



the prairie falcon

Vol. 34, No.7
MARCH 2006

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY, P.O. Box 1932, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1932

NORTHEAST PARK EQUINOX NATURE WALK
SPONSORED BY
NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY
MARCH 20TH, 5 P.M.

Take a walk around the 28-acre restored prairie in the Northeast Park in support of the Campaign for Non-Violence (KSU Women's Center). This restored area was first seeded with prairie grasses and wildflowers in 2001 after a sorghum cover crop was clipped. Some of the seeds were hand-picked from nearby prairies by Audubon members. The area was reseeded in 2002 and is progressing rapidly to become a full-fledged prairie.

Fire is a necessary part of the process that maintains a prairie, so depending on the time you visit in the spring, the prairie might be black from the annual spring burn. Pheasants, Harris' sparrows, Northern Harriers, meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, are just some of the birds sighted here.

The prairie is part of the "nature park" area of Northeast Park. It was conceived by a group of citizens in the late 1990s, and accomplished through a partnership of citizen groups and the Manhattan Parks and Recreation Division. It was recently connected to the Linear Trail by a suspension bridge built by the Westar Energy Green Team.

There is also a birding trail built by the NFHAS in memory of Cecil Best. It extends from the prairie and woodlands area (many newly planted saplings) and connects with Linear Trail near HWY 24. Come and enjoy this "prairie oasis" in our city — you'll be supporting non-violence, nature and your NFHAS. See you there!

Directions: Go east on Allen Road off of Tuttle Creek Blvd. This turns into Knox Lane and the Northeast Park entrance is on the right. We will gather near the picnic shelter near the parking lot and then walk around the Audubon's Restored Prairie (about one mile on a circular path).

Judy Roe, President

FIELD TRIP

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Mar. 11th 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.

NATURE WALK AT
NORTHEAST PARK
MARCH 20, 2006
5 P.M.

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CONTRIBUTORS:

PETE COHEN
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UPCOMING DATES:

MAR 11 BEGINNING BIRDING
MEET AT ACKERT/
DURLAND PARKING LOT,
KSU 8A.M. - 11 A.M.

MAR 20 RESTORED PRAIRIE WALK
NORTHEAST PARK
5 P.M.

MAR SANDHILL CRANE
MIGRATION
LOOK FOR THEM!

APR 8 BEGINNING BIRDING
MEET AT ACKERT/
DURLAND PARKING LOT,
KSU 8A.M. - 11 A.M.

APR 28-30 KANSAS BIRDING FESTIVAL
Wakefield, KS
www.kansasbirdingfestival.org

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NORTHEAST PARK PRAIRIE RESTORATION





"The bird is not, has never been, a harbinger of woe. It is only what it is, a feathered carrion eater, no less usefully and ingeniously engineered than other scavengers —hyena, crab, bone-cleaning ant. Its appearance means nothing more than bird at work, hastening to or actually performing its real job in the real world. And if it seems repulsive in its relish for putrefaction and its utter lack of fastidious table manners, blame the beholder. People are the squeamish ones, not vultures. Yet we share with them several causes (though only a human would denominate as a 'cause' an action that's automatic to the bird). One, for a happily growing number of my kind, is an interest in tidiness, in trying to provide good housekeeping for the planet. The other, the common bedrock urge, is to promote the well-being of our individual selves and so, secondarily, the good health of the species."

Janet Lembke, in "Dangerous Birds: A Naturalist's Aviary," Lyons and Burford, NY (1992).

Yes, March is the month for the return of the turkey vultures to Kansas. Even if they never win the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval (that definitely dates me!), their appearances a sure sign of spring and renewal. It is not to be regarded as a sign of bad luck or impending woe. When the swallows return to Capistrano, and the vultures return to Hinkley (OH), it is time for celebration of a new season for the birdwatcher and others interested in the health of the planet.

