



 Audubon | GREAT PLAINS

# ANNUAL REPORT

North Dakota | South Dakota | Nebraska

Front Cover: Great Blue Heron. Lorenzo Cassina/Audubon  
Photography Awards

Bobolink, female and male, Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center,  
Lancaster County, Nebraska. Brady Karg/Audubon

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## AUDUBON GREAT PLAINS

# LETTER FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This is Audubon's philosophy, that birds are both inspirational and indicators of change. Birds tell us the environment is changing, but who is listening to the birds? Who is taking action?

The Great Plains are a beautiful place. We are blessed with wide open spaces, forest-lined rivers, wetlands and lakes where birds thrive; but we cannot take what we have for granted. I have heard it said that we are always one generation away from loss. The Great Plains depends on land stewards to support the habitat for wildlife and people to prosper. In my travels around North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska over the last year I have met so many people that have chosen to be land stewards. Let me tell you more about two of these encounters.

Last spring, I was privileged to spend time at the remote Cheyenne River Ranch in Western South Dakota while they hosted the SD Grazing Lands Coalition for a Bison and Birds tour. We were greeted by Dan O'Brien, author of "Wild Idea: Buffalo and Family in a Difficult Land", owner of Wild Idea Buffalo Co., ACR Rancher, land steward, philosopher, and grandfather. Cheyenne River Ranch and Wild Idea Buffalo Co. are rooted in Dan's decades-long work restoring the endangered Peregrine Falcon to the Rocky Mountains in the 1970s and 80s, which served as a catalyst for the company.

Speaking on prairie grasses and bison ranching, he explained that when you pay attention to the world around you, you know when the ecosystem is out of balance. You know when you need to make changes. He commented, "There is something wrong if the birds aren't right."

Recently, I met with several community leaders in North Omaha to discuss possible urban habitat restorations that could also add food harvesting opportunities for local communities from Africa, and other countries. We visited a very small urban small park, less than half an acre that often has trash dumped and needs regular care. It was pointed out that right across the park, a couple purchased a house because they wanted to be near that green space and have since started to clean and care for the park. Once one person starts, others follow and start to care.

There are so many people with a passion and drive to care for our natural spaces. Small steps lead to larger impact and communities that care and take action.

Kristal Stoner at Wild Idea Buffalo Ranch in Western South Dakota.



Throughout the Great Plains, we are expanding programs that actively engage local communities in our conservation efforts. For instance, we're extending the Urban Woods and Prairies Initiative—already stewarding over 1,000 acres across more than 30 sites in the Dakotas—to communities along the Platte River, broadening its reach and impact. Additionally, our team has grown with new staff members joining us and several internal promotions that recognize the dedication and talent within our organization.

Stories like Dan's and those of community leaders in North Omaha are inspiring us to rethink conservation and agriculture, highlighting new ways to connect people and nature in meaningful, lasting ways.

Kristal Stoner  
*Executive Director*

# BOARD SPOTLIGHTS



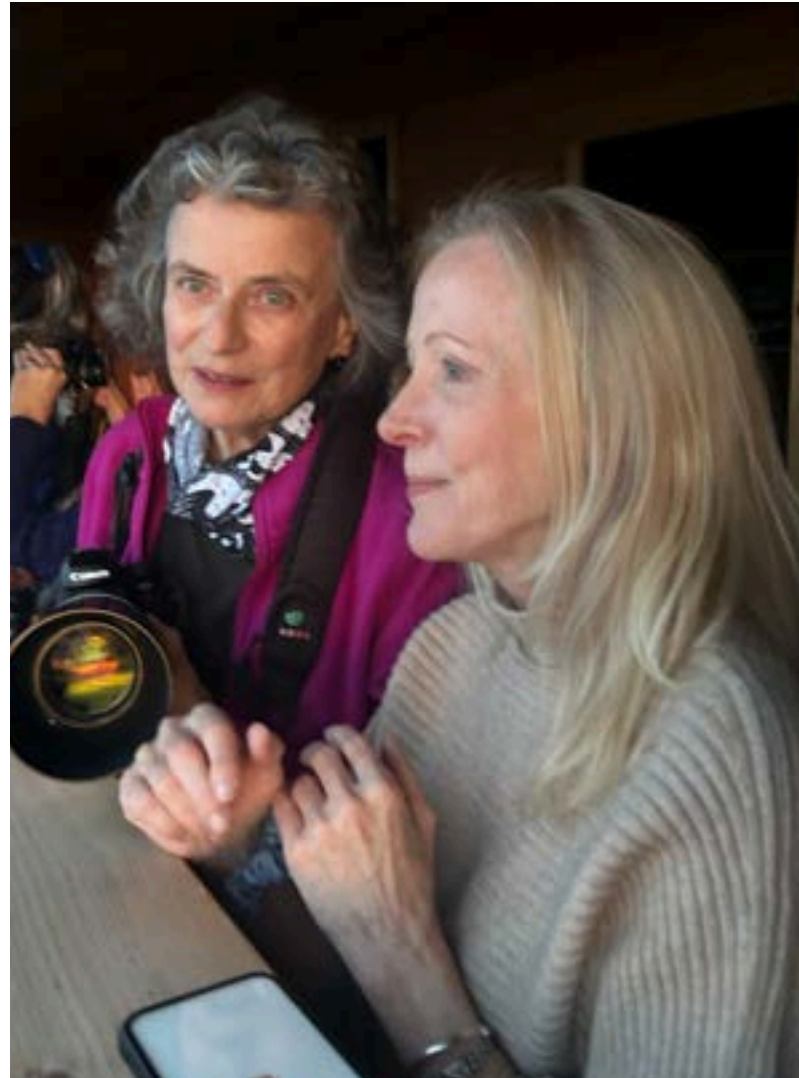
As we enter our second year of board organization since merging, our collaboration demonstrates the wisdom of having combined. Despite sharing the same flyway and similar bird habitats, we find that the people in each of our three states, North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska, have perfected unique strategies to benefit not only the birds and the habitats they use, but also the landowners who are stewards of the land and their respective communities. These differences in strategy inform us more broadly about new ways to benefit the Great Plains and make us stronger and more nimble.

