



COMMUNITY
INFORMATION CENTERS

Grand Island Tourism
201 W. 3rd Street | Grand Island, NE 68801
308-382-4400
VisitGrandIsland.com

**Hastings/Adams County Convention
& Visitors Bureau**
219 N. Hastings Avenue | Hastings, NE 68901
402-461-2370 | 800-967-2189
VisitHastingsNebraska.com

Kearney Visitors Bureau
1007 2nd Avenue | Kearney, NE 68847
308-237-3178
VisitKearney.org

North Platte/Lincoln County Visitors Bureau
101 Halligan Drive | North Platte, NE 69101
308-532-4729 | 800.955.4528
VisitNorthPlatte.com

The design and printing of this brochure was sponsored by:



VisitNebraska.com

Photography courtesy of NEBRASKAland Magazine/Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Diana Robinson, and Brad Mellema.

2021 CNBG_15K



NebraskaFlyway.com



THE SANDHILL CRANE MIGRATION

Each spring, something magical happens in the heart of the Great Plains. More than 80% of the world’s population of sandhill cranes converge on Nebraska’s Platte River Valley – a critical sliver of threatened habitat in North America’s Central Flyway. Along with the cranes come millions of migrating ducks and geese filling the neighboring rainwater basins.

The sandhill cranes come to rest and refuel for a month as they prepare for the arduous journey to vast breeding grounds in Canada, Alaska and Siberia. They arrive from far-flung wintering grounds in northern Mexico, Texas, and New Mexico on a journey of thousands of miles.

For centuries, the birds have come to rest and restore themselves. The shallow, braided channels of Nebraska’s Platte River provide safe nighttime roost sites. Waste grain in nearby fields provides food to build up depleted fat reserves needed for continuing their migration. Adjacent wet meadows provide nutrients and secluded loafing areas for rest, bathing, and courting. During their stop in Nebraska, sandhill cranes gain approximately 15% of their body weight.

Plan your visit to see this migration for yourself using the information on the following pages of this brochure.



THE CENTRAL FLYWAY



	SANDHILL CRANE	WHOOPING CRANE
HEIGHT	3-4 feet	5 feet
WINGSPAN	6 feet	7.5 feet
WEIGHT	8-12 lbs	14 lbs
COLORATION	Gray	White
MIGRATION	170-450 miles/day	200-500 miles/day
FLIGHT SPEED	38 mph	47 mph
NESTING AREA	Northern U.S.A, Canada, Alaska, Siberia	Wood Buffalo National Park, Canada
MATING	Begins at 3-4 yrs	Begins at 5 yrs
EGGS	1-2 per year	2 per year
LIFESPAN	20-25 years	20-25 years
CENTRAL FLYWAY POPULATION	1,000,000+	500+

NebraskaFlyway.com

IAN NICOLSON AUDUBON CENTER AT ROWE SANCTUARY

44450 Elm Island Rd (Kearney, Nebraska)
308-468-5282 | rowe.audubon.org

The Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary lies right in the heart of a critical spring staging area for migrating sandhill cranes. Come experience one of the last great wildlife migrations on the planet.

VIEWING BLIND TOURS

Rowe provides a variety of guided viewing opportunities to see the sandhill cranes on their river roosts for a fee. Tours are conducted from early



March through early April each year. The tours are in demand, and normally sell out. Rowe also has a roadside pullout for daytime viewing of the birds.

MORE ABOUT AUDUBON'S ROWE SANCTUARY

The gift shop has numerous unique items. Your purchase makes a difference in conserving critical habitat along the Platte River.

Iain Nicolson Audubon Center's unique outdoor, experienced-based education is at the heart of what we do. We provide children, families, and adults with opportunities to experience the Platte Valley ecosystem and its wildlife through our indoor and outdoor classrooms, discovery stations, and trails that meander along the Platte River through wetlands, wooded areas, and prairie.

OVERNIGHT EXPERIENCE AT ROWE

Spend a night with thousands of cranes! Overnight blinds are placed near major roosts of sandhill cranes and can provide excellent opportunities for photography, or provide a unique experience for any nature enthusiast. Call 308-468-5282 for more information.

CRANE TRUST NATURE & VISITOR CENTER

9325 S Alda Rd (Grand Island, Nebraska)
308-382-1820 | CraneTrust.org

The Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center welcomes guests to rare, protected lands year-round, and also to the great sandhill crane migration in the spring.

VIEWING BLIND TOURS

The Crane Trust offers public viewing blind tours to people (ages 12 and up) with reservations during the month of March. Handicap accessible bridge tours are available on the weekends.




