

The Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary



A Green Emerald along the Blue Niobrara River

Paul A. Johnsgard

Over the first sixty mile segment of the Niobrara National Scenic and Recreational River, the river makes a graceful bend south, reaching its southernmost point along the northern border of Rock County. There, about 15 miles northeast of Bassett, a relatively new Audubon wildlife sanctuary is situated, like a green emerald set dangling below the blue necklace-like Niobrara.

The sanctuary, nearly 5,000 acres in expanse, is the remarkable gift of the late Harold and Lucille Hutton. Harold was the son of a prominent multigenerational homesteading family. He was a rancher, author, and entrepreneur. Harold was also a lover of nature, and decided that he would like to have his land preserved as a nature sanctuary after his death. He initially approached the National Audubon Society, and considered a number of other organizations and agencies. However, he felt they were all unwilling to promise that the land would never be sold, and/or might not be maintained in a manner that he envisioned. Luckily, Harold found a willing and interested listener in the form of Ron Klataske, executive director of Audubon of Kansas.

Ron Klataske first met Hutton in 1980, while Klataske was serving as a regional vice president for the National Audubon Society, and spearheading a strategy to win Congressional approval for designating a 76-mile stretch of the middle Niobrara as a national scenic river. This would insure that its remarkable geological, paleontological and ecological treasures would not be destroyed by the impoundment of the valley by a proposed \$205-million dam near Norden. The Norden

Dam was to be part of a massive dam and diversion “reclamation” project that would have benefitted only a few agricultural interests sixty miles away in Holt County, at the expense of the near-destruction of Nebraska’s most unique and most beautiful river.

Fortunately, the Norden project was eventually abandoned, but the bonds of friendship that had been formed between Klataske and Hutton persisted, and ultimately after Harold’s death his widow Lucille requested that Audubon of Kansas accept the title and stewardship responsibility for the land. It was not until 2008 that the last legal obstacle to the property’s grazing leases were settled, and the slow process of habitat restoration could begin.

I was part of an informal delegation from PRAIRIE FIRE, Nebraska’s free newspaper published under the banner of “The





Progressive voice of the Great Plains,” that visited the sanctuary in May, 2014. Four of us spent nearly three days roaming the grasslands, woods and wet meadows, and trying to absorb the rich diversity of plant and animal life. A Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, with over 20 participating males, was located on a grassy hilltop only a half-mile from the beautiful guesthouse

(Hutton’s home) where we slept, and from which we could hear the birds’ daily dawn dances.

From the guesthouse’s kitchen windows I watched and photographed many of the bird species attracted to the honeysuckle shrubs and backyard feeders, such as Spotted Towhee, Blue Grosbeak, Black-capped Chickadee, Yellow Warbler, and Northern Bobwhite. Turkey Vultures patrolled the prairie beyond, and dozens of Barn Swallows swarmed around the nearby-dilapidated barn like excited bees. Two gigantic cottonwoods immediately west of the house had probable nesting pairs of Red-headed Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers, as well as a possible pair of American Kestrels. In the past, Wood Ducks have also nested in the trees’ numerous cavities. The front porch on the east side of the house had an Eastern Phoebe nest with a resident incubating phoebe, who was repeatedly frustrated by the frequent human intrusions forced on her. But she persisted.

One of the two cottonwoods, a three-trunk giant, towered over the other. I decided to roughly estimate its circumference



by seeing how many of my fingertip-to-fingertip units of personal measurement (about 80 inches, here defined as one “johnsgard”) were needed to circumscribe it. I found that the distance was in excess of six *johnsgards*, or about 40 feet! What a rich history that tree has no doubt had, and what wonderful animal guests it must have hosted within its cavities and under its leafy canopy over the past century or so.

Along the sanctuary’s sandy upland roads I saw uncountable Lark Sparrows, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Western Meadowlarks and Mourning Doves, dozens of Grasshopper Sparrows and Upland Sandpipers, as well as a pair of Long-billed Curlews, Northern Bobwhites, and Sharp-tailed Grouse. White-tailed deer periodically bounded over the rich Sandhills prairie, and a lone, apparently lost, male Bison plodded peacefully past us on his way to some destination probably known only to him. A colony of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs was thriving within a well-fenced boundary. Ron had somehow managed to negotiate the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s policies to reestablish this colony on the property and legally exhibit prairie dogs for their educational and scientific values. In my opinion, the Commission’s near-absolute avoidance of any participation in proactive management of this species is inexcusable and an absurd failure to recognize the ecological value of this native keystone species. It is an insane policy, political imposed. We saw at least four young pups peering out from the top of one of the burrow mounds. Many of the burrows themselves of one had been covered by metal panels, similar to “cattle panels” but with 4”X4” opening, to keep out Badgers and Coyotes.

