



Audubon | GREAT PLAINS

2023 Spring Newsletter



2023 Audubon Great Plains Spring Newsletter

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In 1997, when Rowe Sanctuary first opened their doors to ecotourism, only 300 visitors came to witness the great migration.

This year, we expect more than 40,000 spectators.

Sandhill Cranes at Rowe Sanctuary. Photo: Janelle Schroeder.

Letter from the Executive Director, Kristal Stoner

Welcome to the first edition of the Audubon Great Plains Newsletter! With the merge to a Great Plains office, we have many things to celebrate and new opportunities stretching from North Dakota to Nebraska. It is an exciting time of change, much like the spring season that brings warmer days, plants blooming, and one of my favorite early signs of spring: the dawn chorus. The American Robin's rich caroling is among the earliest songbirds heard at dawn, often beginning just before first light. Soon, nests will be built and eggs will be hatching; a sign of new life, growth, and cause for celebration.



Aiming for our growth and expansion, Audubon Great Plains launched Elevate Nebraska, the most ambitious fundraising endeavor in our history. Investments will elevate our work across Nebraska from education to working lands, from science-based programming to operations, and at the center of it all, expansions for accessibility improvements at Rowe Sanctuary and Spring Creek Prairie.

We invite you to visit Spring Creek Prairie as we celebrate its 25th year. Enjoy the miles of walking trails and the tallgrass prairie that offers habitat for wildlife and over 235 species of birds like the Northern Harrier that rely on this important ecosystem for nesting, foraging, and survival.

With plans of construction beginning this summer, Rowe Sanctuary will see multiple new additions. Expansion includes improved space for river and bird viewing, an education expansion, a conference room and multipurpose space, and an industrial-grade kitchen designed for catering.

After a record-breaking Giving Hearts Day in North Dakota, we look forward to what's in store for habitat restoration. In North Dakota, signs of growth include the expansion of our Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative through our Urban Pollinator Plots Project over six sites to ensure a healthy habitat for birds, pollinators, wildlife, and the community. For birders, spring means heading to forests, waterways, and grasslands to capture a glimpse of a favorite warbler or possibly waterfowl. For us, it also means new opportunities and expansion as we continue to elevate our work across the Great Plains.

Kristal Stoner, Executive Director



Great Plains staff at Spring Creek Prairie. Photo: Audubon.

Meet the Team! The New Great Plains Regional Office



Nebraska



Kristal Stoner
Executive Director
Omaha, NE



Stephen Brenner
Avian Biologist
Western Nebraska



Bill Sellers
Range Ecologist
Western Nebraska



Melissa Mosier
Program Manager,
Platte River Initiative
Lincoln, NE



Lizzy Gilbert
Director of Development
Omaha, NE



Cat Henning
Development Coordinator
Omaha, NE



Melissa Amarawardana
Communications Manager
Omaha, NE



North and South Dakota



Sarah Hewitt
Director of Conservation
Fargo, ND



Josh Lefers
Working Lands Programs Manager
Corsica, SD



Juli Bosmoe
Senior Range Ecologist
Eastern Dakotas
Fargo, ND



Charli Kohler
Range Ecologist
Central and Western North Dakota
Pingree, ND



Cody Grewing
Range Ecologist
Western South Dakota
Custer, SD



Meghan Carter-Johnson
Senior Engagement Coordinator
Fargo, ND



Amanda Booher
Communications Manager
Fargo, ND



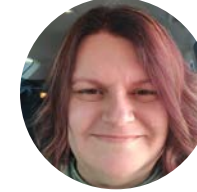
Lindsey Lee
Operations Manager
Fargo, ND