Photography opportunities and VIP tours are available which include an evening viewing, lodging, meals, and a morning viewing in heated blinds.

MORE ABOUT THE CRANE TRUST

Visitors to the nature center will find murals, wildlife exhibits, and information on surrounding habitats and research/conservation programs. An art gallery showcases works by regional artists, and the gift shop offers a variety of Nebraska-made merchandise for the nature lover. Walk outside for a butterfly garden, herd of bison, and roughly 10 miles of trails through lowland tallgrass prairie and wet meadow habitat.

GIDEON'S CRANE CABIN RETREAT

308-383-6913 | Find on [CraneCabinRetreat](https://www.facebook.com/CraneCabinRetreat) 

For a unique bird viewing experience right on the Platte River, rent Chad Gideon's Crane Cabin Retreat. The retreat features a comfortable cabin on one of the busiest sections of the spring migration of the sandhill cranes. Multiple viewing blinds are available for watchers and photographers, and Gideon will personally guide you through the experience if you would like.

OTHER BIRDS TO LOOK FOR

EAGLES

More than 1,000 bald eagles (and some golden eagles) visit the Platte River, the Rainwater Basins, and Lake McConaughy each winter and spring, feeding on fish and migratory waterfowl. Viewing sites include the Johnson No. 2 hydropower plant south of Lexington (308-995-8601) and the Kingsley Dam (308-284-2332) north of Ogallala.



PRAIRIE CHICKENS

Prairie-chickens and sharp-tailed grouse can both be found in central Nebraska. Prairie-chickens are more common and gather on courtship grounds (leks) in the spring, putting on an amazing display of foot-stomping, booming calls and the occasional skirmish with other males. Most leks are on private property; contact the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center, Rowe Sanctuary, or Dusty Trails Outdoor Specialists for viewing opportunities.



GREAT BLUE HERON

These birds approach four feet in length with wingspans of six feet. Herons can be seen along most bodies of water with a fish population. They nest in groups in tall trees. View them statewide in the spring and fall, or in the western and central part of the state during breeding.



AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS

These large birds top five feet in length with wingspans of nearly nine feet. They can be seen statewide in the spring and fall, and sometimes on large lakes during the summer.



DUCKS AND SNOW GESE

Millions of ducks and geese migrate through the central flyway in the spring. A wide variety of duck species can be seen throughout the state. Snow geese mesmerize onlookers with their wide, swirling descents in very large groups down onto a lake. Best viewing is in the Rainwater Basin and along the Platte and Missouri Rivers.



TRUMPETER SWANS

Sandhills lakes may be home to up to 700 permanent resident



swans, while wintering swans totaling in the thousands can be found in the Platte River Valley. Birdwood Creek north of Sutherland is an important wintering area for swans and other wintering waterfowl. Trumpeter swans are the largest waterfowl in the world and the heaviest flying birds in North America.

