



 **2026**   
AUDUBON GREAT PLAINS'  
**BIRD OF THE YEAR**

2026

# SPRING

NEWSLETTER

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# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Spring air brings a sense of renewal, and across Audubon Great Plains that energy is reflected in the work we do to protect birds and the places they need. At Rowe Sanctuary, we wrapped up another incredible crane season, welcoming visitors from all 50 states and from 20 countries. This year, we were especially honored to host an unforgettable event featuring acclaimed author Amy Tan and renowned naturalist John Muir Laws.

We were also thrilled to partner for the fifth year on the “Return of the Thunderbirds,” a seasonal event that builds community across cultures through the lens of conservation. As we look ahead, we’re excited to prepare for another season of Audubon Adventures nature camp at Brigham Sanctuary. Programs like these offer young people the chance to explore the outdoors, build curiosity, and develop a lifelong connection to nature.

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CAPTIONS: (Left) Western Meadowlark. Photo: Jonathan Nikkila/Audubon Photography Awards

(Middle) Clove currant or Golden currant is an early blooming native shrub providing food for pollinators in the spring and birds in the summer and fall. Photo: Jason St. Sauver/Audubon

(Right) One of the earliest bloomers across the Great Plains, ground plum fruit has been a food source for wildlife and people on the prairie for thousands of years. Photo: Jason St. Sauver/Audubon

None of this work would be possible without strong partnerships and sustained support. Our work is made possible by generous donations from our supporters and by dedicated, strong state-based conservation funding. From the Discovery Stations at Rowe Sanctuary to the Conservation Forage Program in North Dakota, these state-based conservation investments support habitat, communities, and wildlife across the Great Plains. This past year, across the three states of the Great Plains, we have seen state conservation funding diminish, while in other states, there are movements to increase funding.

I am very proud how we strengthened our voice this legislative session, engaging in Nebraska to respond to efforts impacting the Nebraska Environmental Trust and building relationships in North Dakota and South Dakota to advance conservation across the region.

Thank you for being part of this work. Your support helps make all of it possible.



**Kristal Stoner**  
Vice President Audubon Great Plains



## COMMUNITY BUILDING

Amy Tan and John Muir Laws onstage at Braided in Unison. Photo: Jimmy Rash

# CRANE SEASON AT ROWE SANCTUARY

Where migration becomes community.

By Marcos Stoltzfus, Rowe Sanctuary Center Director

Each March, central Nebraska is marked by the distinctive call of the Sandhill Crane, as hundreds of thousands of these birds descend on the Platte River Valley. A stopover on their long migration northwards, the river serves as a gathering point not only for cranes, but for the many visitors who are drawn to one of North America's greatest wildlife spectacles.

The cranes gather to feed, building up their fat reserves, and rely on the river's shallow, braided channels for safe nighttime roosting. This daily behavior allows spectacular viewing opportunities to visitors who flock to the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center to witness it for themselves. This year, roughly 18,000 visitors passed through Rowe Sanctuary's doors, representing all 50 states and nearly 20 countries, from Argentina to Zambia. Some were longtime repeat visitors, while others were here to finally tick off a lifelong 'bucket list' item.

"Crane season" at Rowe Sanctuary is an annual expression of connection—between people and birds, conservation and education—that reflects Audubon's Flight Plan milestone of Community Building in action.

More than 100 volunteers from 24 states contributed nearly 7,000 hours over just two months, guiding crane-viewing blinds, answering questions, and sharing stories. Their presence transformed observation into conversation, reinforcing Rowe Sanctuary's role as a welcoming hub during the migration.

Audubon programs further deepened visitor experiences. Over 2,000 people participated in classes, workshops, and events, including daily crane lectures, art workshops, speaker series, and family story times.

The connections and engagement took many forms through binoculars, sketchbooks, and thoughtful dialogue – encouraging visitors to connect to this special location and the birds that rely on it.

