



Audubon | NEBRASKA

2022 Fall Newsletter

How the
Thick-billed Longspur &
American Woodcock
Adapt as their Ranges Evolve

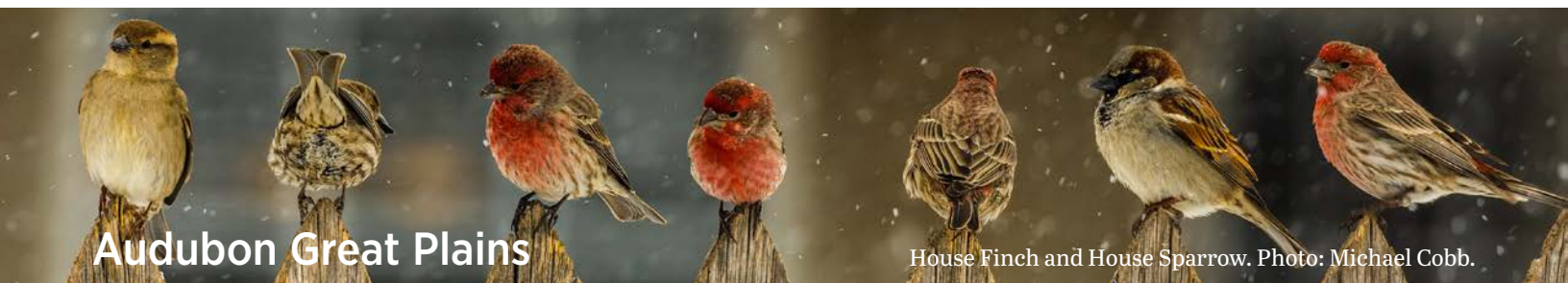


2022 Audubon Nebraska Fall Newsletter

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Audubon Great Plains

House Finch and House Sparrow. Photo: Michael Cobb.

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Stephen Brenner, Avian Biologist
Bill Sellers, Range Ecologist
Lizzy Gilbert, Director of Development
Cat Henning, Development Coordinator
Melissa Mosier, Program Manager, Platte River
Melissa Amarawardana, Communications Manager

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Cody Wagner, Conservation Program Manager
Rebekah Yates, Education Manager
Sonceyrae Kondrotis, Operations Manager
Anne Winkel, Senior Coordinator, Outreach
Catherine Worley, Senior Coordinator, Center Operations
Amanda Hegg, Conservation Program Associate

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Juli Bosmoe, Range Ecologist
Cody Grewing, Range Ecologist
Charli Kohler, Central & Western ND Range Ecologist
Josh Lefers, Working Lands Programs Manager
Lindsey Lee, Office Manager
Meghan Carter-Johnson, Senior Coordinator, Engagement
Amanda Booher, Communications Coordinator

Spring Creek Prairie

Meghan Sittler, Director
Jason "The Birdnerd" St. Sauver, Senior Education Manager
Ed Hubbs, Habitat and Private Lands Manager
Kevin Poague, Operations Manager
Andrea Bornemeier, Educator/Volunteer Coordinator
Amy Plettner, Caretaker
Cacey Wilken, Conservation Field Technician
Matt Harvey, Project Assistant

Coming Soon: Crane Season!

Rowe Sanctuary will be hosting a multitude of exciting experiences for Crane enthusiasts this Spring. In addition to guided tours and viewing reservations, Rowe staff will host Photography tours, overnight camps, Crane Behavior workshops, and – for any who cannot make it – virtual tours.

Ticket reservations will open Wednesday, January 4, 2023 at 9:00 AM CST.

Letter from the Executive Director, Kristal Stoner

Some of us have noticed our birdfeeders becoming quieter; and for some the opposite is true, and it is being ambushed by new flocks of birds.

Fall migration is well underway and we have already said “so long” to many of our colorful summer songbirds for the winter. Migrant southbound flocks will descend on a feeder trying to fatten up as much as possible for the journey. Winter birds have started moving in., foregoing flying for hundreds of miles if they can tolerate our winters and there is enough food, shelter, and water. Afterall, migration is filled with dangers and obstacles, with no guarantee of an unlimited buffet or safety when they arrive.

Bird migrations have long fascinated people, and there is so much about migratory birds that remain a mystery. In September, Audubon launched the Bird Migration Explorer, which gives us a bird’s eye view to migration patterns across North America. Now you can easily see when you should expect the Dark-eyed Junco to show up at your feeder and when to take down the hummingbird feeder for the season. You can also see the challenges birds face as they navigate continents – where and when is drought, pollution, or surface water management a challenge for a Black Tern, for example. Birds have so much to teach us about our world, and this explorer can help uncover a few more. Read more in our story on page 11 and go explore today!



