

# Wild Bird Habitat Store

March Newsletter - 2021

## South Lincoln

In the Alamo Plaza  
56<sup>th</sup> & Hwy 2  
Lincoln, NE 68516  
(402) 420-2553

## North Lincoln

4900 Dudley St  
2 Blk South of Holdrege  
Lincoln, NE 68504  
(402) 464-4055

## Omaha

Harrison Village Mall  
168th & Harrison  
Omaha, NE 68136  
(402) 504-4450

[www.wildbirdhabitatstore.com](http://www.wildbirdhabitatstore.com)

### COVID19 UPDATE:

#### IN STORE SHOPPING FOR

Bird feeders, hardware, birding supplies, gifts  
& pet products

#### WE ASK YOU CONTINUE TO ORDER OUR WILD BIRD FEEDS FOR CURBSIDE PICKUP

North Wild Bird Habitat Call (402) 464-4055

South Wild Bird Habitat Call (402) 420-2553

#### ORDER WILD BIRD FEED ONLINE FOR CURBSIDE PICKUP AT

[shopwildbirdfeed.com](http://shopwildbirdfeed.com)

### March News Notes:

- March, we are at the beginning stages of spring migration.
- Over 500,000 Sandhill Cranes will spend six weeks on the Platte River.
- March snowstorms can cause problems for our birds.
- Suet will be in big demand for the remainder of winter, and even more so from March to August during the nesting season.
- Goldfinches will be flocking to thistle feeders & males will show their breeding plumage.
- If you choose to plant for wildlife this spring begin planning now. Carroll Henderson's book "Landscaping for Wildlife" is a great resource and available at Wild Bird Habitat Store.
- We've seen a lot of snow, but not many northern winter birds.
- Time to clean out nest boxes, make repairs to them, or add a new bird house.
- After a quiet winter it's time for the singing to begin.



## Sandhill Cranes

The Sandhill Crane has one of the longest fossil histories of any existing bird, with the oldest dating back 2.5 million years. This is almost twice as old as the remains of most current living bird species. But even more amazing are the fossilized remains found in Nebraska of what is believed to be the early prehistoric ancestors of the Sandhill Cranes which date back over 10 million years. With the Platte River dating back a young 10,000 years, these early cranes were sharing a savannah type habitat with the North American rhinoceros, camel, and elephant that have long been extinct.



### Social distance on a trip to see the Sandhill Crane migration



On your own or with the family

Easy 1/2 day trip or all day trip from  
the Lincoln / Omaha area

Details and maps available at  
Wild Bird Habitat Stores

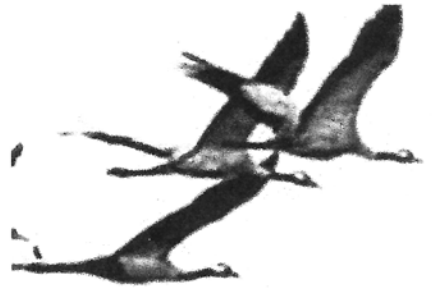
Routes to take, viewing locations  
picnic sights and more.

March 1st thru April 1st  
Prime viewing March 10 to 28

Don't miss it!

[nebraskaflyway.com](http://nebraskaflyway.com)

The Sandhill Cranes survived and adapted as the prairies developed some 14,000 years ago. They witnessed the prehistoric mammals replaced by the American Bison, Pronghorn Antelope, and elk. And in just the last 150 years have further adapted to the influences of man along with the introduction of cattle, row crops, and sprawling urban communities.



The common name, Sandhills Crane, is derived from its relationship with the Platte River surrounded by the Nebraska sandhills. This region is an important annual migratory stopover for more than 500,000 Sandhill Cranes. 15% of that population are intermediate, or Sandhill Cranes which nest in Canada, 5 % are Greater Sandhill Cranes, and the balance are Lesser Sandhill Cranes. The Sandhill Cranes that pass through the heart of Nebraska known as the Central Flyway, winter in Texas, New Mexico and Mexico. The normal arrival date in Nebraska on their way north is late February.

February. The crane population along the Platte River peaks by late March, and by the second week of April, other than a few stragglers, they have made a mass exodus to the breeding grounds. As the Greater Sandhill Cranes settle down to nest in western Minnesota and Manitoba, the Canadian, or intermediate cranes head for central Canada from the Rockies to Hudson Bay. It is the Lesser Sandhill Crane that migrate into the high Arctic nesting across Northern Canada and Alaska with close to 100,000 of them crossing the Bering Strait to nest in Eastern Siberia.

