



Meadowlark

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Remembering Clem Klaphake: Wonderful Birder and Great Mentor

by Bob Wells

The Nebraska birding world lost a wonderful birder, a great educator and an incredible mentor to many on December 28, 2022, when Clem Klaphake lost his ongoing battle with Parkinson's Disease. Clem had just moved with his wife, Bette, to Colorado Springs to be close to his son.

As a very good friend who was privileged to know and volunteer with Clem for several years, I felt his loss deeply. But Clem's passing left many of his friends and fellow birders feeling immensely sad and suffering a gaping void in their birding lives. It very much helped that we were able to rapidly organize a gathering at one of Clem's favorite haunts, Fontenelle Forest, just days before Clem's and Bette's move to Colorado. It was wonderfully attended by many of the friends whose lives Clem had touched during his years in Omaha.

Clem was a retired professor of Sociology at Bellevue University. His vast experience as a high-level educator was just one of the attributes that made

Continued on page 3

Reprinted in memory of Clem Klaphake from the Meadowlark March/April 2020 issue.

Migrating species make early spring a birder's dream

by Clem Klaphake

March and April often mark the beginning of the spring migration for a variety of bird species. Depending on the weather, which can run the gamut from spring-like temperatures to sub-zero snowstorms, initial waves of many migrating birds make their way back to our area.

Sandhill Cranes start sweeping into central Nebraska in late February, and their numbers crescendo to more than half a million by mid-to-late March. If you have never been out to the Grand Island/Kearney area during peak Sandhill Crane migration season, and you would like to go – put it on your bucket list. Opportunities abound to go on your own or with a group of friends or sponsoring organizations. The Audubon Nebraska Crane Festival – the nation's oldest birding festival – celebrates its 50th anniversary March 20-22 of this year in Kearney. Every year a couple of Whooping Cranes show up as well, and large flocks of American White Pelicans like to spend a few days on some of the large reservoirs and lakes in Nebraska (e.g., Calamus, Harlan, Wanahoo, Branched Oak, Wehrspann, and a few other assorted larger bodies of water).

March and April also are the months when several million Snow Geese migrate through eastern Nebraska on their way to nesting grounds on the Canadian tundra. With the geese come great varieties of northbound migrating duck species.

Passerines are more likely to start showing up in large numbers in April and May. Some early migrants to watch for are Eastern Phoebe, Brown Thrashers, Tree Swallows, Eastern Towhees, and by mid-April such neo-tropical warblers as the Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warbler (the latter often winters in the southern U.S.). By the last week of April, you may note an influx of a whole variety of Vireos, Warblers, Flycatchers, Wrens, Tanagers and the like. By late March, Turkey Vultures will also be drifting north. March, April and May are a local birder's dreamtime — the months birders dream about the rest of the year!

GREEN CORNER: HOW YOU CAN COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

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

Go native in March

Wildlife in our area relies on a habitat specific to our local ecosystem to provide food and shelter. Plan and plant native species in your gardens and yards. Rid your landscape of invasive species of plants.

Ideas sprout up in April

Every year, new technologies, new gardening ideas and products that benefit our environment are introduced. Discover the latest ideas by attending the Earth Day event at Elmwood Park, April 22.

ON THE HORIZON

March

MEMBERS' PROGRAM

MONDAY, MARCH 13

What: Virtual Crane Tour from Rowe Sanctuary. Enjoy learning about cranes and conservation efforts from a Rowe Sanctuary expert. Afterward participants can view a live stream of the cranes coming in to land on the river for the evening.

Where: Computer, laptop or tablet

When: 6:30 - 8 p.m.

How: Register for this field trip at audubon-omaha.org on the calendar page. You will receive an email with a link to the meeting.

Who: Members and the public (free)



April

FIELD TRIP

THURSDAY, APRIL 13

What: Birding by Ear with Jason St. Sauver. Join Jason "The Birdnerd" from Audubon Great Plains for all the tips and tricks to recognizing bird sounds around you.

Where: The Barn at Glacier Creek Preserve, 14810 State Street, Bennington, NE

When: 7 p.m.

How: Register for this field trip at audubon-omaha.org on the calendar page. You will receive an email with the meeting place and time.

Who: Members and the public (free)



STUDENT ART SHOW

SATURDAY, APRIL 15

What: Student Art Show and Awards Ceremony

Where: Harper Hall, Creighton University

When: 12-3 p.m.

