



*Prairie Fence Lizard*

# A NATURALIST'S EXPERIENCE AT HUTTON-NIOBRARA SANCTUARY

Reflection and photos by Scott Shupe

The winter of '22-'23 proved to be a long one for me as the new Sharp-tailed Grouse Lek Guide at the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary. I left western Kentucky on a warm, sunny day near the end of the second week in March. The temperature was in the low 70s and the Daffodils, locally known as "March Flowers," were in full bloom. The lawns and pastures were already green with cool-season grasses peeking through the topsoil and the buds of deciduous trees were swollen and ready to burst forth with new leaves. There would be inevitable cold snaps of a day or two yet to come, but spring had arrived in the southeastern US and nature was already wide awake.

But on the high plains of northern Nebraska many plants and animals still slumbered in the grip of winter. Nighttime temperatures occasionally dipped into the single digits and northern winds frequently howled with a vengeance across the Sandhills. Stubborn snow drifts still blocked some rural roads in the region when I arrived, and during my first few weeks on the sanctuary it snowed four times and produced one ice storm! I don't mind cold weather and I don't mind the snow. In fact, I appreciate extremes of weather and I have enjoyed experiencing climates ranging from steamy tropical rainforests to arid deserts to the frigidity of winter in Alaska. But I

am easily bored with seasons that extend beyond the standard that I grew up with in Kentucky. There we experience four distinct seasons, each lasting about three months. By those standards, in mid-March winter should have already begun to give way to spring. But it seemed as if my trip of a thousand miles to the northwest was also a trip backward in time. Like the proverbial Groundhog who saw his shadow, I was in for several more weeks of winter.

Happily, the Sharp-tailed Grouse were undeterred by the daily changes in the weather. Whether it was cold and windy, snowy, cloudy, or bright sunshine, they dutifully appeared on their leks each morning shortly before sunrise. The change of season, if still unapparent to me, was obvious to them. The time had come for the males to gather each morning and engage in the age-old business of getting primed for the chance to pass on their genes. And for the first few weeks on the leks it was all about the males. The females were busy somewhere else, doing whatever it is that females do while the guys were focused on vying for their attention. The males would strut and stomp, leap and dance, cackle and coo with ferocious intensity for several minutes and then suddenly everyone would stop and just sit and stare at one another. Then just as suddenly, at some undetectable



signal it would all begin again. This synchronized scenario would repeat itself dozens of times throughout the morning and continue every day for several more weeks. I will leave it to professional ornithologists to explain the science behind all this frenzy, but in the end it comes down to just one thing. Males trying their best to impress a female who is usually not paying them any attention.

As this was AOK's first year for offering Sharp-tailed Grouse lek viewing to the general public, the occupancy rate at Hutton House was light. Several days would often pass between guests arriving for lek tours. During these "off times" I did my best to complete a few tasks around the sanctuary suggested by AOK Executive Director Jackie Augustine, as well as to spend mornings out looking and listening for any prairie-chickens that might be in the area. But there was still plenty of time for me to explore the sanctuary both on foot and in the "Red Rattler," which was the name I attached to the somewhat cantankerous old Ford Expedition that was to be my transport around the sanctuary. (It was red, and it rattled a lot, thus the name.)

In addition to mornings spent watching grouse on the lek, the sanctuary offered many other equally memorable experiences. One of my favorite morning exercises was to drive to the bluffs overlooking the river. From a small knoll overlooking the Niobrara River and its narrow valley, I could always count on seeing dozens of White-tailed Deer in the fields below. Often, they would appear on the slopes nearer to where I sat. On many occasions flocks of Wild Turkey would also appear. In early April about an hour after sunrise I was getting bored with the deer and turkey and I had already identified the half dozen duck species resting in the marsh. The Canada Geese were mostly gone, having left on a warm south wind a couple days before. I was ready to leave the knoll when I heard what I at first thought was geese, but immediately I knew wasn't. It was a sound that was familiar, but before my mind could retrieve the origin of it, I saw them: two huge snow-white forms flying gracefully up the valley just 20 feet off the ground. From my vantage point on the knoll I was actually looking down on them. Their yodeling bugle echoed



*Lark Sparrow*

up the valley. Trumpeter Swans, gleaming bright white in the morning sun! I have seen swans before, in Alaska, Wyoming, Montana, and other places. But I didn't expect to see them here. And no matter how many times you see Trumpeter Swans, it is always a treat! On this early morning, looking across at the picturesque Niobrara River and at the expanse of bluffs beyond (a landscape largely unencumbered with any sign of humanity), I was in a moment that would stay with me long after my temporary position at the sanctuary was concluded.