The road down to the river bottom wetlands was rich in surprises. Nearly all the trees, other than the invasive red cedars, were deciduous hardwoods, especially bur oak, but there was also green ash, boxelder and various eastern woodland shrubs, such as red osier dogwood, wolfberry, and chokecherry. A couple ponderosa pines are present on the sanctuary’s property and are probably the easternmost naturally occurring ponderosas on the south side of the Niobrara Valley. A grove of mature bur oaks surrounds the original homestead site, where a beautiful wood-frame house that had been built in 1903 and had replaced an earlier log cabin still stands, as does a precariously tilting outhouse. The house’s fate remains to be determined, although the outhouse is now probably only acceptable to Porcupines and Wood Rats, which don’t seem to object to sloping seats.



Perhaps Harold’s childhood home could become a counterpart of Aldo Leopold’s shack in the Wisconsin woods, a place where one can get a sense of the past, the immediacy of nature, the sounds and smells of the present, and a respect for all of our fore bearers.

The bottomlands had several meadows supporting territorial Bobolinks and Red-winged Blackbirds, as well as a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds, whose squeaking courtship calls sounded like so many rusty gates. Sandhill Cranes have nested and produced young in marsh meadows during the past two years, representing perhaps the first record of



Sandhill Cranes breeding in northern Nebraska since the late 1800's. Virginia Rails have been heard calling from the marsh at dusk, and we flushed a lone Great Blue Heron.

One evening we heard Whip-poor-wills, a distinctly eastern species near the western edge of

its range, calling in an oak grove near the Hutton childhood home. We also heard Yellow-breasted Chats calling in the riverine shrubs; this now mostly western species has nearly disappeared from eastern Nebraska, so its occurrence so far east is noteworthy. The orioles here appear to be of the eastern Baltimore species rather than the western-oriented Bullock's Oriole, although this region lies within the two species' broad hybrid zone. Likewise, the bunting here is reportedly the eastern Indigo Bunting, rather than the western Lazuli Bunting, whereas the resident grosbeak is evidently the western black-headed species rather than eastern Rose-breasted type. All of these species pairs sometimes hybridize in the Niobrara Valley. Both Eastern and Western Meadowlark species have also been reported from Rock County, further illustrating its transitional biogeographic location.

Along the river's edge we could see Beaver activity, and River Otters have also been observed here. Farther out on the river, Canada Geese were gathered, and several territorial pairs were scattered over the meadows where they could fight over territorial boundaries. Male Bobolinks resembling feathery flowers periodically erupted from the meadow into their melodic song flights, and on the adjacent hillside nearly a dozen Wild Turkeys were clustered in preoccupation with their own equally remarkable mating rituals.

After a long afternoon of hiking and birding, our last sunset was spent on an overlook that provides both upstream and downstream vistas for a mile or more. Looking upstream, the river is notably wide and shallow, with many bare sandy islands of varied artistic configurations. As we stood there, silently watching the daylight turn softly into twilight, and the sky colors slowly burn out into shades of gray, the unison calls of two Sandhill Cranes suddenly broke the silence and echoed down the valley. I felt goose bumps form on my arms as my favorite and most emotionally powerful sound in the world suddenly penetrated my consciousness; it reminded me yet again why Nebraska is my one and only true spiritual home.



Paul Johnsgard photos: *An Upland Sandpiper; a spectacular sunset view of the Niobrara River from the bluffs within the sanctuary; Spotted Towhee near the guesthouse; Bobolink in song flight over wet meadow habitat; an upland grove of cottonwood trees in morning light; Red-headed Woodpecker in the magnificent cottonwood behind the guesthouse; Grasshopper and Lark Sparrows on pasture fence; prairie carpeting breaks above Niobrara canyon; and, five Wild Turkey gobblers in courtship display.*



Paul Austin Johnsgard is an ornithologist, artist and emeritus professor at the University of Nebraska. His works include nearly seventy books including several monographs, principally about the waterfowl, cranes and gallinaceous birds of the world. Born in North Dakota, he majored in zoology at N.D. State University and then attended Washington State University for his master's degree. His early published works attracted the attention of Charles Sibley who invited him to consider a Ph.D. at Cornell University. Paul moved to England at the Wildfowl Trust at Gloucestershire founded by Sir Peter Scott. Two years later he produced his first book, the *Handbook of Waterfowl Behaviour* published by Cornell University in 1965. Paul is one of the most prolific authors of ornithology books and natural history.