When the cranes reach the Platte River on their way north they will spend approximately 29 days increasing their body fat by a quarter of their weight. That will provide the energy needed to complete the migration and begin nesting. Cranes are omnivores. 90% of their diet during their stay in the Platte Valley is corn with about 10% consisting of invertebrate insects, worms and crustaceans. Prior to the consumption of vast quantities of waste corn they feed on today during their stay, before agriculture shaped the plains the cranes fattened up on a variety of starchy wetland tubers. Today only 10% of those natural wetlands exists having been replaced by corn and soybeans.

After a day of feeding in the fields surrounding the Platte River, the cranes begin to move toward the river as the sun lowers on the horizon. By dusk tens of thousands of Sandhill Crane began landing in the shallows of the river to roost for the night. This provides a respectful degree of protection from predators. As many as 12 to 15 thousand cranes can congregate along a single half mile stretch of the river to spend the evening.

When the cranes head for the river to roost, they arrive in loose flocks scattered across the sky. As they land on the water it appears as if a large feathered raft is being created. But in the morning as the sun rises a nervous anticipation spreads through these massive groups of cranes scattered up and down the river. Then, all of a sudden as if on cue, thousands of cranes ascend into the air with a unified shattering sound of calls and wing beats. It is repeated up and down the river until the sky becomes a shadowy mass of cranes spreading out to select a field where they will spend most the next 8 to 10 hours feeding, loafing, and interacting between family members and with their neighbors.

While in the fields feeding, they can be seen performing their well known "dance of the cranes." Mated pairs will bow to each other with outstretched wings, leaping high off the ground. They may grab sticks or corn stubble and repeatedly toss it into the air during these displays. This courtship is believed to strengthen the pair bond between mates. Sandhill Cranes are monogamous, remaining together for life which can be well over 25 years. But Sandhill Cranes are confronted by many obstacles. Apart from being hunted in some states, they encounter predators, harsh weather, and loss of habitat which has had the most impact on the reduction of all bird species across the planet. If a

cranes loses their mate, they will dance to select another. And for those Sandhill Cranes just reaching sexual maturity after 3 to 5 years, the gathering of such a large number of potential partners throughout the fields bordering this 65 mile stretch along the Platte River each spring provides an opportunity to find a companion. Although among all this dancing and posturing, the jumping, bowing, arching of necks and stick throwing, it is primarily a part of courtship, pair bonding, and a mating ritual. Using a variety of postures is a way to communicate for these hundreds of small family groups that makeup these massive flocks of birds. Scientists speculate it fosters socialization within the group and relieve tensions.



The vocalization of by Sandhill Cranes is also distinctive. Both the males and females make a rattling "kar-r-r-r- o-o-o" sound. It is a sound that, for many Nebraskans, has become as much a harbinger of spring as the sight of an American Robin. The call can vary in length, strength and become louder depending on its intention. The loudest and most noticeable call is during the mating season. Males and females will sing loudly to each other. It is called "unison calling." The cranes stand close together, calling in a synchronized and complex duet. The female makes two calls for every single call of the male.

During their stay on the Platte River Sandhill Cranes can be seen soaring on thermals strengthening the flight muscles that will carry them further north in the days to come. They will use these same thermals when they depart the river riding them several thousand feet into the sky then soaring northward to the next thermal where they will regain lost elevation. This method is very efficient and will be repeated over and over until they reach the nesting territory. On a good day Sandhill Cranes may cover as much as 500 miles, although an average day is generally 150 to 300 miles. Their speed averages between 25 and 35 miles per hour, but increases significantly with a good spring tail wind.

Once they have reached their nesting grounds little time is wasted. A nest will be built constructed from nearby vegetation scratched into a small mound where the female will lay two eggs. These nests are located for the most part in bogs and wetlands, some nearly floating. Both of the eggs may hatch but only one chick will survive the ten weeks it takes to be capable of the long migration south. This can be due to predation, food supply, but most often it is siblings rivalry. The pair will take care of the nest together. While the female incubates the eggs for approximately 30 days, the male will aggressively stand guard, warding off any predators. Once hatched the young are capable of walking and swimming within 24 hours, and can feed themselves almost immediately, become independent in about two months. Pairs remain together year round, and migrate south with their young of the year, which fledge at about 70 days.