A highlight of the season was Braided in Unison, a special evening celebrating the Platte River's braided ecosystem and the united community that supports its conservation efforts. The event drew 250 attendees and featured acclaimed author of "The Backyard Bird Chronicles", Amy Tan, in conversation with author and educator John Muir Laws. Tan and Laws experienced the crane migration for the first time leading up to the event, and they took the opportunity to reflect on the emotional power birds can have to inspire us to care for their well-being and habitats. The event underscored how art, storytelling, and science can intertwine to motivate care for place.

Of course, the cranes themselves remained the heart of the season, with early-season tours offering particularly good viewing this year. Throughout March and early April, visitors enjoyed the daily rhythms of stunning early morning mass liftoffs, a sight that inevitably produced expressions of incredulous astonishment, smiles, and even tears at the sight of so many cranes rising up in synchrony. Evenings once again offered a chance to see cranes alight on the sandbars in unceasing waves, tinged with the ephemeral light of the setting sun.

Now, as the cranes continue north and the river grows quieter, crane season leaves behind more than memories. It reinforces Rowe Sanctuary's role as a place where community is built. A place where landscape, birds, and people come together—braided, like the Platte itself—into something stronger than any single strand.



Sangre Azteca dance group, part of Lincoln's Proyecto Cultural, performed dances of indigenous Aztec peoples during Return of the Thunderbirds 2026. Photo: Nick Manes

## COMMUNITY BUILDING

# WELCOME THUNDERS, RAINS, BIRDS, AND SPRING!

Year five of Return of the Thunderbirds, a cross-cultural community celebration.

By Jason St. Sauver

The days leading up to the 5<sup>th</sup> annual RETURN OF THE THUNDERBIRDS community event were unsettled and unsure. The forecast was for rains and storms. And while this is actually a big part of the event - welcoming back the first rains and thunders of the season - when hosting an almost all-outdoor event, it makes for nervous moments for the planning team.

RETURN OF THE THUNDERBIRDS is a cross-cultural community celebration of renewal. The brainchild of Renee Sans Souci, Umo<sup>ho</sup> educator and cultural consultant for Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, the event brings people together from across Lincoln and eastern Nebraska at a time significant to many indigenous peoples of the Upper Plains. It is a time to welcome back the Thunder beings and celebrate in ceremony a time of renewal for Mother Earth. It is also a time Audubon (and many others) celebrate the return of migratory birds and the budding and blooming of important native plants. So what better time to invite the community together to learn from and about our Native American partners and their culture while enjoying art, music, dance, food, birds, and more.

The event was held on Saturday, April 11, at the Indian Center, Inc. in Lincoln with 50 vendor booths filled with Native art and food, conservation organizations with nature activities, and community organizations sharing health tips for over 400 friends attending. But the success wasn't so sure at 8:00 AM that morning, just three hours before the celebration was to start. The much-needed rains had arrived and storms threatened to wash out the event. But, the rains stopped by 9:30 AM, setup began, and by 10:30 (just 30 minutes late) the event kicked off with a blessing from Ioway elder Rita McClure and a welcome from Renee Sans Souci and Audubon's Jason "the Birdnerd" St. Sauver.

Highlights for many of the attendees were performances by the Many Moccasins Dance Troupe from Winnebago, NE, and the Sangre Azteca dance group from Lincoln; seeing live birds from Raptor Conservation Alliance; and hearing the amazing words from keynote speaker Steve Tamayo of Bluebird Cultural Initiative about the importance of native languages and community connection. There was also delicious food from Onie's Native American Grill, and the afternoon finished up in style with invigorating music from South America performed by Daniel Martinez and Oscar Rios, a great way to top off five years of celebration with our community and for the birds and our planet.



# SUMMER 2026 EVENTS AT AUDUBON'S BRIGHAM SANCTUARY

Family Fun Day and Audubon Adventures Nature Camp to return to the sanctuary.

By Kelly Tebben, Senior Coordinator, Outreach

This is your invitation to join us in exploring the splendor of Audubon's wildlife sanctuary in Spiritwood, North Dakota! August 2026 offers two organized opportunities to visit and interact with staff at The Edward M. Brigham Alkalai Lake Wildlife Sanctuary. The 2,300-acre sanctuary is a vibrant mosaic of intact native and restored grasslands, wetlands, and riparian woodlands that offers critical refuge for hundreds of resident, migratory, and nesting bird species in one of North America's most vital flyways.