**Iain Nicolson Audubon Center
at Rowe Sanctuary
Gibbon, NE**



Bill Taddicken
Director



Sonceyrae Kondrotis
Operations Manager



Cody Wagner
Conservation Program Manager



Amanda Hegg
Conservation Program Associate



Anne Troyer
Senior Outreach Coordinator



Beka Yates
Education Manager



Catherine Worley
Senior Coordinator, Center
Operations



**Spring Creek Prairie
Audubon Center
Denton, NE**



Meghan Sittler
Director



Kevin Poague
Operations Manager



Ed Hubbs
Habitat and Private Lands Manager



Jason “The Birdnerd” St. Sauver
Senior Education Manager



Brady Karg
Education Coordinator



Amy Plettner
Caretaker



Matt Harvey
Project Assistant



Building Community Throughout the Great Plains

Celebrating Giving Hearts

Audubon Great Plains participated in North Dakota's annual Giving Hearts Day celebration. From sharing our story, encouraging family members to donate, and helping us reach our match, we raised over \$23,000 for birds, education, and conservation, more than ever before! We thank our donors, volunteers, and board members for their generosity and for helping us achieve our mission of protecting birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow.



Donations further our impact in the community by supporting festivals and birding events, conservation initiatives such as habitat restoration, outdoor programs that connect students with nature, and other community events. We are expanding our Working Lands programs in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska. Save the date and remember to donate next year on February 8, 2024.

Big B.A.D. Birdhouse Project Winners

The second annual Big B.A.D. (Build and Design) Birdhouse Project brought together community partners, including Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center and the American Institute of Architects-Lincoln, for multiple community build events and a new professional design competition. The project culminated on March 24 at the Big B.A.D. Birdhouse Bash at the Nebraska History Museum. The winning designs below were auctioned off to raise funds for Spring Creek Prairie's programming for Lincoln Community Learning Centers.



"A Diamond in the Rough"
Scot Eaton



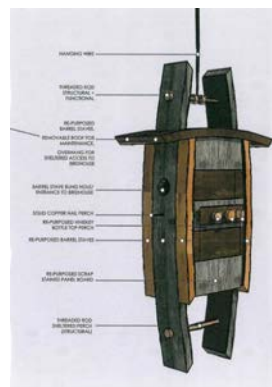
"222"
Daisy Alarcon Panzi



"The Raindrop"
Michael Leiting



"Treehouse"
Emily Roesler



"Stave Cave"
Robert Bartja



"Timber Perch"
Rhonda McClure



Marysa Dominguez performed ceremonial dances with the Many Moccasins Dance Troupe.

Return of the Thunderbirds

Return of the Thunderbirds honors Indigenous traditional spring celebrations thanking the Thunderbeings for providing rebirth with rain and thunder, as well as the migrating birds as the symbolic heralding of spring. The festival was hosted by Lincoln's Indian Center Inc., on April 1. Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center joined the festival with our partners: Lincoln's Indian Center Inc., Many Moccasins Dance Troupe, and the Raptor Conservation Alliance. Funding for the event was provided by Humanities Nebraska and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.



(Above, left) Oscar Rios Pohirieth played the pipes and drum. (Center) Gentry St. Cyr played the flute, and Lewis "Bleu" St. Cyr (right) spoke at the event with Many Moccasins Dance Troupe.

Doug Finch of Raptor Conservation Alliance with Shasta, a Peregrine Falcon. All photos by Brady Karg.



Fargo Birding Festival: Saturday, May 13, 2023

The Fargo Birding Festival is an annual event hosted by Audubon Great Plains and the Fargo Park District that showcases the abundance of migratory birds along the Red River in North Dakota.

For over a decade, bird enthusiasts have ventured out to Forest River Park, an urban nature park nestled along the Red River in Fargo, ND, for the annual Fargo Birding Festival. On one Saturday morning each May, festival attendees can walk the trails while learning from local birding experts and look for dozens of species of migratory birds during this free, family-friendly festival.

Forest River Park is a state recognized Important Bird Area and is enrolled in Audubon Great Plains' Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative. This means it's a site that provides essential habitat to one or more species of breeding, wintering, and/or migrating birds. At Forest River Park, birders can explore prairies, wetlands, and riparian woodlands, to see or hear a rich diversity of birds, among them the Golden-winged Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American Kestrel, Greater Yellowlegs, and so many more!

The Fargo Birding Festival is a perfect opportunity for novice and expert birders alike to enjoy nature and birds all within the city limits of Fargo.

