

WHOOPING CRANES IN KANSAS (NEAR ZEANDALE)



photos by Ron Klataske

NORTHERN Flint Hills Audubon Society,
P.O. Box 1932, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1932



prairie falcon

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

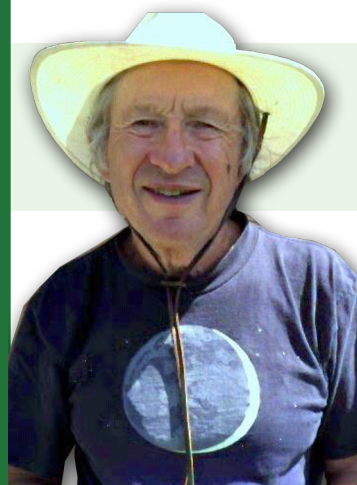
Vol. 37, No. 9 ~ May 2009

Inside

- pg. 2 - Skylight plus - PETE COHEN
- pg. 3 - Whooping CRANES IN KANSAS
RON KLATASKE (AOK)
- pg. 4 - 90 YEARS of Birdwatching
- pg. 5 - Swift HOUSE - TOM MORGAN
- pg. 6 - VAGARIES of Wind - DRU CLARKE
- pg. 7 - INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY
Bird Day - JIM THRONE
- pg. 7 - GBH - DEB CLARK

Upcoming Events:

- MAY 7 - BOARD MEETING 6 p.m.
MANHATTAN Public Library
- MAY 9 - MIGRATORY BIRD COUNT
JIM THRONE SEE pg. 7
- JUN 4 - BOARD MEETING 6 p.m.
(TOM & MJ MORGAN HOME)
- JUN 13 - MONTHLY BIRDING
- JUN 14 - ANNUAL PLANNING MTG.
HOME of PATRICIA YEAGER,
5614 BAYERS Rd., LAKE ELBO.
MEET 4 p.m. - EAT 6 p.m.
PLEASE COME.



SKYLIGHT PLUS

PETE COHEN

I understand that on last St. Patrick's day a meeting occurred in the White House in Washington, D.C., between two leaders of Irish factions that haven't always been kind to each other. The meeting was amicable, yet reflexively I thought of the song, "Wearing of the Green". It's a lively, pleasant tune, though its original lyrics do not refer to pleasant things. Nonetheless the tune is separable and reoccurred as April came, and with it one of the things that comes in these parts with April. Hence:

Oh, Sally, dear, you now must hear
the noise that's going round: It's growing
time and mowing time;
you know where I'll be found.
Our luncheon dates we cannot keep,
at the pool we won't be seen;
And neither will our boot tops if
I'm not mowing of the green.

I've filed the edges of the blades,
And new spark plug I've put in,
And wonder still if the thing will start
Each time that I begin.
Then mixed feelings fill my heart
As amid the snarling roar
I stir up scents of new-cut grass
Everywhere I've been before.

"Old Man Moon" will be making rounds of his own in the month ahead, becoming a companion to Saturn on the 3rd. The nearby star Regulus will be a match for Saturn's brightness, but will maintain its position at the bottom of Leo's sickle handle (or backwards question mark). On the 6th, Moon will be cozy with Spica, by far the brightest spot in Virgo and for a lot of space around. For his late rising on the 10th, and just above him, Antares is the trail-buddy with a reddish tint. Then he travels close to the glowing Jupiter on the 16th and 17th, before forming a trio with the brilliant Venus, and the gradually brightening (and also red-tinted) Mars in the early morning of the 21st. This affair will occur in Pisces. On the 29th-31st he rejoins Saturn in Leo to tell him all about it.

Venus, for her part, shines in the wee hours all month, while at month's start the much more shy Mercury lingers briefly in the west, about an extended hand's width high in the west after sunset, in company with the gossamer glow of the Pleiades cluster.

As to Spica, by the way, the *Audubon Field Guide* tells that the name refers to an "ear of wheat" being held in the maiden's hand. The University of Texas, *StarDate*, says the ear is really two egg-shaped stars – distorted from the spherical by their mutual gravity, being only 10 million miles apart (about a tenth our distance from the Sun). Both are intrinsically more massive and brighter than Sun, and doomed to an earlier extinction, though we still have a few million years to keep them (it) in view. Terrestrial wheat would tend to shatter long before that.