How: Come see all entries in the contest and stay for the awards ceremony. If your student entered, please attend so you can pick up their artwork

Who: Student artists, families, teachers and volunteers are welcome



Field Notes from the President

by Christine Prescott

Once the Unicameral goes into session, my thoughts go to advocacy. How can we as an organization better advocate for those issues we believe are important? Audubon Society of Omaha has been tracking three main topics:

1. Conservation Easements, where no legislation has been introduced;
2. The Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET), where changes have been proposed to the manner in which education monies are spent; and
3. Platte River issues, which we continue to monitor.

Public meetings surrounding NET and Title 137 Rules and Regulations Governing Activities of the Nebraska Environmental Trust took place from October through December last year. When the executive order is finalized, the proposed regulations will be placed on public notice for a hearing before the Nebraska Environmental Trust. I urge everyone to familiarize themselves with Title 137 and then watch for information on the NET public notice and hearing, and both attend and speak at the hearing.

I urge you all to contact your lawmakers to urge them to support or defeat specific bills you feel passionate about. When you are writing or calling, there are some basic guidelines to follow.

1. Keep the letter to one topic. Be direct, concise and courteous.
2. Let the lawmaker know how the issue affects you.
3. Let the lawmaker know you live and vote in his or her state/district.
4. Ask for a reply — you want to know your legislator's position on the issue.

Advocacy is important and something we all can take part in as we look to protect our native ecosystems and restore nature-friendly environments in the greater Omaha area. We can all monitor the issues and stay informed, write letters to the editor, contact our senator, and, lastly, get others involved. Let's make a positive change for our environment!

TIP: Many legislative bills only allow online comments. Find bills and their status at nebraskalegislature.gov/bills. Send comments at least 24 hours before the bill's hearing.

Board of Directors update

STEMPLE MUSEUM FIELD TRIP

Twenty-five people joined ASO for the January 14th field trip to the Stempel Bird Museum in Macedonia, Iowa.

A big thanks to Ruby and Donna for allowing us the opportunity to see this impressive collection and hear about its unique history.



WE NEED YOU: BOARD OF DIRECTORS OPENINGS (DON'T BE SHY)

We invite any member to nominate **themselves** for open board positions for the July 2022 - June 2023 term. Since Covid limited our ability to meet, greet and recruit, we welcome you to step forward. No experience necessary, just a love of wildlife and our native ecosystem. Being a board member requires attending one meeting each month Sept.-May. Board members assist with Audubon activities, initiate new projects and vote to approve projects and our chapter's budget – an average of 2-4 hours commitment each month. Individuals with backgrounds in marketing/outreach, property law/real estate, or accounting and finance are especially encouraged to apply. We are also looking for committee chairpersons and co-chairs. Contact Julia Rawsley at 402-445-4138 or jrawnsley@audubonomaha.org for more information.

Prairies Are a Landscape Shaped by Disturbance

by Kayla Johnson



Left: Firefighters Kayla Johnson, Drew Granville, Les Lowry, Shawna Gorman, Reece Myers starting prescribed fire at Audubon Prairie Preserve. Photo by Matt Miller
Right: Cuming City Cemetery Prairie prescribed fire. Photo by Matt Miller

The spring dormant season in Eastern Nebraska was frequently a time to reset for the tallgrass prairies that historically covered what is now the Omaha area. Every fall, after a summer of growing tall, the thick visible vegetation of a native prairie goes dormant. The plants store energy for the next year in their deep root systems. The winter snows then compact the vegetation into a thick duff layer. Once the snow begins to dissipate, the dry conditions amount to a tinderbox, just awaiting a spark.

Lightning from dry lightning in the early spring is often identified as the beginning of many massive prairie fires. Native Americans in the area were also known to start fires. They appreciated the benefits these fires provided, such as ease of travel and fresh edible sprouts for their horses. They also recognized fire's value to the management of the landscape, and lived comfortably with the presence of wildfire. When fire approached their homes, they simply burned out around themselves and were not devastated by it.

Other lesser-known causes of fire on the plains included spontaneous combustion from the gas buildup inside of dead bison on the open plains. Along the oak-lined rivers, the accumulation of huge amounts of fecal waste from passenger pigeons was also known to

combust under the right conditions.