Sandhill Cranes are very large birds with long thin legs and necks. They stand 3 to 4 feet in height, and have a wingspan of 6 feet when full grown. Their weight varies between 8 to 12 pounds. They are pretty hard to miss seeing. The feathers are mostly grayish but the shade of gray can vary widely. The forehead has a bright red patch that is one of the most distinguishing features of the bird along with white cheeks. The red patch on the forehead is actually bare skin. Sometimes they may appear to have a reddish-brown appearance. This is because Sandhill Cranes preen themselves by rubbing mud on their feathers. Maybe it helps control feather mites or other parasites that thrive among large groups of birds. Maybe it is unintentionally gathered in their bill while foraging for food. None-the-less, the color may vary depending if the mud is brown or red.



Their bills and feet of a Sandhill Crane are important tools. A crane's bill is very sharp and sturdy being useful when probing frozen soil. The edges are serrated to grasp slippery food like worms, tadpoles, or snakes. Not only is the bill used for preening, it can also double as a weapon. The feet and legs of a crane work in conjunction with the beak whether foraging for food or defending itself. The foot has three long toes with claws on the end. These claws are very sharp and can be used for scratching in dirt to find food as well as protection. When a crane is threatened, it will use its wings to maintain its balance and then jump up and strike at the attacker with its feet.



The eggs and the young of the Sandhill Cranes are preyed on by raccoons, crows, hawks, eagles, owls, ravens, wolves, coyotes, and foxes. The adult Sandhill Cranes are threatened by hunters in states which allow it, and habitat loss.

It's hard to believe in this age of media someone has not seen documentaries and images or heard about the Wildebeest migration across the grassy plains of Africa. Yet right here in the central part of North America, along a 65 mile stretch of the Platte River in the middle of the Great Plains called Nebraska, is a migration of wildlife that rivals any on the planet. The migration of the Sandhill Cranes.

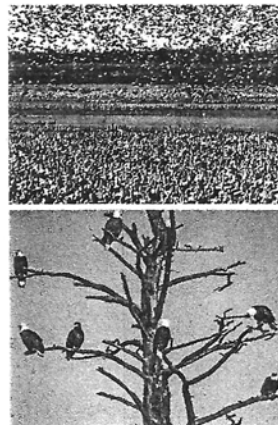


It's been a long cold snowy winter. Time to get out and take a road trip as the spring bird migration begins. Bird watching is an easy way to social distance traveling on your own, with a friend or take the family. Pack a lunch. Grab the binoculars. And just go!

Loess Bluffs NWR - 2 hour drive from Lincoln. Bald Eagles, Trumpeter Swans, Snow Geese, waterfowl and more. Easy access with well maintained roads for viewing. Shelters, restrooms, nature center. Hundreds of thousand of snow geese stage here. Visit Loess Bluffs NWR online for directions

**Wingtip:** *The Missouri River in Nebraska hosts the second largest population of Bald Eagles in the lower 48 states during migration. Many remain to nest.*

Desoto NWR - 1.5 hours from Lincoln. Bald Eagles, Snow Geese, waterfowl, woodland birds and more. Easy access with well maintained roads for viewing. Shelters, restrooms, viewing blinds, nature center. Visit Desoto NWR online for directions



## **The Great Migration: A Celebration of Sandhill Cranes in Nebraska**

January 19 - June 19, 2021

**Great Plains Art Museum - 11th & Q Street, Lincoln, NE**

Cranes have claimed a special place in people's hearts for millennia. They are found in petroglyphs in Utah, in texts from ancient Greece and Rome, and they have long been revered as symbols of happiness and longevity in Asia. In March and April, Nebraska is a stopover place for about a million Sandhill Cranes, mostly along the central Platte River. It is the largest gathering of cranes in the world and one of the most popular of all wildlife migrations. Thousands of people visit Nebraska to see these birds and to reconnect with nature. This exhibition celebrates this annual wildlife spectacle and the unique lives of these elegant birds. The artist, Jude Martindale, interprets her experiences with the cranes in ways that reveal not only their personalities, but also her emotional reactions to watching their captivating behaviors. For more information visit Great Plains Art Museum online.



## Dave's March Bird Chatter

March is the beginning of one of the most spectacular and exciting times when it comes to watching birds. It starts this month with Robins, blackbirds, Meadowlarks, and bluebirds. Water fowl from geese to ducks are on the move, and the Sandhill Cranes are returning to the Platte River in Central Nebraska. Most all these birds will be sporting their breeding plumage making them brighter, and easier to identify. As the nesting season draws nearer, the winter flocks of birds will start to break up and return to their seasonal nesting grounds. During the winter these birds form flocks and travel together, sometimes with other birds, and stay together until this time of year.



