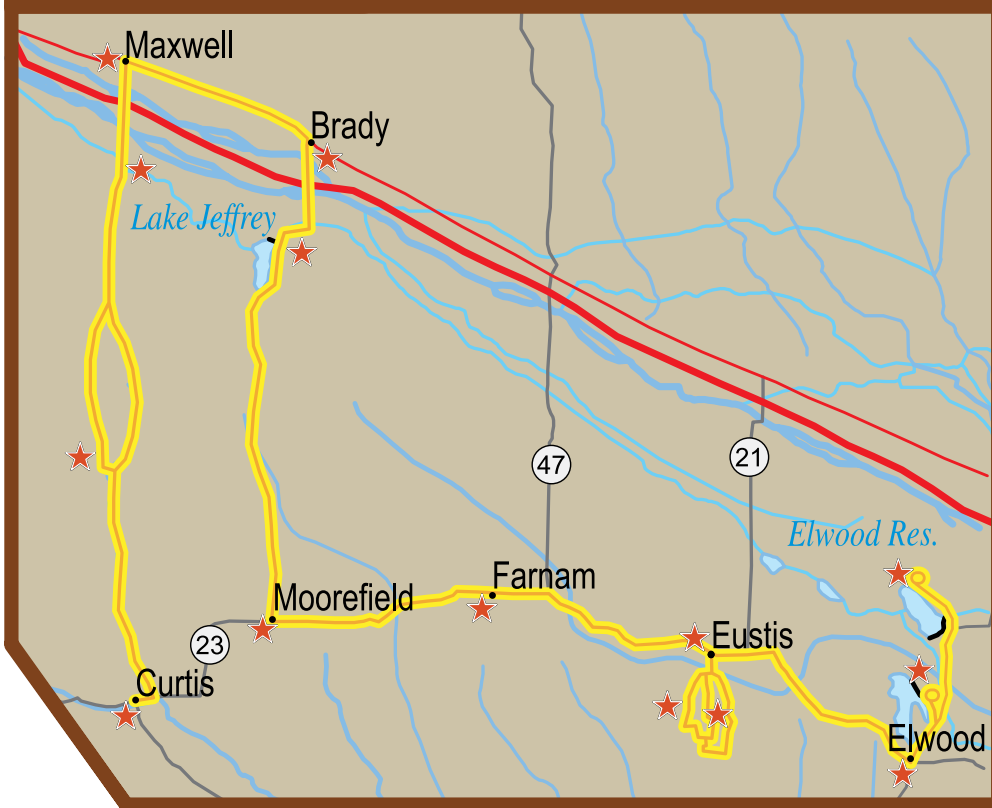


Loess Canyons



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The Loess Canyon Adventure

There's something I don't know, invigorating about early morning in Nebraska. The air is clean and bracing with the scent of sage and water and things growing. As we load the car with binoculars, cameras, water, guidebooks and other necessities for the day's adventure, the sun is just coming up over Johnson Lake, one of a number of surprisingly beautiful lakes in this part of Nebraska. The air is alive with bird calls, some familiar, some strange and exotic.



We've spent the night at the Waterfjord House, a lovely modern B&B, situated right on the shore of the lake, with a great room and deck shaded by big trees looking out over the water. Although the Waterfjord is known for its gourmet breakfasts, we're eager to get on the road and do some serious birding, so we've opted for just coffee for now.

Johnson Lake to Eustis

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.715842 N
-99.87349 S

From the Waterfjord, we skirt around the lake to the north and east and pick up U.S. 283 south to Elwood, a town with its own water feature – the Elwood Reservoir – nearby. Elwood is just waking up when we roll through, turning west on Nebraska 23 toward Eustis. In Eustis, we'll be meeting up with Don Brockmeier, the authority on birds in this part of Nebraska for a guided tour of the canyons south of town and what promises to be a great bird watching experience.

