

Fall Newsletter - 2019



Audubon

NEBRASKA

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Wood Duck. Photo: Milos Verdon Tomajko / Audubon Photography Awards



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Canada Geese. Photo: Christian Hannig / Audubon Photography Awards

Our Audubon Flock by Kristal Stoner, Executive Director

Many birds flock, but only a relative handful fly in synchrony to create the mesmerizing, flowing aerial formations. Scientists are still unraveling the mystery of how hundreds of birds seem to abruptly turn together midflight, but *why* they do it is well established; they are stronger when they work together. There is much to be learned and gained by mimicking the birds we protect.

Changes to the flock

Audubon Nebraska's flock has seen many changes in the past several years and may appear different to our long-time volunteers and supporters, but our foundation and mission to protect birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow haven't changed. Audubon Nebraska's team is located from Omaha to Gibbon. This team has a mix of experience and talent that you will see in our nature centers, towns, and rural

landscapes to deliver conservation and education.

What hasn't changed

Audubon Nebraska has long been known for its two nature centers: Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, located near Denton focused on tallgrass prairie conservation, and Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary focused on Platte River conservation. These centers and sanctuaries will always be foundational to Audubon Nebraska as hubs of education, research, and action.

Beyond our centers, Audubon Nebraska is collaborating with Audubon Dakota to deliver a grassland program called Conservation Ranching that helps ranchers apply "bird-friendly" grazing practices. Audubon Nebraska is working in many towns and cities to improve habitat and create bird-friendly

communities. With our dedicated volunteers, we are also monitoring how climate change is impacting birds.

Our new look

With the addition of Allison Christenson, our communications coordinator, we are streamlining our communication and media. Allison has a background in journalism, advertising, and marketing and with her talent and skills, we will elevate Audubon Nebraska's work while freeing other biologists and educators to better focus their talent. This Audubon Nebraska newsletter will consolidate the previous two center's newsletters and highlight all the work across Nebraska.

I am excited for what the future holds and Audubon Nebraska's ability to take on our most pressing conservation challenges. Stay tuned, as Audubon Nebraska elevates conservation.

Who We Are



Audubon Nebraska works statewide on working grasslands, rivers and in communities through two nature centers and wildlife sanctuaries, Spring Creek Prairie and Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary, to protect birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow.



Kristal Stoner - Executive Director

Kristal oversees all Audubon Nebraska, with two centers as hubs of activity for statewide strategic bird conservation and lay the groundwork to address new conservation challenges including drought, habitat loss, and climate change.



Autumn Taddicken – Director of Development

Autumn is responsible for securing donations to support our work across the state. She works closely with both centers and our statewide program leadership to identify and secure funding.



Allison Christenson - Communications Coordinator

Allison was hired in April of 2019 to take over all communications-related duties for Audubon Nebraska while assisting the two Audubon centers.



Bill Taddicken - Director

Bill leads and oversees all Rowe Sanctuary programs and has worked extensively on conservation of the Platte River for Sandhill Cranes, Whooping Cranes, and other wildlife.



Andrew Pierson - Director of Conservation

Andrew is responsible for the planning, development, and implementation of Audubon's conservation programs in Nebraska.



Rebekah Yates - Education Manager

Beka oversees all educational programming at the sanctuary including school, adult, and family programs and summer camps.



Anne Winkel - Crane Festival Coordinator and Outreach Assistant

Anne is the coordinator for Audubon Nebraska's Crane Festival. She grew up on a farm close to Shickley in south central Nebraska.



Soncey Kondrotis - Office Manager

As Office Manager, Soncey oversees day-to-day management of Rowe Sanctuary. She grew up in Colorado and has lived in Nebraska for several years.

Faces of Audubon



Cody Wagner - Habitat Manager

Cody maintains the habitat programs at Rowe Sanctuary. He has previous experience from the US Fish and Wildlife Service refuge system, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.



Wendy Horine - Director of Community Outreach

Wendy oversees the Rowe Sanctuary volunteer program and works to increase community-based stewardship of the Platte River Valley.



Amy Plettner - Caretaker

Amy has been with Spring Creek Prairie for 12 years as caretaker and outdoor educator. Her poetry has been published in a variety of anthologies and journals.



Meghan Sittler - Director

Meghan oversees the care and management of the Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center. She has a close connection to the prairie; her parents farmed land near Spring Creek Prairie where her sister and brother-in-law now farm.