Being able to live for a time near a federally designated wild and scenic river like the Niobrara would have been a satisfying experience in itself. Rivers have always held a special allure for me, I guess because, in the perceptions of a human, a river is timeless. In this special place on the Hutton-Niobrara Sanctuary where there was so little evidence of human intrusion, I could imagine what it was like here long before the "settlement" of America. Through my binoculars I could see in a small clearing across the river several dark, hulking forms. They were only Black Angus cattle, but for a moment I imagined them to be Bison. With that little bit of imagining, it seemed now that it was as it had always been. For me, and for many others who visit this wonderful sanctuary, this timeless feeling offers solace and spiritual nourishment.

**These experiences are the things that feed my naturalist's soul, and they are the reason I came here.**

It was not a job for everyone. Living alone for days at a time many miles from the nearest paved road. A 20-mile drive for a gallon of milk. No TV, no streetlights, no Starbucks, no highway sounds... no sign of humanity. In all directions lay only the land as nature had made it. For many people accustomed to life in urban America, this job would be like a prison sentence. For me, it was like "throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch."

It was not only the natural aspects of this temporary gig that attracted me. It was also a chance to play a small part in a conservation organization that I quickly came to admire. Upon reading the job description I did my research on Audubon of Kansas. I soon learned that AOK is a steadfast champion for wildlife conservation and environmental stewardship. This is an organization that has long been at the forefront of the fight to save what is left of America's highly endangered grassland habitats and the wildlife that depends upon them. The history of battles that AOK has fought for wildlife conservation shows that they are an organization unafraid to take on really tough challenges. For me, the chance to join forces with an organization having such admirable goals was a no-brainer. When offered the job of lek guide by AOK director Jackie Augustine I accepted immediately.

In this universe it is a given that every positive has its negative. The positives of living on a wildlife sanctuary were balanced against the enforced solitude of the job. Being alone is not the same thing as being lonely, but loneliness can seep in at times. My angst was the pain of being so far away from those I love the most, my sons and grandson. Thankfully, in a place like the Hutton-Niobrara Sanctuary, for the lover of nature there is always compensation for whatever emptiness may haunt one. At dusk, a young Striped Skunk would visit the bird feeders and scrounge beneath for sunflower seeds. A Red-tailed Hawk regularly perched in the ancient Cottonwood growing outside the kitchen window. A lone Western Fox Squirrel enjoyed daily breakfast at the bird feeders. The sight of these wild things always lifted my spirits and along with the local Whitetail herd provided enough company to blunt the lonesome moments. Add to that, on the prairie the sky on a clear night is nothing less than inspirational; as well, the sunrises and sunsets spewed from the horizon pastels of yellow, orange, pink, and purple. All these were compensation for the lack of human companionship.

By the end of the first week in April spring arrived with surprising suddenness. Just a few days after a





*Upland Sandpiper*



*Striped Skunk*

major ice storm, on April 8 at 6 pm the temperature gauge on the Red Rattler said 80 degrees! Early spring migrant songbirds like Say's Phoebe, Eastern Phoebe, and Song Sparrow had already appeared. Turkey Vultures and Great Blue Herons were back from down south and the sky overhead echoed the guttural sounds of flocks of migrating Sandhill Cranes that had recently left the Platte River Valley 120 miles to the south, many of them headed north to some remote wilderness area in Alaska or the Yukon.