Although vast tracts of Nebraska are flat as the proverbial pancake, the area around Eustis is studded with canyons cut into the loess hills when the last ice age retreated. Loess occurs when retreating glaciers grind rock to a fine dust which is then picked up and deposited downwind. The resulting mineral-rich soil forms an ideal seedbed for native grasses, but when it erodes, it tends to form steep and picturesque canyon walls...as we're soon to find out for ourselves.

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It's still early, even in Eustis when we meet Don Brockmeier in his office on Main Street – our stomachs are starting to rumble, but we're telling ourselves it will make us all the more appreciative of the early lunch Don has promised us at the local pool hall after we've seen some birds.

East, Middle and West Canyons

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.652383 N
-100.048027 S

Straight south on Eustis' main street, across the railroad tracks, the paving quickly gives way to gravel and within a few moments we reach a fork in the road. Don tells us there are three sparsely-populated canyons south of Eustis – imaginatively named East Canyon, Middle Canyon and West Canyon – providing a range of habitat and a wide variety of birds at almost any time of the year.



Although Don tells us “birds happen” in all of the canyons, we head first toward West Canyon. Before we've driven a hundred yards, we make a sighting common in this area but rare elsewhere: wild turkey. A flock of about eight hens and toms cross the road unconcernedly in front of us. Populations of these North American natives were seriously threatened in the 19th and early 20th Century, but stocking programs have been successful and populations are on the rise.

As we head down the well-maintained road, Don tells us that keeping an eye on the power lines is often smart birding, because around here, it's usually the highest perch, one preferred by red-tailed hawks as well as the several American kestrels (often called sparrow hawks) we see. Red-tailed hawks often prefer to perch on the pole or crossbar, making them a little harder to spot unless you're paying attention.

Although we don't see any Greater Prairie-chickens nor have a chance to witness their famous dance, Don tell us this is absolutely the kind of country they like – short grass fields on hills with a view of the surrounding countryside.

To find them, Don says, he picks a still morning in April, May or early June and drives down into the canyons.

“When it's still, you can hear them a long way off, as much as a mile,” Don says. “I just get out of my truck and listen for the call – it's a very distinctive booming sound – and I can usually follow the sound back to where they are.”

Don says it's worth it to make a special effort to see the unusual mating dance. The males raise ear-like feathers and inflate bright orange sacs at the sides of their throats while strutting and calling loudly for the females' attention.

Farm Ponds and Abandoned Properties

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.631672 N
-100.072103 S

About five miles down the West Canyon road, you'll start to see farm ponds, which is often great habitat for migrating water fowl and shore birds. We stop near one and see a small flock of mallards feeding and resting, but it's not uncommon to see teal, egret, coot, common goldeneye and many other species in this area, depending on the time of year. Since most of the ponds are on private land it's good etiquette to ask permission of the landowner before venturing off the road.

Don also points out the old abandoned properties and tree breaks along the road as good habitat for the bluebirds, kingbirds, tree swallows and many other species. We branch off down a narrower side road and drive down to a creek bottom thick with giant cottonwood trees. These big deciduous trees



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growing along creek bottoms are a great place to look for cavity dwellers such as bluebirds, barn owls, cardinals, shrikes, wood ducks and woodpeckers.

Along the roadside, Don advises us to not drive too fast and to look for pheasant, quail (also known as bob-whites), magpies and Eastern and Western kingbirds. The plum thickets in the barrow pits are also often good places for bird watching, with the birds almost right at eye level.

Restoring Bluebird Habitat

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.63532 N
-100.02039 S



On the way back toward Eustis, now in East and West Canyons, Don points out some of the 32 bluebird boxes he's built, installed and monitors for Bluebirds Across Nebraska. BAN is an organization of bird enthusiasts who work to restore habitat lost to bluebirds when trees are cut down for development and once-wooden fence posts are replaced with metal stakes.