Ducks will also be returning to Kansas this month, and, if conditions are right, a trip to your local wetland should produce a good list of species. Elegant northern pintails, gaudy mallards, outrageous northern shovelers, and spectacular wood ducks lead the parade north, but others will soon follow. Redheads, canvasbacks, hooded mergansers, and the inappropriately-named ring-necked ducks are here now, but their numbers will increase later in the month, responding to an urgent inner voice that hurls them northward towards the thawing prairie potholes. Half a million lesser sandhill cranes, virtually the entire global population, will fly across Kansas to gather at the annual crane potlatch on the Platte River; their exuberant bugling can be heard daily in late February and early March if you live in the western two-thirds of the state. They will linger at the Platte for a few weeks, eating fine Nebraska corn (and a few snails, frogs, mice and other goodies) before continuing their journey towards the bleak marshlands where they will raise the next generation. Some of these cranes (an estimated 70,000) travel across the Bering Sea to nest in marshes in eastern Siberia, a twice-yearly journey of over 3400 miles. Make plans to take a weekend (or weekday) trip to Grand Island or Kearney to see this spectacular gathering of cranes, ducks, geese and birdwatchers; you won't regret it. Like the birds, you may then find yourself returning there next spring!

Other migrants that become quite obvious in March include the bald eagles. They often gather in great flocks locally, waiting for some mysterious signal or weather change before they too vanish back into Canada to

start building nests and raising eaglets. A good place to see these concentrations locally is the K-82 causeway and bridge across the upper end of Milford Reservoir; several years ago we counted over 100 eagles flying around, loafing on the ice, or sleeping in the trees there. By the end of March most of the eagles will be gone, and the birds soaring over the local reservoirs will be mostly turkey vultures.



Locally, our own red-winged blackbirds have started to stake out territories; by mid March their insistent "oak-a-lee" calls will be blasting from every appropriate fencepost, cattail, or shrub within sight of water. Male greater prairie chickens will commence booming and dancing at their ancient dance floors (leks) throughout the Flint Hills; the odd antics and other-worldly noises seem comical to humans but are apparently quite attractive to prairie chickens of the opposite sex. These mating rituals will continue through April and into May in most years. Last year, however, prairie chickens could still be heard on the booming grounds locally in late June.

A few early shorebirds will make tentative probes into the state in March, but the bulk of the shorebird migration will be in April. That gives you time to study your field guides and get ready for a trip to Cheyenne Bottoms or Quivira in April. You might find a few lesser yellowlegs early in the month, and greater yellowlegs and lesser (American) golden plovers later in the month. Killdeers (some of which stayed all winter) will become more obvious in March as well. The Holy Grail of North American shorebirding, the extremely endangered Eskimo curlew, also probably passes through the state in late March, and would be found in wet meadows (not in mudflats) if any happened to stop over this year. Any sighting or suspected sighting of this bird should be reported to the US Fish & Wildlife Service at (308)-381-5571. It is estimated that perhaps only a few dozen individuals of this once abundant species remain on earth, due to uncontrolled shooting in the last century and habitat degradation in this one.

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photo by Dave Rintoul



SKYLIGHT

PETE COHEN

The dawn was just becoming distinctly present. The view out our bedroom window might have been of smooth hard ice that was taking on a dark yet softly reflective bluish-gray color. It looked like ice across which ten or so snow-covered sleds might have recently traveled, leaving long criss-crossing paths of shaken-off snow that formed a large web-like pattern from one rim of the ice to another. Except it was not really levitating ice that we saw but a clear sky filled with the lingering contrails of jet aircraft. As the dawn strengthened the trails first seen grew wider and more veil-like, while a few sharply pointed, dense new trails were drawn across the old, claiming our attention though with not quite the same contrasting pale-on-dark as existed a few minutes before. At the same time the sky-wide pattern began being less varied, shifting to a soft corduroy affect with parallel strands as all the traffic overhead seemed now to be going only either east or west. We were distinctly awakening under a modern flyway.

Those apparitions, celestial decorations or graffiti, depending on one's outlook, might additionally be described, with a limber tongue, as ephemeral phenomena. It seems almost certain that some of those aircraft are part of some set and repetitive scheduling, but with weather and other factors even they are not always in the same place at the same time, nor are their exhausts always visible. I suspect it would take more patience and intellectual stamina than even the ancient sky-gazers possessed to be able to decipher from the timing or volume of that hodge-podge whether the day was in mid-week or week's end, or what ups and downs of economic activity the gods of finance and industry in their Olympic office mountains beyond the horizon might be brewing, or perhaps what the military might be up to. Yet observing the shifting patterns could be inspirational, leading to new versions of tic-tac-toe, or hop-scotch, or a new school of modern art.