Staff and volunteers are efficiently prioritizing diverse bird habitats across the Great Plains, including wetlands, riparian areas, and grasslands. Outreach to ranchers, farmers, and private and public landowners has permitted new ways to collaborate for the benefit of the birds, wildlife, and our communities.

After filling key vacancies and adapting to available resources, our education efforts on birds, habitat conservation, and natural resources have gained renewed momentum, fostering a deeper understanding of the natural world's importance for future generations. Our newly updated and renovated facilities, made possible through generous contributions, have greatly enriched the experience for both our visitors and our team.

We remain awestruck by the energetic work that is being accomplished by the Great Plains staff, the Audubon Great Plains board, stewardship boards, and other volunteers. Great synergies have resulted from our combined efforts. We urge you to witness it for yourself and join us in contributing your time, talent and treasure to Audubon of the Great Plains.

Dan Lindstrom and Liz Conmy  
*Co-Chairs, Audubon Great Plains Board*



Liz Conmy with Pamela Bergmann during the Great Plains Board Meeting viewing blind social at Rowe Sanctuary.

**“Our education focus also extends to discussions with our respective elected representatives and administrative agencies, allowing us to make the case for conservation when advocacy is needed.”**



# CHAPTER SPOTLIGHT

I've been enjoying birding with the FM Birders Audubon Chapter for over 5 years. We are fortunate to have a local Audubon office right in town with great regional programming. It has been wonderful seeing so many people engaging in local events.

We had a big turnout of members and friends marching in the FM PRIDE parade. The Let's Go Birding Together banner and shirts were perfect for the occasion and the connection to community was really moving.

I have attended several of the monthly Larks Women's Birding walks. We've been able to meet and explore several of our many parks and UWP locations. This group's smaller intimate setting is so welcoming and pressure free for amateur birders like me.

The Learn Like Leonardo Walk with Prairie Public challenged my sketching skills! It was a perspective changing event for me practicing using more of my senses and recording my observations in ways I haven't before.

The Mindful Birding & Yoga event I was able to attend was also a welcome challenge for me to slow my brain down and be present. It really did help to change my focus and tune in to the sounds around me.

The Birds and Brews Trivia event brought out some of our best birders in the area for a fun team trivia night that had the whole room laughing with some good-natured competitive ribbing.

Stephanie Kost  
*FM Audubon Chapter*



Stephanie Kost displaying her sketch at the Learn Like Leo Fargo event.  
Amanda Booher/Audubon

**“There are events for everyone to enjoy and all are always welcome!”**

Larks Women's Birding 1-Year Celebration. March 2024. Amanda Booher/Audubon





# DONOR SPOTLIGHT

THE DONALD AND LORENA MEIER FOUNDATION



If the names “Don and Lorie Meier” do not ring a bell immediately, their legacy of work almost certainly will. They produced the hit television series, Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom, which aired from 1963 until 1987.

While Don served as the creative visionary for the series, his wife Lorie ran the business end, handling lawyers, bankers, insurance companies, ad agencies, and all bookkeeping related to the production. Wild Kingdom took its viewers to 47 different countries to experience wildlife and wild places. In its peak years, 34 million Americans watched the show each Sunday on 224 US TV stations. Don, a Nebraska native, stated “conservation was the main issue throughout all the episodes.” In 1971, the Meiers formed a private foundation with the goal of supporting education, animal and wildlife preservation, and conservation.

Lorie and Don passed away in 2018 and 2019 respectively. They are survived by nieces and nephews, many of whom call Nebraska home. Today, those family members are focused on keeping their aunt and uncle’s legacy alive through grants from the foundation that fund work that would have undoubtedly excited Don and Lorie. In the summer of 2023, Audubon Great Plains announced that the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary had received a grant from The Donald and Lorena Meier Foundation to establish the Donald and Lorena Meier Native Plants Restoration Program.

The Native Plants Restoration Program is supplying native plants for urban landscapes and conservation restoration – ensuring beautiful habitat for birds and wildlife to enjoy for generations to come.



(1) Emmy’s Awarded for Wild Kingdom. (2) Don and Lorena Meier  
Photos Courtesy of the Meier Family.





