

Kearney, Nebraska  
by David Rabenau

The Sandhill Cranes started arriving here in February and today, March 17<sup>th</sup>, they are near their peak. I drove 10½ hours yesterday to see them, and I'm not disappointed. These 4-foot tall, red-capped, gray birds are everywhere in the thousands.

What I also find is what others, including Peter Mathiessen in his book *The Birds of Heaven*, say is true: we humans have a surprising connection to cranes. As if the cranes call us in from states and provinces all over North America (and sometimes from across the world), we come to gaze at them through binoculars, spotting scopes and cameras. We arrive and discover a celebration of natural grandeur, movement, and life.

This is a stopover for the cranes, not a destination as it is for me. Here the cranes feed by day and rest at night—all in preparation for the balance of their journeys to Alaska and Canada, or to Siberia and other points north where they sometimes stray.

Cranes, including the rare and endangered Whooping Crane, specifically choose this Platte River country in central Nebraska. For safety at night, they can roost in the river's shallow flow. Then, during the day, they use the abundant agricultural land which stretches along both sides of the Platte River, and which provides them with an ample and reliable food source of grains, invertebrates and insects.

The cranes aren't alone. With them are Snow Geese, like so much salt and pepper thrown into the bracing Nebraska wind; White-fronted Geese, called speckled-bellies by hunters; and the ubiquitous Canada Geese, found here in all its many sub-species. A

million or more geese—and counting—there are also the combined thousands upon thousands of Pin-tail Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Mallard, Green-winged Teal, and—right now—the occasional Blue-winged Teal, Redhead Duck, and Cinnamon Teal. Each day their numbers shift, as new waves of birds arrive and others depart. All told, it is an awesome spectacle. Especially in the morning, the sky fills with stream after stream of duck, geese and crane, all in groups of their own. Sometimes the groups overlap and intertwine as they fly. Their graceful, fluid lines form and reform. As the sun rises, they fly away from the Platte River to the surrounding fields. At sunset, some return to the river or to the dark mirrored lakes and ponds of the nearby Rainwater Basin. Some, of course, do not return that evening, until eventually all their staggered V's drift north and their calls grow faint. It's hard to imagine it now, but spring ends quietly on these Nebraska plains.

Meanwhile, geese and Sandhill Crane call all through the day. So much so, I quickly learn each species and need not look up to identify them visually. The Sandhill Crane has a warbling, raspy chuckle that travels long distances. Some say the Sandhill's call carries more than a mile. Now and again I hear the plaintive call of a Sandhill Crane and search the candy light blue sky for their dark-gray silhouettes. Sometimes I locate them, riding thermals thousands of feet above the plains. Other times I can't find them at all.

This afternoon I come upon a hundred or so cranes standing in a field alongside Kilgore Road, just south of Interstate 80. I pull over and, using my truck as a blind, sit for two hours watching them feed. During this time, more cranes constantly drop in and

join the gathering. Like parachutists, their gangly legs stretch out below them as they descend. Their wings remain cocked and stationary, and they float down, wavering and tilting this way and that, until about a yard above the ground, they flap their wings, position themselves precisely, and finally touch down. It is in that soft moment I sense that they also drop, as it were, into my heart. That so large a bird is elegant and graceful is the beginning of their appeal and beauty.

Cranes also dance. They aren't supposed to be dancing—that is, courting—this early in the season, but some of these are. I'm told they often dance in order to relieve tension when they are made nervous by humans pulling up in cars, pickups and buses to gawk. But how could I be making them nervous? I have been here so long, sitting quietly inside my vehicle, that the cranes soon seem to forget about me. They no longer look my direction and go about scavenging for food, their heads down and focus intent. Only later do a couple of them begin dancing, which they accomplish by jumping up in the air and lifting their wings out and back. At the same time, their heads swoop forward and up. Upon this basic form of their dance, I've seen cranes build three variations—

- One, a crane picks up a stick or cornstalk in its *bill* and tosses it over its head and back,
- Two, a crane picks up a stick or cornstalk with its *legs* and tosses it over its head and back, and
- Three, a crane throws a stick or cornstalk up with its *legs* and then catches it in its *bill*

—all the while prancing and jumping, and flapping its wings. Other Sandhill Cranes

watch and voice approval.

