

Though I'd lived in Nebraska many springs and many times had planned or promised myself to make the trek west to their staging grounds, I didn't see my first cranes until 2000. Then, on Alda Road south of Wood River, Nebraska, I pulled onto the edge of a gravel road and watched. At first, I didn't know what I was seeing and hearing. Movement in the cornfields. A chorus of trills, trumpets, rattles, calls, and croaks. A sky speckled with black dots. Dropping out of the sky were big birds, with broad, cupped wings, over six feet from tip to tip, fully extended necks, and dangling legs, an almost cartoonish sight that reminded me of people dangling from parachutes. I had never seen or heard anything like this great congregation. I wept with joy. Now, I return to the central Platte each spring just as the cranes do. The cranes know of no other springs than these along the Platte. How good and homey this stretch of the river must be to them after so many spring returns.