Left: Campers looking through binoculars. Photo: Kendall Van Zanten/Audubon. Middle: Family at Brigham Sanctuary. Right: Child at Family Fun Day. Photos: Kelly Tebben/Audubon

## Audubon Adventures Nature Camp August 11, 12, and 13, 2026 9:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Do you know any kids who are on the lookout for fun and educational experiences this summer? Our outdoor day camp for kids is back with new activities and lots of excitement planned for school-aged learners! Curiosity will take flight as campers ages 7 to 12 explore the outdoor wonders surrounding them on the sanctuary's lush landscape. Whether we're learning about birds, insects, plants, or natural systems, we're always focused on cultivating an appreciation for the amazing biodiversity in the Upper Great Plains. There's no better place to engage in natural exploration than a living classroom that successfully models science-based stewardship practices to benefit people while also conserving natural habitats. Each day of camp is different; kids can sign up for one, two, or all three days of camp to enjoy the special experiences our sanctuary and staff have to offer. There's always more to explore at Audubon Adventures Nature Camp!

## Family Fun Day | Sunday, August 9, 2026 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Returning this year with expanded opportunities to explore the property and learn about its habitats and wildlife, Family Fun Day promises to be a lark! Engage in fun activities for outdoor lovers of all ages or enjoy the trails and scenic splendor.

### Activities and opportunities include:

- Interpretive Trails
- Birding
- Sensory Discovery Nature Table
- Outdoor Bingo & Scavenger Hunts
- Themed Crafts
- NEW: Photography/Art Contest on site (more details to come!)



Scan the QR code to stay informed about upcoming events and for registration details.

## POLICY LEADERSHIP

# 2026 AUDUBON GREAT PLAINS LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

Defending conservation and advancing commonsense policy.

By Traci Bruckner, Senior Policy Manager

This legislative session underscored both the challenges and opportunities of advancing conservation policy—and the impact coordinated advocacy can have. Across Nebraska and South Dakota (North Dakota was not in session), we worked alongside partners to defend critical conservation funding, advance practical land management policy, and elevate science-based decision making.

## Nebraska: Protecting the Environmental Trust, Prescribed Fire and Renewable Energy

Our primary focus in Nebraska was defending the Nebraska Environmental Trust (NET), a key source of conservation funding supporting wildlife habitat, water, soil management, air quality, and waste management in all 93 Nebraska counties. This year, NET faced a major threat when the Governor proposed sweeping \$40.7 million from the Trust. In response, we convened a coalition of conservation organizations, landowners, sportsmen, community leaders, and advocates to protect NET.

That work mattered. Although some funds were swept, appropriators reduced the total to \$13.5 million, preserving most NET resources. Audubon members took action 294 times, responding to alerts and contacting policymakers to support this effort.

Alongside the budget debate, we worked to advance LR298CA, a constitutional amendment to protect NET from future sweeps. The bill advanced out of committee unanimously, and our advocacy led to Senator Tom Brandt naming this as his priority bill. Ultimately, the bill was passed over on the floor after misinformation shared by opposing senators weakened support.

We also supported LB823, introduced by Senator Dave Wordekemper, which represents an important step toward recognizing the role of prescribed fire in Nebraska as a science-based land management tool that improves ecosystem health and reduces wildfire risk. This bill advanced through the Legislature and was approved by the Governor.

On renewable energy, we opposed two bills that would have hindered progress and supported one that would promote responsible, habitat-friendly development. Learn more on page 12.

## South Dakota Engagement

In South Dakota, we supported HB1001, which passed and allows for prescribed burning of Title VI land (state-owned land along the Missouri River) by a person owning and/or operating adjoining land.



