



the prairie falcon

Vol. 33, No. 8
APRIL 2005

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY,

P.O. Box 1932, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1932

April 20, 2005, 7:30 p.m.
STRECKER-NELSON GALLERY
THE NATURE OF ART;
THE ART OF NATURE

The Nature of Art the Art of Nature

Wednesday, April 20, 7:30 p.m., Strecker-Nelson Gallery,
406 1/2 Poyntz Avenue, Manhattan
(elevator available in the rear)

A double header tour-de-force highlights the spring program season. Local wildlife artists Anthony Benton Gude and Tammy Kutsuma-Irvine will offer their insights on art based on the natural world. Influenced and inspired by the scenery and wildlife of the Midwest and beyond, these two exceptional artists will use numerous examples of their works to discuss in detail their respective techniques. This is truly an evening not to be missed. Please turn to page 5 for more information.

Before each program, we invite our speakers to join us for an informal dinner and discussion. Feel free to join us this month at Harry's Uptown Restaurant, located in the Wareham Hotel, 418 Poyntz Ave. at 5:45 p.m.. The program begins at 7:30 p.m. All meetings are open to the public.

Field Trips

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Apr. 9th and every second Saturday at 8 a.m. in the Ackert/Durland parking lot on the KSU campus. We will carpool to a local birding hotspot and should return by about 11 a.m. Birders of every age and interest level are welcomed. Children are especially encouraged to attend. For more information call Patricia Yeager (776-9593) or e-mail her at pyky@flinthills.com.

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CONTRIBUTORS:

DRU CLARKE
PETE COHEN
THOMAS MORGAN
JACQUE STAATS

UPCOMING DATES:

- Apr 9 Beginning Birding, 8 a.m.
Ackert/Durland Parking Lot
- Apr 13 Arctic Action: Movies
221 Ackert Hall, KSU
Movie begins 7:00 p.m.
- Apr 20 Nature of Art, Art of Nature
Strecker-Nelson Gallery
406 1/2 Poyntz Ave.
7:30 p.m. SEE pg. 5
- Apr 30 Birdathon SEE pg. 7
(call 539-4856)
- FYI Apr 29 - May 1 SEE pg. 7
Wings N Wetlands Weekend
Great Bend, KS
620-792-2750

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MANHATTAN, KS



SIGNS OF SPRING

dru clarke

Sil* was literally bouncing with excitement as she tucked her head close to mine, speaking insistently, diverging from her usually understated manner, “You HAVE to come with me to the parking lot!” Parking lot? “Sure, I’m game.” We were here, in Kearney, Nebraska, to see cranes, the Sandhill species, by the thousands, who roost each evening on the bars and in the shallows of the meandering Platte River. Was there an errant one in amongst the cars, ruminating for waste fast food or practicing its courtship dance? We witnessed that once, on the river, where one lone crane – hopefully an adolescent — hopped vertically in an ungainly launch, flapping its 6-foot span wings, landing awkwardly, only to repeat this embarrassing display again and again. We could discern no apparent improvement in its performance. Fortunately for the crane, it was sideways to the other cranes and faced the riverbank, not allowing its migrant travelers to gaze into its desperate visage. However, in profile, it must have provided a humorous moment for its brethren.

Sil and I made our way to the parking lot behind the motel and stood on a sidewalk near some exotic pine trees, probably grown up from those free sprigs that the Arbor Day Foundation send out each year. The pine cones were opening like spring flowers, their woody scales parting like petals as the resin melted in the warmth. Papery seeds nestled on the scales were free to be released by breezes, to re-seed, to offer nourishment, to confetti the air in celebration of another spring. A sharp crackling, like miniature rifle shots, punctuated the air. I knew then what she was going to share with me, for I had walked here earlier and was assaulted by the same tiny firings. She cocked her head, and said, “Do you hear it? Do you know what it is?” Her restrained “guided-discovery” approach was perfect. I wish every school child could have her as a teacher – one who provided opportunity and guided before informing.

While in Kearney that morning, my husband and I found a quiet place on the river, away from the trestle bridge where at dusk hundreds of observers would stand with spotting scopes, binoculars and sophisticated cameras, to watch and record the



photo by Dave Rintoul

spectacle of the cranes as they returned from the fields to rest for the night. With our simple binoculars, we could clearly make out the blood-red heads of the tall birds, standing out in stark contrast with the wan hues of winter brush. (Three decades earlier, I had come to this same bridge with a group of students. We had camped in soggy sleeping bags in a cold rain and our campfire had been dowsed, but we were determined to experience these awesome migrants. On the bridge that dreary day, we were the only humans to witness them.)