Don says he monitors his string of boxes about once every ten days, recording the number occupied and by what species, as well counting the eggs, hatchlings and fledglings each box produces.

Eustis Pool Hall

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.662874 N
-100.028254 S

Back in Eustis, we step into the cool dark of the Eustis Pool Hall. Now this is the kind of place where you can feel the history of the town; where you can imagine all those German farmers stamping the loess off their shoes and sitting down to discuss farm conditions over a beer and a brat. We settle into one of the dark wood booths and try to decide if we should choose one of their well-regarded Mexican entrees or maybe go for the beer and the brat in the interests of historical research.

Eustis was settled in the 1880s by settlers, mostly from Stuttgart, Germany. After, well, brunch, as we are saying good-bye to Don Brockmeier, he points out that if you like German-style sausage, there are few places better to get it than at the H&J Grocery in Eustis, where they feature their own and imported meats such as dried summer sausage, polish sausage, pressed-wurst and blood-wurst, among others.

The H&J is also an outlet for Village Piemaker Pies. These remarkable frozen pies are made in Eustis but distributed to retail and restaurant accounts throughout a wide region. Because the Village Piemaker uses only fresh ingredients, these pies are truly as close to homemade as you're ever likely to get.

Eustis to Moorefield

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.708149N
-100.214646S

Our stomachs full, we head west out of Eustis, again on Nebraska 23, and watch for coyotes and deer from the road. Along the way, we pass through Farnam and check out another local eatery that's been commended to us. The Country Blues is right on the main drag through Farnam and features a cozy blend of antiques and casual country diner décor and fare – nothing too exotic, but well prepared and plenty of it. This is obviously a popular local hangout for residents.

At Moorefield, we turn right on Ash Street (the second of the two north-bound streets) and drive through this largely deserted town, cross the railroad tracks and take a right at the fork in order to stay on the Brady-Moorefield Road.



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Moorefield to Jeffrey Lake

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.929207N
-100.414739S



Although the pavement soon ends, this, too is a well-maintained gravel road, winding north through some of Nebraska's most appealing landscape. Here there are rolling hills dotted with cedar and intermittent stands of big deciduous cottonwood, ash and elm. But well maintained or not, it's smart to think ahead before you jump onto these back-country county roads. Although we pass occasional farmhouses, we don't see another car for miles, and neither of our mobile phones shows even a hint of cellular service.

Rock wrens, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Say's Phoebes, Bells Vireos and Yellowbreasted Chats breed in the Loess Canyons and large numbers of American Robins, Eastern Bluebirds, Mountain Bluebirds and Townsend's Solitaires winter these canyons. We drive slowly, pulling off on the few side roads to get out and listen and look, spotting a bluebird and some robins.. Eventually we realize we have reached the southern shores of Jeffrey Lake, one of several manmade lakes in the region built to provide water for irrigation.

A little farther along, however, we find the turnoff we've been promised, leading up the hill on the north side of the lake to a set of cabins and a lodge, once operated as the hydroelectric administrative offices for the Central Nebraska Public Power & Irrigation District which still owns them. Here we have unrestricted vistas of this beautiful body of water and the tree-lined bluffs surrounding it.

On a floating snag a hundred yards off shore, we can see six or eight cormorants drying their wings before preparing for another feeding dive. This is also a terrific vantage point to see many other sorts of waterfowl, wading birds and shorebirds. Behind the lodge is a dam controlling the lake water and dropping it off into Central's Tri-County Canal. Farther north, near Brady, the Canal is a great place to see cliff swallows and majestic bald eagles in the trees overhanging the water.

Jeffrey Lake to Brady

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.02456N
-100.365472S

After leaving Jeffrey Lake, we travel a few more miles north, crossing the Interstate to Brady. Here we meet Mark Peyton, a naturalist for the Central Irrigation District who's agreed to show us some of his favorite bird watching sites in the region.