The 2023 Fargo Birding Festival is scheduled for **Saturday, May 13 from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.** with guided tours and family-friendly activities throughout the event. You can get involved by volunteering, too. We are currently seeking volunteers to assist us at the event. You can help welcome attendees at our check-in table, or assist with this year's family-friendly activity, planting a pollinator plot. If you would like to showcase your bird knowledge, we're in need of volunteer bird guides to help lead groups along the trails, with an overall goal to engage positively with festival attendees, identify birds, and provide an educational experience.



Nome Schoolhouse Birding Retreat: Friday, May 26 & Saturday, May 27

Last spring, in partnership with Nome Schoolhouse, Audubon Great Plains hosted the Inaugural Nome Birding Retreat. Thirteen retreat attendees, ranging from novice birders to expert identifiers, joined us from all over North Dakota to meet other like-minded birders and, of course, to hopefully spot a few rare species. In-between socializing and crafting, the group identified 28 species of birds, including a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Canvasback, and even a Bald Eagle nest. Bird watching took place both around the Nome Schoolhouse and at nearby wetlands. Even with cold temperatures and rain, the Nome Retreat provided an opportunity to meet new people and delight in the joy of birds with others.

This May, join us for the 2nd Annual Nome Schoolhouse Birding Retreat, where you will enjoy bird watching with Audubon Great Plains, and create a needle meadowlark with Teresa of Bear Creek Felting. Birding will begin bright and early Saturday morning,

May 27, followed by a full day of activities everyone is sure to enjoy! Participants are encouraged to stay Friday night, May 26, in the beautifully renovated Nome Schoolhouse boutique hotel or just come for the day on Saturday.

The Nome Schoolhouse was originally built in 1916 with a gymnasium added in 1949. Due to declining rural populations, the Nome Schoolhouse officially closed its doors in 1970 and became a storage facility. Purchased by Chris Armbrust and Teresa Perleberg in 2018, and after three years of restoration, the Nome Schoolhouse reopened as a fiber arts event center, event center, and boutique hotel.

Registration fee includes two meals, snacks, coffee, water, and materials for both crafting opportunities. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Audubon Great Plains. Visit us online for more details.



The Crane Capital of the World

Iain Nicolson Audubon Center
at Rowe Sanctuary
Gibbon, Nebraska

457,800

Cranes counted on Tuesday, March 14
+- 28,600

According to the Crane Trust weekly
count, the third week of March was
the migration's peak this year

1,270,000

Estimated number of Sandhill Cranes
that will visit the Central Platte River
Valley each spring

1,450,000

Estimated Sandhill Crane global
population, including non-migratory
groups in Florida and California

135,000+

Year-round human population of
North Platte, Kearney, Grand Island,
and Hastings

40,000+

Human spectators who came to
Rowe Sanctuary this year

75 miles

The stretch of the Platte River where
Sandhill Cranes will stop to roost



Chaos and Grace

There is a disorganized ballet,
but a beautiful one.



Top photo: Don Brockmeier. Center photo: Rowe Sanctuary/Audubon
Nebraska. Bottom photo: Evan Barrientos.

Crane population estimates from Caven, Andrew J. 2023.
Platte River Natural Resource Reports eJournal 2:1-14.



Stretch! Lesser Sandhill Cranes are smaller than Greater Sandhill Cranes, but both can have a wingspan up to twice their height. Photos: Don Brockmeier.



ELEVATE / The Campaign for Audubon Nebraska

Nebraska is at a crossroads. It sits at the narrow center of the Central Flyway's hourglass-shaped migration pathway, through which millions of birds funnel during their annual journeys north and south. It is also where eastern and western bird ranges mingle and overlap. This convergence draws people from all over the planet to see our amazing bird diversity.

Elevate / The Campaign for Audubon Nebraska is the most ambitious fundraising endeavor in our history. This statewide effort seeks to raise \$34 million to conserve Nebraska's birds and the places they need. This is a call to action to protect birds, and in so doing, to protect our way of life and the landscapes we love across our state.

Our nature centers are our laboratories, in which we innovate, pilot new initiatives, and conduct most of our on-the-ground conservation and education work. At Rowe Sanctuary, thousands of people flock to experience one of the last great migrations—that of the Sandhill Crane. At Spring Creek Prairie, visitors discover one of the few remaining expanses of tallgrass prairie and disappearing grassland birds.

