



# Meadowlark

celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> year

MAR/APR 2022  
VOL 51 ISSUE 2

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## Spring species brighten backyards and backwoods

by Scott Bradley

Many birders and bird watchers await the months of spring migration with great enthusiasm and anticipation. As southern winds kick up and the weather warms in March and April, waves of early spring migrants will journey to Eastern Nebraska. Spring migration peaks in May, and usually ends after Memorial Day weekend.

Spring migration begins with waterfowl, blackbirds and cranes. Look for waterfowl and blackbirds around area lakes, such as Wehrspann, Lake Cunningham, Lake Wanahoo, and Branched Oak. Sandhill Cranes gather near Grand Island and Kearney, growing to roughly 500,000 cranes in mid-to-late March.

In April, a variety of sparrow species are on the move, along with Eastern Phoebes, Brown Thrashers, Tree Swallows, Eastern Towhees, Thrushes and Kinglets. Look for sparrows near the water's edge around area lakes, and roadsides with tall grasses. By mid-April some of the first neo-tropical warblers arrive, such as Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warbler. By the last week of April, we typically see an influx of a variety of Vireos, Warblers, Flycatchers,



Yellow-rumped Warbler,  
photo by Phil Swanson

Wrens, Tanagers and others. Look for these migrants at Towl Park, Walnut Grove Park, and Fontenelle Forest.

## Join us for a picture-perfect March meeting with Ron Cisar!

by Amy Campagna

We have something fun in store for our March program! Join us via Zoom on Thursday, March 10, at 7 p.m., when celebrated educator and former ASO board president Ron Cisar will talk about the importance of sketching and journaling, discuss useful tips and techniques for getting started, and share some of his amazing bird art.

Ron believes students of the natural world must immerse themselves in the outdoor experience to fully comprehend the intricate interrelationships between living things and the environment they inhabit. In all his teaching, Ron hopes to fan the flame of excitement to instill a continuing sense of wonder that drives students to ask questions and seek answers to the mysteries of the natural world.

Ron is an Omaha native and UNO graduate (BS, MS). He taught science and biology in the Omaha Public Schools for 32 years and served Iowa Western Community College as assistant Professor

Emeritus until 2017. He is nationally recognized as a singer-songwriter, has led educational and research programs in national parks, and has earned many awards for excellence in education:

- Presidential Award for Excellence in Science Teaching from the National Science Foundation
- Alice Buffett Outstanding Teaching Award
- Nebraska Conservation Educator of the Year Award
- Education Award from the Yellowstone Grizzly Foundation
- Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Nebraska Omaha College of Education.

Ron currently teaches a program series based on the life work of Aldo Leopold at Pottawattamie Conservation's Hitchcock Nature Center. His teaching style engages learners through a variety of media: PowerPoint lectures, discussion, hands-on experiences, self-reflection, journaling, and song.

### GREEN CORNER: HOW YOU CAN COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

*Conservation begins at home; each of us can help restore our unique ecosystem.*

#### Give bees a chance March

Help bees and other pollinators by letting wildflowers (such as hen-bit, clover and dandelions) grow. Early-growing natives are sometimes the only blooms available for our important buggy friends. Making a lawn "weed-free" with herbicides creates runoff that harms wildlife and ecosystems.

#### 'Water-less' April

Try one less watering day per month. Space out watering to ensure that plants and lawns grow slower and stronger. Slower growth means less mowing and that means less air pollution. Try mulching when mowing to retain moisture and keep clippings out of landfills.

# ON THE HORIZON March

## MEMBER PROGRAM

THURSDAY, MARCH 10

**Speaker:** Ron Cisar, artist/educator at Hitchcock Nature Center

**Topic:** “Importance of Sketching and Journaling” Learning how to immerse yourself in the outdoor experience.

**When:** 7 p.m.

**Where:** Computer, laptop or tablet

**How:** Register for this meeting at [audubon-omaha.org](http://audubon-omaha.org). A link to join the Zoom meeting will be emailed to you

**Who:** Members and the public (free)

## FIELD TRIP - TOUR NWR

SATURDAY, MARCH 19

**What:** Tour the new Baldwin Wildlife Center at Nebraska Wildlife Rehab with Laura Stastny.

**How:** Registration is limited to 30 people – attendees MUST register by going to ASO’s online calendar. Masks are required to attend this indoor event.

