

Annie and Chuck's

Travel Journal



***Sandhill Crane Migration
Nebraska, Spring '98***

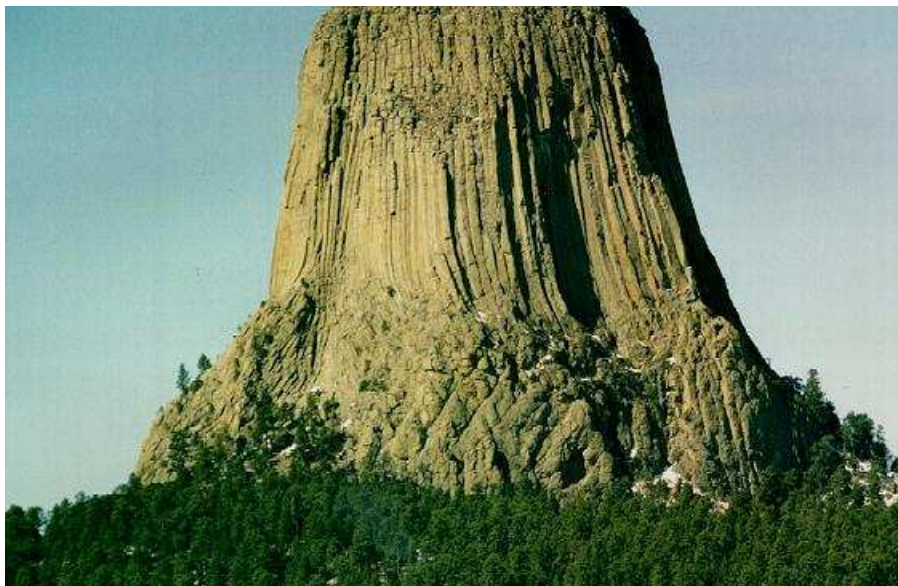
Platte River Basin, Nebraska - Spring 1998

In the early spring of 1998, after returning from Cache Creek, we decided it was a good time to head to Nebraska to see the sandhill crane migration of which we have been hearing for many years. So, on a late winter day in March off we went. So, with all this information it was off to Nebraska, a journey of 1400 miles or so one way from northwestern Montana. Since this was planned to be only a 10 day trip or so, and the old motorhome eats gas bigtime, we decided to drive and staying in motels.

In keeping with our usual resolve to stay off the interstate highways, we started eastward on highway 2 through the front range to Great Falls then onward to Judith Gap, Harlowtown, and Billings. Here we had to get on the Interstate for a short distance to Hardin as the day ended. We found a motel and holed up for the night. The day was beautifully clear and cold. In the morning we made our way through intermittent fog across the Northern Cheyenne reservation and the high dry plains of southeastern Montana and into the very northeastern corner of Wyoming where we made a short visit to Devils Tower National Park.

Devils Tower is located on the edge of the Black Hills batholith in hilly and mountainous country. The dominant ground cover is trees and

meadows. Little wonder that the Plains People considered this part of the world to be sacred. The tower itself is actually the core of a long-gone volcano whose sides have eroded away leaving only the core standing. We had lunch and



Devils Tower, NE Wyoming

watched eagles soar in the upcurrents generated by the warm early spring sun on the rocks. The day became quite warm despite late winter snow cover – it was not to last! Nearby is a large meadow populated by

prairie dogs who were out of their burrows for the first days of early spring as much of the snow had melted.

We continued through the Black Hills





Looking for the first groceries of the year!

country of South Dakota, passing through Wind Cave NP where we could see Bison in what remains of their natural home. We continued into Alliance, Nebraska where we spent the second



night of our journey. As we approached Alliance the weather began to deteriorate with cold, damp air and low clouds. In the morning it was much the same with warnings for freezing rain and very icy roads which fortunately didn't really materialize – it was just a couple of degrees too warm and it was sorta thin slush, not ice. We didn't know at the time, but this cold and dreary weather would persist throughout our visit to the Platte basin.

As we began to travel along side the Platte in

western Nebraska a few sandhill cranes appeared. As our drive continued eastward during the day, more and more cranes were seen in the cornfields any time we were within a mile or so of the river. . It took us most of the day to cross into east central Nebraska and we threw out the anchor in Kearny our eventual destination. We took a short exploratory drive finding hundres, if not thousands, of cranes.

There are actually two distinctive subspecies of sandhill cranes, and the birds seen in the central flyway of Nebraska are the lesser sandhill crane which, though large, are noticeably smaller than those were are used to seeing in the mountain west.

These more numerous lesser sandhill cranes, which comprise nearly 90 percent of the world's sandhill population, gather on the Platte River in south-central Nebraska each spring. Their flights to and from the river in the morning and evening are the greatest spectacles of this congregation. These sunrise and sunset flights of tens of thousands of cranes provide a sight that overwhelms the senses, the din of the birds almost making one dizzy, and the sight of the wheeling flocks overhead seeming at times like a scene from a fantasy or science fiction

Most of the cranes on the Platte in spring nest during the summer in Alaska, the subarctic and the arctic. They spend winter in the open areas of Texas, New Mexico and northern Mexico. About mid-February, when the first south winds start blowing through the middle of the United States, the cranes make a one- or two-day flight up to the Platte River in Nebraska. They could go farther, but the shallow Platte



offers perfect roosting areas, with sandbars at or just below the surface. It is wide and free of trees and high vegetation in many places, allowing cranes on the sandbars to see all around and feel safe from predators through the night. Only some parts of the river offer security, and cranes

congregate in the better areas by the hundreds, thousands and even tens of thousands.