Critical enhancements to both centers are at the core of this campaign. We continually seek to increase these centers' accessibility to the public, because we know that people first must learn more about their environment before they are motivated to care for it. These investments will touch everything—from education to working lands, from science-based programming to operations—that Audubon Nebraska does and can achieve at our centers and beyond.

(above) Sandhill Cranes. Photo: Rick Derevan.



1 Capital Expansion

2 Conservation, Stewardship, and Education Programs

Expand our programs to new communities throughout Nebraska

3 Working Lands Partnerships

Collaborate with private landowners to implement land practices that will benefit birds and people for decades to come

4 Expand the Platte River Initiative

Invest in research and partnerships

5 Sustainable Conservation

Create an enduring legacy, in which birds, people, and the planet can thrive

We have raised over \$32 million toward our \$34 million goal – help us get across the finish line! Learn about ways to give online at:

greatplains.audubon.org/elevate-ne

Capital Expansion Details

Rowe Sanctuary

- Educational building addition with large outdoor pavilion
- East addition with community space and industrial-grade kitchen
- Renovate the Great Hall
- Reconfigure the office space
- Create an accessible entry
- Build a new River Exploration Deck and accessible boardwalks
- Relocate and expand the parking lot
- Create native plant interpretative landscaping; energy-efficient, wildlife-friendly lighting; and interpretative and educational signs

Rowe Sanctuary Additions



Rowe Sanctuary Additions
Top Left: River Exploration Deck
Top Right: Great Hall
Bottom Left: West Pavilion
Bottom Right: Education Room

Spring Creek Prairie

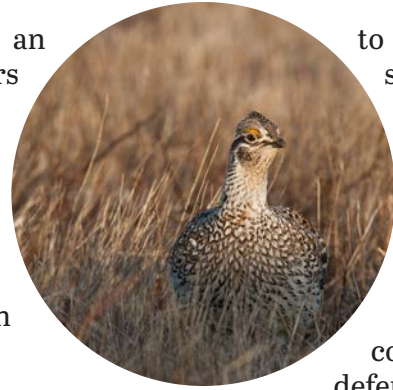
- Repair the creek bridge and improve its accessibility
- Renovate center trails and build a bridge that adds a new connection on the Prairie Trail
- Rehabilitate and develop the Woodland Trail
- Install new interpretative exhibits and signs, increase parking lot lighting, and improve safety features
- Install new signage, improve interior lighting, and upgrade maintenance equipment



The threat to our grasslands that isn't getting enough press: trees

By Juli Bosmoe and Bill Sellers

Grasslands are disappearing at an alarming rate and the primary drivers of this loss may surprise you. Land use conversion and tree cover expansion are increasing at the same rate – and that rate is beyond exponential. We have multiple tree species threatening the great plains grasslands: Eastern red cedar, Rocky Mountain juniper, Russian olive, and Siberian elm.



to control once it inevitably escapes shelterbelts and the long-term costs are high.

In an ideal scenario, land managers would be able to team up with neighbors to remove Russian olives in shelterbelts and remove younger trees that pop up in grassland. That way, a contiguous zone can be developed that is defensible from further encroachment.

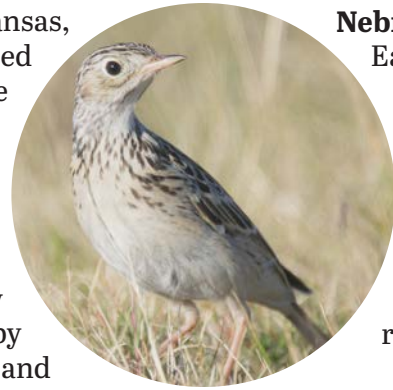
Dakotas

Russian olive and Siberian elm were once thought to be a fantastic choice for shelterbelts when they were introduced in the mid -20th century. They were cold hardy, grew fast, and were disease resistant. However, they tend to escape those shelterbelts and spread into pastures, CRP, and other grasslands at an alarming rate. It may not look like something to be alarmed about now in the Dakotas, but we have warning signs and war stories to heed from Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. Russian olive, introduced from Eurasia, decreases nearby native vegetation species diversity which decreases wildlife species diversity.