Volunteers from Habitat for Humanity Planting. Amanda Hegg/Audubon

Rowe Sanctuary has designed and installed native playscapes and gardens at Bright Futures of Kearney, The Kenesaw United Childcare, and Stick Creek Kids Day Care in Woodriver. The Donald and Lorena Meier Native Plants Restoration Program has expanded this work to provide native local ecotype plants for prairie and wetland restorations. Amanda Hegg, Sr. Conservation Associate at Rowe, has also begun efforts to lower financial barriers surrounding the use of native plants in home landscaping for residents in central Nebraska by partnering with Habitat for Humanity and the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum. Knowing that cost represents just one barrier, Hegg also developed a resource titled “Guide to Native Plant Landscaping in Central Nebraska” that can be found online at [rowe.audubon.org/birds/plants-birds](http://rowe.audubon.org/birds/plants-birds). “Resources like this are so important if we expect to inspire conservation action in our communities” said Hegg.

A growing number of the seeds utilized for these installations are being harvested by Rowe staff and volunteers from Audubon’s own 2,950 acres under conservation. Part of the funding received from the foundation will be used to construct a greenhouse on Rowe Sanctuary which will also be named for Don and Lorie.

**“At Audubon, we often say ‘where birds thrive, people prosper,’” said Marcos Stoltzfus, Center Director for Rowe Sanctuary. “The Donald and Lorena Meier Native Plants Restoration Program is not only benefitting birds; I believe it will be good for Kearney and surrounding communities as well.”**

Foundation representative and Kearney resident Steve Homan is happy to see Don and Lorie’s name and legacy carried on through the program and the greenhouse. “Kearney is already known as the Sandhill Crane capital of the world,” Homan said, “but I hope people come to know Kearney as a bird-friendly community overall – not just along the Platte River, but in our yards, parks, and other greenspaces too.”

This program will expand on Audubon’s Urban Woods and Prairies Program in North Dakota, which has restored and replanted nearly 30 sites across the cities of Fargo, Moorhead, Bismarck, Grand Forks, and Minot, totaling over 1,000 acres.





Taste in the Tallgrass at Spring Creek Prairie. Amanda Booher/Audubon

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Volunteering for Spring Creek Prairie provides me a sense of belonging, collaboration, and activism. I am drawn to a love for nature and wildlife, wanting to help preserve and protect the unique ecosystems found there.

Co-chairing the Tastes in the Tallgrass event has been particularly fulfilling. I enjoy being innovative each year with our planning committee members. They always bring great ideas and energy. Our shared dedication to making this fundraising event a success ensures we can continue supporting the vital work of Spring Creek Prairie.

Volunteering is an opportunity to create a positive impact while immersing myself in the beauty of the prairie. The sense of community and connection with others at Spring Creek Prairie is also invaluable. Surrounding myself with like-minded individuals fosters support, encouragement, and friendships.

Bailey Feit  
*Spring Creek Prairie Volunteer*

**“Bailey is such a great volunteer – with her expertise involved in so many pieces and projects at Spring Creek Prairie. She helps coordinate learning experiences at Northeast High School with our Wildlife Explorers program, she is not only on our Board, but also our Education Task Force, and of course – has done so much as the Chair of our Tastes in the Tallgrass event over the past years, just to name a few!”**

- Jason St. Sauver  
*Senior Education Manager*





Ovenbird with recovered geolocator. All banding and marking is conducted under a federally authorized Bird Banding Permit issued by the USGS. Stephen Brenner/Audubon

# NEBRASKA WARBLER MIGRATION STUDY TAKES FLIGHT

By Stephen Brenner  
*Avian Biologist*

Bird migration remains one of the most exhilarating and mysterious phenomena of the natural world. Despite the fact that many species of birds throughout North America complete cross-continental journeys twice a year, we have barely scratched the surface when it comes to understanding the complexities of migration ecology.

Furthermore, migratory birds will spend most of the year away from their breeding areas, emphasizing the need to understand all aspects of a bird's life cycle to successfully implement more complete conservation strategies.

While the Great Plains is home to a wide variety of important grassland bird species, there are isolated pockets of naturally wooded habitat that host small numbers of migratory wood warblers during both the breeding season and on migration. The Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) is one such familiar species that breeds throughout much of eastern North America and overwinters in parts of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

Starting in the spring of 2023, researchers from Audubon Great Plains and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission began a project aimed at determining the migratory connectivity of warblers breeding at the edge of their range in atypical landscapes throughout the state of Nebraska. Tracking small birds that travel thousands of kilometers a year can be very challenging, but multiple new technologies are available for even the smallest species to aid research identifying important migratory pathways and wintering locations.

Researchers working with Ovenbirds in Nebraska used light-level geolocators, which are tiny tracking devices that collect sunrise and sunset times over an entire year. But in order to access this data, the same individual bird must be recaptured the following spring in order to recover the positional information stored onboard the devices. This remarkable technology has been used to successfully track multiple other warbler species in North America, including Ovenbirds in different parts of their breeding and wintering range.

In May of 2024, Nebraska researchers were able to recover four of these tracking devices, each containing the movements of different individual birds across the entire year. This data is in the beginning stages of analysis, but early returns indicate that birds breeding in the isolated Ponderosa Pine forests of north-central and northwestern Nebraska migrate to and overwinter in northwestern Mexico. While much of the data still needs to be explored, this is an exciting discovery connecting birds from one small corner of Nebraska to a completely different landscape in the Western Hemisphere. Identifying such hemispheric-scale connections between breeding, migratory and non-breeding locations facilitates conservation action and ecological understanding of migratory bird communities.

