TOURIST INFORMATION CENTERS

Grand Island/Hall County Convention & Visitors Bureau
2424 S Locust St, Ste. C • Grand Island, NE 68801
8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday-Friday
308.382.4400 • 800.658.3178
visitgrandisland.com

Hastings/Adams County Convention & Visitors Bureau
100 N. Shore Drive • Hastings, NE 68901
10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday
402.461.2370 • 800.967.2189
visithastingsnebraska.com

Kearney Visitors Bureau
1007 2nd Avenue • Kearney, NE 68847
8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday
9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday
1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday (6 weeks during Crane Season)
308.237.3178 • 800.652.9435 • visitkearney.org

US Fish & Wildlife Service
Rainwater Basin Wetland Management District
73746 V Road • Funk, NE 68940
308.263.3000
fws.gov/refuge/rainwater_basin_wmd

WILDLIFE VIEWING INFORMATION CENTERS

Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center
I-80 Exit 305 (Alda)
308.382.1820 • cranetrust.org

Fort Kearny State Historical Park
1020 V Road • Kearney, NE 68847
308.865.5305 • outdoornebraska.org

Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary
I-80 Exit 285
308.468.5282 • rowe.audubon.org

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service: Rainwater Basin
2610 Avenue Q • Kearney, NE 68847
308.236.5015, Ext. 23 • fws.gov/rainwater
Each spring, something magical happens in the heart of the Great Plains. More than 80 percent 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 them come millions of migrating ducks and geese in the neighboring rainwater basins.

The 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 an epic journey of thousands of miles.

For centuries they have come to rest and restore themselves. The shallow braided channels of Nebraska’s Platte River provide safe nighttime roost sites. Waste grain in crop fields provides food to build up depleted fat reserves needed for migration. Adjacent wet meadows provide critical nutrients and secluded loafing areas for rest, bathing and courting. During their stop in Nebraska, cranes gain nearly 10 percent of their body weight.

There is no question: The arrival of the cranes on the Platte River—and the millions of other migratory birds that visit each spring—is one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on the continent.

This map outlines the northward migration of sandhill cranes from southern wintering grounds through Nebraska and the Great Plains to northern breeding grounds in the Central Flyway. The red lines represent individual birds that have been tracked with satellite telemetry throughout their migration after being affixed with transmitters on the Platte River.

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

The large sign in the Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center parking lot reads, “A Welcome Place for Friends & Nature.” A welcome place indeed, as the recorded sounds of sandhill cranes fill the air to introduce visitors from throughout the region and beyond to a wealth of indoor/outdoor experiences and information.

Once inside, visitors will find larger-than-life murals and graphics depicting Nebraska’s spring migration of sandhill cranes, native wildlife exhibits, and 70-inch touch-screen displays programmed with the latest information on surrounding habitats and Crane Trust research/conservation programs. Also, one of only three special travel kiosks in the state — sponsored by the Nebraska Tourism Commission — gives travelers easy access to updates on attractions and events across the state. You’ll also find the Hornady Art Gallery which showcases beautiful work by regional artists and photographers with Nebraska ties and subject materials, as well as the Crimson Crown Gift Shop, a unique specialty shop, which offers a variety of Nebraska-made gifts and crane merchandise for the nature lover. There are items for all ages; many created by local artists.

When you venture outside, you’ll encounter our butterfly garden where you can relax and enjoy a picnic, a herd of genetically-pure American bison, and you can follow a paved trail to a pair of footbridges crossing the Platte River’s north channel, connecting nature lovers to roughly 10 miles of hiking trails through rare tallgrass prairie, forest and wetland habitats. Nearby, a 35-foot observation tower offers a commanding view of the valley.

The Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center, located on the south side of Interstate 80 at exit #305, is open year-round. Call 308.382.1820 or visit cranetrust.org for spring migration season special hours plus bridge and blind tour information.
**BIRDWATCHING SAFETY ETIQUETTE**

- **DO NOT** stop on roadways, driveways or any other farm road or gated entry.

- **DO NOT** attempt to approach birds on their roosts. One alarm call from a bird can send the entire flock into a panicked flight using up precious energy reserves.

- Most land in the Platte River valley is private property. Always obtain permission before entering and respect the rights of people who live and work in the area.