Since managing Russian olive and other invasive trees is cost-prohibitive, Audubon has financial assistance available to manage these contributors to the drastic decline in grassland bird populations. For those with land in eastern North Dakota, 90% of the tree removal costs can be covered by our Red River Valley Prairie Management Toolbox Program.

The approach to managing Russian olives is multipronged. Using a strategy developed by Dirac Twidwell, a highly regarded rangeland scientist, we start by securing the areas uninvaded by trees and work outward. Then, we manage those sites to avoid bringing in seed or opportunity for trees to establish. Once trees are mature control is difficult; early detection and rapid response are essential.



Nebraska Sandhills

Eastern red cedar has been invading grasslands for decades in southern plains states and now, in places like the sandhills of Nebraska, they have drastically impacted the landscape. The sandhills of Nebraska are the last largest contiguous grassland in the world and this invasion of cedars has ranchers desperately trying to protect it.

In addition, awareness and prevention are the most effective tools for managing against invasion. Russian olives, though not recognized as a noxious weed in North Dakota (yet!), should no longer be planted. It is too difficult



Cedars are ushering in a biome collapse in Nebraska. A native tree once controlled by periodic fire and propagated by windbreak plantings, now completely dominate some portions of the state. The loss of grasslands has several impacts including the state's economics, increased wildfire risk, and wildlife habitat degradation. As cedar seedlings encroach, they slowly decrease available acres for grazing. This process is slow

Sharp-tailed Grouse. Photo: Tracy Brunner.
Bobolink. Photo: Caroline Samson.

Sprague's Pipit. Photo: Forrest Rowland.
Chestnut-collared Longspur. Photo: Joshua Galicki.

enough that stocking rates aren't significantly impacted on an annual basis, but over the course of ten years forage production can be decreased up to 55%, which does impact cattle producers' bottom line at that time.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is leading an initiative to address this widespread threat. Through the Great Plains Grassland Initiative, several conservation partners, including Audubon Great Plains, are focusing efforts toward creating cedar-free core areas. These core areas are both financially and biologically easier to maintain against cedar encroachment compared to areas that still have seed bearing trees present.

Audubon Great Plains is also partnering with the Sandhills Task Force, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide cost-sharing up to 75% for mechanical removal of cedars. This cost-share program is designed to set the clock back for producers with early stages of cedar encroachment in their pastures.

The post removal flush of cedar regrowth and long-term management is the responsibility of the landowner, but removal programs are designed to create a reasonable starting point for cedar management.

Audubon Great Plains and their partners can provide technical assistance for tactics and techniques in managing cedar regrowth, including prescribed burn plans, which is ultimately the only way of eradicating cedar seeds that have laid dormant for years.

Working Lands

Audubon Great Plains Working Lands programs consist of privately-managed lands enrolled in the Audubon Conservation Ranching Initiative, Prairie Management Toolbox Programs, and Conservation Forage Program. Land owners participate in voluntary enhancement and preservation of critical grassland habitats. Audubon also helps landowners apply "bird-friendly" grazing practices and develop market-based solutions to build economic incentives that benefit landowners, consumers, and the environment.

Eastern red cedar dots the Nebraska Sandhills. Photo: Bill Sellers/Audubon.





Pollinator Habitat Grants

In 2022, Audubon state offices were awarded multiple grants to restore critical pollinator habitats in both rural and urban areas.

The North Dakota Industrial Commission approved nearly \$3 million across eight Outdoor Heritage Fund grant projects. Audubon Dakota was awarded two of these grants, totaling \$443,883 for projects that address rural and urban conservation needs within the Red River Valley.

In addition, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awarded Audubon Nebraska \$175,000 to restore native prairie habitat for monarch butterfly and regal fritillary.



Enhancing and Restoring Monarch Habitat in Eastern Nebraska

Audubon Nebraska was awarded a \$175,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to improve habitat for the Regal Fritillary and Monarch Butterfly species on public and private working lands in eastern Nebraska. In partnership with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, the Crane Trust, Prairie Plains Resource Institute, the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Audubon plans to use grant funds to improve 5,180 acres, restore 340 acres, propagate 2,000 milkweed seedlings, collect 110 pounds of milkweed seed, and host a pollinator habitat workshop for Nebraska community members, conservation professionals, and landowners.