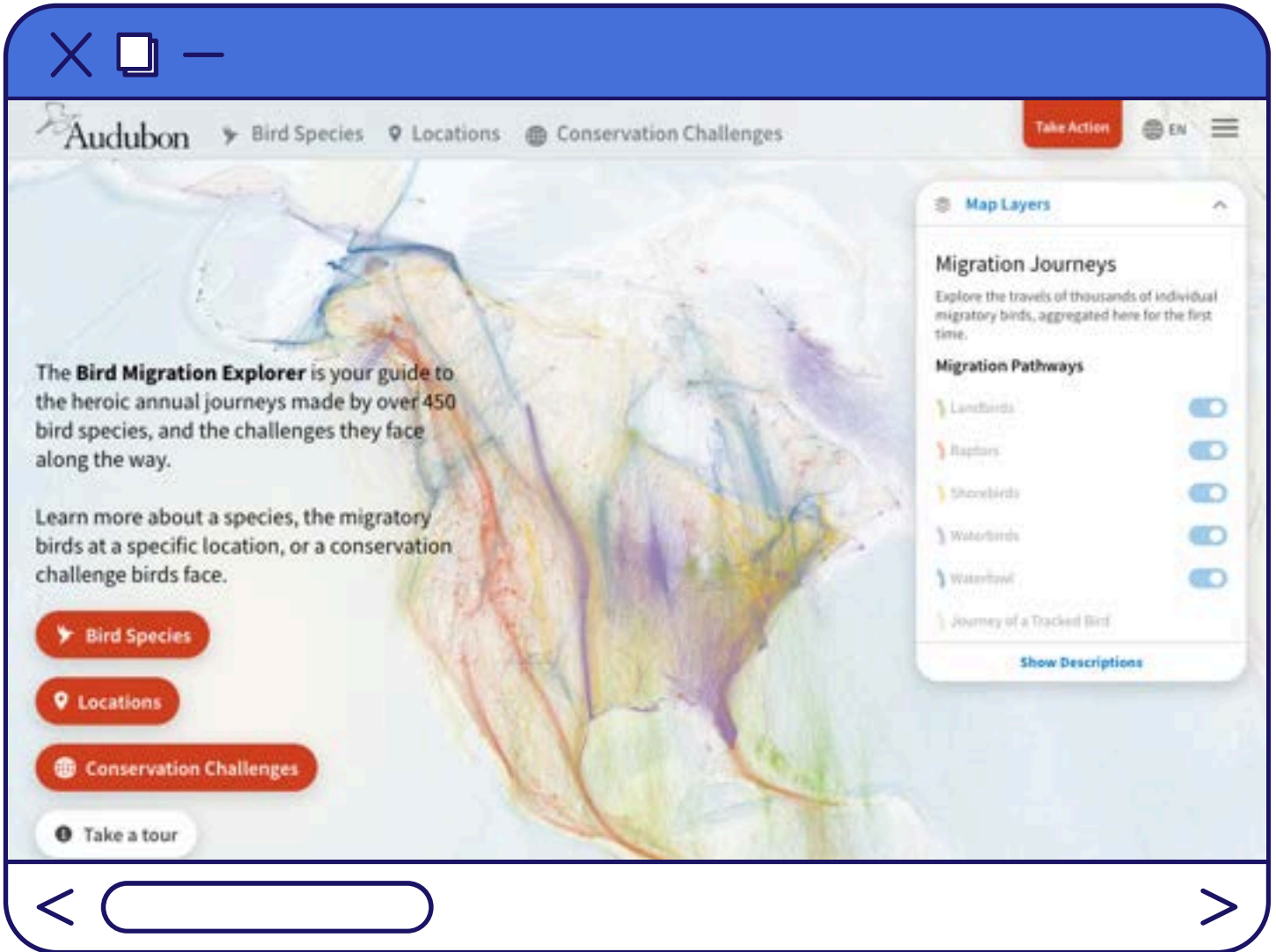
**More amazing bird migrations and continental connections can be explored in the Audubon Bird Migration Explorer.**

# AUDUBON'S WORK ACROSS THE HEMISPHERE

explorer.audubon.org

The Bird Migration Explorer is your guide to the heroic annual journeys made by over 450 bird species, and the challenges they face along the way.

Learn more about a species, the migratory birds at a specific location, or a conservation challenge birds face.



In shady woods, this odd warbler walks with deliberate steps on the forest floor, holding its short tail cocked up higher than its back. Although it is not especially shy, its choice of habitat often makes it hard to observe; its ringing chant of teacher, teacher is heard far more often than the bird is seen. The name 'Ovenbird' is a reference to the bird's nest, a domed structure with the entrance on the side, like an old-fashioned oven.





A hemispheric approach to bird conservation directs our work to the places where birds need us the most. It recognizes that the majority of bird species in the Americas migrate annually between Canada, the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Audubon's programs will be like the birds—unencumbered by political boundaries and seamlessly integrated across the Western Hemisphere.

## 1 We follow the science

Audubon's recent investments in our science leadership are paying dividends. Tools like the Migratory Bird Explorer and studies like Survival by Degrees enable Audubon to make science-based decisions about the places that matter most for birds.

## 2 We embrace nonpartisanship.

Across the Americas, the political landscape is increasingly divisive. Audubon—a known centrist brand—plays a unique role as a convener that engages decision makers and supporters from across the political spectrum. We put policy over politics.