Jason "the Birdnerd" St. Sauver - Director of Education and Outreach

Jason became Spring Creek Prairie's Education Director in April 2015. He was the Education Manager and interim Center Director at the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center in San Antonio, Texas.



Kevin Poague - Operations Manager

Kevin has been the operations manager for Spring Creek Prairie since 1998. He assists with education programs and helps conduct prairie bird surveys during breeding season.



Andrea Bornemeier - Educator

Andrea helps facilitate and lead spring field trips, summer camp programs, and Prairie Immersion in the fall.



Ed Hubbs - Habitat Program Manager

Ed manages the habitat of Spring Creek Prairie. He is a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with a B.S. in fisheries and wildlife.

Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program



by Andrew Pierson



Pronghorn Ranch. Photo: Audubon Rookies

According to Audubon's highly anticipated North American Grasslands and Birds Report, there is little debate that grasslands like we have in Nebraska are one of the most imperiled ecosystems in North America. With temperate grassland regions projected to have some of the highest rates of climate change among biomes on Earth, our native prairies are in trouble and so are the birds and wildlife that depend on them.

Grassland bird conservation is inextricably linked to management practices on millions of acres of rangelands, the vast majority of which are privately owned. Because of this, partnering with ranchers is our best hope for conserving these birds.

Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program uses an innovative, market-based approach to connect conservation-conscious consumers to ranchers who employ bird-friendly management practices in raising their livestock. The program addresses loss in ecosystem function and health through the conservation of at-risk bird species and the habitat they depend upon. It incentivizes bird-friendly livestock management practices, emphasizing regenerative grazing approaches that improve soil health, diversify habitat structure, and ensure environmental sustainability that benefits pollinators and other grassland wildlife.

Audubon Conservation Ranching is making its way to Nebraska ranchers, retailers and consumers. To learn more about the program, visit audubon.org/ranching. You can also find the Grasslands and Birds Report here: www.audubon.org/conservation/working-lands/grasslands-report.



Climate Change and its Effect on Birds: A New Community Science Project

by Allison Christenson

Audubon's new community science project may provide answers for how climate change is affecting the nation's birds. Nebraska volunteers were excited to take part.

Barbara DiBernard, a Lincoln-area volunteer, decided to get involved after retiring as an English professor. "The idea that a total non-scientist could participate and make observations was really appealing to me," said Barbara. "I like feeling like I'm a part of something with others to acknowledge and preserve the environment."

In addition to being a simpler survey, volunteers believe it's very important because changing climate will have a wide variety of complex impacts. As project participant Steve Martindale explains, "The climate is clearly changing and flooding across Nebraska is a direct correlation."

"This survey will provide a window to how birds are responding," explained Kristal Stoner, Executive Director for Audubon Nebraska. "It's necessary that biologists understand how different birds respond to a changing climate in order to make science-based management decisions."

Though the summer survey is over, there is still another opportunity to take part. The winter survey begins in January; get a head start by contacting Jason "The Birdnerd" at jtsauver@audubon.org.



Photo: Camilla Cerea / Audubon



Supporters Meet Spring Challenge, Provide Funding For Habitat Conservation and Education

by Autumn Taddicken

Audubon supporters stepped up and helped our Nebraska Audubon Centers reach funding goals this spring.

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center and Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary conducted fund drives fueled with the help of challenge gift donors. All together, 775 donors contributed more than \$200,000.

At Rowe Sanctuary, contributions will help fill the financial gap left after extreme weather, flooding, and road closures devastated their crane tourism business. Spurred by the offer of two generous matching gifts, donors both near and far responded to help critical conservation work on the Platte River go on without disruption. One of the

matching gifts came from the family of former Rowe Sanctuary employee Greg Wingfield and his sister Deb Wingfield, who volunteers for Rowe during the crane migration.

"The response this spring was great from our supporters," said Rowe Director Bill Taddicken. "People from all across the country and right here close to home sent in gifts, often increasing their support to help us during this difficult financial time. We also had many donations from new supporters."

At Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, the J.A. Woollam Foundation offered a matching grant to support important programs. The challenge helped spur awareness during the

annual Give To Lincoln Day drive and Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center jumped from 60th to 41st in the rankings of organizations supported during the annual community-wide philanthropy day.

"We greatly appreciate the response of supporters," said Meghan Sittler, Director at Spring Creek Prairie. "Programs like this fall's Prairie Immersion for fourth graders at Lincoln Public Schools is only possible through underwriting from our donors. The fact that we gained many new donors during this spring drive is a testament to the importance of our conservation work and our outreach in the community."