How the Thick-billed Longspur and American Woodcock Adapt as their Ranges Evolve

By Stephen Brenner, Avian Biologist

Thick-billed Longspur

Prior to European settlement, the Great Plains of North America used to encompass vast stretches of native prairies, wetlands, and complex ecosystems that hosted a huge variety of plant and animal species. However, these ecosystems are disappearing at an alarming rate, with over 80% of grasslands having been converted to agriculture or other land uses in the past century. Subsequently, grassland bird populations have been negatively impacted by this loss of habitat - it is estimated that over 70% of grassland species in North America are in decline. Climate change also threatens the persistence of these vulnerable ecosystems, adding to the constant risk of potential grassland conversion to agriculture, which makes these areas unsuitable for most native grassland bird species.

North American Grassland birds have experienced the largest declines of any group of birds over the last 50 years.

At the very western edge of Nebraska, the idyllic lush grasslands that stretch from Lincoln in the east through the central Sandhills start to become shorter in stature and much more arid. While this may seem like an unwelcome environment for anything other than cattle, the short-grass prairie is in fact a thriving ecosystem that hosts many unique birds. One of these is the Thick-billed Longspur, a sparrow-sized grassland specialist that sports strikingly black and gray plumage with a distinct rusty wing patch. Thick-billed Longspurs prefer something of a habitat 'extreme' when it comes to grasslands: short vegetation with lots of bare-ground in-between, with little else in the way of shrubs or tall grasses to be seen.

Thick-billed Longspur populations have declined precipitously in the last 50 years across North America, with some estimates as high as a 94% decline in overall numbers since the 1960s. Recently, the state of Nebraska listed this species as 'Threatened' and this status has hastened efforts to begin critical research on this bird in the state. As Nebraska represents the far eastern edge of the longspur's continental range, this research will inform not only state-level conservation and management efforts but also illuminate potentially unknown aspects of longspur ecology in this dynamic and unique region.

The loss of native grasslands to agriculture and woody encroachment continues to threaten the ecosystems these species rely on. Thick-billed Longspurs are a short-grass prairie specialist that rely on informed grazing management. Short-grass prairie is a relatively limited grassland type in Nebraska, which is why it is critical to study this small population to promote its persistence.

Audubon Nebraska is also working closely with the state wildlife management agency, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, to promote the conservation of this imperiled grassland bird. Most of the Thick-billed Longspurs in Nebraska breed on working ranchlands and rely on cattle grazing to maintain their preferred short-grass habitat structure. Working with the state agency allows ensures consistent statewide recommendations for land management and future energy development that can avoid longspur hotspots in the state.

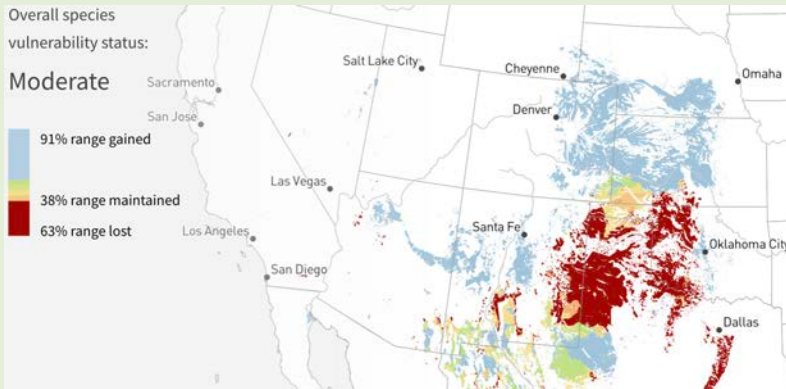
American Woodcock

The American Woodcock is one of North America's most enigmatic shorebirds. It is also one of the earliest-nesting migratory species at temperate latitudes. Woodcock are a quintessential early-successional forest species, requiring open weedy fields for breeding displays, dense shrubs for nesting, and moist forested areas for feeding. Given these habitat needs, woodcock have large but declining populations in the northeastern US, Canada, and upper Midwest.

Nebraska is situated at the western edge of the American Woodcock's range and does not contain habitat-features that are typically associated with woodcock.