WHOOPING CRANES

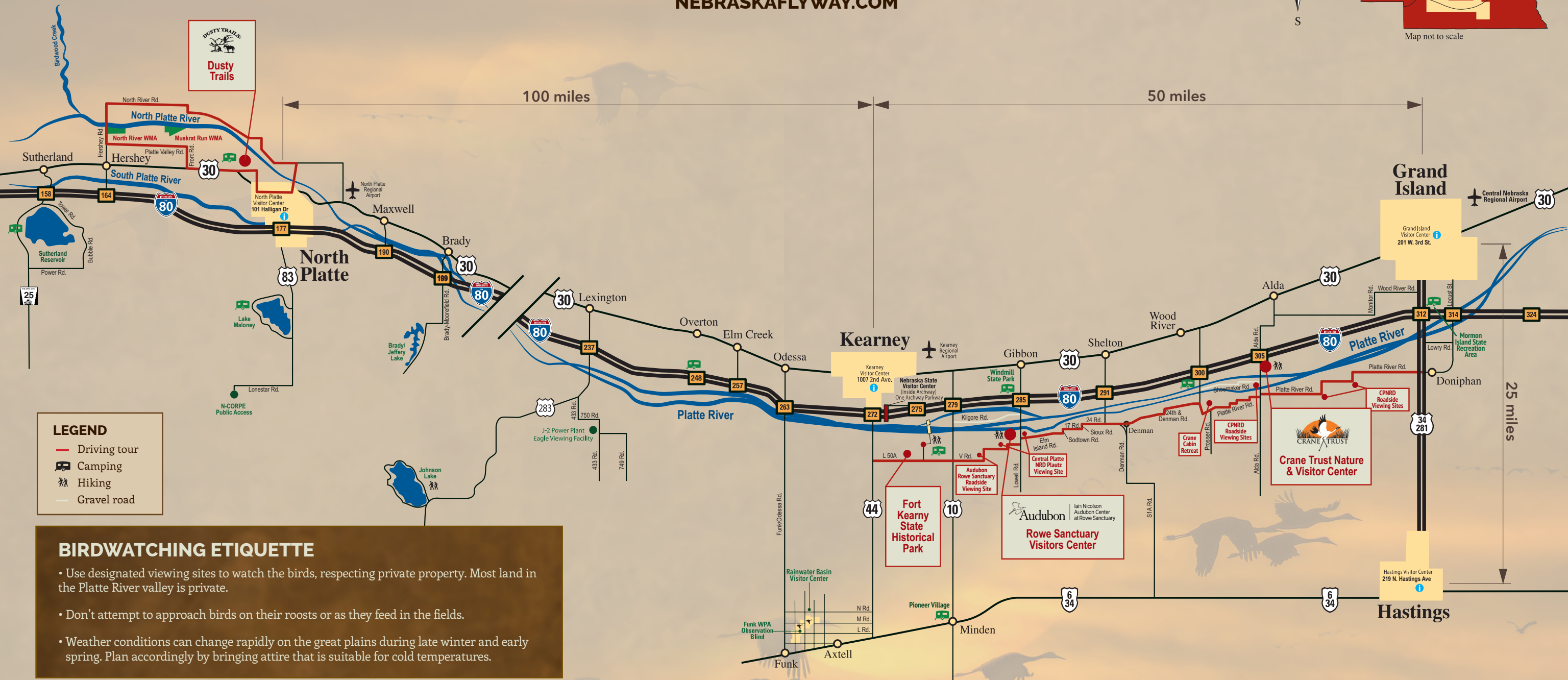
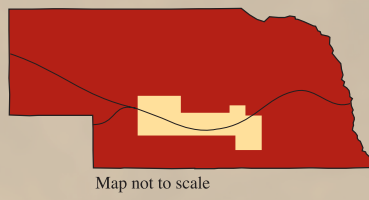
500-plus whooping cranes migrate through the Platte



River Valley and Rainwater Basins, mainly during April and October/November. One of the most endangered birds in North America, the whooping crane is also the tallest bird on the continent at 5 feet tall. Its imposing stature, angel white plumage, black mask, and red crown are striking. Report whooping crane sightings to 308-382-1820.

SANDHILL CRANE VIEWING MAP

Self-guided tours are labeled in red.
Visit the website for more details.
NEBRASKAFLYWAY.COM



LEGEND

- Driving tour
- 🚐 Camping
- 🚶 Hiking
- Gravel road

BIRDWATCHING ETIQUETTE

- Use designated viewing sites to watch the birds, respecting private property. Most land in the Platte River valley is private.
- Don't attempt to approach birds on their roosts or as they feed in the fields.
- Weather conditions can change rapidly on the great plains during late winter and early spring. Plan accordingly by bringing attire that is suitable for cold temperatures.

NEBRASKA'S PLATTE RIVER VALLEY

The **Platte River** derives its name from the first French explorers who called it “rivière plate”, meaning “flat river.” Snow melt from the Rocky Mountains travels through the North and South Platte tributaries, forming the Platte River near North Platte, Nebraska. Making its way east, the slow moving and shallow Platte River forms wetlands as it meanders across the prairie, important for wildlife.

Over time, the Platte River Valley developed into an agricultural and industrial powerhouse, placing strains on wildlife habitats. The modern river is very different from pre-settlement times. Multiple dams provide flood protection, irrigation, and power generation.

The **central flyway** is a north-south, hourglass-shaped, wildlife flight pattern. The narrowest point of the hourglass occurs at the Platte River in Nebraska. The spring bird migration has continued for millenia, adapting to changes in the river. Water flow is diminished compared to historic amounts, but the river still provides a much needed habitat for birds—perhaps – most notably the Sandhill Crane and whooping crane.

Cranes look for shallow channels and sandbars that provide a safe place to roost at night.

Cranes look for shallow channels and sandbars that provide a safe place to roost at night. The birds roost on the same places year after year. As crane populations increase, roost sites are spreading into previously unused portions of the river.

In Nebraska, there is little federal or state-owned land along the Platte River. A patchwork of conservation efforts led by landowners, nonprofits, and government agencies manage the various demands on the water and wildlife.