Much sooner, in fact on May 4th, should peak one of the two meteor showers that emerge from Aquarius each year, this one is some remnants of Halley's Comet. Aquarius will be rising in the SE about 1 a.m. The next will be July 30th. Not a great many expected, though as ever, you never know. Moon will be full the 8th, 11p01, and new the 24th, 7a11.

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WHOOPING CRANES

AUDUBON OF KANSAS

RON KLATASKE

Five whooping cranes were observed along the Kansas River a few miles east of Manhattan near the village of Zeandale in April. The birds roosted at night on sandbar islands in the middle of the river or in shallow waters surrounding them, a strategy important to protect them from coyotes and other predators.

During the day they flew out to corn stubble fields to search for food. Most of the time they fed in the middle of a section of agricultural fields.

They could be viewed from public roads at a distance of 200 to 800 yards. That distance was essential to prevent disturbance of the birds. Ron Klataske, Executive Director of Audubon of Kansas, said he was initially concerned that overzealous photographers would try to get closer, but it appears that visitors observed from Kaw Road and did not walk out into the private property or trek along the riverbank. Human disturbance, especially near their night roosting areas on river sandbars and in small wetlands, can stress these wary birds and deprive them of the rest and feeding opportunities they need to fuel their strenuous migration. They nest in and near the Wood Buffalo National Park in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories of Canada.

This is the second time in recent years that whooping cranes have been confirmed using the Kansas River for night roosting. On this most recent occasion they were known to have stayed at least a week, leaving on the morning of April 15. The most common stopover areas in Kansas include Quivira National Wildlife Refuge near Stafford and Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Areas near Great Bend in central Kansas. Ten whoopers were observed at the Quivira refuge on April 10, the largest number observed in the state so far this spring. Smaller numbers have been reported there and at other locations during the past week. Fortunately, the Quivira refuge offers an expanse of wetlands where the birds can feed, loaf and roost without human disturbance, and roads at a distance where viewers can often see the birds with binoculars and scopes.

Whooping cranes were approaching extinction in 1941 when there were only 15 birds remaining in this population. Protection and conservation efforts devoted to critical habitat have allowed this flock to increase substantially. With drastic losses during last year's migrations north and south and/or on 2008 summering areas, the population stood at 270 whoopers in early winter, including 22 juveniles from last year's hatch.

According to Tom Stehn, Whooping Crane Coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2008-09 represented the worst winter on record for the last remaining wild flock of whooping cranes. Stehn reported, "...Total winter mortality is estimated at 7 adults and 16 chicks, totaling 23 whooping cranes, a loss of 7.8% of the flock that was a record 270 in the fall." When added to 34 birds that left Texas in spring 2008 and failed to return in 2009, over 20% of the flock was lost during the last year.

Stehn attributes the winter losses to poor habitat conditions on the wintering grounds, located on the middle Texas coast near Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges. Low rainfall in 2008 resulted in saltier bays and fewer blue crabs, the primary food source for wintering whoopers. In addition, according to Stehn, whoopers are further stressed when cranes must leave the salt marshes to fly inland in search of fresh water. Two emaciated whooping crane carcasses were found, and staff at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge even took the unusual step of providing supplemental feeding over the winter in addition to burning upland areas to make acorns more available.

Although they generally migrate at a height of 500 to 6,000 feet above ground, they are in greatest danger at lower elevations when flying to and from wetlands and river roosting areas. Forty-six whooping cranes have been confirmed as killed in collisions with power lines since 1956. Whoopers, the tallest bird in North America, stand four feet high and have a seven-foot wingspread, are entirely white except for a small patch of black feathers and red skin on the face and black wing tips that are seen only in flight or when their wings are stretched-as when they are dancing in courtship. They usually migrate in small family groups of 2 to 6 birds, but may share habitats with the smaller, more abundant and widespread Sandhill Crane.

Persons who observe whoopers should avoid approaching or disturbing them. It is requested that they call federal or state wildlife officials to report sightings, or wildlife organizations. Audubon of Kansas can be contacted at 785-537-4585. Other birds that are sometimes mistaken for whooping cranes include sandhill cranes, white pelicans, egrets and even snow geese.

aok@audubonofkansas.org

photos by Ron Klataske

NINETY YEARS OF BIRDWATCHERS' NOTES GOING ON-LINE



The North American Bird Phenology Program houses a unique and largely forgotten collection of six million Migration Observer Cards that illuminate migration patterns and population status of birds in North America. These handwritten cards contain almost all of what was known of bird status from the Second World War back to the later part of the 19th century. The bulk of the records are the result of a network of observers who recorded migration arrival dates in the spring and fall that, in its heyday, involved 3000 participants.