In Nebraska, woodcock are poorly known and understood, as the majority of Nebraska (i.e. grasslands and row-crop agriculture) would not be considered 'typical' or 'likely' woodcock habitat (i.e. mixed-growth forests). Recent evidence suggests a potential woodcock expansion westward in Nebraska and elsewhere, but the dynamics of this population are largely unknown.

Thick-billed Longspur Projected Winter Habitat Change



While the Thick-billed Longspur's most critical threat is habitat loss due to agricultural development, climate change is exacerbating the loss of remaining short-grass prairie. Habitat loss in Texas and Oklahoma due to heat waves and wildfires are pushing Thick-billed Longspurs north into Kansas and Nebraska, and west into New Mexico. Audubon's scientists have used 140 million bird observations and sophisticated climate models to project how climate change will affect this bird's range in the future, this projection shows habitat change at 3 degrees Celsius change scenario.



Thick-billed Longspur. Photo: Stephen Brenner/Audubon.

Threats to the Thick-billed Longspur:



**Cropland
Expansion**



**Spring
Heatwaves**



**Extreme
Wildfires**

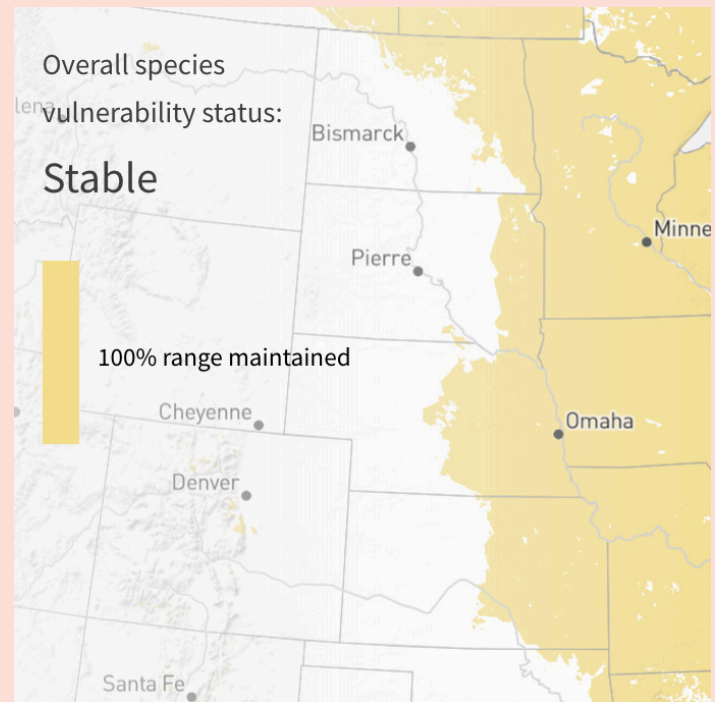


American Woodcock. Photo: Ryan Mandelbaum/Flickr

From 2021-2022, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission with Audubon Nebraska completed a two-year study investigating the seasonal timing, habitat use, breeding and migratory behaviors of American Woodcock across eastern Nebraska. Using satellite GPS transmitters, singing-ground surveys, and historical data, this study has illuminated the ecology of woodcock at the extreme edge of their range and clarified much of this species' status in the state.

Working with Nebraska Game and Parks, we were able to track woodcock in Nebraska and throughout their migrations using state-of-the-art GPS transmitters.

Woodcock Current Summer Range



Threats to the American Woodcock:



**Cropland
Expansion**



**Spring
Heatwaves**



**Extreme
Wildfires**



**Heavy
Rain**



Braided Paths: Science, Policy, and Culture

By Melissa Mosier, Program Manager, Platte River Initiative

One of the biggest challenges in ecosystem conservation, is involving and engaging stakeholders across large geographies and ensuring the latest scientific information is widely understood and applied. This is especially true for Audubon's Platte River Initiative, where the expanse of the Basin and the diverse assortment of ecosystems and communities that make it present hurdles to effective coordination. In an effort to breakdown some of these barriers, Audubon has teamed-up with the Nebraska Water Center and The Rainwater Basin Joint Venture in the planning of the Platte River Basin Conference.

Braided Paths: Science, Policy, and Culture
Platte River Basin Conference & 3rd Playa
Research Symposium
October 24-27, 2022
Younes Conference Center
Kearney, NE

This conference will provide a forum where wildlife biologists, conservation land managers, water scientists, and academics can share their latest research and methods, but the scope of the conference has been broadened to include voices from community members that live and work along the Platte riverscape as well. The team that the Water Center put together to plan the conference includes representatives from Colorado, Wyoming, and Nebraska, and the group decided early on that the overarching purpose of the conference should be to highlight community-based solutions.

