



Winging It

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION, INC.



American Birding
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 17, no. 4 • July/August 2005

CONTENTS

- 3 Observations
- 6 Birding the "New" Guatemala
- 7 Milestones
- 8 On The Fly
- 9 Panama: Much More Than a Canal!
- 10 Life With Merlin
- 12 Books for Birders:
Boreal Forest Special
- 14 Michigan Migration Madness
- 16 The Important Bird Areas of
Arkansas
- 18 Birding Landscapes:
New Mexico Spring
- 19 Pete's Tips: Bad Vibrations
- 20 New Hope for the Colorful
Puffleg
- 20 Membership News
- 22 Birding in Kazakhstan
- 24 ABA-Endorsed Tours
- 26 Sightings
- 29 Classifieds
- 32 Birding with Brunton

The Heart of the Hourglass Birding Nebraska's Rainwater Basin

BY JOEL G. JORGENSEN

The migration of countless birds in North America's central flyway resembles an hourglass, with Nebraska's Rainwater Basin forming the narrow "waist." Every year, millions of waterfowl and tens of thousands of shorebirds pause here to rest and feed. The presence of such immense numbers of birds makes the Rainwater Basin one of North America's most important stopover areas for migratory waterbirds—and the site of some exhilarating birding.

History and Setting

Historically, the 4,200 square miles of the Rainwater Basin was a tall- to mid-grass prairie, virtually treeless, with an extensive network of shallow playa wetlands. Most of the more than 4,000 pre-settlement wetlands were less than 40 acres, but some were as large as 1,000 acres. Many were shallow and short-lived following wet weather, others several feet deep and semi-permanent.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the region's wetlands were converted to cropland, a trend that continued until, by the 1960s, less than 10% of the original wetlands remained. Those that were not destroyed became increasingly degraded by siltation, invasion by exotic and woody plants, and water diversion. As the number and quality of the basins decreased, their

importance to migrant bird populations became increasingly apparent—starkly so in the 1970s and 1980s, when avian cholera killed thousands of waterfowl crowded into the remaining wetlands.

In 1986, under the auspices of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (see www.fws.gov/birdhabitat/NAWMP/nawmphp.htm), the Rainwater Basin became a Joint Venture involving government agencies, such as the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, and private groups like Ducks Unlimited (see www.rwbjv.org). While more than 90% of the region's land is devoted to intensive agriculture, the Joint Venture is engaged in vigorous land acquisition and the restoration of wetland and upland prairie habitats. There are at present nearly 100 publicly-owned areas open to birders. Most are owned and managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as Federal Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs; see <http://rainwater.fws.gov>); about a third are owned and managed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs).

Birdlife and Birding

No fewer than 338 species have been recorded in this underbirded region. Waterfowl are the first migrants to arrive in spring, with 7 to 14 million birds stopping. From late February through early April,

continued on page 4

BRUNTON

Partners In Birding

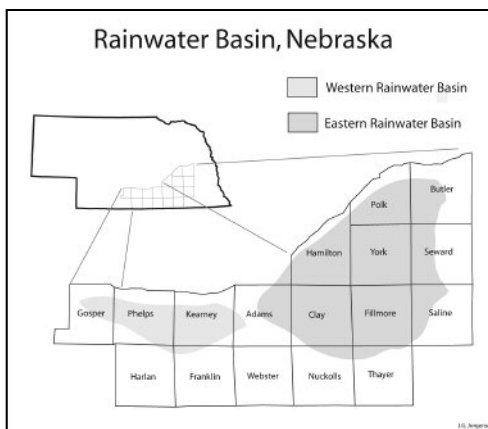
BRUNTON IS THE SOLE OPTICS SPONSOR OF WINGING IT

Snow, Ross's, Canada, and Cackling Geese cover the wetlands and feed in the surrounding cropland. Greater White-fronted Geese are also abundant, with approximately 90% of the mid-continental population stopping in the Rainwater Basin on their northward trek. Occasional rarities have been discovered in the massive flocks: Brant have been sighted several times, and there are single records of both Bean Goose and Emperor Goose.