By the end of March the songbirds and shorebirds will be migrating. Some will just be passing through headed far to the north, while others will remain to nest and raise families in the Plains states. Songbirds will continue to migrate until the first part of June. In Wild Bird Habitat's April newsletter we'll tell you what to look for and where some good birding locations are.

Two frequent questions people ask this time of year is about orioles and hummingbirds. It is a ways off yet. Oriole feeders, the oranges, jelly, and nectars, should be out by April 25<sup>th</sup>, although their earliest arrival date is April 18<sup>th</sup>. You may need to freshen it a few times, but having it ready early pays off. As for hummingbirds, again timing is important. Hummingbird feeders should be in place by Mother's Day if not the week before. But keep in mind that weather can influence the exact time these Neo-tropical favorites arrive. Just keep it fresh and you should be rewarded with their appearance.

Here we are talking about migration already but winter weather may be a long way from over. March can produce some significant snows across the Central Great Plains and Midwest. These storms can create problems for the early migrants to our area. Already in February we had dozens of reports of large numbers of American Robins arriving. Bluebirds should be showing up in good numbers during early March, and by mid to late March those folks with Purple Martin colonies will be scolded by these birds until they open the doors on the martin house. If a sudden snow storm erupts during March, or if the weather is damp and cold, those birds who have arrived that feed exclusively on insects may retreat south as far as they need to go to locate food. The one exception is the Tree Swallow. This aerial acrobat that catches insects on the wing can survive on seeds if necessary. These migrants arriving from the south are driven by their instinct to return to their breeding territories. But even Sandhill Cranes have been known to perish by the hundreds when caught in a Nebraska March blizzard. All we can do for many of these birds is hope for the best.

If we get a March snowstorm keep the feeders well stocked, supply some grit for the birds, and make sure open water is available. Now is as good as time as any to purchase a bird bath heater, or replace the one that just doesn't work as good as when it was new. All bird bath heaters and de-icers, as well as all our heated bird baths will be on sale the month of March. You will probably get some use out of them yet this year, and will be ready to go next winter.

If you feel you have had fewer Goldfinches at your Nyjer thistle feeders than in previous years, that is all about to change. We have been enjoying the Northern population of Goldfinch over the winter months. Our resident Goldfinch, many who drift south for the winter, will be returning this month, usually by the second week. It is easy to double the population at the feeders with their return.





This is also when the olive drab non-breeding plumage of the males is replaced by the bright canary yellow feathers of the male during their partial molt in late winter. At first the male Goldfinch will appear blotchy until the full beauty of his breeding plumage is revealed. It will be May before the northern populations of goldfinch we have enjoyed over the winter begin to follow the dandelion bloom back to their northern breeding territories. That makes March a good time to add another Nyjer thistle feeder to avoid over-crowding.

There seem to be a high number of House Finch at the feeders. This may be due to the snow pack covering a lot of natural foods. It's a joy to have so many of them around as they will compete with House Sparrows for perches at the feeders, unlike the Goldfinch that is not near as aggressive. I have seen large numbers of House Finch at the feeders in the past. It's just been a while. Let us know if you have noticed more House Finch than usual.



Occasionally a customer may ask where all the birds are. It's the lack of resident birds at someone's bird feeders this time of year can be somewhat of a mystery. I am not sure if anyone has the correct answer as to why some birds abandon our offerings in what seems to us to be a well protected area with all their "favorite wild bird feeds". It could be a persistent hawk in your area, a cat, or just a coincidence. This is all the more reason to maintain a bird feeder, or several bird feeders, all year round. But if you do only feed during the winter months, it is best to have the feeder ready by early September when birds are establishing their winter food sources. But it may remain a mystery, until we start thinking like birds. Usually these "dry spells" of few birds at your feeders only lasts a short while.

Many of us have missed enjoying our winter visitors from the north this year. In fact the number of winter birds we typically enjoy, called irruptive species such as; Pine Siskin, Red-breasted nuthatches, crossbills and others, have been lower than normal. This may be due to an adequate supply of food resources in the far northern reaches of the U.S. and Canada allowing these birds to remain in their northern ranges. Normally harsh winters in the North Country will drive many birds south in search of new winter feeding areas. As you recall there were a number of blizzards in the Dakotas, Minnesota and further north last winter and we enjoyed more of those northern birds.