## 3 We pair grassroots diplomacy with grassroots advocacy.

Audubon pairs grassroots diplomacy with a committed network of grassroots advocates. These critical supporters will influence decision makers in government and the private sector to achieve our 2028 milestones.

## 4 We inspire an expansive Audubon flock.

Our chapters and centers are hubs that connect individuals and communities to Audubon. Our lands and sanctuaries are living laboratories where we test and pilot innovative conservation projects. Our network spans the hemisphere.





“The buffalo have given me hope, and with hope anything is possible.”

Dan O'Brien  
*Buffalo for the Broken Heart*

South Dakota Grasslands Coalition's Annual Bird Tour at Cheyenne River Ranch. Jillian Jones/Cheyenne River Ranch.



## HABITAT CONSERVATION

# BIRDS OF FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

By Cody Grewing  
*Range Ecologist*

One of the simple pleasures of the Dakotas is being able to leave the pavement behind and detouring on the thousands of miles of backroads that our sparsely populated state has to offer. One of the more pleasant drives, in my opinion, is the 30 minutes of head clearing gravel roads it takes to arrive at the Cheyenne River Ranch in Southwest South Dakota. Depending on your chosen route, you'll wind through open rolling grasslands, buttes lined with white badlands clays, or the cottonwood strewn Cheyenne River that gives the ranch its namesake. This past June, dozens of avian enthusiasts from around the region made the pilgrimage for the South Dakota Grasslands Coalition's Annual Bird Tour hosted by the ranch.

The 36,000 acre ranch provide a variety of habitats for flora and fauna of the Great Plains. From west to east, heavily clayed mixed grass prairie bleeds into the sharp breaks of the Cheyenne River and transitions into the expansive Badlands on through the horizon. Looking to the west, the history filled Black Hills backdrops an already majestic setting. With the assistance of straw bale covered trailers, tour goers were treated to the sight of pronghorn, mule deer, prairie dogs, and an eclectic array of grassland obligate birds. Due to fortunate spring rains the prairies were green and vibrant with a flush of biennial yellow sweetclover that had taken advantage of the favorable spring conditions. Near the end of the field tour, the hay laden train was treated to a close vantage of the ranch's large bison herd that makes up much of the core values of the O'Brien and Jones family.

The following day, attendees were treated to presentations and activities from various local conservation professionals. An afternoon rain forced the group inside one of the ranch's animal handling facilities where Dan O'Brien told a captivating account of "The Last Ghost Dance," performed by the Sioux on a nearby butte, visible from the ranch.

Throughout the tour, a bird list was tallied. In total 38 species were recorded. Dan is an avid falconer and was instrumental in peregrine falcon recovery efforts. During a stop at the O'Brien home, Dan treated those interested to an up close in personal view of his pet falcons. To cap the event, the group was treated to lunch and dinner of Wild Idea grass-fed bison featuring some of Jill O'Brien's own recipes.

Those with an ecologist's mindset long to imagine landscapes filled with the sum of its parts. For those of grassland interests, a prairie isn't quite complete without those large woolly ungulates that once roamed far and wide across North America's middle parts. Dan O'Brien had that same dream when he started the ranch and the Wild Idea Buffalo Company in 1997. His career and training as a wildlife biologist inspired him to put those pieces back together as it had once been. Much of Dan and Jill O'Briens trials, tribulations, and stewardship efforts are captured in Dan's writings.

Today much of the management of the ranch has been entrusted to Dan and Jill's daughter Jillian and her husband Colton. The stewardship ethic that drives the management decisions of the ranch and the Wild Idea Buffalo Company has led to much adulation by the conservation community. The introductory use of mobile field harvest units on the Wild Idea brand is the gold standard of animal welfare practices in the meat industry. Animals never set foot in a trailer or feedlot. Audubon Great Plains is proud to be a partner with Dan, Jill, Jillian, and Colton through The Audubon Conservation Ranching Initiative, and are very excited for what the future brings.





# 56,493

## ACRES SUPPORTED ACROSS THE GREAT PLAINS



### HERE'S HOW:

- ✓ Audubon Conservation Ranching
- ✓ Conservation Forage Program
- ✓ Prairie Management Toolbox
- ✓ Sanctuary Management

### WHY IT MATTERS:

**Grassland bird populations collectively have declined by 53 percent\*.**  
**Historical grasslands once stretched from Alberta to Mexico.**  
**However, fewer than 40% of these grasslands remain.**

In North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska, Audubon partners with ranchers, producers, and local communities to manage and protect vital grasslands. We collaborate with landowners to develop habitat management plans that include haying, grazing infrastructure, woody encroachment management, seedings and plantings, and prescribed fires. Through our habitat conservation programs we aim to enhance the species biodiversity and provide refuge for many grassland bird species. Our combined efforts with landowners and partners support long-term conservation goals.

\*According to Cornell Lab - Bring Birds Back report



## DRIVING POLICY

# ADVOCACY FOR PLATTE RIVER STREAMFLOW

By Melissa Mosier

*Platte River Program Manager*



In 2024, Audubon Great Plains continued to advocate for the protection of streamflow and the benefits that a healthy Platte River ecosystem offers both humans and wildlife who live within this iconic riverscape. Audubon has been a consistent voice in opposition to a proposal to transfer Platte River streamflow to the neighboring Republican River Basin because of the numerous adverse impacts that would result from the loss of this water. Streamflow is the foundation of the Platte River ecosystem, and as water is diverted from the River's channel, all other ecological processes at play in this dynamic system become weakened.