**CALLS TO ACTION**  
DRIVE POLICY CHANGE



**PROTECT NET**  
**294** TOOK  
**ACTION**

294 people contacted decision makers to support protections for the Nebraska Environmental Trust

## WHY CALLS TO ACTION MATTER



They amplify our collective voice.



They show decision makers that our community cares.



They turn awareness into action.



They create real change for wildlife, habitats, and future generations.

This common sense reform removes barriers to responsible land stewardship and reflects growing recognition of prescribed fire as a valuable land management tool.

We also engaged in legislation to end South Dakota's Nest Predator Bounty Program. This program paid participants \$10 per tail for raccoons, badgers, and other small mammal predators, with the intent to boost pheasant and duck populations. However, scientific research shows that this approach is ineffective. Removing small mammal predators doesn't impact populations unless it is very localized and intensive. Using those funds to increase and improve habitat would have a significantly greater impact. Although the bill did not advance, the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee expressed interest in shifting the program toward youth trapping, and the Department of Game, Fish, and Parks later advanced a resolution to end the Nest Predator Bounty Program and transition it into a Youth Trapping Recruitment Program and the Coyote Bounty Program.

## Looking Ahead

Looking ahead to the 2027 legislative session across the Great Plains, we will engage new incoming legislators, and develop legislative champions to advance key policy priorities aligned with our Healthy Birds, Healthy Planet policy agenda, including strengthening long-term protections for conservation funding.



# FUNDING THE FUTURE: GROWING PRAIRIE WITH STATE CONSERVATION DOLLARS

An investment in the protection of critical habitat for wildlife and people to thrive.

By Josh Lefers, Director of Conservation

Visitors observe Sandhill Cranes from the Discovery Station at Rowe Sanctuary, supported by Nebraska Environmental Trust funding.



Restoration on a CFP site. Photo: Charlene Prodzinski/Audubon



State conservation funding programs are powerful drivers of on-the-ground restoration in the Northern Great Plains. In addition to providing direct funding for conservation actions, state conservation funding also provides a critical match for federal and foundational grants, and helps diversify funding in the event of federal funding freezes or reductions. State conservation funding helps address declining grassland acres and falling bird populations by supporting solutions that meet the needs of both wildlife and working lands. These funding pools recognize that healthy natural resources are essential to the cultural and economic fabric of the Northern Plains, and they invest in projects that strengthen that connection.

At Audubon Great Plains, support from the North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) has been essential to developing and expanding programs that deliver real results for landowners and wildlife. In the past decade, over \$12.5M has been invested into conservation solutions such as Audubon Conservation Ranching, the Prairie Management Toolbox, and the Conservation Forage Program (CFP). CFP is a classic example of how state funding can provide an incubator to big ideas and accelerate conservation outcomes. This program, first developed by North Dakota partners with initial financial support coming from OHF, provides financial and technical assistance to producers who want to expand grazing or haying acres while restoring native grassland function. With support from OHF, Audubon has been able to establish healthy rangelands on over 20,000 acres of marginal croplands.

These grasslands improve soil health, increase drought resilience on the ranch, and create habitat for grassland birds and pollinators. Without funding from OHF, the Conservation Forage Program may still be just an idea, rather than a resounding success.

In Nebraska, the Nebraska Environmental Trust has invested a little over \$5M in Audubon centers and sanctuaries, unlocking nearly \$19M in matching funds. This investment has provided critical habitat management actions, improved visitor services, and expanded outdoor opportunities at these centers. Statewide, NET funding has impacted all 93 counties in the state, with \$422M in investment securing over \$1B in matching funds to advance conservation activities.

South Dakota does not currently have a state-sponsored conservation fund. A group of partners and dedicated landowners have started organizing a coalition to build support for legislation that would develop a fund. Audubon hopes that such a fund would provide expanded opportunities to conserve South Dakota's iconic landscapes, the way state funds have supported efforts in neighboring states.

Audubon Great Plains is proud to work alongside partners who recognize the importance of these programs. Continued support for the Outdoor Heritage Fund and the Nebraska Environmental Trust will ensure that conservation remains a shared public-private priority and that the natural resources of the Northern Plains remain vibrant for generations to come.