One day, while glancing upward, I saw two contrails extending eastward, the one to the north almost directly so, the other somewhat northeasterly. As they proceeded silently above me they drew ever closer together, and closer, and closer, and as I dropped all other attention to focus on what I might be about to witness they came within less than a finger's width apart before the northeastern-aiming one suddenly bent to the southeast, and they gradually separated as they shrank away into the distance. A very near miss, I'll bet, and perhaps I should've phoned the FAA to report my view of it. But I let the occasion pass, poetically inspired to think, in paraphrase of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," that "the sky's a far and spacious place where aeroplanes should not embrace."

There will be little natural embracing in the sky this month. *StarDate* predicts Saturn will start the evening of the 9th near the Moon, then gradually move away, to return in a more friendly mood on the 10th. On the 18th the Moon will have Jupiter's company from late night on. Earlier, from the 4th through the 6th, Ruddy Mars and one of its (now dimmer) look-alikes, the star Aldebaran (Taurus's red eye), will move along within nodding distance of each other, with Mars a little to the upper right. They'll be closest on the 4th to the upper left of the Moon; on the 5th Mars will be cozy with the Moon; then on the 6th they'll both be below the Moon and bright, white Capella will be to the Moon's upper right. Mercury appears very briefly low in the western twilight on the 1st, while Venus continues to appear brilliantly but briefly in the pre-dawn east. Saturn, up high early in the evening, sets in the mid wee hours slightly trailing the Gemini twins. Meanwhile Orion and Canis Major with bright Sirius enclosed spend the evenings setting, and through the night the Big Dipper swings its cup up and over. On the 29th a total solar eclipse will occur across parts of Africa, Turkey, and central Asia, partially in Europe and western Asia. The vernal equinox occurs on the 20th at 12p26, establishing springtime in the heavens. What the weather does on Earth is a betting proposition.



On Valentine's Day, MJ and I indulged ourselves with delectable food in Topeka, but I don't remember the food anymore, just the conversation. We shared ideas about whatever details of life caught our fancy at the moment, including the possible indulgence of buying a shrub for our yard. Replete, we selected a shrub at a nearby nursery. It was a cultivar named "Sandra" of the species, *Hamamelis vernalis*.

It was unusually warm. Small insects were flying about these shrubs, some of which were in bloom, and I remember thinking ... I'll be able to examine insects like these at my leisure in my own yard some day while they sip nectar on warm days

in mid-winter. And there were a few seed capsules on the shrub I had bought.

The capsules were split open, having ejected their seeds. And although this witch hazel was not yet in flower, the yellow petals of new blossoms were beginning to peek out from the buds. As I wrote in the January newsletter, this species, vernal witch hazel, blooms later than common witch hazel, probably to avoid competing for limited numbers of insect pollinators. Yes, it would flower in late winter and perhaps the first few days of spring. It would give me hope for a much anticipated springtime, filled with appreciation of natural wonders and with love for life.

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THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT FEB. 17-20, 2006**CHECK THE WEBSITE FOR RESULTS: WWW.BIRDSOURCE.ORG/GBBC****TOTAL CHECKLISTS SUBMITTED: 50,537****TOTAL SPECIES OBSERVED: 577****TOTAL INDIVIDUAL BIRDS COUNTED: 6,724,182****"BOOMING" STILL TIME TO MAKE A RESERVATION!
GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN VIEWING ON THE KONZA**

Konza Prairie Biological Station (KPBS) is taking reservations for its Prairie Chicken Blind for March 17 to April 20, 2006. Viewing the courtship behavior of the Greater Prairie Chickens will be allowed with a guide assigned by KPBS with a charge of \$10.00/person. The blind will accommodate six to seven persons plus a guide. Smaller groups will share the blind with others. Groups with special agendas, such as photography, should make this clear at the time of reserving the blind. No flash equipment is allowed. Professional photographers require special permission from the Director and a site fee will be assessed.

Details on where to meet and times will be given when you make your reservation. In general, we meet at 4:30 a.m. before the time change at the beginning of April and at 5:00 a.m. during Daylight Savings Time in order to enter the blind before light. Each group should plan to remain in the blind until approximately 8:30 a.m. when the birds have finished courting. We will not disturb the lek before this time unless the birds have already flushed. Please wear wool or other soft fabric outer clothes. The newer high tech materials are very noisy and disrupt the experience of hearing the incredible call of the males.

For more information or to make a reservation, please call Dr. Valerie Wright, Environmental Educator/Naturalist, KPBS, or Annie Baker, Education Assistant at 785/587-0381 or e-mail Annie, bunny@ksu.edu.



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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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