

A Birding Trip to the Niobrara Sanctuary



Fourteen Topeka Audubon Society members journeyed to the **Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary** owned by Audubon of Kansas and located on the northern edge of the Sandhills of north central Nebraska. The scenic Niobrara River borders the property of about 5,000 acres. In the few years that the property has been managed by AOK, a tremendous amount of conservation work has been completed and the diversity of wildlife that is now evident attests to the improved habitat.

This was a three-day weekend outing starting on May 31. As suggested by the photo above, it was chilly and overcast, and windy on Saturday. But it still turned out to be an exceptionally fine trip. We stayed in the two guesthouses where we watched a variety of birds associated with the trees and adjacent grasslands, and those that come to the feeders.

One of many highlights of the trip was a nesting pair of Sandhill Cranes with young! And, as Carol Morgan reported to folks back home, the Sharp-tailed Grouse showed up on cue. There were Bobolinks on their nesting territories in the wet meadows, a pair of Long-billed

Curlews and numerous Upland Sandpipers in the upper meadows, and dozens of other species throughout the sanctuary.

We tallied Ovenbirds and Scarlet

Tanagers in the woodlands near the confluence of Rock Creek and the river, and a Yellow-breasted Chat along Willow Creek.

Several of us got one or more "lifers."

Perhaps one of



Virginia Rails. Ron Klataske photos

the best finds was an illusive rail, which finally made itself visible after many vocalizations and a second foray out into the late evening hours by several in our group. Once we called in one Virginia Rail, a second came along, and then there were four in another marsh.

Several Kangaroo Rats, delightful denizens of the Sandhills prairie, scampered across the sanctuary road in front of our headlights on our return to the guesthouses. Earlier, a White-tailed Jackrabbit raced along the same trail and stopped long enough for photos.

Even with a little drizzle, chilly and strong winds, it was a super weekend enjoyed by all fourteen of us. The weather was perfect on Sunday, but alas we had to leave.

The best advice we can offer is to plan for several days in the area. We didn't even see all of the sanctuary or utilize the trails that are being developed. There are also numerous additional attractions in that region of the state, including the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge and the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge to the west, and the Ashfall Fossil Beds State Historical Park to the east. AOK Executive Director, Ron Klataske can help trip planners consider field trips, scenic routes and river float trip options.

—Evelyn Davis

