

# The Sandhill Crane Migration

This is an opportunity to see a *life changing* wildlife phenomena.

"If one of the worlds top wildlife scientist, Dr. Jane Goodall, travels 10,000 miles to witness this event, shouldn't you consider paying us a short visit?"

"You may think you've been birding, but we mean BIRDING with a Capital B. Join us to view tens of thousands the tallest and oldest birds in the world."

"Sandhill Cranes have been stopping by for a half million years, What's keeping you?"

Join us in the funnel to witness the annual migration of millions of birds passing through central Nebraska on their flight north to their nesting grounds.

Where: Rowe Sanctuary and the Rainwater Basin in Central Nebraska

When: February, March and April

If there is a center to Midwest American croplands, it may be Buffalo, Phelps, Kearney, and Harlan Counties, Nebraska. Vast fields stretch out in all directions, on a landscape that's virtually flat from one horizon to the other. Birds wintering along the coasts of the United States and Mexico stop, rest, refuel in these counties that comprise the center of the Rainwater Basin area before traveling north to their nesting grounds.

The Rainwater Basin is among the notable and "must see" birding destinations for birders worldwide. Most of our attention will be centered on sand hill cranes. Birders will see and hear a flock of tens of thousands of birds awake at sunrise and lift nearly in unison off the shallow, braided river, their night time roost, and then watch them and photograph them in early evening when they return within a short distance of the blind to roost again in the river.

March is an ideal time to visit Central Nebraska. Millions of birds fill the sky and flock in the fields. Their joyous calls herald spring. Birding in the Rain Water Basin is a birdwatcher's dream since many species feed along access roads and are easy to see and study at length.

## ITINERARY

Our route forms a loop beginning at Rowe Sanctuary near Gibbon, NE with stops at the Funk Lagoon, trails at the Harlan County Reservoir near Alma, NE, and trails bordering the Platte River at Fort Kearney. Both guided and self guided wildlife viewing is available. Scenery is spectacular, and the itinerary is arranged to maximize sightings of the cranes, migratory flocks and the prairie nesting birds.

The guided part of the tour begins at Rowe Sanctuary located in the heart of the sandhill crane staging area. The Sanctuary is designed to facilitate photographing cranes and other wildlife on the river. Sandhill cranes may be seen up close and photographed from strategically placed blinds as

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they return from their day of foraging to their nighttime roost in the shallow Platte River and then again before daylight when they lift off to forage in the nearby cornfields and loiter in the mowed hay and alfalfa fields along the moist river bottom.

## **We recommend**

Make your reservations for the crane viewing blinds and see detailed information about crane viewing at the Rowe Sanctuary website, [www.rowesanctuary.org](http://www.rowesanctuary.org) Crane viewing tourists must be seated in the blinds before sun up to see thousands of cranes rise at sun rise, loft-off and fly to the foraging areas, and inside the blinds before sunset to watch them drifting in and settling on the river to roost for the night.

See the Rowe Sanctuary website for reservations, directions, schedules. [www.rowesanctuary.org](http://www.rowesanctuary.org)

Lodging                      Reserve lodging at a motel or B&B from among the motels and B&B's listed on the Chicken Dance Trail website [www.chickendancetrail.com](http://www.chickendancetrail.com)

Meals                         Eat fresh, local and superb Midwestern cuisine in home-owned restaurants from the list found on the Chicken Dance Trail website [www.chickendancetrail.com](http://www.chickendancetrail.com)

Things To Do                See a listing of side trips and points of interest on the Chicken Dance Trail website [www.chickendancetrail.com](http://www.chickendancetrail.com)

## **Day 1 –**

### Rowe Sanctuary

Crane viewing begins at 5:30 a.m. in the morning and again 5:30 p.m. in the late afternoon. Wear warm clothing and snow boots. The blinds are not heated.

We recommend breakfast and morning coffee at any one of the café's and coffee houses listed on the Chicken Dance Trail website.

### Fort Kearney State Park

Following breakfast, see cranes close-up and observe cranes dancing, crane's loitering, feeding, sleeping, walking, and watching people watching them in fields north, south, east and west of Kearney. We recommend fields around historical Fort Kearney, a state park located 2 miles south of Kearney on highway 44, turn east on road L50A and follow the signs to the Fort. Cranes often feed in the fields parallel to the Fort. Walk a scenic bridge across the Platte River to see early migrating sparrows, warblers and resident woodpeckers, hawks, owls, and eagles following the migration

Day 2 –

## Harlan County Reservoir

Merriman turkeys, a prairie dog town, eagles, osprey, migrating ducks, geese, hawks, blue birds, shorebirds may be spotted near the reservoir and on the trails. Wear comfortable walking shoes and prepare for a cold wind.

