

WEEKEND GETAWAY: Kearney, Neb.

Cranes return to the sandhills for 10,000th year

By DUNCAN H. BROWN
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Kearney, Neb. — Two great rivers come together in central Nebraska in early spring, and only one of them is made of water. The North Platte River crosses the state from west to east. The second river is composed of birds — millions of them, migrating North.

Especially exciting to nature lovers is the yearly flight of 500,000 or more sandhill cranes on their way from their winter roosts in northern Mexico, Louisiana, Texas and Florida. From early March to mid-April, there is no better place to be in the world to see the spectacular sandhill crane.

Sandhill cranes are a prehistoric bird — they've been around virtually unchanged at least 10 million years according to naturalists. They have a huge, six-foot-plus wingspan, and range from three to four feet in length.

They've been flying back and forth over Nebraska for an estimated 10,000 years — since the last ice age. The birds pause on their trip north to Alaska, Canada and Siberia for a breather among the braided streams of the North Platte River, and among last year's corn and grain fields on farms close to the river. They fatten up on waste field corn, and take time to socialize, congregate and hunt for mates. As one naturalist quipped, the North Platte River is the world's largest singles bar for sandhill cranes.

The cranes stop in Nebraska for four weeks or so, hanging out in fields and pastures during the day and flocking back to the center of



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Familiar scene: Sandhill cranes wade in the North Platte River.

the shallow North Platte River to roost for the night on islands and in the shallow water. As their stay in Nebraska passes and spring starts to warm the days and lessen the chill at night, the cranes get more active during the day. They perform mating dances in the fields and meadows, in which they leap in the air and spread their enormous wings. Throughout their antics is their constant bugling call, which the listener will hear even a half-mile away.

The cranes can be seen in a narrow ribbon 75 miles long in central Nebraska, centered in the town of Kearney along the North Platte River. They extend west to Lexington and east to Grand Island. The cranes like to roost on the sandy islands in the middle of the river channels where they have clear, unobstructed views in every direction to detect predators easily.

Cranes are social birds, constantly talking to each other. While a large group feeds, sentry-cranes stand watching for danger.

Cranes have extremely sharp eyesight and very acute hearing. When a coyote or bobcat approaches, the sentry-cranes raise the alarm, and the whole flock ascends with a flutter of wings and loud cries. If enough danger is felt, one fleeing flock will cause other nearby groups to similarly ascend and wheel over to a safer location before gliding in, settling and proceeding once again to feed.

A note: cranes are wary of anything that looks like a predator. People are high on their list. In a car, you look harmless. Walking toward them, or even standing still, they will panic and quickly fly away.

The crane watcher has a simple job: show up and bring binoculars.



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Sunrise, sunset: The sky is filled with cranes every spring in Western Nebraska, attracting tourists.

First get to Lexington, Kearney or Grand Island. There are so many cranes to see that you won't be disappointed. A drive along the Platte River Road or any secondary road within five miles of the North Platte River during crane season will yield thousands of sightings. Near sunset, head for the Fort Kearney State Recreation Area railbed trail. The cranes flock

overhead in countless thousands on their way to their night's resting spots.

For a more concentrated experience, consider paying for a crane blind at sunrise or sunset. Groups of seven to 30 sneak into a blind before sunset, or before sunrise, and wait to see the spectacle closer up and aided by an experienced guide.

In Kearney, contact the Rowe

Audubon Sanctuary for reservations. In Grand Island, Crane Meadows Nature Center has similar facilities, along with a pedestrian bridge across several braids of the North Platte River for sunset viewing.

A warning: especially in the sunrise blind tours, temperatures can be frigid. Dress in warm clothes, and be prepared to stand or sit for two hours or more inside a windy blind. When you enter the blind, you can't leave until the birds have departed (in the morning) or arrived (in the evening). There are prime photographic opportunities, and binoculars are a must.

The Minden Opera House shows a hour-long film on the cranes most weekdays. The Rowe Sanctuary has crane experts, pictures and lectures every day. It is run by the Audubon Society, which has purchased over 1,200 acres of riverfront property and preserved the habitat therein for the yearly crane visitation.

The Crane Meadows Nature Center shows a film on cranes, plus offers hikes on its 250-acre virgin mixed-grass prairie.

The Hastings Museum features three floors of exhibits, with mounted specimens of nearly every bird species in Nebraska, including the world's largest display of whooping cranes.

Duncan H. Brown is a freelance writer in Fairfield, Ia.

If you go

INFORMATION: Kearney Visitor's Center, (800) 652-9435, www.kearney.coc.org

Grand Island/Hall County Convention and Visitor's Bureau, (800) 658-3178, www.visitgrandisland.com

LEARNING ABOUT CRANES: Crane Meadows Nature Center, (308) 382-1820

Rowe Sanctuary, (308) 468-5282

Fort Kearney State Recreation Area, (308) 865-5305

Hastings Museum, (800) 508-4629

Minden Opera House, (308) 832-0588

GETTING THERE: From Central Iowa to Kearney on Interstate 80, 312 miles (about 5¼ hours). Lexington is 40 miles farther west; Grand Island is 56 miles east.