

*Pair of fox sparrows at my feeding station daily beginning April 5.*

*MUSGROVE*

4-9-82

Dear Dr. Kent,

Here are some items you may be able to make use of in bird records:

✓ On March 14 at DeSoto Wildlife Refuge I saw about 25 eagles; one was a full-plumage bald eagle; I saw another such bird but it may have been that first adult bald eagle. Others I couldn't be sure of, circling at enough distance that, with bad light, I couldn't pick up field marks. There were no geese as far as I know, though a few mallards were on thawing nearby farm fields and two flocks of Canada geese were migrating. Things were still pretty well frozen up.

That same day I went to Forney Lake hoping to find migrating geese, and ran onto large flocks (I estimated well over 10,000 in each) at Bartlett, north of Forney Lake and south of Forney Lake, but few if any geese on the lake itself, which was still frozen and where people were tramping around. Almost all of these geese were snow geese (including blue variety); there were perhaps a dozen each of Canadas and white-fronts. I believe they had just migrated in.

✓ A week later, on March 22, the only geese at Forney Lake were perhaps 100 white-fronts plus several small bunches of snows on fields in the general area. I did see a full-plumage adult golden eagle in good light, good enough I could see the golden feathers on its neck. At DeSoto that day I pretty much struck out, partly because the road through the refuge was closed, but I believe the goose flight had already moved on northward.

✓ Friday, March 26, my daughter, Jean Strueber of Nederland, Colorado, and I spent several hours at Bay's Branch near Panora. The most outstanding observation: at least 100 Common (American) mergansers, about 3/4 of them drakes; also 7 red-breasted mergansers (5 drakes, 2 hens) and 1 hooded merganser drake. There were at least 50 buffleheads also. Both of us agreed on this. There were 3,000 to 4,000 snow (and blue) geese, and probably 200 white-fronts. In the area of the pen where giant Canadas are raised were two sizes of Canadas smaller than the giants, about a dozen obviously wild geese altogether (and not counting free-flying giant Canadas which may have been reared there). Also a good sprinkling of other waterfowl, especially a lot of mallards at Lakin slough near Yale.

Now for the fun--and this isn't an Iowa record. On Sunday, March 21, I spent the day driving on back roads south of the Platte River between Grand Island and Brady, Nebraska, and saw many thousand migrating sandhill cranes in big flocks eating, loafing, and doing their pre-nuptial dance. Also fair numbers of ducks on the river and adjacent ponds.

The real thrill was just south of the river near Denman (Shelton exit from I-80). There was a very large flock of sandhills south of the road I was on; as I watched, somebody at the south edge of the flock scared up part of the birds and most of those that flew went northwest, some of them over my head.

One bird, flying alone, came northeast and appeared to be very light, so I bounced out of the car fast to get a good look as it came directly over me. It was an entirely white crane--white except for very dark wing tips; the tail was white also. I could hardly believe my luck and turned around, heading east to pick up the northerly road and try to see where that bird might have gone. As I did, a Fish & Wildlife Service truck came up from the south with two young fellows in it, and took off westerly along the road I'd been on.

This raised a tiny doubt in my mind; if that white bird was a whooping crane, it would seem to me the F&WS fellows, coming from the area where it had been spooked, would have followed it. At any rate, I never did locate the bird again and continued my westerly progress south of the Platte, seeing many more cranes. The sighting was about 9 a.m.

About 11 a.m. I overtook the F&WS truck and asked whether they had seen a whooping crane in the area--and they did remember seeing my little red VW Rabbit at that spot. The answer: no. However, at the south edge of that big flock they had seen a mature albino sandhill crane--the identification confirmed by a size comparison I couldn't make in my lone flying bird. This albino had very dark gray wing tips, which might easily have appeared black against the gray sky. Also there had been what they called a partial albino juvenile with slightly gray body plumage (almost white) and dark brown wing tips. They also said that while it was possible I'd seen a whooping crane, there had been no reports of any migrating that early this year, and that the migration was usually around April 1, two weeks or so later. Even so they didn't rule out the possibility my bird was a whooping crane.

I long ago gave up keeping a life list when I had a full-time job and so many other responsibilities that bird records were too big a problem. Even so, I would have recorded that crane, at most, with a question mark. After talking with the F&WS men, I think I probably saw what may be an even more rare crane, an albino--but I still wish I could report a whooper!

I've located a single copy of the check list of Iowa Birds Jack did as a supplement to the April, 1949, Iowa Conservationist, and will try to get a Xerox copy for you soon. I think ~~this~~ this was probably the only such list he did, but am not sure; it's the only one I've found. By coincidence, it has a whooping crane picture he took--a crippled bird in a park at North Platte, which Jean and I also saw the fall of the year he took the picture. At least I've seen a whooper, but not one I would have counted on a life list because it wasn't wild.

Sincerely,



Mary Musgrove

Big migration of Canada geese Monday, March 22, observed from I-80 between Aurora and Seward, Nebraska; also several thousand snow geese and a lot of ducks sitting on a farm pond, but even though I stopped briefly on the highway shoulder, I couldn't with 10x binoculars see enough to be sure what kinds of ducks except for mallards. One pond near North Platte the evening of March 21 had gadwalls, mallards, redheads (4), canvasbacks (2), ringnecks (4), scaup (about 6 or 8), buffleheads (12), all in pairs, in a pond less than 150 x 50 ft! And right next to a rural road.