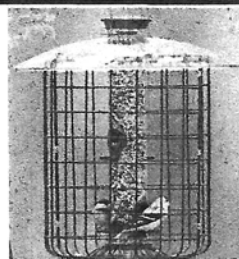
None-the-less, as winter ebbs and spring slowly arrives, the numbers of birds at the feeders will increase. Many natural foods have been consumed by wildlife or destroyed by the snow pack that has lasted several months. Moving into the nesting season is a period of high energy demands for birds. Already we are hearing a number of birds begin to sing. Yes - birds are relatively quiet all winter with the exception of the jays barking out their calls to let all know they have arrived once again at the feeders or the year round calls of the Carolina Wren. You've heard the finch continuously squabble over which perch is theirs. But most other birds just give a few chirps and peeps.

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**10% OFF All Bird Feeders Caged Suet Feeders**

*Thru March 20th*

***Protect your bird feeder from  
marauding squirrels  
and hungry blackbirds!***



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March is the time when singing is the onset of courtship and pair bonding, and the songs mean spring to our ear even if our eyes still see white. The Northern Cardinal seems to be the first, singing as early as mid-January followed by the Chickadees. The intensity and frequency will pick up. along with the mating calls of many other birds. In fact today I heard my first Mourning Dove. This singing is a true harbinger of spring. It reminds us we have endured another winter on the Great Plains and that we are in the home stretch. Soon birds will be establishing territories. Courting a mate. Nest construction. Then raising a family. It will be mid to late summer before any natural foods become available. So keep the feeders filled even after the snow melts and the sun warms the day. The birds will appreciate it.

Suet will remain in high demand over the coming months, even more so than during the winter. In the past suet was considered to be a wintertime feed product for woodpeckers, nuthatches, Chickadees, and an occasional Carolina Wren. However, heading into the nesting season these birds will consume more suet than all winter long. Roughly about 30% more between now and late summer. The animal protein provides them with the extra energy needed to defend a territory, court a mate, and raise a family. Often during the summer months you'll see the Downy Woodpecker bring their young to the suet feeder for a high energy treat. So if you've never tried feeding suet, now is a great time to start. I prefer the upside-down suet log with the Attractor suet plugs. This makes it extremely difficult for European Starlings to feed. Other popular suet feeders I like to use are the caged suet feeders which prevent squirrels from raiding the suet. We have a good variety of suet feeders at Wild Bird Habitat and the details to help you get the most out of it. Give it a try. You'll be glad you did.



March is also the time to get the nest boxes cleaned out and checked for needed repairs. Place a fresh 2 inch layer of wood shaving in the bottom of Wood Duck nest boxes. Also make sure no mice have wintered over in them and that they are cleaned and ready to go by the middle of the month. If the weather warms and is sunny Chickadees, along with some bluebirds, will begin checking nest boxes and start building a nest. Woodpeckers are early nesters as well.

Oh yes! Spring brings not only the highly anticipated return of our favorite summer birds, but of a few we could do without, primarily the Common Grackle. We have a variety of bird feeders and great tips at Wild Bird habitat on how to deal with these overpowering birds and still have a great summer bird feeding experience.

I encourage everyone as the winter of 2020/2021 subsides to get out and enjoy the changing of the seasons from beginning to end. Watch and listen to the birds. Watch your backyard closely for any new or migrating birds. Take a walk in a natural area such as the Pioneers Park Nature Center, Holmes Lake, or Spring Creek Prairie looking for the arrival of spring birds.

Add another bird feeder, maybe a different style. Find out what cavity nesting birds are in your area and attracted to your habitat characteristics and put up a bird house for them. Start planning a new water feature, maybe a small recirculating pond for the birds. Not only will the sound of moving water attract more birds, you can operate them all winter providing a great water source.

And it is not too early to begin thinking about adding some wildlife habitat to your yard for the birds. The Wild Bird Habitat Stores offer the book "Landscaping for Wildlife" by Carroll Henderson, and I recommend it highly. If you were to plant just one shrub to provide food or shelter each year, before you know it you'll have wonderful habitat for birds, and attract many more than just those visiting your feeders. It will also add value to your property.



So enjoy the advance of spring. Make plans now for some outings to view the spring bird migration. You will be amazed at what birds you might find and what birds you will see. Go spend the day viewing the Sandhill Cranes. It's an easy day trip. Enjoy the wonderful wildlife we share space with. Good birding!

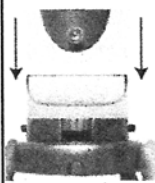
## It's Goldfinch Season!

Attract more Goldfinch this spring with our high quality, fresh, triple cleaned Nyjer thistle seed!



## Nyjer Thistle Feeders 10% OFF

Thru March 20th



See our EZ-Clean feeders with removable bases by Aspects & Droll Yankees

Lifetime Warranty