The proposed "interbasin transfer" project that would remove water from the Platte River was first announced over five years ago. Throughout the slow review process headed-up by the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, Audubon has been a clear and consistent advocate, reminding Nebraskans that this water provides a number of benefits to our state. In May of this year, Audubon spoke on behalf of our almost 9,000 Nebraska supporters at a public hearing on the proposed transfer, highlighting the value of streamflow remaining in the Platte River and the potential consequences of its removal.

Approval of the interbasin transfer project would change the long-standing policies that Nebraska uses to ensure that water supplies are shared equitably. In Nebraska, decisions about how to allocate water are made based on the hydrology of the watershed that those beneficial uses occur in, rather than at the larger and more arbitrary scale of our state's geographic boundaries. This means that water management decisions are made locally, by those who have an intimate understanding of the environmental and social implications of giving water to one use over another.

In Nebraska's history, no transfer of surface water from one river basin to another has ever been approved as a means of dealing with a shortage in water supply.

If this proposed transfer of water out of the Platte River Basin is approved, it will set a new precedent for water management in Nebraska – one that puts future water supplies in the Platte and other watersheds throughout the state at risk for export to locations far from their origin.

Exporting streamflow native to the Platte River Basin could have further policy implications for the State of Nebraska. The Platte River Recovery and Implementation Program (PRRIP) is a cooperative agreement between the states of Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming, as well as the federal government and private water users along the Platte. The purpose of PRRIP is to restore and improve critical habitat in the central Platte River for federally endangered and threatened species, including the Whooping Crane and Piping Plover. The arrangement under PRRIP does not only improve habitat for endangered and threatened species, but also provides Nebraska and its water users with the security of remaining in compliance with the Endangered Species Act. Approval of the interbasin transfer could very well put Nebraska and its citizens in danger of non-compliance with federal law – placing a powerful and more critical eye on our current water uses.

Finally, Nebraska has put its own regulations in place in order to protect our water users by designating portions of the Platte River system as either "over-appropriated" or "fully appropriated". According to Nebraska state statute, this means that the current uses of water within the Platte River Basin are unsustainable over the long-term and that approving additional uses of Platte River water would not be in the public interest.

A decision on whether the proposed interbasin transfer project can move forward is not expected from the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources until at least 2025. In the meantime, Audubon will continue to work with partners and other advocates for the Platte River to ensure that the benefits of protecting streamflow in this Basin are recognized.





Aerial view of Rowe Sanctuary with Solar Panels. Cody Wagner/Audubon

## CLIMATE ACTION

# SOLAR POWER SUPPORTS HABITAT AT ROWE SANCTUARY



By Marcos Stoltzfus  
*Rowe Sanctuary Center Director*

We're thrilled to announce a bright new chapter for the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary: the installation of a 48,000 kWh solar array on our newly updated building expansion. A solar array is a collection of solar panels that work together to generate electricity. This project not only showcases our commitment to sustainability but also aligns with the vision laid out in Audubon's "Flight Plan," which emphasizes urgent action against climate change—an issue that profoundly impacts the birds we cherish.

Every year, Rowe Sanctuary hosts hundreds of thousands of Sandhill Cranes, creating a breathtaking spectacle as these magnificent birds gather during migration. Our new solar array is designed with these cranes in mind, demonstrating that renewable energy can coexist harmoniously with the ecosystems that support such wildlife. By reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions, we are taking a significant step toward ensuring a healthier habitat for the cranes and other avian species.

This array is one small contribution to a massive "Flight Plan" goal of 100 gigawatts of new renewable generation and transmission sited across the hemisphere.

By utilizing solar energy, we are not only preserving the natural beauty of Rowe Sanctuary but also benefitting the environment globally.

This initiative is also an opportunity for education. Visitors will have the chance to learn firsthand about the importance of renewable energy in combating climate change and protecting wildlife. Programming can teach why solar technology matters, and how it supports our mission to safeguard bird habitats. By incorporating the solar array into our messaging, we aim to inspire future generations to become passionate advocates for both birds and sustainable practices.

We're also excited about the ripple effects this project can create in our community. We hope to motivate local residents to explore solar solutions for their own homes and businesses. Our goal is to foster a culture of sustainability that empowers everyone to take meaningful action for the environment. We plan to host workshops and events at the new center, making the sanctuary not just a refuge for cranes but a hub for community engagement. As guests visit from across the country, our solar array will be on display, showcasing renewable energy to each person who enters our visitor center.

As we celebrate the launch of our solar array, we reaffirm our commitment to a sustainable future. Rowe Sanctuary is proud to lead by example, showcasing how we can embrace renewable energy while preserving the vital habitats for bird species. This solar initiative represents a significant stride toward reducing our environmental impact and ensuring a thriving ecosystem for future generations of both birds and people.

Join us on this exciting journey as we harness the power of the sun to make meaningful strides against climate change, ensuring that Rowe Sanctuary remains a sanctuary for wildlife and a source of inspiration for all who visit. Together, we can celebrate the beauty of our natural world while taking important steps to protect it.