We dine at Lindy's Family Dining on Market Street, another source of good, solid Midwestern food and find it bright and clean, and with prompt, friendly service.

Maxwell and Ft. McPherson

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.035535N
-100.520182S

After a light lunch, Mark leads us west on U.S. Highway 30 – the famous Lincoln Highway, the first paved road uniting the nation – to Maxwell, where we turn south on Road 56A, known locally as Ft. McPherson Road. In a short while, this leads us to the gates of Ft. McPherson National Cemetery, the only National Cemetery in Nebraska.

Originally a fort built to protect railroad workers and settlers from Indians, the Ft. McPherson National Cemetery was established on the grounds of Ft. McPherson as part of the military reservation in 1873. Because many forts and military cemeteries were deteriorating, Ft. McPherson National Cemetery was chosen as a re-internment site for many veterans of the Civil War as well as soldiers who died in the Indian Wars. There are many fascinating stories among its 7,643 residents, and it's worth a few minute's stop whether as a birder or amateur historian.



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From the cemetery, we turn south to Cottonwood Road and quickly find ourselves in more of the scenic cedar-studded hills and canyons, with only occasional farmsteads along the way. Mark has promised to show us what he considers, “the prettiest stretch of road in Nebraska” and take us to public wildlife management area with a unique perspective in the region.

Wapiti Wildlife Management Area

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.909102N
-100.536404S



A few miles south on Cottonwood Road leads us to the fork of Cottonwood and Effenbeck Roads. Although Mark assures us they both come out on the road to Curtis, our final destination, Cottonwood hugs the canyon floor and Effenbeck climbs into the uplands, which is the way we choose to go.

Just a mile or so south of the fork, Mark points to a small sign on the west side of the road stating “Access to Public Hunting Area”. Look sharp, because for now, that’s the only sign you’ll see leading you to the Wapiti Wildlife Management area.

From Effenbeck, the road is steep and rutted – no problem for Mark’s big 4WD truck, but we had to take it pretty slow and easy in our sedan. Still, after winding through about three miles of easement through private land, we come to a small sign and an end to the fences. Whatever the bad-road trauma, it was worth it. We found ourselves walking around on a high plateau with views in all directions. Mark tells us Wapiti is one of only three elk hunting areas in Nebraska and an ideal place to bring your spotting scope and a picnic lunch, especially to look for various hawks (red-tailed and rough-legged as well as kestrels), vultures and eagles. Rock Wrens, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Say’s Phoebe and many others are found here. After spending not near as much time as we would have liked, a number of flickers seem to lead us back down the trail to the main road.

On down Effenbeck road, we pass a number of homesteads announcing their establishment in the 19th or early 20th Century and wonder about the kind of people who live on this land. Since most of it is too rugged to farm in any meaningful way, numerous cattle ranches dot the region, and much of Effenbeck road is open range – meaning the cattle have as much right to stand in the middle of the road as you do to drive on it – a right they often exercise. Be patient, though and you can usually work out a compromise.

On to Curtis

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.633952N
-100.513573S

As we rejoin Cottonwood Road and head south toward Curtis, the land becomes flatter and less rugged and we are soon back among planted fields of corn and soybeans.

The ride into Curtis is uneventful except for another flock of wild turkey and soon we find ourselves in Curtis, home of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture. NCTA is a two-year institution that offers technical agriculture-related programs, and we notice that the student parking lot, not surprisingly, is almost exclusively occupied by pickup trucks. We drive by the campus which is anchored by big trees and a fine old brick building, once the state agriculture high school.



We’re tired after our adventure, but not too tired to enjoy a steak at the Curtis Cattle Company steak house (it’s hard to beat that Nebraska Angus beef). We’ve got a room at the Gables Inn, a 100-year-old, two-story, four-gambled house near downtown. It looks quiet and inviting, and we hope the beds are good, because there are still plenty of birds to see on the Chicken Dance Trail, and tomorrow is another adventure.

