



Farm cart against the dawn

Hutton Journal: Three Days in July along the Niobrara

Elizabeth Dodd and Dave Rintoul

The five thousand acres or so of the Hutton ranch abut the south bank of the Niobrara River, land that remained in the Hutton family from their arrival in 1882 until 2001, when Lucille Hutton willed the property to Audubon of Kansas as a wildlife sanctuary. In a privately published family history which I read in the bay-windowed guest house, Harold Hutton described how his family came to settle in the Niobrara valley.

The Huttons arrived not long after the federal government's removal of Pawnee people from their homeland. Three treaties had forced the Pawnee from what would become central Nebraska: one in 1848 removed the people from their lands in the Grand Island region along the Platte; another in 1857 established a reservation in north central Nebraska, along with the mandatory Indian boarding schools that suppressed native languages and attempted to turn tribal people into European-style tenant

farmers; another in 1875 forced their relocation to Indian Territory in what would become Oklahoma.

Thomas Hutton and his brothers, John and Jacob, all Civil War veterans, began investigating land in the region where Rock Creek feeds into the Niobrara in 1880. Two years later, Thomas, a widower, brought his seven children to settle on the south bank of the river. As Harold wrote,

In the spring of 1882, my grandfather sold the farm in Iowa and brought his family out to the Niobrara country. He shipped on the railroad to Stuart and unloaded there since there was no depot either at Newport or Bassett; in fact, there was almost nothing at all at either place, other than the designation. The wagon had been shipped knocked down, and he unloaded it piece by piece from the freight car, reassembled it,



Crane portrait, petroglyph at Three Rivers, New Mexico.

loaded the possessions he had brought, hitched up and headed out to the homestead, 25 miles away.

*Years ago, my college friend Karl wanted to see the Sandhills so much that when an academic conference he and I both frequently attend was scheduled for early October in South Dakota, he decided this was his chance. “Let me fly to Manhattan from Cincy,” he gushed. “Since you guys are driving anyway, let me come along.” Of course, there are no direct flights from Cincinnati, Ohio to Manhattan, Kansas, so he had a long day of travel and a quick overnight stay in the guest room before we all drove north and west, with two men over 6’4” folded into the front seats. But Karl knew—Nebraska has landscape and habitat that combine subtlety with sublimity. I thought of Karl’s eco-enthusiasm as Dave and I headed to the Hutton-Niobrara Sanctuary for the first time.

*The two earliest written appearances of the word “map” in English are from 1527 and 1547. Both suggest something diminutive in size: “a little Mapped or Carde of the world” and “a little Mapped ... of parchment sette in a frame,” respectively. I love maps of all sizes. The granular-detailed survey maps of Scotland and England where

every footpath and stile the walker might want is perfectly pinpointed with a little Icon; the huge, roll-down maps that once hung in classrooms where I teach, though they have mostly been taken down. The paper USGS quad maps you used to buy all rolled up and then had to figure out how to carry along with you; the later plasticized topo maps that folded much more neatly to fit in your pocket.

The map I had of the Hutton was a color printout on cheap, 8 X 10 inch paper. The roads and trails doglegged and meandered unmistakably in bright colors but somehow the land wasn’t interested in such clear delineation, so pretty quickly I just folded it back up and headed across country. This map-less method worked well as I dropped down from the grazed headland of the upper northeast sector of the ranch and followed a draw steadily north, north, north, bound for the river. Within minutes, through the cedar canopy came the bright sound of water. Where the rivulet pooled, a tortoise sheltered on a mossy bank no wider than my size-six boot. From there, I could follow the stream clear to the Niobrara.

*Grassland draped beneath the palisades of cottonwoods is one of my favorite landscapes on the planet. The environmentalist Paul Shepard would tell me this is an ancient preference, a memory in the DNA that dates to when our primate ancestors left the dark forests for the African savannahs where, finding it good, they slowly became our human ancestors. My own memory goes back decades, not millennia, to visions of aspen leaves quaking yellow in the autumn light from family trips into the Front Range foothills; I think my preference might be personal, not evolutionary. But then again, it might be both. The sprawling copses of cottonwoods on the uplands between Willow and Rock Creeks were lush and green in our Mid-July visit but in late-day light the scene seemed golden enough.