# April

## MEMBER PROGRAM

THURSDAY, APRIL 14

**Speaker:** Matthew Webb, Avian Ecologist, Motus Tracking System

**Topic:** Using the Motus Tracking System to track small birds and bats

**When:** 7 p.m.

**Where:** Computer, laptop or tablet

**How:** Register for this meeting at [audubon-omaha.org](http://audubon-omaha.org). A link to join the Zoom meeting will be emailed to you

**Who:** Members and the public (free)

## FIELD TRIP - TBD

**What:** Please check the ASO online Calendar later this month for details

## VIRTUAL STUDENT ART SHOW

MONDAY, APRIL 11

**What:** See all entries and awards in the 2022 Art Show at [audubon-omaha.org](http://audubon-omaha.org) under the Special Events tab. Ribbons and prizes for students can be picked up April 14-16 at the ASO office located at 4339 S. 90th – check website for times.

# Legislative Update

by Kristal Stoner, Executive Director,  
Audubon Nebraska



The legislative season has arrived, and there are a few exciting – and a few concerning – bills I want to bring to your attention.

I also want to share a great new video exploring conservation easements.

First, the video, which was developed in partnership with the Nebraska Land Trust, Ducks Unlimited, Sierra Club, Wachiska Audubon, and The Nature Conservancy, **From the Grass Up**, illuminates facts and elevates the landowner’s voice about the critical issue of conservation easements. Coming soon are “byte-size” short segments suitable for social media.

We are very concerned about Senator Dave Murman’s conservation easement legislation. **LB 1135** would change conservation easements by limiting them to 99 years and allowing county planning commissions the leeway to

deny easements by simply not addressing them (the default would be denial). Over the past year, with the same partners Audubon convened to produce the video, we have prepared the attached talking points and easement facts. Audubon is actively opposing Senator Murman’s legislation.

Two bills could impact the Platte River, as well as the birds and animals it supports. The first is **LB1023**, which would create a lake at a yet-to-be-determined location near Ashland. This lake would not involve the construction of dams but might increase evaporation and impact lower Platte River hydrology. The Platte currently provides an important habitat for Piping Plovers and Least Terns. Without details regarding the lake’s location, Audubon is planning to go on record raising concerns for considerations related to the river and birds as project development continues.

The second is **LB 1015**, which proposes the construction of an irrigation canal running from Colorado  
*continued on page 3*

# The eyes have it – your photos

We need your bird photos! Please email them to [MeadowLark@asopublisher@gmail.com](mailto:MeadowLark@asopublisher@gmail.com)



American White Pelican, Photo by Laura Lux



Kildeer, photo by Bob Tooley



Rose-breasted Grosbeak, photo by Kellie Hayden



# Legislative Update

*continued from page 2*

into Nebraska to ensure that Nebraska continues to benefit from the 1923 South Platte River Compact. This bill offers no details about where the canal would terminate and no explanation of how it would impact the Platte River Recovery and Implementation Program or the South Platte River's natural ecosystem. Audubon is gathering more information but, given the magnitude of unknowns involved in this project, we believe we should adopt our approach to LB1023 and communicate our concerns to legislators. Alex Hager, an NPR reporter at Colorado's KUNC, interviewed Melissa Mosier, Platte River program manager at Audubon Nebraska, recently, and Melissa did a great job articulating our position.

**LB1255**, a positive piece of legislation, would allocate federal funds to the University of Nebraska to update its climate change report. Audubon supports this legislation.

**LB 953**, introduced by Senator John Cavanaugh, would change provisions relating to open burning permits and limit the liability related to land management burning. Audubon supports this legislation because it benefits private landowners seeking to manage their property with habitat benefits for birds.