Check in with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' visitors center to see maps of the region and information about wildlife in the vicinity and interesting facts about the reservoir. The project covers 31,000 acres, with 13,250 acres of water surface. The reservoir is 9 miles long and has 75 miles of shoreline. The Corps maintains six established campgrounds, with the entire project open to public access. [www.harlanlake.com](http://www.harlanlake.com)

Prairie dogs entertain visitors during daylight hours. Watch their antics and study their behaviors at the dog town near the Army Corps of Engineers visitors center. An excellent website for learning about prairie dog behavior and habitat is the following: [www.deltatech.com/rv/praredog.html](http://www.deltatech.com/rv/praredog.html)

## Pheasant Ridge Trail in Alma

The smooth, wide, paved trail winds for three miles along the north shore of Harlan County Reservoir, through trees and parks from the picnic area and gazebo at the west end to the boat ramp and campground at Methodist Cove on the east. Offering frequent opportunities for outstanding photos, the trail is ideal for photographers, exercise enthusiasts, and wildlife viewers. See pheasants, owls, wild turkeys, water fowl, shore birds, wading birds and other wildlife.

At sunset find yourself on the south side of the reservoir. Drive across the dam and turn right at the first opportunity. You will be at a high point on the south side of the dam, focus your camera and prepare to photograph the shimmering, jewel tones of a Nebraska sunset.

## Nature Trail

Walk a mile nature trail east of the dam to see a heron rookery and explore trails on the south side of the reservoir and along the scenic Republican River. Experience a handmade corduroy road on the nature trail.

## Funk Lagoon Waterfowl Production Area

Visit the Funk Lagoon waterfowl production area for views of shorebirds, ducks, hawks and potential sighting of Whooping Cranes. The Funk Lagoon was designated as a "Landscape of Hemispheric Importance" by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network.

## More About the Rain Water Basin

The Rainwater Basin refers to a network of wetlands covering some 4,200 square miles of south and central Nebraska. In good years, these shallow basins fill up with rainwater and snowmelt early in the spring and provide a fertile breeding ground for invertebrates. This, combined with seeds and tubers

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from the wetlands and waste crops from the thousands of acres of surrounding corn, soybean and wheat fields provide an ideal diet for a wide variety of migrating birds.

The rainwater basin in south central Nebraska is deep inside one of the most unique and fertile bird watching regions of the world: the central migratory flyway. Each year, some ten million waterfowl, sandhill cranes and other birds of all types drop down into this area to feed and restore their depleted reserves in preparation for the next leg of their migration north.

U.S Fish & Wildlife data ([www.fws.gov/rainwater](http://www.fws.gov/rainwater)) reveal that Ninety percent of the continental population of white-fronted geese, nearly 50% of the continental mallard population and 30% of the continental pintail population use the Rainwater Basin for rest and food. Shorebirds migrate through the area during April and May and again in August and September. Wading birds use the area because of the shallow wetland depths and abundance of food, and from about the first of March to mid-April, over 500,000 sandhill cranes concentrate along the Platte River between Overton to Grand Island, NE. The cranes stay about six week to feed on waste corn and insects. Endangered whooping cranes migrate through southern Nebraska in the spring and fall, using the wetlands during their migration.

### **Rainwater Basin receives unique designation**

04/02/2009

MANOMET, Mass. — South-central Nebraska's Rainwater Basin has been named the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network's first "Landscape of Hemispheric Importance" by its executive office at the Manomet (Mass.) Center for Conservation Sciences.

The network's mission is to conserve shorebird species and their habitats through a network of key sites in the Americas. It includes 73 sites and one landscape in 12 countries totaling about 25 million acres.

The Rainwater Basin is a 6,100-square-mile region of shallow wetlands south of the Platte River. Each spring and fall, millions of migratory birds pass through the region to feed and rest. About 40 species of shorebirds also use the habitat.

The reserve's designation required a commitment from a recognized conservation entity — in this case the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture — to work with area landowners and make shorebird conservation a priority.

Jorgensen said that in addition to being the reserve's first-named "landscape," the Rainwater Basin is only the second Great Plains site to receive the network's highest designation of "hemispheric importance."

"Here in Nebraska, we've always known the Rainwater Basin was important to shorebirds," said RBJV Coordinator Andy Bishop. "The WHSRN designation confirms that fact and brings international attention to the Rainwater Basin."

For more information, visit [www.whsrn.org](http://www.whsrn.org) or [www.rwbjv.org](http://www.rwbjv.org).

Taken from *Kearney Hub* newspaper