## HABITAT CONSERVATION

# A THOUGHTFUL PAUSE ON THE PLATTE-REPUBLICAN DIVERSION

Keeping Platte River water where it belongs.

By Melissa Mosier, Audubon Platte River Program Manager

Growing ecological concerns have prompted state regulators to temporarily halt review of a proposed project that would diminish streamflow in the Platte River. The Nebraska Department of Water, Environment, and Energy (NDWEE) recently announced it is suspending review of a proposed project that would transfer water from the Platte River Basin to the Republican River Basin. The delay, requested by the project's applicant, will allow time to study a serious concern: the risk of invasive carp spreading between river systems through the project's infrastructure. While invasive carp are already present in the Platte River, they are not found in the Republican River Basin, making the risk of water transfer a significant environmental concern. That's an important issue—and one worth taking seriously. Invasive carp have caused widespread ecological and economic damage across the country, disrupting native ecosystems, harming fishing industries, and even interfering with recreational use of waterways.

We appreciate both NDWEE and the project sponsors for recognizing these risks and choosing to pause rather than push forward too quickly. Taking the time to better understand potential consequences reflects thoughtful leadership and a willingness to get this right.

But even beyond the carp issue, there's a more fundamental problem with the project proposal: It attempts to move water from one already-stressed river basin to another. Audubon Great Plains has long opposed the project for this very reason. The Platte River is not a river with water to spare and in most years, it's already stretched thin. In fact, it is estimated that about 70% of its historic flow is diverted before reaching the central Platte.

Additionally, what streamflow remains supports one of the most important ecosystems in the Great Plains. Each spring, the central Platte becomes a critical stopover for migratory birds. Species like the Whooping Crane, Sandhill Crane, and Piping Plover rely on its shallow waters, sandbars, and braided river channels for rest and for survival after their long journeys.



The confluence of the North and South Platte Rivers near North Platte, NE, shows the diversion dam and canal where water would begin its route to the Republican Basin. Photo: Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Just downstream from the proposed diversion point lies Rowe Sanctuary, where decades of conservation work have helped restore and protect vital habitat. Reducing streamflow further could undermine those efforts and put even more pressure on species that are already struggling.

The reality is simple: you can't solve water scarcity by shifting water between basins that are both already limited. It's not a long-term solution, but a temporary tradeoff that risks creating new problems while worsening existing ones.

The added threat of invasive carp only strengthens the case against the project. Once introduced, these fish are nearly impossible to control and can permanently alter ecosystems, damage recreation, and hurt local economies. Invasive carp would degrade local fisheries, harm recreation, and create safety hazards for anglers and boaters. This would lead to significant economic losses for businesses that rely on fishing and tourism, along with high costs for monitoring and removing them. The current pause is welcome, but this project raises deeper concerns that no amount of delay can fix. Water management decisions made today will shape Nebraska's rivers for generations. Instead of moving water out of an already depleted system, the focus should be on sustainable solutions—protecting existing flows, restoring streamflow back to the river where we can, and ensuring that both people and wildlife have a sustainable resource to not only survive, but to thrive.

We're grateful to NDWEE and the project sponsors for taking a thoughtful pause, and we hope that same careful consideration ultimately leads to the right conclusion: keeping Platte River water where it belongs.



## Canopy members champion Audubon's bird-inspired, people- powered conservation.

The Canopy is a community of conservation leaders, advocates, and generous donors united by their love of birds. With annual gifts starting at \$10,000, Canopy members play a critical role in advancing Audubon's work and inspiring others to take action.

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### Exclusive Member Benefits

Through exclusive communications and events, The Canopy offers a space for conservation-minded leaders to connect with one another and the birds that spur us into action.

Become a Canopy member today to join us in August on our next Canopy trip to Tucson, AZ where we will visit the Appleton-Whittell Audubon Research Ranch and the Paton Center for Hummingbirds.

Please contact  
[alyssa.mirto@audubon.org](mailto:alyssa.mirto@audubon.org) for more  
program information.



