

WILDLIFE TOURISM



MATTHEW URBANSKI/CRANE TRUST

Cranes come to Platte River in Nebraska to rest, refuel and fatten up from mid-February to early April, before heading north to their summer nesting grounds.

# FLIGHTS of fancy

‘Craniacs’ swoop into Nebraska each spring to catch one of the world’s great wildlife migrations

REBECCA L. RHOADES  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

I hear the sandhill cranes before I see them. Their fricative bugle calls and guttural honks echo in the distance. Then, on the horizon, formations appear: amorphous wisps that grow larger and more cacophonous with every passing minute. Soon, tens of thousands of birds swoop and swirl above the Platte River’s braided channels, darkening the fiery evening sky in a symphony of sight and sound as they scout the shallow waters and serpentine sandbars for the perfect spot to roost. Each spring, sandhill cranes

journey north along the Central Flyway from their winter habitats in southern Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and Chihuahua, Mexico. From mid-February through early April, between 600,000 and 1.25 million of the birds converge on the Platte River Valley in central Nebraska. The city of Kearney, billed as the “sandhill crane capital of the world,” is about a three-hour drive from Omaha. Here, the cranes rest, refuel and fatten up before heading to their summer nesting grounds in Alaska, Canada and Siberia. This phenomenon is some nine million years old, according to fossilized wing bones

SEE WILDLIFE, T6



BRAD MELLEMA

About 600,000 to 1.25 million sandhill cranes converge on the Platte River Valley in a migration that’s nine million years old.



AMY SANDEEN/CRANE TRUST

Bird enthusiasts, nicknamed “craniacs,” watch the sandhill cranes from an observation blind on the river’s edge.

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# It's a full-body experience'

## WILDLIFE FROM T4

found in the state.

"This is one of the last great migrations and the largest one in North America," says Brice Krohn, president and CEO of the Crane Trust, a non-profit conservation organization. "This is the only place in the world where you can watch the migration unfold and see that number of cranes in one place."

On a cold, wet March morning, I join Krohn, several Crane Trust biologists and a handful of other "craniacs" in an observation blind on the river's edge. As the morning sun filters through darkened clouds, faint outlines of sandhill cranes, still asleep in the gently flowing river with their heads tucked under their wings, begin to emerge.

One by one, the long-legged birds begin to stir and purr, calling to family members. Sandhill cranes mate for life, and the chicks remain with their parents for their first year. The collective coos and trills are replaced by long, rolling "kar-r-r-oos" that carry across the water. Necks elongate, daggerlike beaks point toward the sky, and wings unfurl with black-tipped feathers.

Suddenly, Krohn lifts his binoculars and lets out an excited low whistle. A singular white shape emerges, towering above the line of bobbing red crowns: a lone "whooper." Dubbed Bob by the Crane Trust's staffers, the whooping crane had joined the sandhills years ago while still a juvenile, and his appearance is eagerly awaited each spring.

"The whooping crane is the rarest crane in the world, so you're really lucky if you get to see one," says Michael Forsberg, a photographer in our group who has dedicated most of his career to studying the majestic birds. "A lot of the conservation that goes on the Platte River is because of the whooping crane."

According to Brad Mellema, executive director of the visitor's bureau for Grand Island, the cranes react very quickly to conservation efforts. "If habitats are unacceptable to them, they'll vacate an area and seek out other locations that better suit their needs," says Mellema, also former executive director of the Crane Trust Nature &



KYLEE WARREN/CRANE TRUST

Sandhill cranes mate for life, and the chicks remain with their parents for their first year.

Visitor Center. "We try to restore the river habitat to mimic historic wide-open prairie rivers."

On my final night, Rowe Sanctuary guide Patty Geist leads our group through the trees to a discovery station on the banks of the Platte River. We sit in anxious silence as the sun begins its descent.

"Listen," Geist whispers. From somewhere far beyond the trees on the other side of the river comes the unmistakable kar-r-r-oo, kar-r-r-oo. An answer comes from behind us. Suddenly, cranes are everywhere, flying in from every direction and floating down onto the sandbars, wings cupping the air and legs outstretched.

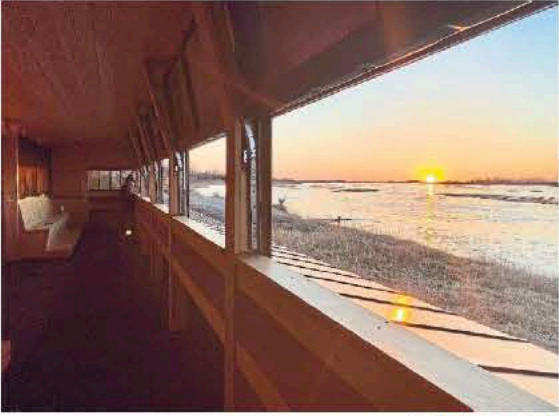
"This is an experience you'll never forget for the rest of your life," Forsberg says. "It's not just what you see, but it's what you hear. It's what you feel. It's a full-body experience: a surround sound of life that's been pulsing up and down the heart of the continent for thousands and thousands of years in an endless cycle of seasons."

REBECCA L. RHOADES TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF THE NEBRASKA TOURISM COMMISSION, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.



VISIT KEARNEY

Inside the Kearney Visitor Center. The Nebraskan city is billed as the sandhill crane capital of the world.



ROWE SANCTUARY

A discovery station on the banks of the Platte River.

## CORRECTION

In the Nov. 15 travel feature on Australia, the stated population for the Top End did not encompass its entirety. Accounting for all regions, the population is approximately 207,000, not 17,900.



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