The day before, a group of students from Japan had clambered down from the bridge onto the flood plain, noisily advancing toward the weary cranes. Sil and Ed (her husband) had wisely intercepted them, nudging them toward a more correct demeanor for watching these exquisite wild lives. The experience – for all of us, even though we stood shoulder to shoulder – had been salvaged by their intuitive and practiced response.

Sil had taught me to cup my hands behind my ears to augment the cranes’ calls, heightening the aural experience which is often eclipsed by the visual one as the birds return in droves. The cranes’ primitive, but raucously joyful voices complemented their grand forms as they glided in to find their places in the braided channels. Now my husband and I stood alone on a high bank, looking downstream as the sun rose over the shimmering water and the drowsing cranes. Groups began to peel away from the masses, rising in oblique trajectories, forming strands that stitched the sky in geometric patterns. I imagined this scene repeated year after year, for millennia, stopping the hearts of earlier peoples and a different fauna of bison, sloth, and dire wolf. Now it is our good fortune that it is also good economics to protect this river: the cranes are not only harbingers of spring but a marketable item for local trade.

A few years ago, on a bright March day, my husband and I were walking and found a grassy hollow, a sun trap several degrees warmer than the

(continued on bottom of page 3)



Riley County Fire Department Emergency Response personnel, directed by Roger Davis, conducted the 2005 spring burn of the prairie at NE park on Sunday March 20 as a training session. There were three trucks and 8-10 RCFD personnel and trainees involved. At one point during the burn, at least two dozen pheasants flew overhead. Would that be considered a “phlock” of pheasants?
Jacque Staats



photos
by
Jacque
Staats



surrounding hills and woods. There, the switch grass was snapping and crackling, its nodes swelling and bursting in the heat, a celebration at the end of winter not unlike a Fourth of July fireworks display. How lucky we were to have been in that place at that time!

Last week, on a warm afternoon, I went into our pasture to stroke one of our old mares whom we didn't think would make it through the winter. She stood, head drooping, broadside to the sun, basking in its warmth. In the quiet, as I smoothed her bony side and soothed my conscience, I heard random, sharp, popping sounds. Our windbreak of Austrian pines was responding to the warmth as well: here, several degrees of latitude south of Kearney and several weeks earlier, the cones were opening! I smiled and wished that Sil were here, but she was busy, I hoped,

with children in Minnesota. In a month, she will more than likely guide those kids to “discover” a moment of spring, the “flowering” of the pine cones or some other subtle change which happens only in those northern woods.

We won't be in Nebraska to see the cranes this year, but we are sure they will return to offer up a wild gift to those who trek from near and far to experience them. If you go, be sure to be alert to the other signs of spring. They will be there – you only need to look and listen.

(Cranes and Cones and Grassy Canes) Dru Clarke March 4, 2005

**Sil and Ed Pembleton are well-known old friends of many in NFHAS. Sil is education director of a science/nature center in Minnesota and Ed is executive director of the Leopold Education Project. We miss them, but know they are doing good work where they are.*



SPARKLE-FLOWERS OF NYSSA SYLVATICA

tom morgan

As trees begin to bloom in this season of awakening, I marvel again at nature's precise mechanisms. One tree I've been reading more about is *Nyssa sylvatica*. Its range is similar to that of flowering dogwood, extending into eastern Oklahoma and central Missouri. It's known as either black gum or sour gum, because its berries are too sour to be relished by people. In 1868, Charles Wright reported in *The American Naturalist* that if a bear eats a lot of the berries, "... these impart to the flesh, not a bitter taste, as would naturally be supposed, but the peculiar savor of fish; so that, for a person of delicate taste, only severe hunger will force him to eat the meat of a bear that has lapped black-gum." If so, perhaps this fishiness provides a survival advantage for black gum lappers.

The berries contain 15% fat and this rich food is consumed by bears, raccoons, foxes, and many birds. Robins often arrive when the fruit of *Nyssa sylvatica* or *Nyssa biflora* is ripe. Many naturalists have noticed the voracious consumption of the berries by migrating robins.

The production of berries comes at a cost to female black gum trees, and a female that has borne fruit may fail to flower the following year, while a neighboring female which failed to bear may flower profusely. Flowering is costly also, since nectar is secreted in large amounts. The small, green flowers have almost no smell, and yet attract hungry bees.

Suzanne Batra has called these enchanting flowers "sparkle-flowers" since their droplets of nectar glisten in the sunlight. As secretion continues, the droplets coalesce to cover the center of a flower with a glistening sheet of nectar. According to Batra, "... slight movements of the branches cause the sunlit nectar to sparkle." In addition to the wavelengths which are visible to us, the nectar glistens with ultraviolet wavelengths. Batra observed

fewer bees on the flowers that happened to be shaded at that moment in time.