UNO Students in a viewing blind during the policy presentation.  
Photo: Kaitlyn Kelly

# CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CONSERVATION

The UNO Conservation Society visits renowned Sandhill Crane migration.

By Kaitlyn Kelly, Sustain UNO President

One of the largest wildlife migrations in North America occurs in central Nebraska each spring when more than half a million Sandhill Cranes make a pit stop on the Platte River Valley before continuing their northward journey, drawing in thousands of tourists as well as students from the UNO Conservation Society.

From mid-February to early April, the skies, cornfields, and flowing waters of the Platte River are populated with Sandhill Cranes, a large, gray-bodied bird with a distinguishable red crown and white cheeks, known for their trumpet-like call. This year, twelve students from the UNO Conservation Society, a club focused on conservation-related efforts on campus, visited the renowned migration with assistance from the Audubon Society of Omaha.

After months of prep, the club members set off on a two-and-a-half-hour road trip to the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary on Saturday, March 7, for a day of learning and sightseeing. The UNL Conservation Society was also in attendance.

According to Morgan McAndrew, the Vice President of the Conservation Society, the club was in charge of gathering students and figuring out transportation while the Audubon Great Plains team planned the rest, including educational sessions, dinner, and a guided crane experience.

McAndrew said this was her first time visiting the Sandhill Cranes, along with most of the students in attendance. “It was a great opportunity to show students just how cool Nebraska is,” McAndrew said. “It is one of those events that can be cherished forever.”

Speakers for the educational sessions included Melissa Mosier, Platte River Program Manager; Marcos Stoltzfus, Rowe Sanctuary Center Director; and Traci Bruckner, Senior Manager of Policy for the Audubon Society’s Great Plains region. In the sessions, students were informed about the significance of the Platte River and Rowe Sanctuary for the longevity of the cranes.

For example, the river, historically known to be “a mile wide and an inch deep,” provides a critical open-space habitat for the cranes, allowing them to see approaching predators.

However, due to increasing demand on freshwater ecosystems, much of the Platte is being diverted for irrigation and dams.



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# WACHISKA AUDUBON RECEIVES “AUDUBON IN ACTION” GRANT

Protecting green space, preserving nature.

by Mark Brohman, Executive Director, Wachiska Audubon Society

The National Audubon Society recently awarded Wachiska Audubon Society (WAS) a \$5,900 Audubon in Action Grant to support its Prairie Pines Buffer Plan, an effort to guide development around its 145-acre Prairie Pines Nature Preserve (PPNP) in southeast Nebraska. The grant is matched by a local donor, with additional funding from WAS and Prairie Pines Partners. WAS serves 17 counties and manages significant conservation land, including 10 prairies totaling 741 acres and 23 conservation easements covering 384 acres.

The Prairie Pines Buffer Plan will create a master plan for the land surrounding PPNP, focusing on balancing growth with conservation. A consulting firm specializing in greenspace planning has been hired, and a working group is being formed with representatives from the City of Lincoln, local agencies, landowners, the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, the Otoe-Missouria Tribe, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and other partners.

One key issue is a 305-acre tract adjacent to PPNP owned by the City of Lincoln and proposed for residential development. The plan will emphasize protecting green space, preserving natural drainage systems and riparian corridors, and expanding trail connections. It will also address potential impacts from the proposed East Bypass, a major four-lane roadway planned less than two miles from the preserve.

Prairie Pines Nature Preserve. Photo: Mark Brohman/Wachiska Audubon Society

The goal is to incorporate the plan’s recommendations into the City of Lincoln’s future Comprehensive Plans, ensuring that development near PPNP is thoughtfully managed.

This project aligns with National Audubon’s Flight Plan, particularly in Policy Action, Habitat Conservation, and Community Building. It supports proactive, science-based planning by bringing together diverse stakeholders to shape land-use decisions. It also advances habitat conservation by protecting critical ecosystems threatened by rapid development.