Cranes are in Nebraska for just one reason - to eat heartily and store energy for their



migration. Every morning they leave the river after dawn as singles and pairs and groups of hundreds or thousands to settle on fields within three miles of the river. The cranes spread out across the fields, searching for corn left from the previous harvest and other food. About 90 percent of the diet at this time is corn, which quickly adds fat and puts them in ideal condition for the rest of the migration. They also will spend time in pastures, usually wet meadows, looking for other foods, such as insects, earthworms, snails and

forbs. These make up the other 10 percent of the crane diet and provide proteins and essential amino acids for migration and egg production.



Early morning – getting ready to head for the corn fields

Wet meadows are pasture lands adjacent to the river where the groundwater level is near the surface. When the river rises during ice breakup, usually in late February, the meadows become soggy, pushing invertebrates to the surface where cranes find them by probing with their sharp bills. The birds often feed in the pastures in the afternoon.

Cranes stay near the Platte River for about three weeks, until they have taken on the weight and nutrients they need for the rest of their migration. For some of the birds several more weeks and several thousand miles of travel remain. Sandhill cranes leave the Platte valley in late March or April and follow the edge of winter north to their breeding grounds, ranging from the Canada border north to the arctic and even to Siberia. The cranes begin nesting no later than late May.

Sandhill cranes reach sexual maturity



Crane Dance



Cranes on the wing

and find mates in their fourth summer. These new adults engage in "dancing" and in "unison calling," an interesting display of synchronized calling between the mates. The two adults form the core of the family unit. Every year they return to the same area, often the same part of the same wetland, to make a nest and raise young. The one or two young of the year complete the family unit. Although thousands of cranes might gather in a small area, the family units stay together. All cranes dance as part of their pre-mating and



The Platte River near Kearney

mating behavior. But sandhill cranes also dance alone or in groups, and it is beautiful to watch. Usually, a pair of cranes engages in an intricate array of bows, jumps and wing flapping. Sometimes the need to dance will spread among the cranes, even to unmated cranes that seem to dance simply for the sheer joy of it.

Sandhill cranes mate for life. They nest in wetlands on flattened mounds of vegetation. Unlike geese or herons, which nest in colonies, nesting cranes stay as far as possible from other cranes. There usually is only one crane nest per wetland. The female lays two eggs about the size of a fist and incubates them for 28 to 30 days. The newly hatched "colts" are fully feathered and able

to walk and swim within hours. They grow quickly, faster than any other bird species. In fact, sandhill cranes hatched in the Arctic progress from egg to a fully

feathered and flying bird in a little more than two months. During this time, they add up to 10 percent of their body weight every day.

The northernmost cranes start a leisurely fall migration by late August, passing through Nebraska in late October or early November. Most will be on their wintering grounds by mid-November, where they stay, roosting in marshes or shallow rivers and lakes and feeding in meadows and fields, until the urge to breed gets them moving north again in February.

Each day we explored the general area and found that indeed the Cranes confined themselves to an area no further than a couple of miles from the river. We visited a historical state park where they had a visitor's center dedicated to the spring crane migration as well as historic Fort Kearney. Also nearby was a Audubon operated area with an



Snow geese gathering on a frozen wetland – note carcasses of diseased killed birds



associated visitor center. During the week we saw hundreds of thousands of lesser sandhills, out in the stubble corn fields during the day and then

moving to the river at night. At dusk they and thousands of Canada and snow and white fronted geese move from fields to the river, and at around 6 AM they leave the river in black clouds of formations, and it literally sounds like a huge stadium of people shouting! We simply drove the back roads, watching the cranes and geese out in the fields. Several extremely rare Whooping Cranes were reported at various times and locations, but we were not able to locate them.

The weather remained unseasonably cold with occasional freezing rain during our stay. This actually presented some real problems to the migrating waterfowl, particularly the geese and ducks. Most of the outlying shallow lakes and ponds were frozen that they rely upon during this, the height of the migration along the central flyway. When this happens, they tend to



Hundreds – perhaps thousands of geese take wing

concentrate on the few ice free ponds that remain and avian cholera and botulism take a very heavy toll. During our stay the state wildlife people and volunteers were gathering up dead ducks and geese by the truck-full in an attempt to limit the

diseases. We

observed snowgeese, white fronted geese, and Canada geese in the stubble in flocks consisting of thousands of individuals.

Evidently this is normal for them to concentrate in the fields, it is only when they are concentrated

in the wetlands and ponds that disease takes it's toll.

When we left the Platte river valley and began our journey home, we discovered as we went westward and northward that the weather improved considerably. It was warmer, sunnier and drier. Not only did it improve, we found that the ponds were no longer frozen - evidently the long delayed spring was much further along. There were some ducks and geese on these open ponds, but not many - evidently they had not yet discovered that conditions were better than further south and east. We more or less retraced our steps, back through the Black Hills country



Freezeout lake – northwest of Great Falls, Montana

and into Montana. As we left Great falls, we decided to take a look at Freezeout lake just to the north and west. Freezeout lake is a large, shallow lake – in fact a series of lakes – that attract wildfowl by the thousands and is a favorite stop on the intermountain flyway. Most of the ducks, geese, and cranes spend their winters in California, Arizona, New, and Old Mexico. When we arrived the lake was partially open and the migration was well underway. Thousands of ducks, geese, tundra swans, some greater sandhill cranes and the like. Although not blocking the sun as had been reported a century ago, there were enough birds in the air it times that it looked a bit like thin clouds from a distance.



Clouds of birds