New voices and expertise will be weaved into the conference with additional speakers sharing different cultural perspectives on natural resource management, how the humanities and social sciences can make our work more meaningful to ourselves and the communities we serve, and how our work could better influence policy-making and vice versa. Reaching out beyond our typical cast of partners, the conference will hold true to its theme, "Braided Paths: Science, Policy, and Culture."

At the conclusion of the conference, attendees will have the opportunity to take part in an interactive discussion about the future of the Platte River Basin and decide what roles they will play in shaping it. We hope that by bringing in a wider range of perspectives from throughout the Basin, especially from those whose relationship with the Platte River is more personal than research-based, we can take a moment to redesign our vision for the riverscape and ensure that our efforts going forward will bring truly meaningful benefits to the people and birds that depend on it.

Experience the Platte

Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary will also host a nature photography demonstration on the evening October 25, 2022. Special guest Joshua Redwine, a professional photographer working in Nebraska, will give a presentation at the event where he will provide hands-on tips and tricks for taking photographs of landscapes and nature.

Following Joshua's demonstration, participants will have the opportunity to try-out their new skills on the grounds of Rowe Sanctuary at sunset, providing ideal lighting and plenty of striking views and natural objects to focus on. This event will give the conference attendees and members of the public the opportunity to see and experience the Platte River in-person, while also learning some photography skills that they can use while at Rowe, or on future nature excursions.

Tickets are open to all Platte River Basin Conference attendees and any members of the public. In addition to the nature photography demonstration, attendees will also be treated to roasted hot dogs, s'mores, and drink options. Throughout the evening attendees will have access to great views of the Platte River and nearby wetlands and grasslands, with access to the river itself, Rowe's hiking trails, and a few of the viewing blinds that have been built along the River.

This event is intended to braid together the science, history, and community of the Platte Riverscape through the lens of photography and artistic expression. We hope that by providing an opportunity to immerse themselves in the riverine setting at Rowe Sanctuary, and by offering practical take-aways on how to improve artistic skills, the event attendees will develop a stronger personal connection to the Platte and how it connects people and wildlife across the Basin.

Happy 50th Anniversary to the Audubon Society of Omaha!



On Thursday, October 13, the Audubon Society of Omaha celebrated their 50th Anniversary with a tour at Lauritzen Gardens. A brief history of their accomplishments:

- 1971 – The Omaha Birding Club votes to become the Audubon Society of Omaha, the first officially chartered chapter in the state.
- 1982 – Audubon Society of Omaha (ASO) begins its Birdseed Sale, which continues to be the most successful and popular fundraising effort of our chapter.
- 1988 – ASO teams up with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Raptor Recovery Center, and Fontenelle Forest, to release 22 peregrine falcons on the roof of the Woodmen Tower in Omaha.
ASO coordinates with Woodmen Tower and builds boxes for the falcons.
- Early 90's – ASO starts a bluebird nest box route by building the boxes and then monitoring them, and reporting the results to Bluebirds Across Nebraska.
- 1992 – ASO and Papio-Missouri Rivers Natural Resources District save an 11-acre wetland, Heron Haven. ASO turns over conservation to the NRD in 2005 with their conservation easement and oversight.
- 1995 – ASO starts a kestrel nest box route along the Kennedy Freeway and Highway I-680. With permission from the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and the Nebraska Department of Transportation, ASO constructed the boxes, monitored them, and reported the results to the NGPC until 2002.
- 1998 – ASO purchases a 13-acre eastern tall grass prairie preserve that continues to be restored to its original state. It's now home to over 80 species of flowers and grasses as well as grassland birds, mammals such as badgers, foxes, rabbits, gophers, three species of mice, and reptiles.
- 1999 – The Omaha Raptor Team joins the ASO and provides educational programs with nonreleasable birds of prey for schools, scouts, civic and other community groups until they disbanded in 2006.
- 1999 – ASO receives a conservation easement on 52 acres of greenspace that winds around the Allen Hills housing area in Washington County. This is the only conservation easement that ASO owns and our Natural Areas Management Chairperson monitors it annually.
- 1999 – The Audubon Society of Omaha receives the Omaha World-Herald's Conservationist of the Year Award for their efforts on behalf of Heron Haven.
- 2001 – ASO expands the Student Art Contest for K-12 and home-schooled students in the Greater Omaha area. Exhibition of all artwork and the awards ceremonies are held in venues accessible to the public and continues each year.
- 2003 – ASO hosts guided walks at backyards of members, reaching out to the community and raising funds. Discontinued in 2008 to focus on our prairie preserve.
- 2008 – ASO conducts annual, guided walk & talk about tall-grass prairies, herbaceous plants, wildflowers, birds, insects at our prairie preserve.
- 2014 – ASO initiates an open-to-the public free special speaker series annually with expert-led field trips featuring renowned birders/authors.
- 2018 – ASO acquires the only known Missouri Valley, Loess Hills-type prairie in Nebraska. Saved from the plow and other incursions, the 10-acre prairie, which houses the 1-acre Cuming City Cemetery near Blair remains as it was when Native Americans were its only human inhabitants. This site will be extremely valuable to botanists and others dedicated to preserving remaining native prairies and plants