Return of the Thunderbirds. Jason St. Sauver/Audubon



**“We can’t do this alone, and we don’t want to,” says Jason “the Birdnerd” St. Sauver, Sr. Education Manager. “We have to have voices from the community involved in all levels of our programming and projects. Starting, building, and fostering these long-term relationships takes time but can have huge benefits for all involved, especially the birds and the people who love them.”**

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES



By Jason St. Sauver  
*Senior Education Manager*

Audubon Great Plains, as part of the National Audubon Society, has some lofty and important goals for birds and people over the next several years. From “Bending the Bird Curve” and stopping the sharp decline of so many birds, especially grassland birds of the upper plains, to “Creating a diverse network of bird lovers working together to advance our shared vision,” our Community-Building milestone taken right from Audubon’s new strategic plan. But, how will we accomplish this? The answer is right there in the words: by building community relationships, trust, and partners.

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center (SCPAC) staff, board members, and volunteers have been hard at work over the past several years exploring, chatting, counting, writing, dancing, singing, and more all as a way to connect communities around southeast Nebraska. Not only to each other and their cultures, but to birds and the climate crisis affecting humans and feathered friends alike.

Over this past year, we continued to strengthen tribal partnerships and to involve and share more indigenous voices and knowledge from across Nebraska, SCPAC’s RETURN OF THE THUNDERBIRDS event was a huge success at the Lincoln Indian Center. Co-created by cultural consultant Renee Sans Souci, the event welcomed over 500 community members who enjoyed native dances, songs, and art, listened to indigenous artists and authors, and celebrated a cross-cultural event to mark not only the return of migratory birds in spring but the Thunder Beings that bring rain, thunder, and renewal.

The event featured native dancers and musicians sharing native knowledge and culture, collaborative art thanking the birds and the earth for what they give us, and time for community members to chat, listen, and learn from each other on a beautiful spring day.

Later in the year, the center partnered with Lincoln Parks & Recreation to host CLIMATE AND CULTURE CONVERSATIONS: Birds & Words. The event, our second in a series, focused on sharing stories and inspiration using poetry and prose from State Poet Matt Mason and indigenous author and birder, Thomas C. Gannon. The event aimed to strengthen relationships with local writers, donors, and volunteers and provide writing prompts for attendees to use bird inspiration to tell and share their stories of what they see happening to birds in our community and the effects of climate change.

And finally, SCPAC is honored to be a part of the “Walking in the Footsteps of Our Ancestors” project with the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska. This three-year multi-faceted project looks at land-based commemoration around Nebraska with the Otoe-Missouria nation and celebrates “Otoe-Missouria Day” every September 21 – this year held on the grounds at Spring Creek Prairie.

Building these and many more diverse relationships is imperative for birds, people, and our center. It not only strengthens our ties to our partners, friends, and families in the communities, but it strengthens all of our combined connections to each other, to birds, and the planet we share together.



Mindful Birding in Sioux Falls, SD. Amanda Booher/Audubon



# 10,214

## PARTICIPANTS IN OUTREACH EVENTS ACROSS THE REGION



# 138

## VOLUNTEERS

Across the Great Plains region we have continued to grow our outreach and build community through events such as the Larks Women’s Birding group, Crane Viewing Tours, volunteer opportunities, and field trips at our various nature sites. Many communities throughout the Great Plains have limited access to preserved nature spaces and few opportunities to learn about conservation. Our team ensures to make it a priority to reach underserved communities while also engaging broader audiences.

OUTREACH EVENTS FOCUSED ON

**35** EQUITY.  
DIVERSITY.  
INCLUSION.  
BELONGING.

**HERE’S HOW WE EXPAND OUR REACH:**

- ✓ Birding Events
- ✓ Educational Field Trips
- ✓ Workshops
- ✓ Partnerships
- ✓ More!



Monarch Tagging event. Amanda Booher/Audubon

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

# TAG YOU'RE IT! COMMUNITY SCIENCE MONARCH TAGGING



By Amanda Booher  
*Communications Manager*

Earlier this fall, Urban Plains Park, an Urban Woods and Prairie nature site in Fargo, North Dakota, came alive with the vibrant colors of monarch butterflies and a mosaic of plants. Urban Plains park is full of native blooms and grasses including Black-eyed Susan, Common Milkweed, Blazing Star, and Purple Coneflower, and grasses such as Brome Grass, Big Blue Stem, Little Blue Stem, and Indian Grass, providing an array of colors and areas to explore. Species seen at the park include the Canada Goose and Ring-billed Gull, this park serves as a well-maintained site for birds, wildlife, and people to enjoy. Hosted in partnership with the Fargo Parks District, United Prairie Foundation, and North Dakota State University, the Monarch Butterfly Tagging event was a memorable day for our community.

The tagging event was organized to raise awareness about monarch butterfly conservation and the importance of native plants. We achieve both by engaging our community in a citizen science project. Monarch populations have faced significant declines due to habitat loss, making community involvement, like this, crucial in understanding their migration patterns and more about them. With the joyful participation of more than 250 community members we were able to tag 16 monarch butterflies! Once caught the monarchs were successfully tagged by a certified handler. Each monarch receiving a small, harmless sticker on their wing with a unique identification code. These tags allow researchers to track the butterflies' migration routes if they get caught again at a new location.

Attendees ventured off the main trail to find sheltered areas where the monarchs were more likely to be found, looking closely for the bright purple of the blazing star flower known to be a popular source of nectar for the species. Once attendees "spooked" the butterflies from their hiding spots, participants equipped with nets and enthusiasm, gently placed the net over the monarch cinching the net closed to keep it safely in the net. Events like these serve as a great way for the community to play an active role in conservation.

