

Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary

Sandhill Crane Chicks, Woodland Restoration & New Trails

A pair of Greater Sandhill Cranes were observed hanging out in the wet meadows along the Niobrara River in the northern part of the sanctuary in the summer of 2012. They returned this past spring, and we immediately restricted human activity, hoping they were nesting in the associated wetlands. We saw them at a distance, with two small chicks, on June 1. A month later the adult cranes were still in the wet meadows, foraging in the grasses with one surviving chick. The parent birds are keenly aware of the surroundings and watchful of any potential threat from humans, Coyotes or Bald Eagles in the area. The young chicks seem careless as they charge forward in search of grasshoppers and other food.

Sandhill Cranes have only started to return in recent years to historical nesting habitats in Nebraska, possibly expanding from the Great Lakes population that was not extirpated, as had been the case for cranes that previously nested in the Great Plains.

It was there in the marshes of Wisconsin where Aldo Leopold wrote of the quality of cranes. Regarded by many as the father of wildlife conservation, he appreciated the natural beauty of all forms of life and wrote with as much inspiration as a poet. He regarded the quality of cranes as beyond the reach of words. In *A Sand County Almanac*, he wrote poetically about these birds at daybreak with a tribute that a “new day has begun on the crane marsh.” On the northern edge of the Sandhills, we are delighted that new crane marshes may now exist.

Providing quality habitat for grassland birds and other wildlife is a principal focus for management of the sanctuary. Bobolinks arrive in mid May and they need a couple months to breed and fledge young from nests in the wet meadows. Hay harvesting is delayed until after the middle of July to accommodate their needs. Likewise, livestock grazing is delayed and/or redirected to alternative pastures to minimize potential disturbance and trampling impacts on prime nesting areas used by Sharp-tailed Grouse, Upland Sandpipers, Western Meadowlarks and a pair of Long-billed Curlews. Some rangeland units are not grazed for a year to allow growth of taller nesting and brood cover.

Lark Sparrows and Grasshopper Sparrows are two of the more common nesting birds in sanctuary prairies, but Dickcissels have become much more prevalent in recent years in the 200 acres of native grasses and forbs planted on previously cultivated fields. Seventeen acres were specifically planted with an array of wildflowers and legumes to serve as “pollinator habitat.” It appears to be ideal for Bobwhite Quail and as brood habitat for young Sharptails.

The project to reestablish a small colony of Black-

tailed Prairie Dogs continues to receive our attention. There is no evidence that any have escaped from the 15-acre fenced enclosure and left the reintroduction site. In that and other respects it has been a success. However, reproduction was low in the spring of 2013 due to the fact that most of the prairie dogs relocated to the sanctuary were juveniles. At least two litters of pups were observed. The source was a hundred prairie dogs captured at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in late summer 2012. Predation by Badgers, Coyotes and raptors have taken a toll, but we are hopeful that enough have survived and will raise young this spring to begin to build a sustainable colony. We’re looking forward to the time when Burrowing Owls also settle in to raise young in this small prairie dog town.

Red Cedar invasion of grasslands often diminishes the value of these areas for prairie grouse and other grassland birds. With shearing of cedars in upland areas over a period of several years and controlled burning in 2011 and 2012 we’ve restored the open grassland character to most of the native rangelands. Combined with total “resting” (no livestock grazing) of some pastures in recent years, followed by light to modest grazing, range conditions and plant community health have markedly improved.

In the past six months our emphasis on cedar removal has been designed to restore the natural character of the deciduous woodlands along streams, the Niobrara River and on the north-facing slopes extending down to the river. In many areas Red Cedars were overwhelming deciduous woodlands, choking out understory and mid-level vegetation, eliminating regeneration of new hardwoods and even killing larger trees as they grew taller to compete for moisture, soil nutrients and even sunlight. Woodlands with Bur Oak, Basswood, Green Ash, Serviceberry, Cottonwood and Willow are being restored.

Visitors Enjoy Sanctuary, Guesthouses and Trails

For a personal retreat, family gathering or group outing with lodging within a wildlife sanctuary, the opportunities provided by the 5,000-acre Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary are unique. Both of the two guesthouses are exceptional, with four bedrooms each, fully equipped kitchens, living rooms and much more.

In addition to sanctuary roads suitable for hiking and biking, we are developing miles of walking trails for nature appreciation within the forests and upland prairies within the river valley and along the river bluffs.

Anyone interested in exploring the possibilities for activities and reservations should contact the AOK office or the niobrarasanctuary.org website.