Thank you for all that you do and for your support.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

*The President's field notes article will return in our next issue as well as the Board of Director's update, the winter Bird Seed Sale report and Student Art Show winners of Best in Show for 2022.*

### KEEP OUR DUCKS IN A ROW!

Audubon Society of Omaha is looking for a bird-loving, part-time Contract Administrator. Interested? Find the details at [audubon-omaha.org](http://audubon-omaha.org), then in "Who We Are" and then "Careers".

# Did you know. . . THAT OUR AUDUBON PRAIRIE

**PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN MITIGATING CLIMATE CHANGE?** *by Glenn Pollock*

While it's easy to observe a prairie's natural beauty, you have to look below the surface to appreciate the work it does to alleviate climate change – because that's where carbon sequestration occurs. What does the Audubon Prairie have to do with carbon sequestration?

Animals are the primary natural source of atmospheric carbon dioxide, the most common greenhouse gas, while human activities — mainly energy production — account for the vast majority of the remaining CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Audubon Society of Omaha purchased and preserves its prairie lands to provide critical habitats for insect and other pollinators, birds, snakes and many species of animals. But there's more.

It turns out that tallgrass prairies are great at biologic carbon sequestration — storing atmospheric carbon dioxide in the soil. Biologic carbon sequestration removes carbon from the atmosphere, which helps counter the negative impacts of climate change. In fact, prairies like ours are even more effective at reducing atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> than trees. Two-thirds of the biomass of prairie plants lie underground; the opposite is true of trees. Of course, we all love trees, but when they die, they release carbon dioxide back into the air. When grassland plants die, as much as two-thirds of the dead material does not break down and emit carbon dioxide. Instead, it simply remains underground.

I was curious about just how much carbon is stored under the Audubon Prairie, so I went online — and found what seemed like thousands of academic articles exploring the calculations. Eventually, I estimated that each acre of our prairie sequesters approximately 1-5 tons of carbon per year.

Okay, let's do the math. First, let's assign a value of 2.5 tons of carbon per acre per year for our purposes. Next,

let's divide Audubon Prairie into three segments: virgin prairie, the 22-year restoration, and the 1-year restoration. Here's what I came up with:

- The virgin prairie. Because it's been around for thousands of years, it has no doubt reached its maximum storage level. The upper two feet of soil may be made up of as much as 50 percent carbon compounds. Even more carbon may be stored as far down as six feet below the surface.
- The 22-year restoration. To come up with this figure, I multiplied 7.25 acres by 22 years and then by two tons, which resulted in a total 51.25 tons of carbon.
- The 1-year restoration. It's too early to calculate the exact number of tons of carbon sequestered under these 3.25 acres because the plants are still new and relatively small.

To understand the magnitude of global climate change, remember that all of the carbon stored under the Audubon Prairie grasslands does not make up for the amount of carbon dioxide each of us releases into the atmosphere during the course of our daily lives — breathing, driving, cooking with natural gas or propane, heating and cooling our homes, and more. But the prairie certainly helps.

It's also important to remember that some government agencies understand and value efforts to address climate change. My farmer friend near Crescent, Iowa, just planted 80 acres of his hilly farmland with native prairie plants, which will help offset his carbon emissions while preventing soil from running into the Missouri River. He signed up for the Conservation Reserve Program offered by the USDA to help pay for the project.

### VISIT THE ASO PRAIRIES

Explore our prairie preserves. Find maps and more at [audubon-omaha.org](http://audubon-omaha.org).

# Environmental Update: Nebraska edition *by Dan Murphy*

“The salvation of nature is watchfulness in the citizen.” Given his appreciation of Native American culture and spirituality, it’s likely that Nebraska-born philosopher, professor and iconographer Hartley Burr Alexander would appreciate this version of the inscription carved over the north entrance of the Nebraska Capitol. Helping you keep an eye on the environmental goings-on in our neck of the woods is what sparked this brief roundup of ecological concerns.

## **SURVEY SAYS ...**

Ever feel as if you’re among a minority of people who care about conservation? Think again.