Is my presence the cause of all this rowdiness? If these early dances truly aren't courting behavior, then perhaps the cranes *are* getting nervous, not about me, but about soon having to find a partner. I've also been told that cranes mate for life.

A biologist at the University of Nebraska said he saw a crane one spring on the same corner of a farmer's field as he drove each day to and from work. Eventually, all of the other cranes around Kearney left and continued their migration north, but this one crane stayed. It remained in the same spot, day after day, standing alone. At first the biologist thought the crane was probably injured and couldn't fly, so one day he stopped his car and walked up to the bird. Upon approach, the crane rose up in the air and flew off. So much for that idea, he thought. Yet, that afternoon on his way back home, the perplexed biologist again saw the crane standing on the same corner of the same field.

The crane remained in Kearney through a searing summer and into fall. It puzzled the worried biologist as he drove by the crane at least twice a day. Finally, on one harsh winter morning, the biologist found the thin crane lying frozen in the field.

The biologist casually shared this story with those he met, and often whenever he spoke in front of an audience or class. It haunted him. He hadn't known what to make of the lone crane's behavior, or the private loss he felt. One weekend at the end of a seminar, a Nebraska Game and Parks agent in attendance came up and told the biologist that he had removed a dead crane in mid-March from that same corner of the farmer's field. The two cranes were probably mates, the agent ventured, and the biologist had witnessed a lone crane stand vigil at the last place the crane had seen its mate. The crane

probably didn't know his mate had died, and so waited for her return, and waited... until his own death came by winter.

Sitting here alone and watching cranes dance with one another, I think about that solitary crane. I can't help but hope that perhaps he finally found his mate. Maybe he heard her call and parachuted down one last time, somewhere, to dance with her by a river whose rills and riffles no longer flow through Nebraska.

Thus, I discover my own bond with cranes. They've become like family, so that I, too, talk about them with whomever I meet.

I worry about their safety. Driving the farm roads here, I now wince every time I see a power or telephone line. When you find an injured crane, look up and you'll most likely see the utility line that injured it. These lines kill more cranes than any other happenstance or predator, anywhere. Utility lines—in addition to putting electricity and telephones in our homes and businesses—break wings, legs, bills and necks. Cranes strike them in flight, whether taking off or landing, as you or I might walk into a clear plate glass door. Neither of us sees it coming and we meet the obstacle full force.

Sometimes power lines electrocute. The crane's 7-foot wingspan bridges two of the lines and completes a circuit. At least death by electrocution is quick and merciful, better than standing in a field with a broken wing, unable to move or find food. The mates of these injured cranes—those that have mates—often stay close by their partners, taking leave only to forage for their own food. When the injured birds finally starve, their mates continue north alone.

I wonder if it would cost too much to bury all of the utility lines from Grand

Island to North Platte in a five-mile swath along the Platte River. Depends on whom and when you ask, I guess. Days ago, back in St. Louis, I would have paltered. “Probably”. Tonight, my answer comes more slowly.

I start my truck and go to the Rowe Sanctuary run by the Nebraska Audubon Society, and spend three cold hours in a wind-blown, rickety wood blind on their property. Across what deepens into a dark red, western twilight, I see cranes dropping down to roost for the night along the Platte. I can also see the black strands of utility lines that stretch across the river upstream. The evening switches dark and soon only the slightest sliver moon is visible. I can no longer see the cranes, or the wires. Stars begin to sparkle in the faint purple dome above, and the North finally relents its last cold breath. The wind dead, the sanctuary seems stilled by an unknown hand, but not silenced. I listen to the cranes call as they continue to fly over me, unseen. Soon, this night becomes one of many nights, and reaches back through time. In it Sandhill Crane make these same calls on these same journeys for longer than we know, for longer than humans have stood along the Platte River watching them. I stand and listen across the many years, and feel as though I fall back through them.

It seems abrupt when a sanctuary volunteer arrives and whispers to me that it’s time to go. I hesitate to leave, but then reluctantly start the stiff walk back to my truck and think of the long drive home ahead of me tomorrow. Still vainly searching overhead for cranes flying through the dark, I see a meteor shoot across Orion into Taurus. I stop. Listening to the cranes calling me, I answer and make a wish.

I wish them safely home.