Duck numbers peak slightly later, with the largest numbers typically seen from late March to late April. All of North America's widespread dabblers are abundant; 50% of mid-continental Mallards and 30% of mid-continental Northern Pintails stop here each spring. Cinnamon Teal are present in small numbers, and Eurasian Wigeon is recorded frequently enough to be classed as regular. Divers such as Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Duck are also numerous; daily counts of Redhead can peak at up to 34,000 on a single wetland. Greater Scaup and other deeper-water species such as mergansers and Common Goldeneye are relatively rare on the shallow wetlands of the Rainwater Basin.

Just as exciting are the shorebirds. The spectacle begins in late March, with the arrival of the first Baird's Sandpipers, and continues through early June, when the large flocks of White-rumped Sandpipers depart. Forty shorebird species have been recorded in the Rainwater Basin, thirty of them annually. American Golden-Plover, American Avocet, Long-billed Dowitcher, Willet, and Semipalmated and Baird's Sandpipers are most common by the end of April. Numbers and diversity are highest in mid-May, when White-rumped Sandpipers are abundant, usually outnumbering all the other species present. This is the best time to find less common birds such as Black-bellied Plover and Short-billed Dowitcher, and rare-but-regular species such as Snowy Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Ruddy Turnstone, Whimbrel, and Red-necked Phalarope. Hudsonian Godwits are present from mid-April through May, but numbers can be erratic—in May 2005, daily counts for this species ranged from 0 to 1,305.

Not all shorebirds in the Rainwater Basin occur at wetlands.



The Rainwater Basin occupies a large area in south-central Nebraska, and is often divided into eastern and western sections.

Recent surveys suggest that the Rainwater Basin is the Buff-breasted Sandpiper's primary stopover site in the Great Plains and perhaps North America. The species is fairly common during the appropriate periods, but can be difficult to find; a good strategy is to search agricultural fields near wetlands in York and Fillmore Counties during the early morning between May 8 and May 20. Birds can also be found at wetlands on very warm days in the late afternoon and evening. Morning and evening are also when these birds are most likely to be seen performing their striking courtship displays.

Migrating Buff-breasted Sandpipers in this region are often accompanied by other "upland shorebirds" including American Golden-Plover, Baird's Sandpiper, and a few Upland Sandpipers. Historical information suggests that the Rainwater Basin was a primary stopover site for the Eskimo Curlew. It may be wise to keep that in mind in light of recent developments in the status of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

Franklin's Gull is another migrant associated with agricultural landscapes. Large flocks often forage in newly plowed fields, with numbers peaking around the first of May. Kettles of Swainson's Hawk can be found circling farming equipment in late April and early May. Blackbirds, mostly Red-winged and Common Grackle, are ubiquitous; Yellow-headed are common and Brewer's are uncommon, the latter frequenting prairie burns. Great-tailed Grackles arrived in the late 1970s and are now conspicuous at the larger, more permanent wetlands.

More than 40% of all Whooping Crane sightings made in Nebraska have been in the Rainwater Basin, and in fall, more use-days for the species have been recorded here than in any other area in the United States. The birds stop primarily in the western parts of the region, including Phelps and Kearney Counties, with most records from mid-April and October. Sandhill Cranes can also be found from late March through April, but numbers are much smaller than in the Platte River Valley just to the north.

Eared and Pied-billed Grebes, Sora, Virginia Rail, American Bittern, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and White-faced Ibis are all regular in low numbers. Peregrine Falcons often cause a commotion where shorebirds congregate; Northern Harriers and occasional Short-eared Owls glide over wetlands and grasslands. Greater Prairie-Chickens, nearly absent a few years ago, have staged an encouraging and not easily explained incursion into the region during the past two years; it remains to be seen whether the species becomes a permanent fixture or disappears as quickly as it appeared.



Rainwater Basin birders can often view the courtship display of Buff-breasted Sandpipers during mid-May.



