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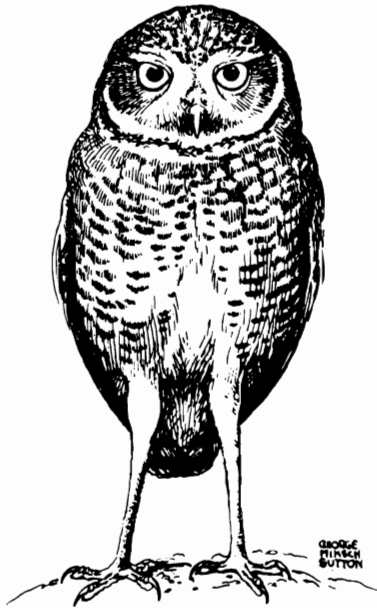
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SIXTY-FIVE YEARS OF WHOOPING CRANE RECORDS IN NEBRASKA

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School of Life Sciences
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INTRODUCTION

In 1933, Myron Swenk determined the status of the Whooping Crane in Nebraska by summarizing all of the records then available to him, and established the general pattern of timing and geographic distribution of Whooping Crane occurrence in this state. Although the population of this species has remained very low since that time, a sufficient number of observations have been made to warrant updating his analysis and comparing the more recent records with these earlier ones. During the summer of 1977 the junior author undertook such a summary as a class project, by extracting such records from all of the issues of *Nebraska Bird Review* from the fall of 1933 through the spring of 1977. No other sources such as newspapers were utilized, although it is possible that some acceptable records may have been overlooked as a result. The materials were prepared for publication by the senior author.

RESULTS

Yearly Variations. Although there are obvious dangers in tallying the total number of birds seen in a selected time period, such as variables in the numbers of active observers and the possibilities of the same birds being reported more than once, such a summary provides some suggestive variations in the magnitude of Whooping Crane migrations through the state. Thus, if the 65-year period is subdivided into five-year periods, the following total minimum numbers of cranes were reported during spring and fall:

	Spring	Fall
1912-1917	56	12
1918-1922	56*	41
1923-1927	203	31
1928-1932	413**	65
1933-1937	488**	81
1938-1942	97	3
1943-1947	46	17
1948-1952	2	7
1953-1957	2	10**
1958-1962	5***	1
1963-1967	6***	*
1968-1972	2***	*
1973-1977	11	8

*One or more "small flocks" also reported.

**One or more "large flocks" also reported.

***Sightings reported but flock size not indicated.

Interestingly, both the spring and fall observations indicate a peak of crane sightings in the early 1930's, when the crane population was lower than in recent years and during a major drouth period. It would be of interest to examine variations in the levels of the Platte River during that time, as well as to learn of possible corresponding variations in use of the river by Sandhill Cranes.

Seasonal Variations. Of equal interest to these long-term changes in crane occurrences are the seasonal variations associated with migrational timing in this species. Thus, the records for the entire 65-year period were analyzed as to spring and fall occurrences in five-day intervals. Total numbers of birds reported per five-day period in spring and fall as well as total sightings for each such period may be summarized as follows:

	Total Sightings Reported	Total Cranes Reported*
March 6-10	2	1
11-15	3	6
16-20	3	7
21-25	7	26
26-31	7	130
April 1-5	28	424
6-10	23	339
11-15	21	319
16-20	12	161
21-25	3	18
26-30	3	24
May 1-5	4	7
6-10	2	1
11-15	0	0
16-20	1	?
21-25	0	0
26-31	1	1
September 11-15	1	41
16-20	0	0
21-25	3	63
26-30	0	0
October 1-5	0	0
6-10	6	21
11-15	9	17
16-20	11	34
21-25	8	48
26-31	3	22
November 1-5	3	27
6-10	2	3

*Excludes records of indefinite flock sizes.

It may be readily seen that the spring migration averages about two weeks later than that of the Sandhill Crane, which peaks in Nebraska during the last two weeks in March. The peaks of Nebraska's Whooping Crane migration occurs during the first half of April, since 60 percent of all the spring sightings and 74 percent of the total cranes counted during spring were reported between April 1 and April 15. In contrast, 48 percent of the fall sightings and 38 percent of the total cranes counted during fall were seen between October 16 and October 31, suggesting that the fall migration is less predictable than the spring movement.