She was curious whether non-native honey bees would displace other bees from this nectar source, but she found 51 native bees and only two honey bees on the sparkle-flowers even though the flowers were within 55 yards of an apiary that had 73 large colonies of honey bees. She suggested that native, short-tongued bees were highly attracted to the sparkle-flowers, while honey bees were attracted to more conspicuous flowers such as those of black cherry and black locust which were also blooming.



Black gum is known as a "gum" because honey bees sometimes reside in a hollow black gum. So it is odd that the honey bees bypass sparkle-flowers for other flowers. And it is odd that the similar-appearing flowers of *Nyssa ogeche* serve as an effective source of a sublime honey. Batra speculated that the production of this honey might depend on the absence of competition from more conspicuous flowers of other trees.

She cited other studies of the flowers of an ivy that has sparkling nectar that attract bees when the droplets are sunlit. When Batra published her study in 1999, she must have been unaware of a German publication (Uphof, 1931) which reported that bees can home in on the sparkling nectar of black gum's sister species, *Nyssa biflora*.

Perhaps a person noticed the sparkling of sunlit droplets a milleneum ago ... but regardless, we have had our eyes on these flowers for a brief moment. Native bees have had their eyes on the sparkling droplets for a considerably longer span of time. And after reading Batra's rhapsodic descriptions, my strongest wish is to see through the eyes of a native bee as it flies towards the glistening sweetning.

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Wednesday, April 20, 7:30 p.m., Strecker-Nelson Gallery,
406 1/2 Poyntz Avenue, Manhattan (elevator available in the rear)

Artist Anthony Benton Gude attended the School of the Museum of Fine Art in Boston nearly twenty years ago, mastering the Venetian technique of oil painting, employing a monochromatic under painting to develop form and composition before the color is painted on. The work ends up with many layers of paint that gives the final result a stronger body. Continuing with studies at the Art Student's League of New York City, Mr. Gude focused on drawing and painting the figure based on the study of anatomy, believing that the artist must understand the form one intends to represent. His commissioned murals grace several regional edifices, and are remindful of those by his grandfather, Thomas Hart Benton.

Artist Tammy Kutsuma-Irvine grew up along the foothills of the Colorado Rockies. Captivated by the intricacies of nature and a fundamental desire to draw, she studied art and biology at the University of Northern Colorado, receiving her BA in Fine Art/Minor in Biological Science in 1987. She migrated to Kansas soon after and studied under Tom Bookwalter for three years, hoping to pursue a career in illustration. A graphic design position paid the bills for seven years, while the urge to paint raged on. In 2003, Irvine quit her design job and founded the Rear View Studio, specializing in animal and scientific illustration. If Lady Luck would call her name again, she'd catapult into the world of wildlife art. Animals to her, are a fundamental source of color, texture, line and shape. Few subjects offer such an arena for art. Every season changes the color, mood, and expression. Animals can be tragic, soft, dynamic, or beautiful. They skitter, stomp, dance, and creep. For every painting Irvine completes, there are four more waiting in the wings, sometimes literally. Irvine's illustrations can be found in books, magazines, wildlife preserves, universities, and advertisements. Her media of choice is gouache, an opaque watercolor, although she is competent with ink, watercolor, and pencil.



Tammy Kutsuma-Irvine



Our year 1932 marked the final time March 4th was employed as a presidential Inauguration Day. Yet in the Flint Hills of 2005 that date came out of retirement to contain another inaugural, and this gala continued for a couple days. I was engaged in a project that required a busyness of heavy lifting and hauling, and such physical activity doesn't necessarily free the mind to wander. Eventually I paused to relax my focus and discovered that, were we in earlier times, I and my two companions might have immediately proclaimed a festival. The clear eggshell blue sky of early that morning was no more; there were only shattered and scattered bits of blue shell. And what had been hatched was a flotilla of clouds masquerading as airborne tugboats with firm lines to their gunwales and superstructures, stolid and solid-looking, and yet made-up for a party with tints of rouge and shadow. A much more voluminous change had been wrought than our labors were wringing in to the area immediately around us.

Over the preceding three or four months I'd grown accustomed to having my clear days interrupted by clouds like paper napkins drifting away from some large picnic ground, or else having the sky densely blurred by a blanket of heavy gray wool awaiting shipment to somewhere else. One adjusts, but suddenly that adjustment was passe; winter's term of office was expiring. With a sudden though quiet flair Spring had arrived and was that day re-inaugurated.

That we didn't strip off our gloves, and begin some sprightly rite had two reasons. First, we're not in those earlier times; we've become too modern for that overarching shift to have greater meaning for us than the work at hand. Second, we suspected that the party was just beginning, and we'd better get the lifting and hauling done while the ground would let us move and not gob up and grip us. Sure enough, barely did a day more pass before came the first flash, then the delayed but affirming boom of thunder, and the potential for the kind of muddy-boots-on-the-sofa affair that evolved at Andy Jackson's inaugural in 1828. Of course, immediately afterward Spring had to hang out in a motel for awhile till Winter cleaned out

all its desk drawers and cabinets, but the pronouncement of those first clouds of Spring was not subject to recount and reversal.

