



Audubon | NEBRASKA

2022 Summer Newsletter



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Working
Lands



Water



Climate



Bird-Friendly
Communities

Who We Are

Audubon Nebraska operates statewide from an office in Omaha and through two nature centers and wildlife sanctuaries, Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center and Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary, to protect birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow.

Tastes in the Tallgrass

Sunday, Sept. 18, 2022 • 4:00 – 7:00 pm
Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center

This popular fundraiser is held each September as the prairie matures and the beautiful gold and yellow colors blanket the fall landscape. Guests enjoy mingling with friends and listening to swinging live music, and then sit down to a catered dinner (appetizers, fine wines, and a delicious buffet with dessert) served outdoors amid the enchanting birdsong and lovely fall breezes. Exciting silent and live auctions offering special experiences, art, and more will take place to support Spring Creek Prairie's conservation and education programs.



Registration information is available on SCPAC's website. Questions to scp@audubon.org; (402) 797-2301.

A River Runs Through It

Saturday, Sept. 24, 2022 • 5:00 – 8:00 pm • Rowe Sanctuary

Enjoy a gourmet, sustainable meal created by local chefs served outdoors along with fine wine and brews. New this year will be two conservation-inspired cocktails by mixologist Amanda Hegg. Combining this meal with stunning sunset views of the Platte River makes for an unforgettable evening at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. After dinner, participate in a lively benefit auction featuring art and experiences to benefit Rowe's education and conservation efforts.

Tickets are available at rowe.audubon.org/events or call (308) 468-5282.



Director's Corner

by Kristal Stoner

Summer is upon us, and our birds are busy with chicks! Our grassland birds have returned and settled in across Nebraska and our sky, prairies, rivers, and woodlands with their melodic songs. Birds aren't the only busy ones. As you look through our newsletter, you will see that with new staff additions, our reach stretches across the state from Scottsbluff with Stephen Brenner to Cat Henning in Omaha. In North Platte, we are increasing our focus with an approach that engages the community while investing in scientific studies to understand future sustainable possibilities.

At Rowe Sanctuary and Spring Creek Prairie, our spring season was finally busy again! As always, the Sandhill Cranes put on a magnificent show, despite some challenging weather, and for the first time in three years we were able to guide guests to the barely used new Discovery Stations.

Spring Creek Prairie continues to see large numbers of new explorers enjoying our recently upgraded trails, and several new programs have new audiences asking, "What is a Big B.A.D. Birdhouse anyway?" Staff members are excited about the new upgrades to the visitor center. Accessibility has been improved with new automatic door openers and light sensors in the bathrooms and gift shop. More upgrades are planned in the next few months.

Our growth is exciting and is so urgently important. With birds and our environment needing care and stewardship, I am so proud of our team's work and the positive impact we are making across Nebraska.

New Faces of Audubon

● Rowe Sanctuary

● State Office



Stephen Brenner – Avian Biologist

Stephen joins the team at Audubon Nebraska as an avian biologist stationed in the panhandle of Nebraska. His work will focus on a variety of grassland and pine-forest birds of conservation concern with limited breeding ranges in the state.

Stephen comes to Audubon after three years with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as a nongame bird biologist. Before his time in Nebraska, Stephen worked on many different avian research projects in a variety of locations, with highlights from northern Canada, Malaysia, and the southwestern U.S. He completed his graduate work at the University in Rhode Island in 2018 studying American Woodcock habitat selection and their response to management. While

woodcock will always hold a special place in his heart, Steve enjoys studying any and all birds, and in his free time can usually be found bird watching or trying to photograph them. Born in Buffalo, New York (and despite growing up in a largely forested landscape), Steve has quickly taken to the expansive open spaces and incredible beauty and ecological diversity found across the state of Nebraska.



Cat Henning – Development Coordinator

Cat is the new development coordinator for Audubon Nebraska. In this new role, Cat will be managing our donor database and supporting development work in Nebraska.

