

The Luckiest Person on Earth

Text and photos by Abby Jensen

Good timing, good light and great luck led to the photo adventure of a lifetime for a photographer looking for whooping cranes on the central Platte River last spring.

It was dark when I pulled into the campground at Fort Kearny State Recreation Area (SRA) near Kearney. The excitement for my upcoming whooping crane adventure was thick in the air. I had been researching the endangered whooping crane for months and was hoping I would get the chance to see a couple of whoopers during my trip to the Kearney area in early April. The Big Bend portion of the Platte River in central Nebraska is a common stopover location for the cranes during their annual spring migration to their nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park, located in northeastern Alberta and the southern Northwest Territories in Canada.

I had no idea what lay ahead of me.

My first day was spent with Gene Hunt, superintendent of the SRA and adjacent Fort Kearny State Historical Park. Gene is an informed and knowledgeable tour guide, as well as

an expert historian for Kearney County. We toured some of the conservation efforts being done in the area, including numerous wetlands scattered among corn fields and grasslands. It was amazing to see the work being done to bring these lands back to their prairie beginnings.

Because there were still a number of migrating sandhill cranes in the area, I spent some time photographing these intriguing birds. A close relative of whooping cranes, sandhill cranes typically begin their northbound migration much earlier than whoopers, often arriving in Nebraska by late-February, and typically staying here for up to six weeks as they put on the valuable fat reserves they will need when they arrive at their nesting grounds in northern Canada. While driving around, I was fortunate to see a leucistic, or white, sandhill crane. Occasionally the feathers on a sandhill crane don't develop their usual color

pigments and the feathers remain white instead of the typical gray. Leucistic sandhill cranes are frequently mistaken for their much larger cousins, the whoopers.

After an afternoon of driving, bird watching and photographing, it was time to head back to the campground. That evening, listening to sounds of the sandhill cranes as they gathered along the Platte, was magical and something I will never forget.

The next day I was out and about surveying my surroundings when I got the call – eight whoopers were roosting in the south channel of the Platte River right in front of a blind nearby at the Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary. Whooping crane spotters were looking for a photographer with a long lens to get some pictures of them and I fit the bill!

Gary Lingle is an ornithologist and conservationist who has been studying

cranes and other birds of the Platte River Valley for more than 30 years. I met up with him on a county road near the blind as soon as I could. Gary is one of numerous people who serve as an aforementioned "whooping crane spotter" during their migration. These spotters help keep track of these endangered birds and help protect them from intentional or unintentional harm. After making our introductions, Gary and I slowly walked out to the blind,

taking care not to disturb the majestic birds. Once inside I was breathless: The most amazing sight was right in front of me – eight whoopers with their heads tucked under a wing and a strong north wind fluttering their feathers, were taking a much needed rest on a sandbar. We were there for some time before even one of them peeked out from under its plumage. The strong north wind continued to blow throughout the next few days



Six endangered whooping cranes fly to a nearby field for breakfast in beautiful morning light near Kearney last spring.



Lifting off into a brisk north wind, five whoopers leave their roost in front of a blind at Audubon Nebraska's Rowe Sanctuary.

which, as I later learned, worked to my advantage.

Gary told me I was the luckiest person he had ever known – in all his years of studying and tracking whooping cranes, this was the first time he had ever seen a group this large on their stopover while migrating north. We stayed for about 90 minutes watching and waiting. It was almost time for Gary to turn his watch over to another spotter when the birds begin to move around. Playing with sticks, tugging on the radio transmitters they'd been fitted with as chicks in order to track their movements, and cleaning their feathers, Gary thought the birds might be getting ready to make a move.

The flock had been there overnight and whooping cranes don't normally like to stay around in one area too long while migrating. We waited patiently for another 10 minutes or so until the flock crouched into their pre-flight stance and whoosh – the group was up fighting against the north wind. All while I was snapping away with my camera. I could not believe I was actually there experiencing the moment.

The cranes lifted off straight into the north wind and with a sharp turn glided back south. We ran out of the blind to watch. Gary kept the flock in sight as best he could. We were excited about the sharp turn back south the

birds made, hoping that we would get a chance to see them again. I couldn't wait to get back to my camper to download the digital images from that breathtaking experience.

The next day, with a strong north wind still blowing, the group was spotted hunkered down in a wetland southwest of Kearney. So I headed over and started waiting and watching again. The wind was so strong that they stayed hunkered down the entire four hours I was parked along the roadside. They seemed quite content to simply mill about the wetland, enjoying the Rainwater Basin.

The following morning, back at that same wetland, I was treated to a



"Dancing" and tossing sticks into the air, two whoopers interact as the trio around them look on.



After spending the night in a wetland southwest of Kearney, a flock of whooping cranes fly to a nearby cornfield for a late-morning snack before continuing their migration north last spring.

beautiful sunrise. The winds had died down considerably, and it wasn't long before a flock of sandhills joined what was now a group of nine whooping cranes. The two crane groups seemed comfortable with one another, although neither took too kindly to the woodducks that wanted to stop for a visit.

After about an hour, the whoopers began dancing, playing and preening their feathers, which I took as a sign that they might be getting ready to fly again. Camera ready, I watched in the beautiful, perfect morning light.

Sure enough, just as Gary had taught me, they crouched into preflight postures and took off. To my surprise

and delight they flew right over my head and landed in a cornfield behind me. The flock spent about 30 minutes in the field looking for a late morning snack before returning to the wetland. After a short rest, the nine cranes continued their migration – giant white wings with black tips carrying them skyward in the morning sun to the

warm thermals above that would carry them north. That was the last time I saw this amazing group of whooping cranes.

After spending time with the spotters and the locals of the area, I realize that, as Gary said, I might have been the luckiest person on earth for those three days ... it was definitely an experience

that I will treasure and remember forever. ■

Abby Jensen is a native Nebraskan who recently moved to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to expand her wildlife photography business. To see more of her work, visit www.jensen-photography.com.