Western Meadowlark. Photo: Stephanie Becker.

Special thanks to long-time members and leaders of ASO, Laurine Blankenau and Nelli Falzgraff for their help in preparing this history, courtesy of The Audubon Society of Omaha.

Rowe Sanctuary



Platte River Safari and Flying Higher Summer Camps

Rowe Sanctuary hosted two weeks of Platte River Safari (2nd-5th graders) and one week of Flying Higher (6th-8th graders) day camps in June and July. A total of 53 campers got muddy and sweaty exploring nature to a different theme each day.

In addition to these summer camps, staff and volunteers also engaged a group of about 25 second graders from KCLC this summer. The students came out to Rowe for a one-hour program every Monday in June and July. Sunshine Daycare Center in Kearney also brought out 24 K-5th graders, Migrant Education Program in Hastings brought out 21 3rd-4th graders, and Rainbow Club in Grand Island brought out 20 1st-5th graders.



Photos: Beka Yates/Audubon.

Pollinator Habitat Workshop at the Prairie Plains Resource Institute



On August 3, Rowe Sanctuary's Amanda Hegg teamed up with Nebraska Game and Parks and Prairie Plains Resource Institute (PPRI) to host a pollinator habitat workshop. Speakers shared their expertise on land management and restoration techniques, as well as a panel discussion on invasive species management. Later, expert led a prairie hike where participants could see restoration in action and identify ongoing challenges. Participants also got a tour of PPRI's seed collection and learned about their processing equipment.

Tastes in the Tallgrass and A River Runs Through It: Big Success for Birds, Prairie, and People

The unseasonably hot 90 degree days of mid-September did not deter more than 250 guests from enjoying Spring Creek Prairie's annual fundraiser, Tastes in the Tallgrass, on September 18. Overlooking the 850-acre tallgrass prairie preserve and nature center, the evening's festivities included live music from the Lightning Bugs (a crowd favorite), delicious appetizers, a special cocktail (the Tallgrass Tonic), and a wonderful buffet dinner from Venue Catering. Guests also participated in silent and live auctions filled with artwork created by local artists as well as local experiences to enjoy in around Lincoln. Over \$40,000 was raised to support the Center's education and conservation efforts.

The following week, Rowe Sanctuary's annual dinner and auction fundraiser was a great success. Local Chefs Travis and Sara Evans created a four-course menu featuring local ingredients and Audubon Conservation Ranch-raised beef brisket from Sagebrush Beef. Supporters bid on several live auction experiences, including a four-day trip to Audubon's Hog Island in Maine, a sunset flight over the Platte River during Crane Season, and catered dinner in Rowe's Discovery Station.



Tastes in the Tallgrass Photos: Courtesy of Chris Sommerich.

A River Runs Through It Photos: Courtesy of Patty Geist.

Spring Creek Prairie

Prairie Immersion lives up to its name

By Melissa Amarawardana

The Prairie Immersion program at Spring Creek Prairie is like a language immersion program for the statewide 4th grade Nebraska history curriculum, but it's immersion into the setting of the past. It's one thing to be able to recall historic names and dates, but quite another to experience the natural environment and feel its effects.

"Some of them are really interested in the history, but everybody gets something out of being outside," Discovery Leader Sam Armstrong said. "As long as they're outside and enjoying and making memories of the prairie, making connections, that's my main goal."

She describes one student having an epiphany with wide eyes and a big grin: standing in a wagon rut and realizing out loud that history happened right there in that spot.

Bella Devney, a junior Environmental Studies major at UNL, says she was thinking about a minor in Environmental Education, but decided getting experience with education programs would be more beneficial.