She grew up in Minnesota and moved to Omaha in 2015. She holds a bachelor's degree from Creighton University in communication studies and cultural anthropology. She is also active with the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha where she serves on the board as Co-Director of Voter Services. Cat also enjoys disc-related hobbies, such as disc golf and ultimate frisbee. She married her partner this past October, and moved into a new house with a Lab (Betty) and Corgi (Todd). Cat is looking forward to learning all about the great variety of birds found in the state, and discovering the natural wonders of both Spring Creek Prairie and Rowe Sanctuary.



Catherine Worley – Senior Coordinator, Center Operations

Catherine moved into the position of Senior Coordinator-Center Operations at Rowe Sanctuary in November 2021. In her new role, she manages the volunteer program, gift shop, and facilities rentals, and assists with on-site development events. Prior to that, she was the 2021 Marian Langan Conservation Young Leader at Rowe, getting to learn the ins and outs of boots-on-the-ground conservation in Nebraska.

Catherine grew up in Houston, Texas, and has a B.S. in biology with a concentration in ecology & evolution from Trinity University. Since graduating, she has had experience in prairie restoration, vegetation, and pollinator monitoring from working with the Texas Conservation Corps and Monarch Joint Venture. She also has a strong background of volunteerism through Girl Scouts, Rotary Club, Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity, and H.O.P.E., Trinity's houselessness service organization. She first became interested in birding through her grandmother, an avid birder, and has enjoyed sharing this love for birds with her, even adding her sightings to the very same checklist her grandmother used decades prior. Catherine's excited to be engaging volunteers and visitors in Rowe's conservation mission and looks forward to continuing to learn from the experiences of staff and volunteers across the Audubon network.



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New Research from Audubon Nebraska

Audubon Nebraska is spearheading some exciting new avian research projects across the state, with one project in the eastern half of Nebraska nearing completion and multiple research projects in the western panhandle beginning in earnest.

Since March 2021, avian biologist Stephen Brenner along with biologists from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission have been capturing and banding American Woodcocks during their spring migration in Nebraska.



After the birds' basic measurements and band info were recorded, each bird received a satellite GPS transmitter before being released. These transmitters are tiny backpack-like devices capable of providing exact locations for each individual bird on a near daily or weekly basis, without



the need to recapture the animal or retrieve the tag. This is particularly valuable when studying migratory species, as woodcock captured in Nebraska during spring can end up in Manitoba within a few days if conditions are right.

Five birds were tagged in the spring of 2021, with an additional 10 tagged in 2022. Most of the birds spent anywhere from two weeks to a month in the state before continuing north for the summer, settling mainly in northwestern Minnesota and southern Canada. A few of the woodcock have remained in Nebraska all summer, and these data are extremely valuable to researchers. In Nebraska, woodcock habitat use and migratory movements are largely a mystery, especially in what would be considered atypical woodcock habitat at the very western edge of their range. The behaviors of a 'forest obligate' shorebird in a prairie state provide some fantastic opportunities to study potential range expansion and other unknown aspects of woodcock biology during multiple points of their life cycle. This work has already produced some exciting results, including documenting some incredible long-distance migrations for this species!

In the western third of the state, new research has just begun on a variety of Nebraska species that breed only in the panhandle. Much of this work will focus on the conservation of the Thick-billed Longspur, a state-threatened songbird of short-grass prairies. There are additional long-term monitoring projects underway for avian communities that breed in the ponderosa pine forests of Nebraska's Pine Ridge and Wildcat Hills. The focus of this work will be refining the distribution, status, and population viability of various western species whose ranges are naturally limited in the state. Most of these species have received minimal study given their relatively remote locations, but hopefully the ensuing research in this beautiful area will help inform conservationists, land managers, and bird enthusiasts alike.





Audubon's Focus on the North Platte River

Lying within Lake McConaughy is a “bucket” of water that is set aside for environmental uses. This bucket fills every year before being released to boost the water flowing in the Platte River on its eastward journey across Nebraska. When the spigot on this bucket is opened, water spills into the North Platte River at the right time and amount to restore downstream habitat for endangered and threatened species like the Whooping Crane and Piping Plover, as well as other key species like the Sandhill Crane.

But, in the stretch of the North Platte River that runs past the City of North Platte, sediment and invasive plants have been piling up in the river’s channel and forming a chokepoint where less and less water can pass by without bringing flooding concerns along with it. The obstacle preventing us in getting sufficient flows down the North Platte River is not necessarily how much water is waiting in the bucket, but instead it’s the narrowing of the path through which the water passes after it is released.