Equally important, the project promotes community engagement. Public meetings and planning sessions will invite residents to participate in shaping the area’s future, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for conservation. By involving a broad range of partners and community members, the Prairie Pines Buffer Plan aims to ensure that future growth reflects both environmental priorities and local needs, while continuing Lincoln’s efforts to protect valuable natural spaces.



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Kristal Stoner at the Nebraska State Capitol. Photo: Kristal Stoner

## CLIMATE ACTION AND POLICY LEADERSHIP

# PROTECTING PROGRESS: KEEPING NEBRASKA MOVING FORWARD ON CLEAN ENERGY

Investing in renewable.

By Kristal Stoner, Vice President and Executive Director

This legislative session, Audubon Great Plains was proud to stand up for Nebraska's clean energy future—and for the birds, wildlife, and communities that depend on it.

We successfully helped prevent the passage of two bills—LB1026 and LB1027—that would have slowed or halted renewable energy development across the state.

LB1026 would have restricted the ability to retire or update older energy facilities, even when newer, more efficient technologies are available. That kind of limitation risks locking Nebraska into outdated systems and prevents investment in cleaner, more cost-effective energy solutions. At a time when climate change is already impacting birds through heat waves, severe storms, and habitat loss, we need flexibility to adopt better technologies—not barriers to progress.

Similarly, LB1027 would have reversed years of progress by reintroducing regulatory hurdles that previously discouraged renewable energy investment.

Nebraska passed an important regulation years ago that is necessary in a public power state to level the economic playing field for wind and solar development. We have seen that renewable energy development benefits landowners and strengthens rural economies.

At the same time, we supported LB1186, a forward-looking bill designed to attract responsible renewable energy investment while ensuring projects are thoughtfully sited to protect birds and habitats. While the bill did not pass this year, we remain optimistic. With continued collaboration, there is always next year.

Audubon believes the path forward is clear and that we need to accelerate clean energy while doing it right, in ways that avoid sensitive habitats, minimize impacts, and invest in conservation.

To learn more about our broader policy work this year, see our legislative wrap-up article on page 6.



Illustrated by Brady Karg/Audubon

## BIRD OF THE YEAR: AND THE 2026 WINNER IS... THE WESTERN MEADOWLARK

Celebrating the iconic grassland species.

By Amanda Booher, Communications Manager

This year, we launched Audubon Great Plains' Bird of the Year contest to celebrate the many amazing bird species found in our region. We narrowed down to ten species and shared them on social media to build engagement and have our followers vote on the winner.

With 115 votes cast, our region has spoken, and in a tight race, the winner is the Western Meadowlark with 27 votes, and the Bobolink came in a close second with 24 votes.

It came as no surprise to us that the Western Meadowlark was selected as the winner. The state bird of North Dakota and Nebraska, it serves as a powerful symbol of the Great Plains. The song of the Western Meadowlark represents the arrival of spring, joy, and an open prairie landscape. The Western Meadowlark breeds mostly in natural grasslands, abandoned weedy fields, and rangeland.

### Migration

In early spring, often March through April, Western Meadowlarks return to their nesting grounds in the Great Plains to breed again, filling prairies with their distinctive flute-like song and marking the seasonal renewal of grassland ecosystems.

During spring and summer, these birds nest in native prairies, hayfields, and grazed grasslands, where males can often be found singing from a fence post to defend their territory and attract a potential mate.

Western Meadowlarks are short-distance migrants and begin to head south in mid-October through November. Western Meadowlarks from the Great Plains (North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska) head to states such as Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and parts of the Mississippi Valley.

### Conservation Challenges

In North America, grassland species are experiencing the fastest decline of any bird group. Grassland species have experienced more than a 40% decline since 1970. Like many declining species, the Western Meadowlark faces a variety of conservation challenges, including residential and commercial development limiting green spaces and natural vegetation, and agricultural practices, to name a few.

Generations of farmers have been good stewards of land and wildlife while also providing food for people and livestock. However, some agricultural practices, like overuse of pesticides, can reduce the availability of food, clean water, and safe places for birds to feed, rest, and breed. And, the conversion of natural vegetation, such as native prairies, to agriculture has reduced the areas once used by birds. Our working lands team works with landowners and producers to enroll in programs providing cost-share assistance, such as the Prairie Management Toolbox and the North Dakota Conservation Forage Program.