*Dave and I have seen sandhill cranes in many parts of the world. Flocks wintering in the marsh-and-cottonwood Bosque del Apache refuge of New Mexico, where the proprietor of the B&B where we were guests got up at 4:00 AM to light the woodstove and begin making tamales.



Hutton Ranch Savanna



Sandhill Crane pair with colt, Hutton Ranch

Tamarisk-clogged Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge in Texas. Along the Platte River, year after year of watching from blinds on the Rowe Sanctuary, camping at Ft. Kearney, standing on bridges overlooking the icy spring current, often with students (mine) or children (Dave's) along. At Quivira and Cheyenne Bottoms—wetlands that Audubon of Kansas, and surely many readers of *Prairie Wings*, have helped protect through defending their water rights. Along the Gulf Coast, keeping company with the occasional whooper. Lanky colts and parents in the brilliant high-latitude light of summer in Alaska. Once, amazingly, an ancient petroglyph on a rock at Three Rivers, New Mexico; the Ancestral Puebloan artist, who may have carved the image hundreds of years before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, had used the curve of the rock to give shape to the bird's face, and a small bump served as the crane's watchful eye.

Until our stay at the Hutton, the only cranes I'd seen in Nebraska were in transit, during their cacophonous, dancing pause along the Platte. The ornithologist-author Paul Johnsgard says that, in their long migrations, cranes live always at the edge of winter. But from a slope between the mouths of Rock and Willow Creek, Dave and I watched as silent birds the color of summer-parched reeds moved in the tawny foliage. At once, they knew we were there and disappeared. Then one stretched its neck and looked intently toward the gallery woods along the river. Over the course of long, light-filled minutes the birds entered and exited our sight, rejoining as a family group, and then passing into the trees, shadows that felt, suddenly, like the edge of summer.

*A few hundred miles north as the teal flies, as the crane flies, as the Black Tern flies, and you're really in prairie pothole country, stretching across the Dakotas and Minnesota. The

Hutton lies right on the edge, according to a USDA map I found—Nebraska hasn't figured much in the decades' worth of studies tallying agricultural destruction of potholes, but it's part of the picture all the same. Four miles south of the guest house, Dave discovered an ephemeral wetland—water pooled on both sides of the road, the short grass pasture stretching on beyond. It seemed like the ghost of a prairie pothole, refusing to really give up the ghost, and in this wet year it hosted a small exuberance of associated wildlife. The photographer and his passenger could simply park the car and watch. Most exuberant were several Black Terns busily ladling up pollywogs. The birds skimmed over the surface, circling back once or twice if they came up empty-billed. But pretty quickly, each seemed to make a successful capture and then wheeled back to where a handful of babies were lined up on a fence wire, waiting to be fed. Or they zig-zagged to the edge of the pasture and dropped the froglet for the fledglings to practice pouncing. Once or twice we watched a parent dip back down to the pool to dunk the frog back in the water, as if washing off gunk or a strand of wet weed. We think they were American bullfrogs on the menu: huge tails and legs akimbo as the parents wheeled toward the hungry young.

The glare of a Burrowing Owl always suggests to me that if the bird ever dreamed it were a mammal, it would appear as



Black Tern with Bullfrog tadpole

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All photos by Dave Rintoul



Burrowing Owl

a top predator: a wolf, even a grizzly. The closest we came to one was just down the road from the pollywog-fest; the bird had staked out an old badger hole in the roadside embankment and took off into baleful flight when we approached. But the uplands deep within the Hutton Sanctuary provide prime habitat for prairie dogs; and dog towns, unmolested by landowners or county exterminators, can support both owls and another endangered predator, the Black-footed Ferret. Audubon of Kansas has contributed to the reintroduction of ferrets elsewhere in the Great Plains and has been working to establish a viable dog colony in the heart of the Hutton.

It's a fine thing to be held in the gaze of a Burrowing Owl. She could be sizing us up, taking the measure of our environmental ethic. She could be looking through us to a possible future. Or she could be doing neither at all, judging only the threat of the moment, before turning her head, keeping her thoughts to herself.



"Grassland draped beneath palisades of cottonwoods"