

Crane Watch—2010

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 25 March 2010 20:02 - Last Updated Thursday, 25 March 2010 20:08



Imagine a star-filled night in central Nebraska.

A fingernail moon lies suspended in the black sky as thousands of Sandhill cranes trill their ancient song.

They roost on a Platte River sandbar or glide above its chilly waters, constantly calling to each other.

“To the crane watcher, the music is a symphony of wonder,” said biologist Mark Peyton of Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District. “It’s a sound so different, yet one that resonates within.”

Peyton said the cranes have had a presence on the Platte for as long as the river has meandered through Nebraska and perhaps longer than that.

Last Thursday afternoon, the biologist took several Gothenburg residents on a crane watch.

We loaded up in a CNPPID van and drove some of the back roads to the Platte River Whooping Crane Habitat Maintenance Trust blind south of Grand Island.

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Along the way, we watched cranes feed in cornfields or settle on sandbars of the Platte and in nearby wetlands.

In the late afternoon sun, birds descending for a landing reminded me of the winged monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*, their long slender legs suspended almost motionless behind them.

Peyton said the Platte River and nearby cornfields are where the Sandhill cranes begin landing in the hundreds of thousands in mid-February where they feed, fatten and strengthen pair bonds before their long trip north.

Typically he said each bird stays three to four weeks before flying north to nest in an area bordered by Siberia to the west and Hudson Bay to the east.

By mid April, most of the cranes are gone.

The journey of the Sandhill cranes that fly to Nebraska begins as far south as Mexico where they spend the winter.

Peyton said they then fly nonstop to the Cornhusker State where they used to stay longer.



“Now there’s less waste from corn so they leave in poorer shape and fly to South Dakota,” he

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explained, noting that the cranes eat anything small enough to swallow—even mammals.

As we gather this evening in the blind, we hug binoculars and cameras to our eyes.

We watch their odd mating dance on a sandbar and their graceful wings in flight silhouetted against a crimson setting sun.

What I will remember most, however, is their primordial song of spring that brings hope for new birth.

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