Regional Distribution. As Swenk (1933) established, the distribution of Whooping Crane sightings in Nebraska is closely associated with the Platte River, particularly in the area between Lexington and Grand Island. Since 1912, cranes have been reported from 26 Nebraska counties, but of the total 162 sightings that can be localized as to county, over half (58 percent) were from Buffalo and Kearney counties. The total number of sightings by counties may be summarized as follows: Buffalo, 74; Kearney, 20; Dawson, 13; Hall, 11; Lincoln, 10; Adams, 9; two each in Garden, Logan, Morrill, and McPherson counties, and one each in Blaine, Brown, Cass, Cherry, Clay, Custer, Franklin, Hamilton, Howard, Keith, Keya Paha, Merrick, Phelps, Platte, Sarpy,

Sheridan and Webster counties. The importance of the Platte River may be indicated by the fact that over 90 percent of these sightings occurred within 30 miles of the Platte River, and about 80 percent occurred between Lexington and Grand Island, an 80-mile distance.

CONCLUSIONS

This review of published Whooping Crane sightings indicates that over half of the total spring occurrences in Nebraska occur during the first half of April, and are closely associated with the Platte River, particularly the section between Lexington and Grand Island. Fall occurrences are less predictable, but occur from early October to early November. The role of the Platte River as a major stopover for Whooping Cranes between their wintering and breeding grounds is clearly evident, and the maintenance of an adequate flow to provide suitable habitat during migration periods of this endangered species should be a matter of concern to state and federal conservation agencies. Additionally, the presence of a federal wildlife refuge on the Platte River between Lexington and Grand Island would be of obvious significance in the preservation of this species.

LITERATURE CITED

Swenk, M. H. 1933. The present status of the Whooping Crane. *Nebr. Bird Rev.*, 1:111-129.

1977 FALL FIELD DAY

The 1977 Fall Field Day started Saturday night with a get-together at the home of the George W. Browns in Kearney. Sunday, 2 October, started out gray and chilly, but eventually developed into the fine fall day which had been ordered and promised. The trip started at the Newark Township building and went north on Nebraska 10 to the north bank of the Platte River and explored eastward along the river. After that area had been covered the group went to an area northeast of Fort Kearney. After the lunch at the Newark Township building, at which the official tally was compiled, some of the group went to the Funk lagoon for more birding. Thirty-three people were at the lunch (it was easy to count them while they were sitting down) but more than that were involved in the activities at one time or another.

Forty-six species were seen Sunday morning (or forty-seven if any of the silent Meadowlarks were Easterns): Pied-billed Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant; Great Blue and Green Herons; Blue-winged Teal, Turkey Vulture; Red-tailed, Swainson's, and Rough-legged Hawks; American Kestrel, Bobwhite, Killdeer, American Avocet, Ring-billed Gull; Rock and Mourning Doves; Screech Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Common Flicker; Red-bellied, Red-headed, Hairy, and Downy Woodpeckers; Barn Swallow, Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Thrasher, American Robin, Eastern Bluebird, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Starling; Orange-crowned, Nashville, and Yellow-rumped Warblers; House Sparrow, Meadowlark sp. and Western Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, Cardinal, Pine Siskin, American Goldfinch, Rufous-sided Towhee, Dark-eyed Junco, and Field Sparrow. In addition, an Osprey was seen just south of Kearney the day before, and in the afternoon eighteen new species were added: Western Grebe, Canada Goose, Mallard, Gadwall, Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck; Ferruginous and Marsh Hawks, Sora, American Coot, Franklin's Gull, Burrowing Owl; Tree and Rough-winged Swallows; Yellow-headed Blackbird, and Vesper Sparrow.

The front rank of the morning group saw a mule deer and all saw a beaver which floated in the middle of a sand pit while the group birded all around it. And the afternoon group saw prairie dogs along with the Burrowing Owls.

NOTES

LITTLE BLUE HERON. An immature Little Blue Heron (*Florida Caerulea*) was observed feeding in a pothole near Overton Lake, Holt County (S19, T27N, R16W) on 20 May 1976. The bird was white with greenish legs and a bluish bill. It was watched through a 20x spotting scope for about ten minutes at a distance of 100 to 150 yards.

— Ken Robertson, Game and Parks Commission, Bassett

AN ALBINO SHOVELER. On 30 April 1977 an albino Northern Shoveler, *Anas (Spatula) clypeata*, was observed on Nobel's Lake, just east of the south end of De Soto National Wildlife Refuge in northern Pottawattamie County, Iowa. The bird was first observed by eight persons comprising the ornithology class from Dana College and by Dr. Larry Holcomb, who was visiting with us that day.

Later that morning Dr. Holcomb and I returned to try to photograph the bird — an effort that met with little success. However, we were able to make better observations that enabled us to arrive at some conclusions that the initial observation did not allow.