Through our new Audubon Great Plains' Bird of the Year program, we hope to build awareness and inspire action. As we celebrate the Western Meadowlark throughout the year, everyone can play a part. At home, you can plant native species in your yard or garden and provide habitat for birds using our native plant database. And lastly, you can spend time outdoors, visit a prairie, and grow your connection with birds and the places they call home.

## Who We Are

Kristal Stoner, Executive Director  
Amanda Booher, Communications Manager  
Juli Bosmoe, Working Lands Program Manager  
Adam Brendemuhl, Range Ecologist  
Stephen Brenner, Avian Biologist  
Traci Bruckner, Senior Policy Manager  
Keith Fisk, Range Ecologist  
Lizzy Gilbert, Senior Director of Development  
Chelsea Heck, Prospect Engagement Manager  
Cat Henning, Development Manager  
Sam Kiley, Leadership Giving Director  
Charli Kohler, Range Ecologist  
Lindsey Lee, Operations Manager  
Josh Lefers, Conservation Director  
Melissa Mosier, Program Manager, Platte River Initiative  
Kelly Tebben, Senior Outreach Coordinator

### Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary

Marcos Stoltzfus, Center Director  
Kass Goentzel, Facilities Assistant  
Amanda Hefner, Education and Outreach Manager  
Amanda Hegg, Senior Conservation Associate  
Ashley Jarmin, Operations Manager  
Katie Moore, Volunteer Coordinator  
Bryce Sutton, Conservation Program Technician  
Anne Troyer, Senior Outreach Coordinator  
Cody Wagner, Conservation Program Manager

### Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center

Meghan Sittler, Director  
Matt Harvey, Project Assistant  
Ed Hubbs, Habitat and Private Lands Manager  
Brady Karg, Senior Education Coordinator  
Wyatt Koehler, Senior Habitat Coordinator  
Kevin Poague, Operations Manager  
Amy Plettner, Caretaker  
Jason "The Birdnerd" St. Sauver, Senior Education Manager

## Where We Are

### Audubon Great Plains - Dakotas State Office

3002 Fiechtner Dr S, Suite A., Fargo, ND 58103  
(701) 298-3373  
[www.audubon.org/great-plains](http://www.audubon.org/great-plains)

### Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at Rowe Sanctuary

44450 Elm Island Road, Gibbon, NE 68840  
(308) 468-5282  
[rowesanctuary@audubon.org](mailto:rowesanctuary@audubon.org)  
[www.audubon.org/rowe](http://www.audubon.org/rowe)

### Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center

11700 SW 100 St, Denton, NE 68339  
Mailing address: PO Box 117, Denton, NE 68339  
(402) 797-2301  
[scp@audubon.org](mailto:scp@audubon.org)  
[www.audubon.org/spring-creek-prairie](http://www.audubon.org/spring-creek-prairie)

### Chapters

#### Fargo-Moorhead Audubon Chapter

Fargo-Moorhead, North Dakota  
[Facebook.com @F-M Audubon Chapter](https://www.facebook.com/@F-M-Audubon-Chapter)

#### Prairie Hills Audubon Society phas-wsd.org

[Phas.wsd@rapidnet.com](mailto:Phas.wsd@rapidnet.com)  
605-787-6466

#### Audubon Society of Omaha

**PO Box 3542**  
Omaha, NE 68103 (402) 445-4138  
Nebraska Bird Line (402) 721-5487  
[www.audubon-omaha.org](http://www.audubon-omaha.org)

#### Wachiska Audubon Society

3100 No. 112nd St., Lincoln, NE 68527  
(402) 486-4846 [office@wachiskaaudubon.org](mailto:office@wachiskaaudubon.org)  
[www.wachiskaaudubon.org](http://www.wachiskaaudubon.org)

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Greater Prairie Chickens lekking in central Nebraska. Photo: Brady Karg/Audubon