THE BIRDS OF THE RAINWATER BASIN

Rainwater Basin Visitor Center
73746 V Road (Funk, Nebraska) | 308-263-3000
[FWS.gov/refuge/rainwater_basin_wmd](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/rainwater_basin_wmd)

The Rainwater Basin is a complex of wetlands scattered throughout a 21-county region in central Nebraska. These shallow basins provide roosts and nourishment for millions of birds during spring and fall migrations. Historically, bison and wildfire kept the wetlands clear of perennial vegetation. Today, the wetlands are managed to maintain this habitat – a much smaller area than it used to be – needed by migrating birds.

It is common to view 200,000 or more birds on a single wetland during spring migration. This amazing migration starts in February with the arrival of snow geese, mallards, pintails, and white-fronted geese and continues until the last of the 1,000,000 migrating Sandhill Cranes leave in mid April.

Most birds can be viewed from your car. Since water conditions often vary from year to year, assistance and information on prime viewing are available by calling 308-263-3000 or by visiting with area nature centers. All viewing in the Rainwater Basin is free.

DUSTY TRAILS OUTDOOR SPECIALISTS

2617 N Buffalo Bill Ave (North Platte, Nebraska)
308-530-0048 | DustyTrails.biz

Dusty Trails is Nebraska’s premier destination for outdoor adventures, including the incredible spring Sandhill Crane migration.

SANDHILL CRANE BUS TOUR

Each tour will include a round trip through the Platte River Valley between North Platte and Hershey, Nebraska. The tour will linger wherever there are large groups of Sandhill Cranes feeding, dancing and singing so that you can observe, video, and photograph



as much as you would like, all from the comfort of the bus. Cranes won’t be the only wildlife you will see either! Turkeys, prairie chickens, and various other wildlife mingle in the beautiful Nebraska countryside.

VIEWING BLIND TOURS

A blind on the North Platte River, just a short distance from North Platte, offers the remarkable experience of being near a large roost of sandhill cranes. Whether you choose the evening when cranes are circling overhead awaiting the perfect time to land on the river, or the morning when hearing the calls from the roost go from a coo here and there to a crashing crescendo as hundreds of Cranes depart at once, the experience will be unforgettable.

PRAIRIE CHICKEN DANCE TOURS

In the spring the hearts of the Nebraska greater prairie chickens turn toward love, and that urge manifests itself into a beautiful dancing ritual carried out on a ‘lek’, the term for the dancing grounds. The Dusty Trails Prairie Chicken Dance Tour will take visitors to a large lek located south of Sutherland, where dozens of birds have been observed dancing during a single visit in the past. This tour can be combined with one or both of the Sandhill Crane Tours for an incredible experience.

PUBLIC VIEWING SITES

The **Central Platte Natural Resource District** manages and provides free viewing decks located along the Platte River in Alda and Gibbon. These decks offer a safe and bird-friendly way to view cranes during their spring migration as well as view other waterfowl throughout the year. Free parking is available at each of the decks.

There are additional roadside turnouts, shown on the map on the next page, to enjoy safe daytime viewing.

Central Platte Natural Resources District
308-385-6282 | CPNRD.org

Alda Viewing Deck & Roadside Turnout

2 miles south of I-80 Exit 305 (Alda)

Plautz Viewing Deck

1.5 miles south of I-80 Exit 285 (Gibbon)

Rowe Viewing Pullout

1 mile west of Rowe Sanctuary (Kearney)



VIEWING AT NEBRASKA STATE PARKS

Fort Kearny State Recreation Area offers the best over-river viewing of cranes. An old railroad bridge spans over the Platte River, making it the perfect spot for sunrise or sunset viewing. It’s about a 300-yard walk from the parking area. Dress accordingly as the bridge is open to the elements. Camping and other wildlife opportunities are available at Fort Kearny State Recreation Area.

A Nebraska state park permit is required and is available at the entrance or Fort Kearny Historical Park visitor center. The visitors center has an 18-minute video about the migration and other year-round migratory wildlife. Staff are on hand to answer questions and direct you to the best viewing locations.

Fort Kearny Historical Park

1020 V Road | 308-865-5305 | OutdoorNebraska.gov/fortkearny

Fort Kearny State Recreation Area

2196 30 Road, ¼ mile east of the Historical Park

Mormon Island State Recreation Area

Northeast corner of I-80 exit 312 | 402-471-1414

North River Wildlife Management Area

4 miles north of I-80 exit 164, 1 mile east on W. Wildlife Road

Windmill State Recreation Area

1/4 mile north of I-80 exit 285