To explore how we might increase the North Platte River’s ability to carry larger flows while also protecting the safety and well-being the North Platte community, Audubon Nebraska and partners have embarked on two studies of the North Platte chokepoint – one that will focus on the technical side of the problem, and another that will focus on its social impacts. The two studies will continue through 2022; the information gathered will be used to identify solutions that will ultimately provide long-term resiliency for both the community and the surrounding ecosystem.

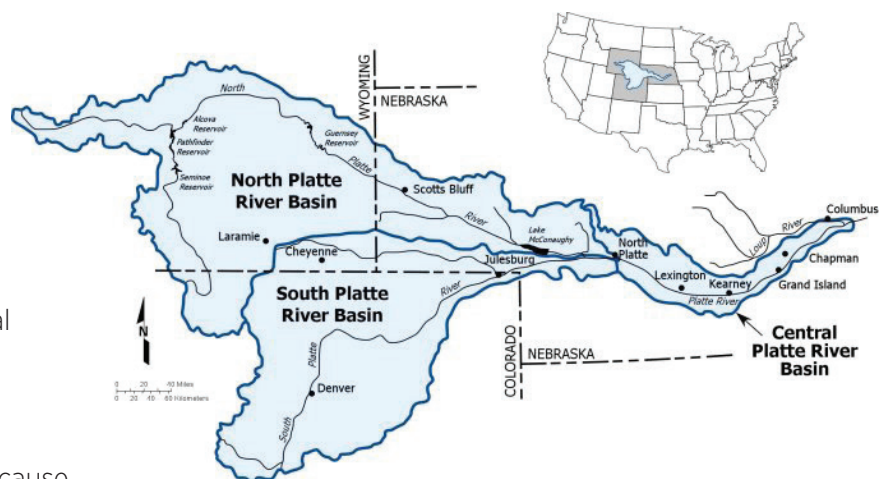


The Perkins County Canal and the South Platte River Ecosystem

In early January 2022, the State of Nebraska announced that it would reinstate a 100-year-old irrigation canal project along the South Platte River where it crosses the Nebraska/Colorado state line. What is referred to as the Perkins County Canal Project would be built in order to safeguard flows crossing into Nebraska during the winter months as required under the 1923 South Platte River Compact. These flows are in addition to the Compact-required flows that Colorado is already sending across during the summer irrigation season.

Preserving streamflow for the central Platte River and the species that depend on it will always be a top priority for Audubon, but we also have to remember that the rest of the 88,000 square miles that the Platte Basin drains, including the South Platte River, have critical ecological value. On both sides of the Nebraska/Colorado state line, the Platte River connects the ecosystems that birds and other wildlife depend on, while also supporting our local agricultural economies and enhancing quality of life for community members.

Because Audubon is dedicated to its mission to protect the whole Platte River ecosystem, and because there are still so many crucial unknowns that must be negotiated between the states, Audubon Nebraska took a neutral stance on the Perkins County Canal Project Act earlier this spring. As the states share information and discuss the long-term impacts of the proposed canal, Audubon will continue to advocate for protection of the ecological integrity of the South Platte River and foster a spirit of cooperation among partners so that the final outcome provides multiple benefits that will meet the needs of the diverse array of interests within the Basin.





Audubon

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center



What's Good for the Herd is Good for the Bird: Cattle Ranching and Bird Conservation

Nebraska's wide open spaces have allowed the state's ranchers to operate successful cattle ranches statewide. Not only are the ranchers doing their part to feed the world, the cattle are beneficial to the landscape, the environment, and help drive bird conservation.

Historically, massive herds of bison roamed free across the state. In modern times, cattle have replaced bison as settlement spread over the Great Plains. While cows and bison do not feed on plants in the same manner, cattle still mimic the actions of bison by feeding on plants and disturbing the landscape. This disturbance is not negative; it opens up areas of bare soil that can allow seeds from nearby plants to sprout, thus diversifying the plant landscape.

