a few degrees higher in the Omaha area and a few degrees lower in the Sandhills. It is not unusual on this tour to experience a temperature range of over 60° in the course of the week. We can expect wind most of the time, ranging from a light (but often still chilly) breeze to strong winds. Precipitation is possible at any time. On average, rain is more likely in eastern Nebraska and snow in the Sandhills, but any combination is possible—as is a solid week of warm, bright, clear days. Whatever the weather, our mornings spent sitting still in the grouse blinds are likely to feel cold. The weather's variability and the possibility of rapid changes make dressing in layers essential.

**CONDITIONS:** We will be staying in four hotels of good standard quality. Birding activities will include easy walks along level roadsides and on wide trails; our destinations can also be birded from the vehicle, an important consideration should the weather turn cold or rainy. Though the physical demands posed by this tour are modest, and there will be occasional opportunities to sit out a particular walk, you will benefit most from our birding if you are able to walk a mile at a normally slow birding pace. Most of our days will start with breakfast at 6:00, followed by a full morning in the field before stopping for lunch, generally in a fast-food restaurant. We will usually visit new areas in the afternoon, then have a break before dinner. On our first evening, weather permitting, we will venture out to look for dancing American Woodcock, returning to our hotel around 8:30 p.m. Our mornings in the Sandhills will be earlier, with starts around 5:45 a.m.—but we will have the advantage of having entered a new time zone, making it feel like (small consolation) 6:45. If the birds are active, we generally sit in the blind until after 8:00 a.m., then return to Mullen for a large breakfast before continuing with the rest of the day's birding plans.

**TIME:** Eastern Nebraska is in the Central Time Zone; during our time in the Sandhills, we will be in the Mountain Time Zone, which is one hour behind Central Time. In both time zones, Daylight Saving Time begins on Sunday, March 11, Day 2 of our tour.

**MONEY MATTERS:** Your trip to Nebraska includes most necessary expenses. You will want to bring enough cash to cover personal expenses not included in the program, such as alcoholic beverages, taxi rides, gifts, laundry, gratuities, and personal items. It is best to carry cash in small denominations, as many places we visit may be unable to provide change for large bills.

**HEALTH:** As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with vaccinations against a variety of preventable diseases, including the so-called Routine Vaccinations, which comprise the

measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine and diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine. You should also be up to date with your Hepatitis A, or Immune Globulin (IG), and Hepatitis B vaccinations. If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication. Those who are not fit for light to moderate physical activity, including those with physical disabilities that affect mobility and balance, heart or immune deficiencies, or other conditions associated with poor health, are advised not to join the trip. Comprehensive optional travel insurance is available and recommended. This coverage is available through your trip cancellation policy, if purchased through Travel Insured International. Please consult your insurance agent or existing policy, if in effect, for the terms and limitations of your existing coverage. Refer to the section on Trip Cancellation Insurance.

**Sun Exposure** – The sun's ultraviolet rays are damaging to the eyes and skin with prolonged exposure. Any time you are outdoors you will want to protect your skin, including your lips, eyes, nose, and ears. Severe, potentially very painful sunburn is possible whatever the temperature or cloud cover, and it will affect your level of enjoyment. Always protect yourself when outdoors and be sure to bring an ample supply of high-SPF sunscreen and lip balm. We strongly recommend the use of ultraviolet-blocking, polarized sunglasses. In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line 800-CDC-INFO (232-4636), or you can check the website at [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel). Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html) (click on travel health).

**SUGGESTED READING:** A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Sibley, D. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. 2nd Ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. Either of the smaller regional volumes published in 2016 is also usable in Nebraska, though those books gain portability at the expense of the ingenious and informative layout of the large single-volume edition.

Dunn, J., and J. Alderfer. *National Geographic Field Guide to North American Birds*. 6th Ed. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2011.

Farrar, J. *Birding Nebraska*. Lincoln, NE: Nebraskaland, 2004.

Forsberg, M. *On Ancient Wings: The Sandhill Cranes of North America*. Lincoln, NE: Michael Forsberg Photography, 2004.

Hoch, G. *Booming from the Mists of Nowhere: The Story of the Greater Prairie-Chicken*. Iowa City, IA: University Iowa Press, 2015.

Janovy, J. *Keith County Journal*. Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1979.

Johnsgard, P. *The Platte: Channels in Time*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

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Johnsgard, P. *The Nature of Nebraska*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

Sharpe, R., et al. *Birds of Nebraska: Their Distribution and Temporal Occurrence*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

Vance, J., and N. Paothong. *Save the Last Dance: A Story of North American Grassland Grouse*. Jefferson City, MO: Paothong Photography, 2012.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its Agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on May 30, 2017, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.

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