"I'm surprised every day. School groups come with all different levels of knowledge, different levels of excitement," said Devney.

"We learn about bug, plants, and have reflection time, but really focus on getting them out there physically. We talk about the animals, we don't always see them, but there are very interesting things that they have never seen before, they are very curious and that's always fun," said Armstrong.

Sam Armstrong says she did a lot of online research to find a program that would be a good fit for her; she wanted a center that focuses on conservation, but had seasonal work and a flexible schedule for students. Armstrong has also led summer camps at the Henry Doorly Zoo. What sets Spring Creek Prairie apart – besides the prairie itself of course – is the enthusiasm of the people.

"This is a beautiful place and everyone is surprised by what we have here," Armstrong said. "It's great to drive out, watching the city disappear behind you and coming out to so much space and just slowing down... This is a very unique organization in the sense of community and culture, very positive and nurturing. Everyone here has this passion, and when you work where your passion is everyone around you can feel it."



Prairie Immersion Photos: Andrea Bornemeier/Audubon.

“They want to know the names of every single thing. They come in wanting a lot of facts,
but what we try to do is let them explore and make their own discoveries.”

- Bella Delvey, Discovery Leader



Prairie Immersion Photos: Andrea Bornemeier/Audubon.

Farewell to Andrea Bornemeier, Educator and Volunteer Coordinator

Andrea Bornemeier is bursting with the enthusiasm that memorable teachers are known for. She has spent her career sharing her love of nature with countless students, budding conservationists, and birders. Andrea will be retiring at the end of the year.

When Spring Creek Prairie had to reimagine the Prairie Immersion program during the pandemic, Andrea collaborated with Jamie Kelley of Pioneers Park Nature Center to create a series of YouTube videos to share her love of the prairie with local 4th graders.

“I grew up between Lincoln and Omaha, and I remember studying NE history in 4th grade, but don’t ever remember anyone – even in college – telling me about the tallgrass prairie. So when I discovered Spring Creek Prairie, I just couldn’t believe it.”



Photo: Courtesy of Andrea Bornemeier.

Andrea says the best thing about Spring Creek Prairie is introducing people to this habitat in particular, which opens their eyes to what we don’t see: what used to be here, what used to be everywhere. This is fundamental to understanding what is at risk with climate change and environmental degradation.

Prior to her time at Audubon, Andrea spent almost 30 years with the National Park Service developing programs for visitors, teaching, and working with volunteers.

Bird Migration Explorer

In September, Audubon and partners launched the Bird Migration Explorer – an online platform with consolidated migration data using state-of-the-art visualizations and the best-available information on conservation challenges that migratory birds face.