A recent New Bridge Strategy survey of Nebraska voters commissioned by Audubon Nebraska, The Nature Conservancy in Nebraska, the Sierra Club, and the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District revealed overwhelming support for conservation efforts across political lines. Seventy-nine percent of Republicans, 84 percent of Independents and 83 percent of Democrats agreed that “more needs to be done to protect land, water and wildlife.”

Concern extends to the preservation of family farms and ranches, with 60 percent of Republicans and 52 percent of Independents labeling the potential loss of these cultural and economic drivers “an extremely/very serious problem.”

Fully 90 percent of respondents — again, across party lines — backed the use of Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund dollars to activate conservation easements.

“It’s heartening that Nebraskans are united by nature,” noted John Cougher, State Director for the Nature Conservancy in Nebraska. “Whether they hunt, fish, birdwatch, hike, bike, or simply want clean water, the people of this state care not only about nature, but also about the families who are stewarding our land and water.”

## **SPEAKING OF WATER ...**

Nebraska versus Colorado? Next time, the game might not play out on the gridiron, but along the South Platte River in Eastern Colorado and Western Nebraska.

Invoking a nearly century-old agreement between the two states to ensure the equitable flow and use of river water, Nebraska leaders are considering the construction of a canal to irrigate Nebraska farmland. The canal would begin in Colorado and end in Nebraska. In addition to its estimated \$500 million cost (woefully short of the actual price tag, according to some experts), the effort is likely to trigger eminent domain considerations, lengthy lawsuits, and

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environmental studies. There is also the question of whether Nebraska’s use of \$100 million of American Rescue Plan Act funds to help finance the project would meet federal guidelines for allocating COVID relief monies.

Experts interviewed by the Omaha World-Herald note that neither state has violated terms of the 1923 South Platte River Compact, and an editorial in the paper strongly advocates for continuing constructive dialogue identifying possible paths toward an amicable and equitable resolution.

Regardless of how this yet-to-be-formalized proposal plays out, the situation underscores the life-or-death consequences of water conservation in the West.

## **THE BUZZ ABOUT POLLINATOR PROTECTION**

ASO’s own Glenn Pollock is promoting a resolution sponsored by State Senator Carol Blood to “determine what is needed to develop a plan to protect managed and native Nebraskan pollinators from current harmful practices.”

The resolution, which was referred to the legislature’s Executive Board in mid-January, would create an interim study, which would, in turn:

- Analyze the effects of neonicotinoids (insecticides chemically related to nicotine) on such pollinators as bees, butterflies, moths and bats;
- Understand the population decline of managed and native pollinators;
- Identify and promote best practices for enhancing and creating habitats to support the continued viability of Nebraska pollinators;
- Identify and promote efficient and cost-effective practices that will protect pollinators; and
- Provide leadership and guidance to localities and the private sector to protect pollinators.

## **CARBON NEUTRALITY IS OFFICIALLY A NEBRASKA ‘THING’ NOW**

Did you know that, in 2015, the U.S. Energy Information Administration reported that Nebraska was No. 1? Yep, carbon emissions increased more in Nebraska than in any other state from 2000 through 2015. Not exactly GBR, unless our faces were flushed with embarrassment.

Good news now, though! On December 9 of last year, the board of directors of the Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) committed to reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, joining the state’s two other major electric utilities — Omaha Public Power District (OPPD) and Lincoln Electric System (LES) — in targeting net-zero  
*continued on page 5*

# Environmental Update

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carbon omissions. That means nearly every Nebraskan is now served by a utility pledged to decarbonization.

This isn't just serendipity, however. Nebraska Conservation Voters Deputy Director Chelsea Johnson reminds us that, "In recent election cycles, voters have elected new NPPD board members who more closely reflect their values ... NCV supported these candidates in their elections and ensured that, over the course of the last year, the board heard from their constituents in regards to the decarbonization goal."

NCV's grassroots engagement has advanced energy and environmental policies, as well as preventing bad bills from becoming laws. In fact, NCV advocacy efforts have led to wins in 88 percent of targeted races, placing conservation champions on the boards of OPPD and NPPD and across Lincoln's city government. In addition, through Conservation Nebraska, NCV offers monthly educational programming analyzing critical conservation issues, such as water quality, soil health, pollinators and climate change.