Dense concentrations of waterfowl are a typical spring sight at the area's wetlands.

Grassland breeders such as Dickcissel and Grasshopper Sparrow can be reliably found in season. Wetland breeders, on the other hand, are unpredictable. Favorable conditions in late spring frequently entice some species to nest, but the falling water levels of mid-summer can doom their attempts. Still, there are recent records of successful breeding for American Wigeon, Redhead, and Black-necked Stilt. Sandhill Cranes first bred in the Rainwater Basin in 1994, with five further records since.

Summer and early-fall birding is less predictably spectacular than spring, but with adequate water these seasons, too, can be productive. Southbound shorebirds appear as early as late June; numbers and diversity are lower than in spring, but sought-after species such as Buff-breasted Sandpiper are regular. In most years, wandering southern herons include a few Snowy Egrets, Little Blue Herons, and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. The potential for rarities is good at this time of year; recent highlights include Black-bellied Whistling Duck, White and Glossy Ibis, Tricolored Heron, Curlew Sandpiper, and Red Phalarope.

As fall advances, many of the wetlands may go dry. Those that retain favorable habitat host a variety of waterfowl, shorebirds, and other species through November. Sedge Wrens and Le Conte's Sparrows are fairly common from mid-September through mid-October; Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow is probably more numerous than the infrequent reports indicate.

Other than flocks of Lapland Longspurs and the occasional Rough-legged Hawk, winter birding is lackluster. But by the end of February, temperatures are warming and the ice melting, and the geese soon stream northward on southerly winds.

Making the Trip

To make the most out of a trip to the Rainwater Basin, visiting birders should allow for flexibility in where and when to go. Birding here can be spectacular, but also challenging, unpredictable, and sometimes even frustrat-

ing. Fed only by precipitation, Rainwater Basin wetlands are extremely dynamic, and the visiting birder may find them dry, very full, or somewhere in between, depending on the fickle precipitation patterns of the central Great Plains. In some years, some areas have good conditions while other areas have poor conditions and very few birds. Tracking local birding reports and soliciting current information from local contacts is recommended.

Because some wetlands will typically be better than others, a good strategy for birding the Rainwater Basin is to visit as many sites as possible. Some of the most productive include Straightwater WMA, North Lake Basin WMA, Spikerush WMA/Waco WPA, Mallard Haven WPA, Kissinger Basin WMA, Hultine WPA, Harvard WPA, Kenessaw WPA, and Funk WPA; descriptions and directions for all of these localities are available at the websites referred to above and at www.nebraskabirdingtrails.com. From late February through mid-April, it makes good sense to incorporate a visit to the Platte River Valley, where large numbers of Sandhill Cranes, more waterfowl, and a host of other birds can be seen.

Whatever your route, be ready for the unexpected. Weather in the spring is quite changeable. Snowstorms are possible in March and early April. Late April through May is not only peak shorebird migration, but also a time when strong thunderstorms rumble across the plains. These storms can drop torrential amounts of rain in short periods, filling many former wetlands that are now agricultural fields. These "sheetwater" wetlands on private property often host large numbers of shorebirds, so do not drive right past them! During wet weather, avoid low-maintenance roads without exception, even with four-wheel drive.

Rarely will a visitor to the Rainwater Basin encounter



Even though Rainwater Basin wetlands may cover several hundred acres, they are never deeper than a few feet.

another birder. Hunters, however, can be expected at public wetlands with water, primarily in the morning, from September onward in fall; in recent years, there has also been a spring light-geese season.

WMAs and WPAs essentially lack facilities. Larger cities, such as Kearney and Hastings, have a range of

accommodations and dining options. Most of south-central Nebraska, however, is rural in the literal meaning of the word, so do not wait too long to fill up with gas.

Joel Jorgensen is finishing a Master's at the University of Nebraska, with a thesis on Buff-breasted Sandpiper stopover in the Rainwater Basin. He can be reached at zrtac@huntel.net.