Cattle are not the only changes that have been seen in this region. The

prairie landscape has been drastically altered through human development and farming operations. As such, grassland bird populations that depend on large expanses of prairie have taken a heavy hit. According to Audubon's North American Grasslands and Birds Report, total populations of grassland species have declined more than 40 percent with some species hovering toward "the brink of extinction."

The desire to reverse the negative population trends for prairie birds, and to bolster Nebraska's ranching communities, is where Audubon's Conservation Ranching program (ACR) comes in. At its heart is the idea that ranching and bird conservation can co-exist. Audubon is teaming up with local ranchers to offer them incentives for good grassland stewardship through a certification label on beef products. This gives

consumers, for the first time, the ability to contribute to grassland conservation efforts by selectively purchasing beef from Audubon-certified farms and ranches. The Audubon certification seal brings a broad market appeal that enhances demand by consumers that want options for beef that is sustainably raised and benefits wildlife habitat.

By choosing beef products from Audubon-certified ranches, consumers can contribute to the expansion of livestock management practices that are better for your health, better for cattle, and better for the environment. When expanded to millions of acres, this program will support more sustainable ranching livelihoods, resulting in more grassland birds, cleaner streams, healthier soils, more pollinators for plants, and more carbon stored in plants and soil.

More information on Audubon's Conservation Ranching program can be found at <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/ranching>.

Protecting the Denton Hills Landscape

Spring Creek Prairie has partnered with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Center for Resilience in Agricultural Working Landscapes (RAWL) over the past two years. The partnership is part of our continued focus of working with private landowners to better understand opportunities and challenges

5 facing the Denton Hills landscape

surrounding SCPAC. ("Denton Hills" refers to the area in and around Spring Creek Prairie and the town of Denton that encompasses a circle measuring roughly 10-15 miles in diameter consisting of similar habitats and topography.)

Daniel Morales, UNL RAWL Master's Candidate, developed a survey that

was sent to a variety of landowners (acreage owners, large agricultural producers, et. al.) in the Denton Hills. The survey focused on individuals' connection to their land and the wider landscape, as well as their thoughts on both threats to the landscape and opportunities for conservation and preservation. The survey was sent last winter and results are being compiled.



New Birdhouse Project Takes Wing

Creating bird-friendly communities is a priority for Audubon across the U.S. So when Chad Kruse, architect at Sinclair Hille and current President of the American Institute of Architects Lincoln (AIA-Lincoln), came to our Birdnerd, Jason, with the idea of a community-wide project focused on design and building of birdhouses, Jason jumped at the chance.

“This was such a great collaboration and idea from the start,” said St. Sauver, senior education manager at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center. “The project would not only let us reach hundreds of people of all ages across southeast Nebraska, but allow us to create important bird habitat in suburban areas.” The project became the Big B.A.D. (Build & Design) Birdhouse Project and for six months, a team of local partners (AIA-Lincoln, Lincoln Community Learning Centers, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, Nebraska History Museum, Art Bus LNK, and The Wild Bird Habitat Store) planned and created a birdhouse design and building contest for all ages and abilities. Architects helped students with design, Dave Titterington at the Wild Bird Habitat Store donated hundreds of birdhouse kits, and Jason and the team held twelve community build events from January through March. The project brought communities together in multi-generational “build parties” to not only build, but to learn more about Nebraska’s birds, the importance of design, and the fun of conversation with neighbors and friends.



By April 1, more than 300 birdhouses had been made, many from kits, but others from clay, glass, paper, and lots of reclaimed and recycled materials. Nearly 70 were entered in the competition, judged, and displayed for two weeks at four locations around Lincoln. Prizes were given out in two categories (Creative Art & Design and Form & Function) for six different age groups or teams. And to top it all off, the contest ended with a celebration and fundraising auction at the Nebraska History Museum on the first Friday in May (Bird Month in Nebraska) for over 100 winners, families, and new bird friends in Lincoln.



Following the survey mailing, UNL RAWL in partnership with SCPAC hosted two workshops with a small group of landowners within the Denton Hills. The goal of the workshop was for participants to discuss and learn from one another about natural resource and agricultural management, and to find cooperative efforts to maintain and improve the

working landscape of the Denton Hills for future generations. We asked participants to answer these questions: 1) What gives the landscape its unique character? 2) What features of the landscape are important to you and what future do we want to see for this area? 3) What are the current and future threats to your and other landowners’ livelihoods?