While families waited for nets to and their turn to try and catch a monarch, they could fill out a coloring sheet, check out the playground, learn more about native plant species, or my personal favorite, enjoy an ice-cream treat from the ice cream truck that joined our event! Adding a creative touch to the event, a "make-and-take" craft station was set up for attendees of all ages. Participants had the opportunity to create their own transparent mosaic butterfly craft. This artistic activity was a hit, allowing children and adults to showcase their creative flair.

The partnership between the Fargo Parks District, United Prairie Foundation, and North Dakota State University ensured the event's success. Experts were on hand to explain the monarch's lifecycle, the challenges they face, and how citizens can help by planting milkweed and other pollinator-friendly plants.





## COMMUNITY BUILDING

# EMBRACING THE GREAT OUTDOORS

## FINDING THE OPPORTUNITY BEYOND THE CONSTRUCTION TAPE



By Amanda Hefner

*Education and Outreach Manager*

In my years of working in conservation, I've found that the best-laid plans can go astray even with the most thorough planning. And there will be times when one must embrace the proverb, "Necessity is the mother of invention" with vigor. With the new construction on the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary, it was crucial to adapt our sites for education programming, while also maintaining ecological principles, sustainable practices, and an appreciation of nature in unique circumstances.

Environmental education focuses frequently on empowerment and building a connection to nature. These tactics are key to having high engagement and developing a sense of understanding. Acquiring an emotional connection is also an important aspect of the pedagogy of environmental education. When planning programming after my first Crane Season, I wanted to focus on getting people out in the prairie for an immersive experiential learning experience and explore options to connect with others off site.

In April, I presented to the Women's Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (WTREX) program and give them an introduction to the ecosystems of Nebraska and some of the amazing species we protect, like the Sandhill Cranes. The WTREX program is an international program that focuses on creating a safe and educational experience for women and other diverse populations to learn and grow in fire management. This was the first time WTREX was held in Nebraska, and I'm so grateful that I was able to connect with 45 fire practitioners from across the United States and explain the value and importance of Nebraska ecosystems. Hopefully, I created some Crane Enthusiasts too.

In June, I also traveled to Chadron, NE to teach for a week at the 60th Range Camp, which is supported by the Society of Range Management. This year, 34 high school students spent a week studying range and native plants and learning range ecology at Chadron State College. It was an opportunity to educate the next generation of potential landowners in the state about the importance of grasslands and plant biodiversity.

Between May and June, our Education team hosted four field trips at Rowe Sanctuary, and an education booth at Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo's School Days. We tabled at several other events, including two PRIDE events, at local libraries, and even at a Migrations Concerto that included a musical piece based off the Sandhill Cranes Migration. Our onsite programming focused on teaching birding basics, understanding our connection to nature with walks through the prairie, and learning about bird adaptations.

Earlier this year I launched a Volunteer newsletter called Sandhills Snippets and a Volunteer Speaker Series, which brings in a monthly speaker about a topic that interests the volunteers. We recently hired our Volunteer Coordinator to lead and expand our volunteer program at Rowe Sanctuary.

While there were challenges, my time at Rowe Sanctuary has been so fulfilling. In conservation and ecology, we often talk about the adaptability of species. And I felt like this year, adaptability was the driving force for success. What a privilege it was to learn about Rowe Sanctuary through the eyes of those we were able to serve in our Education and Outreach programming.

BIRD REPORT

# GREAT HORNED OWL



Linda Scher/Audubon Photography Awards

## HABITAT

Coasts and Shorelines, Desert and Arid Habitats, Fields, Meadows, and Grasslands, Forests and Woodlands, Freshwater Wetlands, High Mountains, Shrublands, Savannas, and Thickets, Tundra and Boreal Habitats, Urban and Suburban Habitats.

## REGION

Alaska and The North, California, Eastern Canada, Florida, Great Lakes, Mid Atlantic, New England, Northwest, Plains, Rocky Mountains, Southeast, Southwest, Texas, Western Canada.

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Found almost throughout North America and much of South America is this big owl. Aggressive and powerful in its hunting (sometimes known by nicknames such as 'tiger owl'), it takes prey as varied as rabbits, hawks, snakes, and even skunks, and will even attack porcupines, often with fatal results for both prey and predator. Great Horned Owls begin nesting very early in the north, and their deep hoots may be heard rolling across the forest on mid-winter nights.

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## What is an owl's favorite type of book to cozy up?

“Whodunnit Mysteries”



Kristal Stoner (left), Sarah Hamilton Buxton (middle), Xerces Society Pollinator Conservation Specialist, and Jodie Provost (right) the North American Grouse Partnership's Communications Director at the Women in Conservation event at Brigham Sanctuary, Spiritwood, North Dakota.



## Partners

The National Audubon Society protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow. Audubon works throughout the Americas using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. State programs, nature centers, chapters, and partners give Audubon an unparalleled wingspan that reaches millions of people each year to inform, inspire, and unite diverse communities in conservation action.

From planting pollinator plots to prescribed burns, and everything in between. We are fueled by collaboration and inspired by like-minded agencies interested in working together for the benefit of nature. Together we are better.

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Contributions made to Rowe Sanctuary and Spring Creek Prairie stay with them.

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