

Sandhill Crane Migration, Through A Photographer's Eyes

by Perry Stoner, NET News

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The sound of hundreds of thousands of Sandhill cranes in the Platte River Valley in central Nebraska is distinct as they migrate to northern summer feeding grounds. The spring stopover allows them to nourish their bodies for the rest of their lengthy journey, some headed as far as northern Canada. The open spaces of the Platte keep them safe, and nearby agricultural land provides grain to eat. The result is a daily spectacle of sights and sounds that draws nature lovers from around the world. One of those is photographer Michael Forsberg. Forsberg lives in Lincoln, you might say, for eleven months of the year. When March comes around, most of his time is spent along the Platte River capturing images of the migration. NET News reporter Perry Stoner spoke with Forsberg recently at the Rowe Sanctuary, located south of Gibbon.

PERRY STONER, NET NEWS: Mike, thanks for your time. You've ventured to the Platte every spring since your youth. What is it about the crane migration that keeps you returning?

MICHAEL FORSBERG: It's pure magic. Coming, you know, missing a crane season on the Platte would be like missing Christmas for me. It's just this, you know, menagerie of sight and sound, and it really is truly one of the most amazing wildlife spectacles anywhere on the continent. And I would argue anywhere in the world.

STONER: And you know that because you've traveled the continent, capturing images of nature and landscapes. How does it compare with some of the other things you've seen?

FORSBERG: Well, this is like a rock concert. You know, a lot of the times natural moments are very quiet and this is the exact opposite. You know, I don't think that there's probably anything louder in Nebraska, except Memorial Stadium on a football Saturday. It's ... this is the pinch in the hourglass of the central flyaway, and you have 500,000 cranes, roughly 80 percent of the world's population, a large gathering of cranes anywhere in the world pass through here and need to rest and refuel for about a month. And on top of that, there's 15 million or so other waterfowl that are passing through at the same time. So this is just like this big superhighway and this is their great weigh station before they head up to breeding grounds in the north.

STONER: What's the super highway looking like this year? I know we've had a mild winter here in Nebraska. Does it have any effect on the migration as it happens?

FORSBERG: I think that's yet to be determined. It's been a very interesting year, though. However, you know, this year we had Sandhill cranes that either on their fall migration decided to stay on the Platte or went down to the southern plains and turned around and came back because there was no water and very little food. Remember, this was a historic drought. I mean, this is a drought on the southern plains that hasn't been seen for a very long time. And so we had birds on the Platte over the winter. We had, you know, the first group of whooping cranes show up in late January. You know, gosh over the rivers and wildlife celebration weekend this last weekend, we were watching cranes in sandals and shorts, you know. Last year or two years ago, remember it was you would have froze to death if you had tried to do

that. So but I think everybody's sort of keeping a close eye out on what's gonna happen. And what sort of effects this has on cranes and what sort of effects it has on other bird life that's migrating through.

STONER: Mike, your latest book that you published a couple years ago is called *Great Plains, America's Lingerin' Wild*. And you call the Great Plains a dynamic but forgotten landscape. So tell us just a little bit more about what you mean by that and how does the crane migration fit into that story?

FORSBERG: Well, the Great Plains in North America is one of the most dynamic landscapes in the world because it's a continental climate. It's right in the middle of a continent and so it's either, you know, from our standpoint, it's either too hot or too cold or too wet or too dry. It's a land of extremes. And creatures that grew up and evolved in these land of extremes have had to be able to be able to move and adapt. They either hunker down and wait for weather to get better or else, they move and find conditions that are right for them to continue to live their lives. And migration is a key component of the Great Plains' landscape.

And so, you know, most of these animals that migrate are great connectors. They connect these habitats all up and down the Great Plains, which is a million square miles. It stretches from southern Canada to northern Mexico and they've got to be able to move and so in order to protect these birds and their habitats and other creatures and their habitats, you know, they just don't live in one place, they live in several places. They're nomadic you know. And so for cranes, for instance, that we're talking about now, they have to have not only summer homes, but also migration homes and wintering homes. So you have to protect all of those things along their along their flyaway in order for them to and them to survive. And they need they need that freedom to roam.

STONER: Mike, your work, your photography, is about more than just pretty pictures so tell us a little bit about what it is that you hope the images that you capture of the Sandhill Crane migration and other things in the Great Plains, tell us about conservation and the importance of nature in broader terms.

FORSBERG: Well, I think the very first step in conservation is appreciation. You have to be able to appreciate something. If you appreciate it, then you value it, and if you value it, you're gonna be more apt to protect it. The Great Plains in North America used to be one of the greatest grassland eco-systems on the face of the planet. In the last 150 years, it's now one of the most altered landscapes on the planet. You know, it helped grow a country. It helps feed a world and is increasingly being asked to fuel our energy needs now. None of those things are gonna change, but we have this natural heritage here, this ecological infrastructure that underpins all of this. And we've got to be able to take care of our natural resources. And so when we photograph wildlife and talk about wildlife and the importance of conservation, we have to remember that wildlife relies on grasslands and wetlands and other, you know, water sources in order to survive and good top soil and all of those things, but we also depend on those same things too. So if we protect wildlife, we're protecting us.

STONER: And I wanted to ask you just real quickly too, Mike, if you've got any pointers for folks that like to come out to the migration, maybe they can't spend as much time out there as you do in March, but still like to try to get some good photographs. What kind of suggestions do you have for folks that like to take some photographs?

FORSBERG: Well, what I would do is I would come out and drive a stretch between Grand Island and Kearney and just travel the grid of county roads south of the river. And you know, you're gonna see birds

all over the place and you pick a spot when the sun's getting ready to set that's near the river and wait for birds because they're all coming back to the river to roost at night and you can have these arrow like silhouettes against, you know, a fiery Nebraska sunset and it's pure magic you really can't miss. The you know, what I encourage people to do is once you find a spot, stay there. You can go crazy trying to run from one spot to another to another to another. And all you're doing is burning gas. Find a spot. Stay there and wait for the magic to happen. And almost always it does.

STONER: Mike, thanks for your time in giving us some tips today.

FORSBERG: Thank you very much, Perry.