Sandhill Cranes. Photo: Brad Lewis / Audubon Photography Awards



Mark Your Calendar for the 50th Crane Festival!

Audubon Nebraska's 50th Crane Festival will take place on March 20 and 21, 2020. For more information about the event, visit www.ne.audubon.org/crane-festival or email nebraska@audubon.org. Registration will be available in December.



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Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center



The Prairie Takes Care of Itself, Right?

by Ed Hubbs

All prairie managers have heard it: “The prairie basically takes care of itself, right? Why don’t you just let nature take its course?” Those who have spent time walking through a once treeless prairie full of newly growing, two-foot-tall invasive cedar trees know better. But why is it like that? Why do we need to take action to ensure our prairie stays...well, prairie?

Nature is a never-ending battle for survival. There are winners and losers every growing season. So how are the victors decided, especially for something like a plant that is constantly competing with neighbors for sunlight and nutrients? It often comes down to environmental factors that favor one plant over another.



Prescribed burn at Spring Creek Prairie.

These environmental factors can happen over an extended period of time, like drought or season-long grazing pressure. Or they may come and go quickly, like a flash flood or a fire. When this happens the growing cycle of plants is interrupted. Timing and intensity determine how dramatic that interruption is.

It is human nature to control these environmental factors as much as possible for our comfort. But preventing wildfires and channelizing waterways have come at a toll to native species. By removing the environmental factors they evolved with, we are favoring invasive species that take advantage of the change in circumstances. To compensate, additional hands-on management is needed.

Hands-on management can include tools such as chainsaws and shovels, or prescribed burns to replicate the effects of historic fires. Prescribed burns in Nebraska are often practiced in March and April, but fires would have historically occurred year round, including during the green growing months of July and August.

The benefits of burning at different times of the year may surprise you. Please contact us at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center for more information about prescribed burns and upcoming habitat management events.



Internships in Honor of Marian Langan

by Kevin Poague



Megan Petsch

Sam Cubrich



Marian Langan



Marian Langan was the first director for Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center. After her untimely passing in 2017, a memorial fund was set up to continue Marian's passion of developing a new generation of conservation stewards.

As part of the new Marian Langan Memorial Internship Program through Audubon Nebraska, two interns, Megan Petsch and Sam Cubrich, joined our staff for the summer.

They are stationed at Spring Creek Prairie, but have also spent time at

Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary on the Platte River near Gibbon. This has allowed them to gain experience in both the tallgrass prairie ecosystem and the riparian/river environment.

Megan is working with Audubon's education program, helping with summer camps and off-site programming.

Sam is part of our habitat management team, assisting with thistle removal, grazing practices, trail maintenance, and other prairie restoration duties.

While working for Audubon, they are also completing special independent projects based on our conservation priorities.

We are thrilled to have two dedicated and hard-working people assisting Audubon's goals of protecting birds and sharing our passion with others.

We hope that the success of this initial program will allow us to gain support to continue the internships into the future.



Bobolink's my Favorite Bird, He Sings a Jazzy Little Song

by Jason St. Sauver

If you happened to visit Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center this summer, you may have heard this song being sung by young prairie explorers from Lincoln Community Learning Centers (CLCs). The kids are here as part of our ongoing summer camp program to provide them with 20-25 hours of hands-on investigation of the prairie and the birds that live in it.

This year, thanks to grants from BirdNote and the Coleman and Susan Burke Center for Native Plants, youth from over 10 CLCs across Lincoln are not only learning and exploring, but they are creating community projects to provide more native plant habitat for birds at their schools and community centers. We call the overall project NEST: Nebraska Environmental Student Teams.

In addition to each youth team creating their own project(s), they help remove invasive plant species, learn all about bird adaptations and migration, and will present some of their projects – along with a free native plant giveaway – at our Fall Fest on Friday, September 27. Creating bird-friendly communities and our next generation of conservation leaders in a fun and feather-friendly way is what our NEST summer camps are all about.



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Iain Nicolson
Audubon Center
at Rowe Sanctuary



Audubon Collaborates to Recover Platte for Endangered Species

by Bill Taddicken

The Platte River Recovery Implementation Program is one of the most useful tools that we have to protect the river for wildlife and people into the future. This program was adopted in 2007 to meet the needs of threatened and endangered Whooping Cranes, Least Terns, Piping Plovers, and Pallid Sturgeons as well as water users. After 10 years of negotiations between Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, the federal government and water stakeholders, a basin-wide management plan was devised. This group included Audubon as a voice for the river and wildlife.