- Approaching cranes or migratory waterfowl while in the field will disrupt their feeding, since they are used to being hunted by humans. Use your vehicle as a ‘blind’ and stay in your car or right next to it.

- Harassing cranes and other birds by honking your horn, flashing your lights or yelling is not only illegal, it also disturbs the birdwatching experience for others.

- Weather conditions can change rapidly on the Great Plains during late winter and early spring. Plan accordingly by bringing attire that is suitable for low windchills.

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There are two crane species in North America. The sandhill crane is the most abundant of the world’s 15 species of crane. The whooping crane is one of the largest cranes and the most endangered in the world with a wild population of less than 300 individuals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>SANDHILL CRANE</strong></th>
<th><strong>WHOOPING CRANE</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Height</strong></td>
<td>3 to 4 feet</td>
<td>5 feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wingspan</strong></td>
<td>6 feet</td>
<td>7.5 feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weight</strong></td>
<td>8 to 12 lbs.</td>
<td>14 lbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coloration</strong></td>
<td>Gray</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Migration</strong></td>
<td>170-450 miles/day</td>
<td>200-500 miles/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flight Speed</strong></td>
<td>38 mph</td>
<td>47 mph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nesting Area</strong></td>
<td>N. Canada, Alaska, Siberia</td>
<td>N. Alberta, NW Territories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mating</strong></td>
<td>Begins at 3 to 4 years</td>
<td>Begins at 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eggs</strong></td>
<td>2 per year</td>
<td>2 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lifespan</strong></td>
<td>20 to 40 years</td>
<td>20 to 40 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central Flyway Population</strong></td>
<td>650,000</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CRANE VIEWING AT ROWE SANCTUARY

During March and early April, the sanctuary’s four miles of wide and treeless channels attract as many as 60,000 sandhill cranes plus numerous geese, ducks, eagles and shorebirds.

Guided tours to see the sandhill cranes on their river roosts are conducted from early March through early April each year. For dates, times, costs and additional details, please visit rowe.audubon.org or call 308.468.5282.

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

- Indoor viewing for motor coach tours or other large groups is available. Call for details.
- Overnight photography blinds are available. Please see website for additional details.
- Hiking and nature appreciation trails are open year round, except during Crane Season.

IAIN NICOLSON AUDUBON CENTER AT ROWE SANCTUARY

44450 Elm Island Road • Gibbon, NE 68840

Take I-80 Exit #285 (Gibbon), go south for two miles then right (west) for two more miles on Elm Island Rd. See detailed map in center of this brochure.

Crane Season Hours: (February 15 - April 15) Open daily 8 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

Regular Hours: Open Mon-Fri 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Sundays 1 p.m.-4 p.m.

Phone: 308.468.5282 • Website: rowe.audubon.org

FORT KEARNY STATE HISTORICAL PARK

Visitor center hours : 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Open: First weekend of March through mid-April. 308.865.5305
Fort Kearny SHP blends the history of the Platte River valley with its military history, including reconstructed buildings and a visitor center with a museum and video.

FORT KEARNY STATE RECREATION AREA

From I-80 Kearney Exit 272 - 2mi south on Hwy 44 and 5mi east on Hwy 50A. From the I-80 Minden Exit 279 – 3mi south on Hwy 10 and 2mi west on Hwy 50A. Offering the best over-river viewing of cranes, the Fort Kearny Hike-Bike trail bridge located on the east side of the park and is 3 miles from the parking lot. Open to the elements, so dress accordingly! The best times to view the cranes are half hour before sunrise and sunset.

A Nebraska state park permit is required and is available at the entrance and at Fort Kearny Historical park visitor center, or by visiting outdoornebraska.org.

PUBLIC VIEWING DECKS

The Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD) has led a task force to provide a series of free crane/waterfowl viewing decks for use by visitors. The decks provide a safe and bird-friendly way to view cranes throughout the day. Parking is available at each deck. 308.385.6282 • cpnrd.org.

There are two locations on the Platte River (best times one hour before sunrise/sunset):
  • Richard Plautz Crane Viewing Site: 1.5mi south of I-80 Exit 285 (Gibbon)
  • Alda Crane Viewing Site: 2mi south of I-80 Exit 305 (Alda)

There are three additional roadside turnouts to enjoy safe daytime viewing. These are located south and east of the Alda interchange on Platte River Drive—and west of the Rowe Sanctuary office on Elm Island Road.