Historically, these fires would often have stretched for miles and miles. While they were vast, these fires were also patchy. Fire only burns where fuel exists, and goes out where it does not. Cold north-facing slopes, low wet areas, and areas that were heavily grazed upon by massive bison herds would have slowed and stopped the fire with irregular edges. Even the way in which a fire spreads across an area affects the ecological usage of the space.

Areas that slowly backburned increased the time that woody roots were exposed to heat and thus were effectively killed. Only the truest of prairie plant species could survive the heat, thus creating favorable conditions for such species as the Greater Prairie Chickens and bison. Areas that quickly head-fired, did not burn as hot, allowing this or that woody species to resprout from the reserves stored in its roots, creating areas favored by elk and Bluebirds.

The result of all this was a beautiful mosaic of differing but connected prairie pieces, shaped both by the frequency and the irregularity of disturbance in the prairie. A mosaic that had space set aside for every niche of life found under the Nebraska sun.

Remembering Clem Klaphake

(continued from page 1)

him a one-of-a-kind mentor to so many. I had the privilege of working with Clem in several capacities related to birding, particularly within the Omaha birding community. I first met Clem while taking one of his famous Beginning Birding classes at Fontenelle Forest. That inspired me to join Audubon Society of Omaha and become engaged in all of the activities that we mutually enjoyed, including the annual Christmas Bird Count and the semiannual Bird Seed Sales. Through Clem, I met many members of the Omaha and Nebraska birding communities who have become treasured friends. Clem convinced me to join him on the 60-foot HawkWatch tower at Hitchcock Nature Center for several years of fall HawkWatch experiences. Investing year after year counting migrating raptors in the sometimes frigid and always windy environment solidified our birding bonds. Throughout these years, I grew to appreciate Clem's encyclopedic knowledge of all aspects of birding — but more importantly, his wonderful ability to share all of this information in an understated and conversational way that truly respected the people he was teaching.

I remember one ASO field trip in particular that Clem was leading. By this time, I was feeling more comfortable with and confident in my birding skills and was even able to answer all manner of questions our members asked. Clem leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Slow down; you don't want to overextend yourself. I'm very proud of you." That was Clem personified: never afraid to share all of his knowledge and always helpful and caring toward those around him.

I'm sure that Clem is still birding somewhere on legs that work well and is still sharing his experience with everyone around him.

Nebraska Legislative update *by Kristal Stoner, Audubon Great Plains Executive Director*

The Nebraska Legislative year is well underway and there are several bills that we will be actively engaged in and monitoring relating to encouraging prescribed fire, supporting clean energy and supporting healthy river systems with emphasis on the Platte River.

First, it is worth noting that there were no bills introduced that attacked conservation easements! We have launched many education efforts to celebrate easements as a valuable tool for conservation, so we consider the lack of bills to eliminate easements a success!

The Riparian Protection and Water Quality Practices Act – LB 40

– establishes a policy for the Department of Agriculture to create buffer zones of native perennial plants around river banks. This is a so-called “natural solution” that provides several benefits: Nebraska’s native prairie plants have deep root systems that help to filter pollutants from water, prevent erosion, and create floodplains to reduce damage. In addition, native prairie grasses are extremely effective carbon sinks, pulling pollution from the air and turning it into enriched soil. The “Riparian Protection and Water Quality Practices Act” is an expansion of the Nebraska Buffer Strip program, which provides private landowners with financial incentives funded by a tax on pesticides. Habitat destruction and lack of continuous habitat constitute the number one threat to most endangered species. This policy shows that commonsense progress is within reach – and 30 feet at a time is no small step.

Second, LB 218 appropriates \$6 million annually for grant programs to manage bank and flood plain vegetation, to curb invasive species that disrupt streamflow. Audubon recognizes that ecosystem level riparian conservation in highly managed systems requires investment. The type of

work needed on the Platte River and other large rivers includes innovative control methods or land management practices that respond to introductions or infestations of invasive plants that threaten or potentially threaten the hydrology and associated habitats.

Third, LB 237 – will appropriate \$2 million over the next two years for the Low-Income Weatherization Assistance Program, to aid in carrying out energy efficiency audits and weatherization improvements. In conjunction with this bill, we support

LB 556 – which will increase assistance for nonprofits to deliver low-income weatherization programs. Nationally, low-income households spend a larger portion of their income on home energy costs, which is referred to as the “energy burden.” It is imperative that consideration is given to those who face disproportionate energy burdens, and implementing cost-effective energy efficiency measures helps reduce consumption of electricity and other fuels. In neighboring states, funding energy efficiency audits and funding weatherization improvements have been found to significantly reduce energy generation needs and has proved to be cost effective.