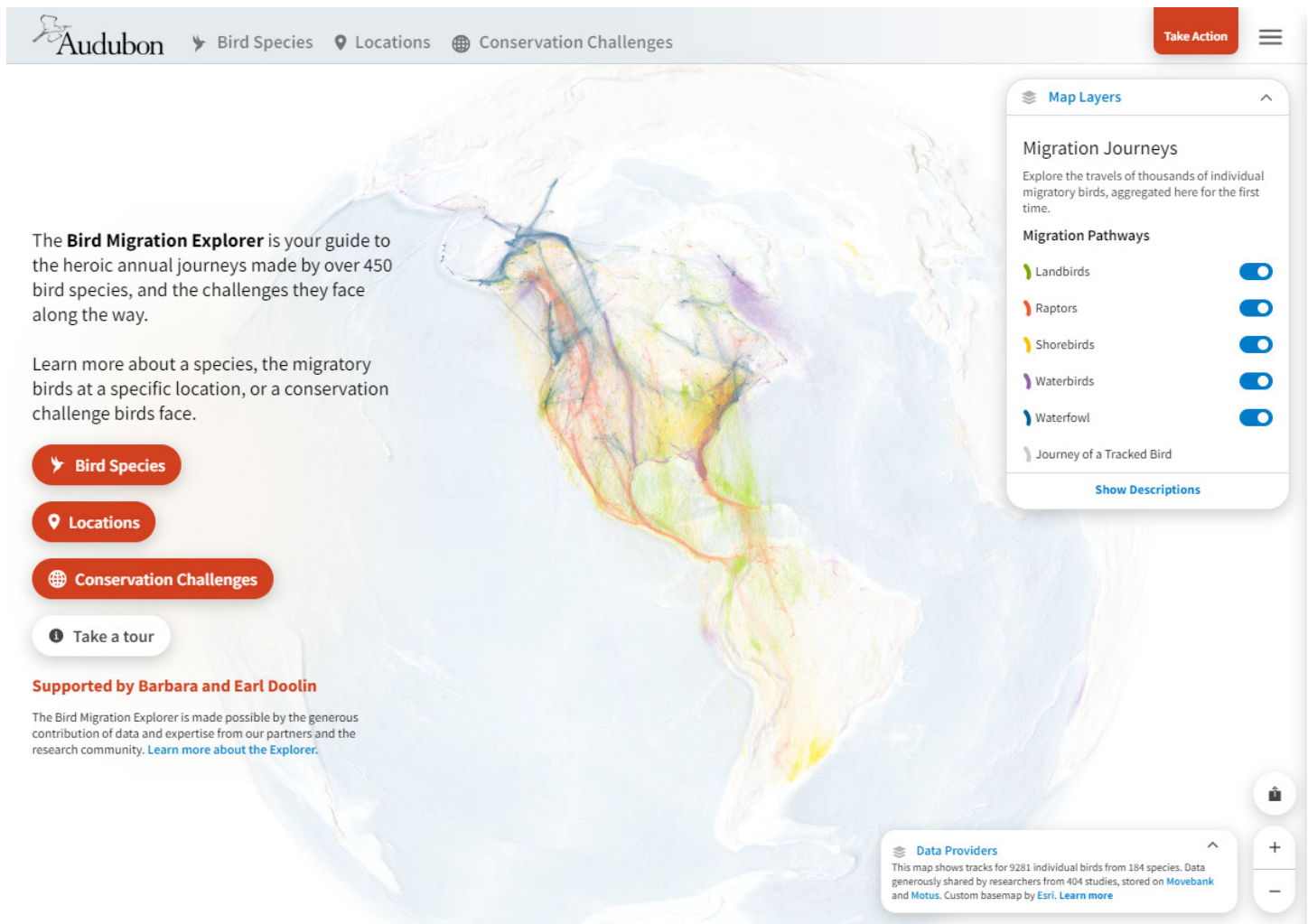
Birds are important ecological indicators that tell us about the health of our environment. Protecting migratory birds requires science-based conservation policies at the local, state, national and international levels; work across borders and hemispheres to address challenges they face on breeding grounds, non-breeding grounds and important migration stopover sites along their routes in between. Efforts like Audubon's Migratory Bird Initiative and the Audubon Americas program bring together dedicated conservationists, researchers, local communities, and volunteers to secure a future for migratory birds.

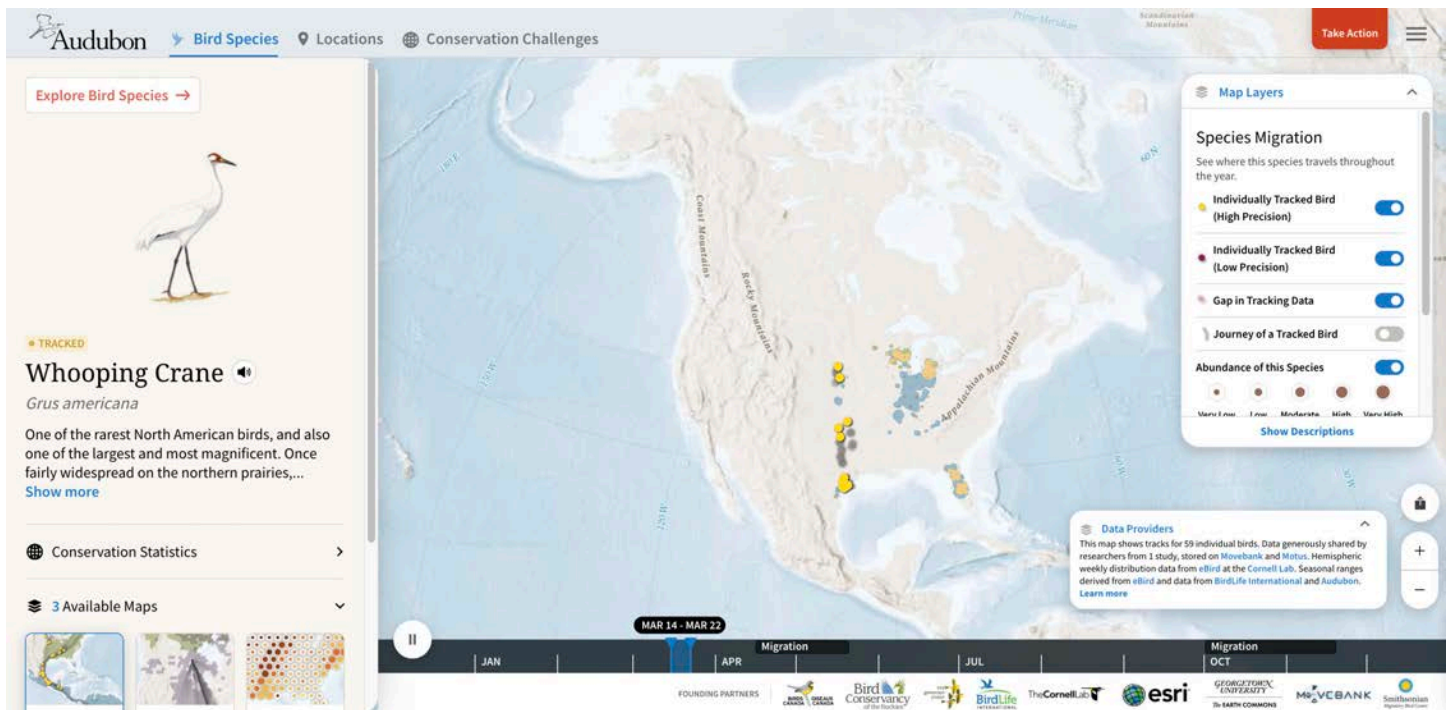
Partnerships like this one, advances in migration science and technology allow us to better understand