Currently, Daniel is compiling the results of the workshops into “scenario maps and descriptions” showing what changes in the landscape could look like at several time scales. We look forward to sharing the results and for continued discussions with our neighbors in the area. Stay tuned for information on another gathering at SCPAC later this year.



Audubon

Iain Nicolson
Audubon Center
at Rowe Sanctuary



Crane Season 2022

It was amazing for Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary to once again share this spectacular Sandhill Crane migration with people from all over the world. In planning the 2022 season, staff looked at all of the strategies needed to keep not only our volunteers, staff, and guests safe from COVID, but also our community. Masks were required in all buildings at Rowe Sanctuary as well as in the blinds. The numbers of people on each tour was reduced and the normal group orientation was revised to keep numbers small and get everyone outside as soon as possible. In the end, none of the staff or volunteers got sick the entire season and overall there was a positive response to all of the precautions.

The season shaped up quickly with large numbers of cranes here by early March and high numbers remaining until after April 11. March weather came in like a lion this year and basically roared the whole time. There were many days with extreme winds over 50 mph but at least the road stayed dry and we had only one morning with snow.

People came from 52 countries and 49 states. We will have to work harder on Alabama as they were our only hold out. Overall visitors numbered around 30,000 and the tours were full the entire season. We also had a larger increase in people taking the crane behavior classes.



Two of Rowe's supporters sponsored crane tours for the following groups with which Rowe has started working: Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Out Nebraska, the Multi-Cultural Coalition in Grand Island and the board from Stick Creek Kids Daycare in Wood River.

Rowe sends a big thank you to those people sponsoring these groups and getting them engaged

in protecting the Platte River. We also thank all our supporters that help us keep this resource for the cranes. Each year when the cranes return, Rowe staff see the results of all the hard work that you support and make possible. As thousands of cranes descend on the river each evening, we all know that you are creating a future for America's Greatest Migration.

Celebrating Cranes and Conservation

On Thursday, April 7, Rowe Sanctuary held a benefit at its Iain Nicolson Audubon Center to raise crucial funds to support bird conservation on the Platte River. More than 100 guests filled the visitor center for cocktails and delicious hors d'oeuvres provided by Country Catering from Litchfield, Neb. Center Director

Bill Taddicken welcomed guests for Rowe Sanctuary's first in-person fundraiser since the onset of COVID-19. He reflected on how the pandemic impacted Rowe, and the ways in which supporters banded together to ensure the conservation work was able to continue, even if visitors couldn't be there in person.

Audubon Nebraska Executive Director Kristal Stoner shared information on our work to protect the Platte River, and Central and Mississippi Flyway Vice President Suz Dixon talked about the value of Rowe Sanctuary within the Audubon network. Guests then headed outdoors to the state-of-the-art Discovery Station blinds to experience one of Nebraska's iconic



A New Bird Tracking Tool Takes Flight at Rowe

This spring, a Lesser Yellowlegs wearing a tiny backpack visited Rowe Sanctuary, signaling a three-day stopover point during its annual migration between Colombia and the boreal region of Canada. While we all may take joy in envisioning this slender, long-legged shorebird on a trip with a backpack, perhaps it is important to note that the backpack serves one very important purpose: to document this bird's 4,000-mile migratory journey. This is possible thanks to recent advances in wildlife tracking technology that allow researchers to remotely monitor bird movements on their breeding grounds,



migratory routes, and wintering grounds in much greater detail than ever before. Today, researchers use a wide range of methods to track birds such as banding, isotope analysis, genetic markers, and transmitting devices such as radio transmitters, radar, and satellite tracking.