(Left) Calliope Hummingbird on wild bee balm. Photo: Cortney Litwin.

Red River Valley Prairie Management Toolbox Project

The Red River Valley Prairie Management Toolbox (PMT) project will expand the PMT geography into an ecoregion pressured by conventional crop agriculture yet is critical habitat for charismatic fauna such as the monarch butterfly, Golden-winged Warbler, and Greater Prairie-Chicken. Within the Red River Valley, the PMT will provide private landowners financial and technical assistance to conserve the diversity in grassland ecosystems through practices such as managed grazing, invasive species management, and grassland seed enhancement. The geography specifically includes North Dakota counties that are identified as the North Core area for the monarch butterfly, as classified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Audubon has placed emphasis on this geography due to pollinators' immense importance to other wildlife species. Multiple monarch butterfly and pollinator conservation plans have outlined key solutions to save pollinators, many of which are fully incorporated into the PMT and include habitat improvement and protection, technical assistance to private landowners, and full life-cycle conservation.

Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative, Urban Pollinator Plots Project

The Urban Pollinator Plots Project, a pilot project of the Urban Woods and Prairies (UWP) Initiative, is a collaboration between Audubon, North Dakota State University, and the Fargo Park District to couple on-the-ground conservation and environmental education. Building on the success of the UWP Initiative, the Urban Pollinator Plot Project will establish small urban plantings to simultaneously grow native pollinator-friendly plants and community understanding of habitat needs of pollinators. Across 50 acres within six urban sites, Audubon and partners will plant high-diversity native seed mixes, flush with species such as echinacea, blazing star, purple prairie clover, and multiple milkweed species. North Dakota State University and Audubon will co-host volunteer opportunities aimed at education and hands-on stewardship experience through invasive species control, seed harvesting, and even prescribed fire. Audubon is grateful for the invaluable partnerships and conservation progress this project represents.

Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for frequent updates:

- @AudubonGreatPlains
- @AudubonGreatPlains
- @Audubon_GP

Audubon Dakotas and Audubon Nebraska are now Audubon Great Plains across social media!

Where you can find us

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How You Can Help



Make a Cash or Online Donation

Money orders or checks can be mailed to nature centers directly or you can donate online at: www.greatplains.audubon.org | **Support Our Work**
100% of contributions made to Rowe Sanctuary and Spring Creek Prairie stay with them.

Contribute to Science

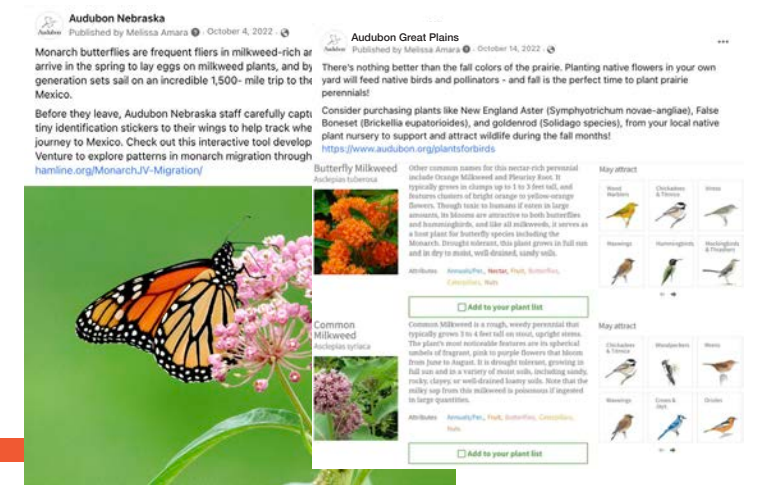
Audubon offers opportunities to get involved in community science projects. Read more at audubon.org/science



Sign up for eNews on our website!



Volunteer at a Center or with a Chapter



www.greatplains.audubon.org

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Cover Photo: Sandhill Cranes. Photo Credit: Sara Stein.