



The Sandhill Cranes Touch the Earth

Mary M. McCoy
Photo Jay Dee Miller


The Platte River

is wide in this place. It almost resembles its former mile-wide-inch-deep self that was described in the old journals. Sandbars are scattered about, sloping shallowly into the cold current. Grasses, ochre and dove-gray, clump near the edge of the water, and dark leafless trees cluster farther away. Clouds are blown along swiftly by the March wind. It is dusk, and it is cold here in the Sandhill region of south-central Nebraska.

Late in the day I join others at the Rowe Sanctuary in a blind on the edge of the Platte River. This simple wooden building has open windows facing the water and the fast-sinking sun. Twenty of us are here, hushed, making few sounds except for the mechanical noises caused from adjusting cameras and tripods and binoculars. The last rays of the sun shine in our eyes as we scan the horizon. There is an energy in this enclosure, almost palpable, fueled by great anticipation but constrained within our quiet selves, as if held in by our down jackets and insulated boots.

Someone murmurs a sound, unintelligible but recognized by everyone: the first wave of Sandhill Cranes has

been spotted approaching the river. They are flying in from surrounding cornfields, where they have been feeding on scattered waste corn. They will roost densely on the river this night, seeking its protection from predators. The sky is pink and leaden gray in layers, and in such light the incoming cranes look like another long low cloud just above the horizon. This cloud moves closer, though, and increases in height, and individual birds become visible, flying wing-tip to wing-tip. And now the crane calls are heard: throaty chortling sounds, family signaling to family, the mass signaling to the mass. Several people gasp quietly, as if in response. Just now, below this approaching band, a second line of birds becomes visible farther back: one more long narrow black cloud. The first group starts landing on the river, slate-gray bodies shining in the reflected light, legs dropping beneath them as they glide to the sandbars. Cameras click rapidly and insistently, but some people just watch, absorbing. The birds' calls become louder. Now a third dark thread appears beneath the second one. As the horizon closes toward the bright ball of sun, orange and red suffuse the sky and reflect on the water. The black line of trees mirrors the many lines of birds now



approaching. More cranes land on the sandbars and shoulder about for room. They land ever closer to the blind, and their calls pervade and overwhelm. We can now see their earth-hued plumage. Some fly directly overhead, necks stretched forward, long legs trailing languidly, and six-foot wings extended with primary feathers spread like fingers embracing the earth. Some of us inhale sharply, one shows tears. High overhead, one group of cranes begins a descent in a spiraling helical line, reflecting the very DNA that we all share. I gasp at this sight. The sky is now indigo, and wave after wave of birds descend, jostling for ever-limited space. Then the numbers of incoming birds diminish, and the crowded masses before us begin to quiet. The sky has turned black, a full moon has risen, the birds are silent, and we softly leave, uttering nothing. I pick my way carefully along the trail in the moonlight: depleted, joyous, transformed.

How could our reactions be otherwise? Such vast numbers of cranes—600,000, the largest grouping of cranes in the world—move through this narrow, 80-mile stretch of the Platte. Such a long arduous flight is demanded in their migration from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada and even to Siberia, and back again within the year. Such touching family bonds are revealed to us by these cranes: their balletic courtship dances, their pairing for life, their coaxing of tiny chicks to full height so they can return south within only a few months. Such ancient lineage prevails. Such a tenuous grasp is held on the survival of their species in this world of

diminishing water and wild space. Such indecipherable beauty emanates from their very existence.

A little distance upstream the river's broad expanse narrows, pushed inward by encroaching grasses and shrubs. It deepens, and there are no sandbars. Not far downstream the river again narrows and deepens, unable to withstand the insistent succession of plants. In the past, before the 15 dams were built on the Platte, the torrent of snow melt from the Rockies washed away those plants that might catch hold and impede the river's flow. But now the dams intrude, and the plants invade, and the river narrows, and the birds cannot roost in these places. And so the water flow diminishes, sometimes to nothing.

Yet now, in this particular part of the Platte, the river has been coaxed back to its old wide and shallow sandbar-laden state. It has been dredged and disked and weeded and protected by caring people who know these birds, who tend their river sanctuary, and who wait for their return next year. Many of us will migrate back here too, to be brought closer to the cranes and to each other. We gravity-bound creatures will reach out to the cranes again, as they touch the earth.

About the contributor: Mary M. McCoy is retired from teaching biology, with a special focus on entomology, at Washburn University. Living in Lawrence, she is engaged in writing about her experiences with insects and with a diversity of other creatures in our environment.