The albino was part of a group of some twenty Shovelers on the nearly dry lake. For quite some time we watched it dabbling in the shallow water with a small sub-group of four birds. Two of these were males and one was a female. The albino remained constantly close to one of the males and, since paring is almost universal at this season, we believe the albino to be a female. Its entire feather cover was an extremely pale tan color, not pure white. The bill was bright orange-yellow, about the same color as that of the domestic Pekin duck. Bill shape left no doubt that the bird was indeed a Shoveler.

When flushed, the some twenty Shovelers circled over the lake for some time. While in flight they remained in sub-group formation. During at least 75 percent of the time of such flights the albino led a sub-group formation, and occasionally its sub-group led the entire flock, so that the albino was the leader. Experience would indicate that the bird was not a pure albino and was not without iris (eye) pigments. Such pure albinos, lacking iris pigments, have notoriously poor vision and would not likely assume a leadership position at any time.

— George E. Grube, Biology Dept., Dana College, Blair, Nebraska

BALD EAGLE. About noon 16 November 1976 I was walking over to lunch when I noticed a large bird circling about a quarter mile away. As it banked for a turn I could see the bright white of the head and tail. It was the first Bald Eagle of the year for me and the first adult I've seen here. We live on the Elkhorn River and usually have one or two that winter here, but they have always been immatures. After 4:00 P.M. I went back to the river to see if the Eagle was still around, but unfortunately it was deer season and much shooting was going on and I didn't see the bird again. It was most likely going to the Missouri, but I hope it is one of the immatures, now adult, back for the winter.

— Mark M. Peyton, Ewing

PEREGRINE FALCONS AT INDIAN CAVE STATE PARK. On 9 April 1977, between 6 and 7 P.M., my wife, Shirley L. Bucknell, and I spotted three large falcons present in the windmill area of Indian Cave State Park, near the Missouri River east of Schubert. The day had been warm and windy and the lighting was still very good. Several single sightings were made and then a pair came into view as they flew together and then broke apart for a stoop or two at each other, reminiscent of courting displays. As the pair were performing aerial maneuvers a lone bird sailed in and perched high atop of a dead tree north of the Campsite in the windmill area. We both had nearly ten minutes of viewing (with 7x and 10x binoculars) at what appeared to be not a Prairie Falcon, but a Peregrine, as this bird was distinctly much darker gray or black than the light brown of *Falco mexicanus*. A very dark cap and a wide black sideburn, and lack of the two distinct sideburns evident in the Prairie Falcon, certainly added to the suggestion that these birds were Peregrines. We have both observed Prairie Falcons in the Scottsbluff National

Monument area for several days last spring and these birds were much darker than the falcons we saw out west. The next morning, while I was walking north in the deep ditch trail (8 to 15 feet deep in spots) from this campsite, an indentation in the ditch wall caught my eye and I crawled up to look into it. The chamber (3 feet wide, 2 feet high, 1.5 feet deep) was littered with feathers and droppings, and appeared to be a spot for plucking a kill out of sight. After crawling down the bank I noticed that the site was directly below the dead tree where the Peregrine was seen perched the previous evening.

— Michael F. O'Connor, Omaha

COMMON GALLINULE. In May 1977 I observed a large flock of Common Gallinules on the upper end of Harlan County Reservoir. They may be breeding there as there is suitable habitat.

— William F. Rapp, Jr., Crete

DUNLIN. On 1 June 1976 David Westerman (SCS Broken Bow) observed a Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*, formerly *Froila alpina*) at Cameron Lake, Rock County, feeding along the shoreline. I have reviewed colored 35 mm slides of the bird and there is no doubt about the identification. The bird has a downward droop at the tip of the bill and a black patch across the belly.

— Ken Robertson, Game and Parks Commission, Bassett

SNOWY OWL. On 19 February 1977 I saw a Snowy Owl seven miles east of Albion, sitting on a haystack about 200 meters from the road. After watching it for some time I tried to approach more closely but it flew off to another stack almost immediately. We met John and Willetta Lueshen of Wisner for dinner that day and they informed several other birders that night. The following day a group from Wayne State College, Biology Professor A. Jewell Schock, Ed Brogie, Mark Brogie, and Mike Pelc, came over and we were lucky enough to find the Owl in the same field. Again, it would not allow us to approach closer than 100 meters but some photographs were taken nonetheless.

— Wayne J. Molhoff, Albion

POOR-WILL. This fall, as I was walking at the Enders Dam site, I picked up a bird which had been run down by a car. I later identified it as a Poor-will by the amount of white in the tail feathers. I have never heard their calls here, but I don't live in the lowlands along the Frenchman River. (Written 5 November 1977).

— L. Iola Pennington, Wauneta

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