## CONTROL+ALTEN+DELETE?

Anyone following the continuing drama surrounding the AltEn ethanol plant in Mead, Nebraska, is probably wondering when — or if — it will end.

AltEn has operated a biofuel plant in Mead, using seed coated with pesticides to produce ethanol and, unfortunately, highly contaminated solid and liquid byproducts, which the company deposited on area fields, describing the waste as a "soil amendment." Over time, Mead residents reported pets "stumbling about in a stupor, dead wildlife and their own bloody noses, headaches and respiratory problems," according to the Omaha World-Herald. Entomologists at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln argued that pollution from AltEn's

plant killed 100 percent of the bees at its research facility.

Eventually, governmental bodies in Mead voted to prohibit AltEn from manufacturing ethanol, but allowed the company to operate on-site so it could remediate pesticide-contaminated soil and water at the facility. Cleanup efforts have been uneven, at best, and have been led by companies that had supplied contaminated seed to AltEn, including industry giants Bayer and Syngenta.

In mid-January, the sale of AltEn-produced biochar, billed as a natural substitute for chemical fertilizers, was thwarted by analyses conducted by the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. The analyses concluded that the AltEn product was "prone to breaking down," that it contained levels of a dangerous contaminant several multiples above safety benchmarks, and that it should be disposed of as solid waste.

Finally, a recent "Midlands Voices" column in the Omaha World-Herald by John Janovy, Jr., professor emeritus with the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, contends that the "failure of the State of Nebraska to avert an environmental disaster at the AltEn ethanol plant in Mead is a familiar story of money and politics at work to create a public health problem."



*AltEn Methanol plant in Mead, NE*

## RESOURCES & INFO:

### HOW TO JOIN/RENEW/UPDATE

Join or renew your membership online at [auduon-omaha.org](http://auduon-omaha.org) and select "Get Involved." Save paper and avoid confusion. Your membership with National Audubon automatically makes you a member of Audubon Society of Omaha.

### CHANGE OF ADDRESS?

Please call National Audubon toll-free at 1-844-428-3826, or send an email to [audubon@emailcustomerservice.com](mailto:audubon@emailcustomerservice.com)

### STAY CONNECTED

Join our email list at [audubon-omaha.org](http://audubon-omaha.org) under "Get Involved."

### BEQUESTS & GIFTS

A bequest to Audubon Society of Omaha is a gift to those who will succeed us and secure our natural heritage. Want to send a gift on behalf of someone? Mail your check along with the name and address of the person to be notified to:

Audubon Society of Omaha  
P.O. Box 3542, Omaha, NE 68103  
We'll send them a thank-you note letting them know of your gift.

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0.5% of your eligible purchases to the charitable organization of your choice, including Audubon Society of Omaha. When you shop on Amazon, use this address: [smile.amazon.com](http://smile.amazon.com) and login to your account as usual. In the account info section, there's a link to enter the non-profit of your choice. It's a win-win-win; there's no extra cost, you get the same convenient shopping, and you'll help local conservation efforts.

**TAKE ACTION** Big things are happening, so communicate with your elected officials. Go to [audubon-omaha.org](http://audubon-omaha.org) for links to contact info for each.

### INJURED BIRD?

Raptors: Call 866-888-7261 to speak to a Raptor Recovery volunteer.

Non-raptor: Call Nebraska Wildlife Rehab at 402-234-2473.



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STEWARDSHIP OF THE EARTH AND ITS CREATURES

# the Meadowlark

celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> year


MAR/APR 2022  
VOL 51 ISSUE 1



*The Audubon Society of Omaha is dedicated to the active promotion of environmental awareness to our community through education, conservation, and enjoyment of our natural heritage, especially birds.*

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Twitter and Instagram.

**ELECTED OFFICERS**

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2nd Vice President: Michaela Johnson  
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Kristal Stoner

*Photo by Larry Frame*