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2003

## Nebraska Birds in Recorded History

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Knopf, Fritz L., "Nebraska Birds in Recorded History" (2003). *USGS Staff -- Published Research*. 86.  
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## NEBRASKA BIRDS IN RECORDED HISTORY

*Birds of the Untamed West*. James E. Ducey. 2000. Making History Press, Omaha, Nebraska. 299 pages. \$25.00 (paper).

The critical image of historical perspective is lacking in much of conservation biology's dialogue on protecting biotic diversity. Some biologists offer that the vision for bird conservation on the Central Grasslands of North America is to secure at least fragments of the avian assemblage that coexisted with Native Americans when Europeans first arrived. Nowhere, however, has anyone really tried to re-create such a historical image in any biological arena, until now.

Exploration of the Louisiana Purchase started with Lewis and Clark in 1804. The Missouri River was the highway of access to early travelers and the river formed the eastern boundary of lands that would eventually become modern-day Nebraska. The great overland migration (along the Oregon and Mormon trails) followed almost 50 years later and perhaps nowhere lent itself so well to early travelers keeping journals as Nebraska. Those travelers from the east were passing through this country rather than viewing it as a place to live. Here too Native Peoples were among the last tribes to live freely on the land, and individuals like George Bird Grinnell were able to live among them and record tribal ways, traditions, and beliefs.

The stated objective of this volume is to document and illustrate the bird life of the prairie and plains of what is now Nebraska between 1750 and 1875. The intent is to "provide a single source of historical information on just one portion of the Plains." Presenting Nebraska as "the untamed West," however, seemed like a stretch, given that it had a relatively friendly human history in this time period. The author divides the volume into five chapters.

The first chapter begins with Native American perspectives on birds in language and lore. This chapter is unique to the literature. Many Native American names for individual species are presented, often with their descriptive English translations. The whooping crane was descriptively "Large White Crane," and then there was "Looks up at the Sky" (American bittern), "Crying Duck" (wood duck), "Fork-tailed Bird" (barn swallow), "Owl Having Horns," and "Laughing Bird" (wrens collectively). Birds were often perceived to have supernatural powers with avian anatomical parts used as symbols of strength in ceremonial events and battles. At the same time, grassland passerines existed primarily as challenges for honing hunting skills of boys—not dissimilar from a modern youngster's fascination with a BB gun. This is a chapter without comparable ornithological synthesis in the literature and leaves the reader begging for a more comprehensive tome addressing the many cultures and societies of the continent.

The second chapter is a nice synthesis of bird notations from early documenters and explorers of frontier Nebraska. Each notable historic excursion is

treated separately. I was surprised somewhat by the reference to John Kirk Townsend as a zoologist from an eastern university who “came to visit the Platte River country,” when in fact he was the first trained zoologist to cross the continent (1834, the Wyeth expedition). I noted occasional historical inconsistencies such as reference to the Omaha tribe migrating from the Ohio Valley by 1800 (page 14) yet also being referenced as possibly trading pelts in 1712 along the Missouri (page 59). Such inconsistencies, however, are inherent in dealing with the somewhat casual nature of most historical references to birds.

This second chapter presents intriguing images of landscapes with black-billed magpies, Say’s phoebes, western kingbirds, and burrowing owls being common along the lower Platte River, far eastward of their modern range. This image is one of a Central Plains that was really a true prairie east of the Missouri River and the Great Plains to the west, with a mixed-grass prairie landscape presented more as a feathered edge between the two rather than as a full member of the prairie triad (tall, mixed, short) as currently envisioned at this latitude. The image of the Missouri River also is of a broad floodplain with backwaters for white pelicans and exposed sand bars for least terns. Of note for my Nebraska birding friends is the image of current Lake McConaughy as the home of the state’s greatest marshland avifauna—one that now exists only below the dam as Lake Ogallala along the North Platte. Overall, this chapter sets a scholarly standard for interpreting the historical impacts of European “development” on a native biota.

The third chapter addresses bird “habitats” by looking more specifically at the general topographic, edaphic, and floristic character of “native Nebraska.” Although this chapter is something of a summary of the previous one, it stimulates the most inquisitive exercises for the reader. The previous summary of easily noticed species by historical amateurs and the few trained zoologists really fails to portray the historical landscape template for the native avian assemblage. Certainly, the lack of shoreline trees on the Platte tells an ornithologist far more about the native avian assemblage than do historical notes of the presence of a variety of conspicuous ducks across the drainage.

In the fourth chapter, the author summarizes the historic bird life by biotic region of the state. These summaries should be the essence of the volume. I found the author’s syntheses to be cautious and descriptive. Unfortunately, the chapter contains a major component of revisiting the historical explorers’ activities, which I found not only redundant but also detracting from a tight presentation. The chapter ends with seemingly misplaced sections on “Birds as sustenance for Indians” and “Birds as sustenance at trading posts.” The final chapter is a historical record of species accounts from the period. This chapter reads as much of a more traditional state ornithology, albeit stopping circa 1875.

My native Nebraska friends often refer to the Fort Collins, Colorado, and Fort Laramie, Wyoming, locales as being “merely western Nebraska.” I find such hard to argue ornithologically, and the author too includes some information from

beyond the contemporary western boundary of Nebraska. Likewise, some references extend beyond the 1875 date defined as the historical limit of the book. I view both of these exceptions as an attempt to be ecologically representative rather than a liberty within the topical organization. The volume appears to be printed locally in Omaha, which I find a tremendous disservice in that the information is of a caliber meriting a finer press. Many figures are so poorly printed that most of the maps are illegible. Most figures are but marginally relevant to text information.

Overall, this is “my kind of volume,” as it reviews history and raises as many questions as it answers. It is essential for Nebraskan birders and ornithologists. More significantly, it is a model for what hopefully will be a flurry of similar historical summaries of native avifaunas. This example of historical background prespective begs for major academic inquiry into these types of pre-European ornithological histories. Much like Margaret Morse Nice’s *Studies in the Life of the Song Sparrow*, this volume exemplifies the inquiry and contribution to ornithology that is possible from outside traditional academic and agency institutions.—Fritz L. Knopf, *U.S. Geological Survey, Fort Collins Science Center, Fort Collins, CO 80526-8118.*