By 1997, seventy percent of the water had been diverted before it reached Central Nebraska and ninety percent of the wide-open channels the birds need had been lost. Water battles have been frequent and come in many forms costing millions. Through every battle, Audubon has given a voice to the river and to finding sustainable solutions.

The program has been tasked with protecting 10 thousand acres of land and adding 130 to 150 thousand acre-feet of water to the river at designated times for the target species in the central Platte region. The land goal has been met with 12 thousand acres protected and managed but the water goal has fallen short. Overall, the program has 8 out of 10 benchmarks successfully met. However, with the first 13-year appropriation coming to a close, more time is needed to meet the water goals and satisfy the Endangered Species Act regulations.

An extension has been requested from Congress so goals can be met. Without the extension, endangered and threatened species on the Platte River are at greater risk. Irrigators, cities, and wildlife on the Platte River depend on this program for the future. It is estimated that the program has saved the states over \$400 million in the last 13 years.

Bills S.990 and H.R.3237 have been introduced in the House and Senate. All governors have signed and all senators in Colorado, Wyoming, and Nebraska, except Ben Sasse, have written letters of support.

It is imperative that the House and Senate hear from you that this program is important and must be extended and funded for the future of the Platte and the cranes.



Photo: Cody Wagner



The 2019 Rowe Summer Camps: Days of Learning and Amazement

by Rebekah Yates

Rowe Sanctuary had a successful summer camp season with two weeks of Platte River Safari and one week of Flying Higher.

This year for Safari, mornings were spent out on field sites doing activities like dip netting for water critters, looking at plant diversity in a wet meadow, and using spider catchers to catch invertebrates. Afternoons were busy learning about grassland insects, using microscopes to learn about aquatic invertebrates and learning more about recycling.

Families of campers came out Wednesday evening and enjoyed a

couple of songs from the campers. They then became leaders for their family members and showed them the sanctuary as well as some projects they worked on.

As always on Thursday morning, kids played in the water, caught water critters, learned about hydroelectric power, completed a water relay race and shot off water rockets.

This year, Flying Higher camp was focused on slimy and scaly critters that act as indicator species in their habitat. Campers also gathered data on different animals and submitted data online to aid scientific research.

Projects included catching butterflies, water invertebrates and amphibians, listening for frog calls, and looking at what fish are in a wetland.

Camps would not have been possible without our great sponsors. Thank you to Central Platte NRD, Cornerstone Bank, Gibbon Exchange Bank, Headwaters Corporation, Minden Exchange Bank, Minden Public Schools, Nebraska Central Telephone Company, Shelton Dental Clinic, Tri-Basin NRD, Wild Birds Unlimited, Royal Engineered Composites, Mason's Market, and Larry's Market for your generous donations in support of Rowe Sanctuary!



Vegetation Transects with The Crane Trust

by Cody Wagner

A new collaborative effort at Rowe Sanctuary will expand the scientific knowledge of Platte River wet meadows and guide future management efforts.

Teams from the Crane Trust and Rowe Sanctuary have created 14 permanent transects on the sanctuary to monitor vegetation. These transects will provide data on the plants present at these locations and the height of those plants. Then, the information will be combined with bird and butterfly surveys done at the same locations to tell whether management activities are having the desired effect.

Our data will also feed into larger research projects, allowing for a greater understanding of our remaining Platte River wetlands and wet meadows.



Purple Prairie Clover. Photo: Cody Wagner

Save The Dates!

Sunday, September 15



Buy your tickets to this wonderful fundraising event on the prairie today at www.bit.ly/TastesTickets

Saturday, September 21

A River Runs Through It

Buy your tickets to this enchanting evening by the river at www.rowe.audubon.org/events



Sandhill Cranes. Photo: Roger Van Gelder / Audubon Photography Awards

Contact Us

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How to Help

Make a Cash or Online Donation at ne.audubon.org

Money order or check donations can be mailed to the centers directly or you can donate online.

Volunteer

Call, email or stop in to either center for info on volunteering.

Sign up for Audubon Nebraska's ENews

By signing up for our ENews, you will receive opportunities for advocacy throughout the state in addition to bird-related news.

Contribute to Science

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

Need a place to host an event? Contact either one of our centers!