WHERE TO GET THE BEST PERSPECTIVE
CENTRAL NEBRASKA WILDLIFE

OUTSTANDING WILDLIFE VIEWING ALL YEAR LONG

BALD EAGLES

Back from the brink of extinction, the Bald Eagle has become a frequent and thrilling sight in central Nebraska. 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. One of the best indoor viewing sites is the Johnson No. 2 (J-2) hydropower plant south of Lexington operated by the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District. Viewing is also available at Kingsley Dam north of Ogallala. Visitors are advised to bring binoculars or spotting scopes. Admission is free, though weather can affect the number of eagles present. Call CNPPID at 308.995.8601 or the Kingsley Dam office at 308.284.2332 for information.

GROUSE COURTSHIP

Prairie-chickens and sharp-tailed grouse both occur in southcentral Nebraska. Prairie-chickens are more common and have increased significantly in recent years. Prairie chickens gather on courtship grounds called ‘leks’ in the spring. Males arrive before dawn and put on an amazing display of foot-stomping, booming calls and the occasional skirmish with other males. Courtship starts in early March and can last through May. Since most leks are on private property, it is advisable to contact Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center or Rowe Sanctuary for the best viewing opportunities.

BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOGS

Prairie dogs live in short and mixed grass prairies including those in the hilly regions of south-central Nebraska. Watch for untilled fields with mounds of sand or dirt. Prairie dogs are active during the day and are often seen frolicking around the raised mounds that indicate a prairie dog ‘town’—a collection of burrows that can cover several acres. Prairie Dog Waterfowl Production Area, northeast of Wilcox, and Harlan County Reservoir offer excellent viewing opportunities. Staff at Rowe Sanctuary or Crane Trust & Visitor Center can provide other viewing locations.

WHOOPING CRANES

Approximately 220 whooping cranes migrate through the Platte River valley and Rainwater Basins, predominantly during the months of April and October/November. One of the most endangered birds in North America, the whooping crane is also the tallest—over five feet tall. Its imposing stature, angel white plumage, black mask and red crown make it a striking sight—and a birdwatcher’s dream. If you think you have seen a whooping crane, please report it to Whooper Watch (888.399.2824), or the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (308.865.5310).
Each year, more than 10 million migrating waterfowl and other birds descend on south-central Nebraska’s Rainwater Basins, which encompass 6,150 square miles across 21 Nebraska counties. In years of normal precipitation, rainwater and snowmelt fill the basins. The shallow basins warm quickly in the spring and brew up a protein-rich soup of invertebrates. This, and a generous supply of seeds and tubers from wetland plants and waste grain from surrounding farms, provides a well-rounded diet for the birds.

The Rainwater Basin is ideally situated midway between wintering areas along the Texas Gulf Coast and southward, and breeding sites as far north as the Arctic, serves as an important resting and refueling station for waterfowl. The Rainwater Basin area is now just a fraction of its former self. Partnerships such as the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture are working with private and public landowners to help restore significant portions of these wetlands for the enjoyment of birds and humans for decades to come.

**VIEWING AREAS**

The birds arrive in February after wetlands begin to thaw and stay about three weeks. It is possible to see enormous concentrations of 1 million or more geese on some wetland basins.

In the western Rainwater Basins, Funk Waterfowl Production Area offers the best viewing opportunities. In the eastern Rainwater Basins, Harvard, Massie Waterfowl Production Areas and Kissinger and Pintail Wildlife Management Areas provide some of the most reliable viewing opportunities.

Most birds can be viewed from your vehicle. Since water conditions often vary from year to year, assistance and information on prime viewing are available from Rowe Sanctuary and Crane Trust Nature & Visitor Center. All viewing in the Rainwater Basins is free.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WILDLIFE VIEWING CALENDAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
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<td>February</td>
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<td>November</td>
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<tr>
<td>December</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE BIRDS OF THE RAINWATER BASIN**

Each year, millions of ducks and geese stop in the Rainwater Basin including:

- 90% of the mid-continent white-fronted goose population
- 50% of the mid-continent mallard population
- 30% of the continent’s northern pintail population
- 90% of the mid-continent snow goose population

At least 329 species of birds have been observed in the Rainwater Basin including:

- 35 species of waterfowl
- 41 species of shorebirds
- 3 threatened and endangered species (whooping cranes, least terns, and piping plovers)