At Rowe Sanctuary, a Motus station was recently installed by Bird Conservancy of the Rockies as part of a larger network of towers throughout the Western Hemisphere. These towers help researchers better understand the short- and long-distance movements of birds and other animals fitted with small nanotag radio transmitter backpacks. The magic behind this technology is the use of radio telemetry signals and receivers to pick up signals from tagged animals such as birds, bats, butterflies, and even dragonflies

as they fly within close proximity of the towers. Information such as the tag ID number is then uploaded to an online database that lists locations that each tagged individual travels to; this database is available to researchers and conservation organizations. Data from Motus also contributes to Audubon's Migratory Bird Initiative and helps us understand what birds need throughout their full life cycle and identify the greatest threats to birds throughout their range. This allows us to maximize our conservation efforts and funds to support species such as the Lesser Yellowlegs during their remarkable migratory journey.

Check out our Motus tag detections at Rowe Sanctuary: <https://motus.org/data/receiverDeploymentDetections?id=8166>



sunsets and the awe-inspiring sight of thousands of Sandhill Cranes coming in to roost overnight on the Platte River.

Thank you to the event sponsors: Carol and Dan Lindstrom; Oldfather Financial Services; Prairie Chicken Dance Tours; Tye & Rowling, PC, LLO; Deb Wingfield; Greg and Dina Wingfield; and the many guests who made the night so enjoyable.





Tribal Relationships Flourish with “Return of the Thunderbirds”

On a breezy April morning in Lincoln, a new event began among Audubon Nebraska and many tribal partners to celebrate not only the spring and return of migratory birds, but a much longer celebration of the return of the spring thunderstorms, known in many Upper Plains first nations as the Thunders, Thunder Beings, or Thunderbirds.

“Return of the Thunderbirds” was a collaborative community event to share cross-cultural knowledge of this important time of year for birds, people, and the planet. It was also designed to share knowledge of indigenous science and arts, dance and culture, and celebrate the ability to come together as a community (after the restrictions of COVID 19) to learn, laugh, and enjoy the renewal of spring. Nearly 150 persons of all ages and backgrounds enjoyed the event.

The program was created by Renee Sans Souci, cultural consultant and educator; and Jason St. Sauver, senior education manager at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, and hosted on the sacred grounds at the Indian Center, Inc. The four-hour festival was filled with family-friendly activities, art and food vendors, and performances by native and local musicians, dancers, and artists. It is part of Audubon Nebraska’s ongoing work with tribal partners in eastern Nebraska focused on relationship-building; sharing of cross-cultural knowledge; and equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives.

Thank you to the following corporate sponsors:

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

Make a Cash or Online Donation

Money orders or checks can be mailed to centers directly or you can donate online.

Sign up for Audubon Nebraska's eNews

By signing up for our eNews, you will receive Audubon Nebraska and center updates plus so much more!

Volunteer

Call or email either center for information on volunteering.

Contribute to Science

Audubon offers opportunities to get involved in community science projects. Read more at audubon.org/science.

Audubon Centers & State Office

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Photo Credits

Front Cover

Sedge Wren. Photo: Kathryn Cubert / Audubon Photography Awards.

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Spotted Towhee. Photo: Mick Thompson / Audubon.

Tastes in the Tallgrass. Photo: Nick Manes.

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American Woodcock with GPS transmitter. Photo: Joel Jorgensen / Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Spring migratory tracks of American woodcock tagged in 2021. Map: Stephen Brenner / Audubon.

The Pine Ridge in northwestern Nebraska. Photo: Stephen Brenner / Audubon Nebraska.

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Side channel of the North Platte River near North Platte, Neb. Photo: Melissa Mosier / Audubon Nebraska.

Platte River Basin. Map: University of Nebraska, National Research Traineeship Program.

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Cows. Photo: Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center.

Birdhouse display at Nebraska History Museum. Photo: Jason St. Sauver / Audubon Nebraska.

Pages 7-8

MOTUS tower. Photo: Amanda Hegg / Audubon Nebraska.

Lesser Yellowlegs. Photo: Steven Biegler / Audubon Photography Awards.

Viewing Blinds at Rowe Sanctuary. Photo: Luke Franke / National Audubon Society.

Crane Celebration. Photo: Lizzy Gilbert / Audubon Nebraska.

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Return of the Thunderbirds. Photo: Jason St. Sauver / Audubon Nebraska.

Back Cover

Red-winged Blackbird. Photo: Nick Shearman / Audubon Photography Awards.

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