LB 534 declares a state of emergency on the level of cancer-causing nitrates in Nebraska’s water. More importantly, it would allocate \$150 million in grants for filtration infrastructure in rural communities, many of which rely on well water. Nitrate pollution in Nebraska is primarily caused by nitrogen-based fertilizer; according to the Nebraska Water Center, up to a third of the nitrogen applied to corn is leaching into the water supply. High nitrate levels are closely linked to colorectal cancer, thyroid disease, neural tube defects, and pregnancy complications, including anemia, premature labor, and miscarriage. While

this bill is extremely important, it does not address the root of the problem: overuse of nitrate fertilizer that seeps into the Ogallala Aquifer.

Next, LB 576 protects local fire departments that use prescribed fire from liability in the rare instance of collateral damage. It also allows fire chiefs to delegate their powers and duties to other members of their departments. Prescribed fire is one of the most effective methods for restoration of native grasslands and preventing wildfires, especially where invasive species have taken over. Audubon Nebraska has a long history of cooperation with local fire departments and private landowners; we will always support policies that give more power to local fire departments to ensure planned burns are done safely.

Finally, LB 655 would fund two statewide firefighting crews with technical expertise to support rural communities, to provide extra resources for wildfires, and to assist local fire departments in the prescribed burning to control the spread of Eastern Red Cedar trees by partnering with the Nebraska Forest Service.

However, there are also bills introduced that would hinder our ability to protect the state’s wildlife.

One of these is **LB255**. This bill would block NPPD, OPPD, and LES from pursuing “community-based energy development” projects meant to sell renewable energy to Nebraska electric utilities. NPPD has developed community solar farms in Scottsbluff, Ogallala, and other communities. This includes solar or wind farms or plants that generate electricity with biomass, landfill or methane gas, hydropower, fuel cells or microturbines. This would also prevent these utilities from federal IRA funds.

We will also oppose **LB 398**, which will change provisions relating to in

Nebraska Legislative update

(continued from page 4)

lieu of tax payments by the Game and Parks Commission (NGPC). NGPC manages property across Nebraska for wildlife conservation and for the enjoyment of the public. Budgets remain tight to achieve their mission, and this bill would increase their budget by potentially 3 million dollars. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission already pays an in lieu of tax payment on wildlife lands that have been acquired since 1977. Taxes are being paid the same as they would be if the land was in private ownership. The existing system is straightforward to apply because the value is determined by the county assessor at the time of acquisition. By adding the language of “highest and best use,” it would add significant complexity, inconsistency, and undue administrative burden annually based on what a potential

highest use could be across counties. This would divert funds needed to manage and restore our natural resources on both public and private land.

And finally, **LB 400** – Pheasant Restoration Act – is a misguided attempt to protect Pheasants from “nest predators” such as badger, coyote, opossum, raccoon, red fox, and striped skunk. This bill establishes a bounty program that would unnecessarily endanger common Pheasant predators. In Nebraska, if more Ring-necked Pheasants are desired, address their greatest threats – habitat loss and degradation. That would have the greatest impact. Predator reduction would have minimal population level impact.

Thank you for your engagement and your work protecting our birds!

The eyes have it – your photos

We need your bird photos! Please email them to Meadow Lark at asopublisher@gmail.com



Red-shouldered Hawk, photo by Ryan Johnson



Wood Duck, photo by Haylee McTee



Baltimore Orioles, photo by Clare Wiltse

RESOURCES & INFO:

HOW TO JOIN/RENEW/UPDATE

Join or renew your membership online at 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

STAY CONNECTED

Join our email list at 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.

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS:

- We need volunteers for our 2023 Student Art Contest and Show. There are a wide variety of dates and times available for helping with this popular community event. Learn more on page 3 of this issue. Contact Julia Rawnsley at jrawnsley@audubonomaha.org

KEEP BIRD FEEDERS CLEAN

With the avian flu outbreak still going strong, please take a few minutes to clean your feeders with warm, soapy water and allow to air dry before refilling. Stop the spread of this terrible disease that has already killed thousands of birds, both wild and domestic.

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

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Birds to see in Spring
Legislative updates
Keeping prairies healthy

Photo by Ron Hiett

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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