

Prairie Rapids Audubon Society

General Meeting Minutes

April 12, 2022

Submitted by Kris Rash

People from one-tenth of the states in this country were represented as 38 viewers tuned in with 29 devices for the April 12, 2022 meeting of the Prairie Rapids Audubon Society. That will be hard to match next month as we will be gathering in person for the first time in more than two years at First Presbyterian Church in Cedar Falls.

President Tom Schilke called our meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. with this good news. Our presenter in May will be Tom Milligan with his one man play portraying Ding Darling. (I've had the privilege of seeing this and it is well worth your time.) To accommodate the performance the board voted to purchase a wireless microphone which will also benefit future speakers.

There will **NOT** be our usual potluck meal this May so save your favorite recipe for another time. Plan to hang around after the meeting for socializing and some treats provided by the board.

Treasurer, Francis Moore, reported \$10,282.91 in our bank account. Grants in the amount of \$5,200 have been paid out to projects in our six-county service area. Details will follow in a future Red Tail and on the web site. The board also voted to contribute \$100 to the Iowa Young Birders. Their group recently held a field trip at Sweet Marsh on International Crane Count Day, April 6th. The bird feed fund has shrunk to \$5.13. The feeders at George Wyth State Park will cease to be filled after June 1st for a summer break. The Cedar Falls Visitors Center and Cedar Valley Hospice Home feeders will continue to be filled year-round.

Plans for Motus towers in Black Hawk, Bremer and Hardin counties have been put in place. Getting some necessary parts seems to be an issue here, as well. We will keep you informed with their progress.

Wednesday Morning Birding has resumed although the weather has been slow to respond to spring's arrival. Plans for each week will be listed on the web site gopras.org or sent out as an email should a cancellation or change need to be made. Members have still reported seeing such migrants as winter wrens, merlins (on Kimball Ave. in Waterloo) and cormorants. Early spring ephemerals including Pasque flowers and snow trilliums are brightening the landscape.

Lastly, would you like to participate in a breeding bird survey? Former Iowa resident Howard Higley who now resides in California has a route that he needs to have a local volunteer take over. It is approximately 25 miles long and runs from Hudson to Shell Rock. Howard would train you in how to record your findings. For details contact Tom Schilke.

Tonight's presentation really had us focused on one of the most spectacular rights of spring in North America. Ken Heiar has been fascinated by the migration of the Sandhill Cranes in central Nebraska for many years and introduced our speaker Amanda Hegg to present "Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary and Conservation of the Platte River Ecosystem". Amanda has been at Rowe for two years as a program associate. She helps to form policy and educate others about the area. Rowe Sanctuary was dedicated by Audubon in 1974 and has grown to contain 2,900 acres with 5 riverine miles and 1,700 acres of grassland.

Amanda first explained Audubon's strategic priorities involving coasts, water, bird friendly cities, climate and working lands. She went into greater detail about working lands as Rowe falls into this category encompassing large areas of grasslands. The threatened piping plover nests here along with bobolinks, harriers and other grassland species.

The Platte River itself has seen a great deal of change since European settlement where it was described to be "a mile wide and an inch deep". Seasonal flooding left wide open plains and wet meadows that were historic migration sites. Human activity has changed stream flow and reduced wet meadows by 75%. Encroaching vegetation on the river banks makes it unappealing for migrating cranes. Conservation actions have become necessary. More on that later.

Three main species of cranes come through an 80 mile stretch of the Platte River each year during spring migration to feed and rest before continuing their journey to breeding grounds. The smallest group are the Whooping Cranes with 802 wild and captive birds surviving today. That is up from an unbelievably low 21 birds in the 1940's when they were declared endangered. They prefer open spaces to watch for predators. Threats include predation, power line collisions, sea level rise, threats to wintering grounds and nesting areas, and being shot.

The mid-continental populations of the greater and lesser Sandhill Cranes spend their winter in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. They have a strong connection to the Platte River Valley going back 10-12,000 years to the last ice age. During their stopover they are occupied with eating various animals and plant materials including waste grains.

They are also doing their best dancing moves to entice a mate. This is a bond they form for life. Many fly on to breeding grounds some as far north as Siberia. The Sandhills typically lay two eggs in their nests but usually only one survives. Being precocial they are able to run and follow their parents as soon as they are dried off after hatching. The cranes form loose feeding groups and face many of the same threats as the whoopers.

Rowe Sanctuary will be busy during the later spring and summer mechanically removing invasive plants and trees to maintain the 150M wide river that the cranes require since flooding no longer occurs to wipe vegetation from the river banks and sand bars. Willows and cottonwoods would take over in as little as 3-5 years and the cranes would no longer make their spring and fall stopovers.

The sanctuary also conducts prescribed burns and selective grazing of the grasslands to control cool season grasses. In the fall seeds are collected for sowing new prairies further helping grassland birds which have been in steep decline.

Amanda indicated that most management costs come from ecotourism which has become a very important business in central Nebraska. If you haven't witnessed the spring **crane** migration it is an amazing sight. Rowe Sanctuary has recently built new blinds to accommodate visitors. Amanda extended a personal invitation if you are going to visit to give her a call. She'd be glad to greet you at Rowe. Contact her at: Amanda.hegg@audubon.org or call 308-468-5282 As always you can Zoom this meeting by going to our web site ***gopras.org*** Thanks to all who made this program possible.