the incredible journeys that migratory birds take, which in turn leads to more effective conservation efforts. By protecting birds and the places they need, we also protect the places that people and other wildlife rely on.

Efforts like Audubon's Migratory Bird Initiative bring together the best-available migration science from hundreds of professional and community scientists to engage people around the wonder of migration and inform on-the-ground conservation efforts across the hemisphere.

The Bird Migration Explorer reflects an extraordinary partnership among science, conservation, and technology organizations and institutions and is made possible by data from the following major partner organizations and uses the data from more than 500 studies generously shared by researchers and institutions from around the world.





Tracking the migration of the Whooping Crane, users can see individual tracked birds across the year, connections between resting places, other species the cranes likely encounter, and conservation challenges along their journey.

“We are initiating a lot of research projects in western Nebraska focused on grassland species where we don’t have a lot of local information, specifically on Thick-billed Longspur and Chestnut-collared Longspur. The Bird Migration Explorer is a great way to see the connection between the birds in our state with their wider populations and gain insight into what other researchers have discovered. This tool also highlights the links between breeding, migratory, and wintering locations and identifies the threats that longspurs and many other species face throughout their lifecycle.”

- Stephen Brenner, Audubon Avian Biologist

Migratory Bird Explorer Partners



Upcoming Events

Rowe Sanctuary

Birding with Rowe Volunteers
Thursday, October 20, 2022 - 5:30 pm

Experience the Platte Photography Exhibit
with Joshua Redwine
October 25, Time TBD

Spring Creek Prairie

Hoot n Howl
Saturday, October 22, 5:00 - 8:00 pm

Third Tuesday Birding
Tuesday, November 15, 8:00 - 10:00 am

Holiday Open House
Sunday, December 4, 1:00 pm - 4:00



Northern Flicker. Photo: Andrew Baruffi.

Where you can find us

Audubon Nebraska - State Office

11205 Wright Circle Ste. 210, Omaha, NE 68144
Mailing address: P. O. Box 22521, Lincoln, NE 68542
(531) 867-3128
www.nebraska.audubon.org

Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary

44450 Elm Island Rd Gibbon, NE 68840
(308) 468-5282
rowesanctuary@audubon.org
www.rowe.audubon.org

Audubon Society of Omaha

PO Box 3542, Omaha, NE 68103
(402) 445-4138
Nebraska Bird Line
(402) 721-5487
www.audubon-omaha.org

Audubon North Dakota - State Office

3002 Fiechtner Dr S, Ste A., Fargo, ND 58103
(701) 298-3373
www.dakota.audubon.org

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center

11700 SW 100 St, PO Box 117 Denton, NE 68339
(402) 797-2301
scp@audubon.org
www.springcreek.audubon.org

Wachiska Audubon Society

4547 Calvert St, Suite 10, Lincoln, NE 68506
(402) 486-4846
office@wachiskaaudubon.org
www.wachiskaaudubon.org

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Cover Photo: Thick-billed Longspur. Photo Credit: Evan Barrientos.