Today, those records are being processed and placed into a modern database for analysis. This information will be used, along with recently collected arrival times of migrant birds, in conjunction with historical weather data to show how migration is affected by climate change. The information from this analysis will provide critical information on bird distribution, migration timing and migration pathways and how they are changing. There is no other program that has the depth of information that can help us understand the effect that global climate change has on bird populations across the country.

How did this Program Begin?

This program was started in the 1881 by Wells W. Cooke, who wanted to broaden knowledge and understanding of migration. While teaching on the White Earth Indian Reservation in Minnesota, Cooke began noting the arrival dates of migratory birds. He later coordinated volunteers throughout the Mississippi flyway to collect arrival and departure data. His success sparked the interest of C. Hart Merriam, of the newly formed American Ornithologist's Union (AOU) who expanded the volunteer network to include the entire United States, Canada and a portion of the West Indies. The program was then passed, in the late 1880s, to the Division of Economic Ornithology where it reached its greatest extent of 3000 volunteers. Although the program was actively maintained by the Federal Government, participation gradually declined and in 1970 the program was closed. For many years since, these records have been kept safe by USGS Senior Scientist Chan Robbins and after years of little use and even less recognition passed on to Jessica Zelt who is databasing these past records and reviewing the program's possible uses and potential for collecting new data. You can view a short interview of Chan Robbins on the BPP website <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bpp/>

Who is Wells W. Cooke?

Wells W. Cooke, son of Reverend Elisha Woodbridge Cook and Martha Miranda (Smith) Cook, was born on January 25, 1858, in Haydenville, Massachusetts. The 5th of nine children and eldest boy, Cooke developed an interest in natural history at the age of 12, when he received his first gun. He was known to collect bird specimens from his neighborhood and surrounding area. Cooke went on to receive an A.B. and A.M. degree from Ripon College. After his marriage to Carrie Amy Raymond in 1879, Cooke became a teacher in Indian schools and secondary schools in Minnesota. It was here, in Minnesota, that Cooke first began documenting arrival dates and began what is now the BPP. Notably, Wells Cooke, became a member of the newly formed American Ornithologist's Union in 1884, elected in part due to papers he published while teaching in the Mississippi Valley. In 1885, Cooke became a Professor, and over a 16 year period was associated with three colleges: the University of Vermont, the state Agricultural College of Colorado, and the state College of Pennsylvania. Cooke also began an appointment with the Biological Survey in the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1901 which lasted for 15 years, in which he published many publications on bird migration and distribution. Wells W. Cooke contributed in countless ways to the field of ornithology. He was the most eminent biologist on bird migration and distribution of his time.

Information from BPP website www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bpp

A SWIFT TOWER IN THE BACKYARD

TOM MORGAN



Readers may recall the Chimney Swift Tower Project NFHAS is working on. Chimney swifts originally nested in hollow sycamore trees, but extremely little nesting occurs in trees today. Chimney nesting is also problematic. We've found that most swift tower designs are quite expensive, and unfortunately, each is inhabited by no more than one breeding pair (although non-breeding swifts may be tolerated). Therefore, the creation of cheap designs is potentially important.

I suggested a speculative design at a board meeting of our Audubon chapter, and the board supported the project, voting I construct an experimental "tower." My expenditures were about \$145.

Swifts are known to fly through openings if they can see daylight on the other side, so I used a furnace ductwork tee (the most expensive part of the tower). The tower rests on a metal stand. Swifts require a dark area for nesting, so I placed the tee in an east-west orientation and painted its interior black. The survival of young swifts can be endangered by overheating. Therefore, this swift tower has a double wall design of a duct & sono tube combination, white paint on the exterior, and is positioned in afternoon shade. Swifts require a rough surface for holding on to with their toenails and for adherence of saliva that secures the nesting material. I didn't trust the surface of the sono tube and chose to nail short lengths of scrap lumber to a small block of firewood positioned in the lower part of the tower, an alternative nesting site.

Will this tower be inspected by swifts this month? April is the month of their return, so perhaps they're flying through the tee now. Even if this doesn't work, I'm hoping someone will succeed in finding a simple, cheap, swift-attracting design soon. And then may we all have towers in our backyards.