In my daily forays throughout the sanctuary I was always on the lookout for tracks and other signs that would help me get a picture of what species were present in the area. Large excavations scattered across the landscape were the work of a resident Badger. Although I never caught a glimpse of it, the large round holes (exactly the diameter of a badger torso) were a telltale signature of a Badger digging out a hibernating ground squirrel or Kangaroo Rat. The two-track lane from the main road to the river was loose sand and always good for recording animal tracks. Every morning there were fresh Coyote tracks

following the lane. Each day the tires of the Red Rattler would obliterate the Coyote tracks, but the next morning they would always be there again. I surmised this Coyote had its daytime lair somewhere in the labyrinth of Oak and Cedar canyons that radiated up from the valley and that each evening he traveled up onto the prairie where dinner could be more easily obtained from the prodigious populations of rodents living among the grasses. The lane was not the shortest route from the canyons to the prairie, but it was the easiest. No one who knows anything about wildlife has ever accused a Coyote of being stupid. Why struggle through fields of dense grasses when you can just walk down the road! In this instance it would seem that Coyotes and humans have at least one thing in common. All things being equal, both will usually take the path of least resistance.

By late April the sun had climbed high enough in the sky to warm the prairie soils and awaken all the life forms that had slumbered through the winter. Following a year of exceptional drought, a rare spring thunderstorm one night gave the parched landscape

a much-needed drink. Almost overnight the prairie began to turn from brown to green. By now the Rough-legged Hawks that had been so common on the sanctuary had all flown north and were replaced by migrating Swainson's Hawks, some of whom may have wintered in South America. More and more passerine migrants began to appear. Lark Sparrows and Vesper Sparrows would be followed within weeks by Bobolinks, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and Grasshopper Sparrows.

By the end of my tenure I had spent many a morning in a pop-up blind on one of the two Sharp-tailed Grouse leks located on the sanctuary. I also had the privilege of traveling south to western Kansas where I guided folks to Prairie-Chicken leks during the second annual AOK Kansas Lek Treks Festival. During all this time I encountered people who shared my interest in natural history, a love of wild things and wild places, and a profound concern for environmental and conservation issues. These people helped make this temporary position so rewarding. They came from all walks of life but shared common values and virtues. At times as I sat with them in the dark awaiting the dawn and the appearance of dancing grouse, I would imagine each person as a tiny dot on a spinning globe in the vastness of space. Each of those dots randomly moved here and there across the surface of the planet. Some briefly travelling great distances and then returning to their own special place on the spinning ball. Others maybe rarely straying far from that special place. But here and now these disparate dots had converged in this place and time to pursue a common passion and engage in a common endeavor. I found a mutuality with each of them and a few would prove to be true "kindred spirits." Finding special people can be a bittersweet experience when accompanied with the knowledge that these moments of intersecting lives is temporary. I discovered that after people left, the days that followed with no clients often felt a little empty. One night as I sat alone on the porch enjoying the night sky I texted an old friend and mentioned my feelings. She replied with characteristic wisdom,

"saying goodbye to good people always feels lonely."

It is easy to think of a place like Hutton-Niobrara Sanctuary as a place preserved just for the wildlife. But wildlife sanctuaries are far more than just places for wildlife. They are also places for people.

**Organizations like Audubon of Kansas are not living, breathing entities, but they are made up of living, breathing people. And it is those people, working through these kinds of organizations, that give this old naturalist reason to have hope for the future.**

My tenure as lek guide with Audubon of Kansas has been brief and my impact on the overall objectives of the organization has been insignificant. But it has been a privilege to play my tiny role.

Finally, in my many weeks of living in the lodge known as "the Hutton House," I have come to know a little about the people who once lived here and whose generosity and appreciation of the natural world created this sanctuary. Most of us who have worked in conservation efforts during our lives like to think we have been able to make some kind of contribution — that our lives have in some small way made some kind of difference. I am not immune to that pretension. But when compared to the contribution of saving 5,000 acres of natural prairie and a significant stretch of a wild and scenic river, my life's work seems faint by comparison. To say that I have come to admire and respect the late Harold and Lucille Hutton would be an understatement. I have had the benefit of living in their home and roaming on their land. What a joy it would have been to be able to meet them in person. Perhaps they would have appreciated my company and we would have engaged in extended conversation. At the very least, what a pleasure it would have been to just be able to look them in the eye, shake their hands, and say, "Thanks."