To this point I've referred to clouds as "napkins," "wool blankets," and "tugboats" modified by creams and oils from milady's boudoir. In doing so I've been participating in an exercise that has a long history, and which has been practiced for more than only rhetorical effect. With certain exceptions, as occur through those heavy gray days, clouds are notoriously ad hoc in their appearances, and the average life of an eyeful of cloud patterns makes mayflies seem Methusalehen. For millenia the task of describing clouds in a way that would get them to hold still, and to be grouped for study and comparison, and for the observations to be put into words that would hold their meanings from place to place despite the creative imaginations of everyone involved – this task was to meteorology what the task of determining longitude was to navigation. And navigation solved its problem first. More on those four youthful horsemen of the heavens – *Cirrus*, *Cumulus*, *Stratus*, and *Nimbus* – anon.

Meanwhile, Jupiter will be soaring unmistakably a-gleam all through the nights amid the demure stars of Virgo the Maiden. Saturn will be going to bed with the Gemini Twins about 2 a.m. Mars will wink up a little before dawn in Capricorn, and near the Moon on April 4th. A few days either side of April 22nd the Lyrid meteoroids will be in our path again, some of whom will become swiftly visible brief meteors immolating in our atmosphere. About 10-12 per hour seems to be the historical average, but on a few unpredictable occasions the Lyrids have been lurid.

Noticeable blue Vega in the Lyre Bird, low in the east at 8 p.m. and flying its highest by 4 a.m., will be our guide-on. Also, a couple half-hearted partial eclipses are on tap. Of the Sun after 5 p.m. April 8th, from San Antonio (18%) to Tampa (28%) to San Juan (59%). Penumbral shading of the Moon's upper right for about an hour starting about 4a25 April 24th. Details from *StarDate*. That bane of early risers, Daylight time, begins 2 a.m. April 3rd. New Moon, 3p32 April 8th, Full 5a06 April 24th.

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APRIL 13

Arctic Action Day/Caribou Commons

Come see movies about the Arctic National Refuge “**Being Caribou**” and if time, “**Oil on Ice.**” The first movie is by a team who follow a herd of 120,000 caribou across the Arctic tundra for five months. We will start playing the movies at **7 p.m. in Ackert Hall 221.** Learn about the Arctic and hopefully it won’t be too late to help save the Arctic Refuge from drilling.

APRIL 30

BIRDATHON

**Contact Clyde Ferguson 539-4856
or Cindy Jeffrey, 532-3157 (wk)**

Yup, it’s that time again, when we bird not only for fun, but for money! Now is the time to start gathering pledges – so much a species, or so much for the day, – whatever works best. Then, go birding! Keep a list of the species you see and report back to all those who pledged with you. The day is 24 hours long, midnight to midnight. Do as much as you like.

You may also contact Clyde Ferguson or Cindy Jeffrey for more information. If you need a checklist, you can download the Kansas Bird List - created by Chuck Otte for the Kansas Ornithological Society, at <http://www.ksbirds.org/kos/koslist10.pdf>. If you do not have access to the web, contact Cindy Jeffrey and one will be mailed to you. After collecting your pledges, send the money to Jan Garton, our treasurer via the NFHAS address:

**Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS 66505-1932.
HAPPY BIRDING!**

Apr 29-
May1

FYI Apr 29 - May 1 Wings N Wetlands Weekend, Great Bend, KS

Registration for the festival is required and pre-registration is strongly recommended. For more information about the Wings and Wetlands Weekend or to receive registration information, contact the Great Bend Convention & Visitors Bureau at 620-792-2750, or e-mail the Bureau at information@visitgreatbend.com. Registration forms are available online at www.visitgreatbend.com and www.cheyennebottoms.net

MAY 14

MIGRATORY BIRD COUNT

**Contact Hoogy at (785) 539-7080
or email him at Hoogy@cox.net**

MAY 18

Save the date! May 18th

2nd General membership and planning meeting.

Everyone is welcome to discuss the future of NFHAS



**Northern Flint Hills
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Subscription Information:

Introductory memberships - \$20 per year; then basic membership is \$35 annually. When you join the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the National Audubon Society and receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine in addition to the *PRAIRIE FALCON*. New membership applications may be sent to NFHAS at the address below; make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Membership Renewals are handled by the National Audubon Society and should not be sent to NFHAS. Questions about membership? Call toll-free, 1-800-274-4201, or email the National Audubon Society join@audubon.org.

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 per year. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: **Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan KS 66505-1932.**

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

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