THE VAGARIES OF WIND

DRU CLARKE

“...let me tell you about the winds. ...There is a whirlwind from southern Morocco, the Aajej, against which the fellahin defend themselves with knives. And there is the Ghibli from Tunis which rolls and rolls and rolls and produces a rather strange nervous condition.”*

Wind wages war in my husband's head: when it blows at night he can't sleep. While he hasn't resorted to fending it off with knives, he does exhibit an agitation that the dogs and I view with some apprehension. His childhood physician, “Dr. Mary,” wrote a book about it entitled “How to Sleep on a Windy Night” and I assume the readership was greater than just one patient so afflicted.

Wind can disturb the mind, and land, and water, as well. It lifts the unprotected surface layer of bits, rubbing particle against particle until it is small and light enough to defy gravity and remain aloft for miles. Witness our Dust Bowl era. Washing out of the air, it colors the rain. “...the Harmattan, a red wind which mariners call the sea of blood. Red sand from this wind has flown as far as the south coast of England apparently producing showers so dense they were mistaken for blood...”* A thousand years in the making, one inch of soil can disappear in high velocity exhalations of the atmosphere that come in quick succession.

Wind across large expanses of water – lakes and oceans – pushes the top layer back, as a person rising from sleep scrunches the top sheet and blanket into an accorded pile. Bottom water, cold and rich in nutrients, rises up to replace the displaced water, stirring the molecules into a broth that fuels plankton, then fish, then birds. These areas of upwelling are valuable commercial fishing zones and on land, where the seabirds roost and nest, rich deposits of guano accumulate.

Wind through a forest sounds quite different from wind through a grassland. A forest wind is like lifting a fist-sized spiraled seashell to your ear and hearing the ocean within: it soughs and moans, tunneling through resistant limbs, making a hollow, swooshing, tumbling sound, like waves rushing toward shore. On the east coast, I lived on a wooded hill and wind usually arrived before a rainstorm, tossing the tree limbs with a vengeance. I stayed indoors during such events. Here, on the prairie, wind is an everyday event: it is expected, and while mildly irritating, it is not usually problematic unless it is fire or tornado season. In planning a burn, one waits for a light wind from the right, or a dead calm day. In tornado time, one listens for sirens... or the sound of an oncoming train.

Wind is a pollinator. Grasses reproduce themselves well enough through root spread – one plant may be hundreds of years old – but their seeds are pollinated by wind. Cedars, too, rely on wind. In March the wind tugs at cedar branches, and when it lets loose of them, the male cones puff out clouds of yellow pollen, seminal smoke filling the air.

We stood one afternoon on a hill looking east at a winter prairie that spread smoothly over a ridge. The wind blew from the north, and the grass responded to its energy: “And there was so much motion to it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.”** And running it was, although when the wind ceased to blow, the grass was still there (as I knew it would be, despite the illusion).

“Herodotus...writes about a wind, the Simoom, which a nation thought was so evil they declared war on it and marched out against it in full battle dress.”* We may not like it, but we should learn to live with the wind, it seems, and reach a truce with it, and put down our knives and armor when confronting it. Now, if we could only get a good night's sleep when it blows...

*Almasy's speech in Anthony Minghela's screenplay of *The English Patient*

** Willa Cather's *My Antonia*

© 2009 March, Dru Clarke

TAKE NOTE



DON'T FORGET SPRING MIGRATORY BIRD COUNT MAY 9, 2009

JIM THRONE, COORDINATOR, COMPILER

Anyone who wants to cover an area, or wants to join an existing group, please e-mail me at jim.throne@sbcglobal.net.

Jim Throne



GREAT BLUE HERON ROOKERY

*Photos by
Deb Clark*



BUTTERFLY GARDEN SUSAN BLACKFORD

Jacque Staats came to the rescue and volunteered to lead the spring cleanup. Dick Oberst, and Kevin Fay also pitched in to clear out last years vegetation to let the new growth come up. Jacque will also be coordinating a weeding party sometime soon. If you would like to be notified about butterfly garden events, send an email to sjb0166@hotmail.com and your name will be added to the email notification list. Thank you to all who help with the Butterfly Garden.



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If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in our local activities, you may subscribe to the Prairie Falcon newsletter for \$15/yr. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS, 66502-1932.

RARE BIRD HOTLINE: For information on Kansas Birds, subscribe to the Kansas Bird Listserve. Send this message <subscribe KSBIRD-L> to <list_serve@ksu.edu> and join in the discussions.

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