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Heeding the Call of the Sandhill Cranes

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SECTION: THE NATURAL WORLD

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By Malcolm G. Scully, editor at large.

GRAND ISLAND, NEB.

Paul A. Johnsgard has made this trip almost 200 times—as many as five times each March for the past 40 years. He leaves Interstate 80 near this central-Nebraska city and follows Platte River Road along the southern banks of the braided river toward Kearney, some 40 miles to the west.

On one such trip this year, the ornithologist and professor of zoology at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln talks about a career that began in 1961 and has produced an average of a book a year ever since. He describes early research on the genus *Anas*, which includes mallards, pintails, and other familiar ducks, and his expanding interest in other genera and species.

But most of all he talks of sandhill cranes and of their annual arrival for a month long stay along the Platte, where they refuel before continuing their spring migration to breeding grounds far to the north.

The cranes draw Johnsgard back to this stretch of the river year after year. The stately gray birds, which stand about four feet tall and have a bright-red crown, have enthralled him from the first time he saw them. He has grown intimately familiar with their habits. They feed by day in cornfields and wet meadows, and return each night to the river, where they roost on sand bars. In March, an estimated 500,000 sandhill cranes, out of a total population of 700,000, congregate along the Platte River.

Since that first encounter 40 years ago — he calls it "a day of epiphany" — Johnsgard has studied them, admired them, written about them, and become a well-known figure across the state. Two of his books on the species, *Crane Music* and *Those of the Gray Wind*, are available in virtually every motel gift shop in this part of Nebraska.

Conversations during such a journey proceed in fits and starts. An estimated seven to nine million birds pass through the Platte Valley from late February through the end of April, and Johnsgard frequently interrupts himself to point out as many of them as possible to his traveling companions and to share his pleasure in them.

The journey ends at dusk in a blind along the river, some 100 yards from an unheated cabin where Johnsgard has spent many a night, in the unreliable weather of early spring, marveling at the migratory pageant taking place above and around him.

The prairie sky is filled with skeins of birds — not only the cranes, but snow geese, Canada geese, greater white-fronted geese, mallards, pintails — some flying in disorderly flocks and others in long lines that at high altitudes appear to be dark threads in the failing light. They descend as night falls, seeking the safety of the river. The air is filled with their calls.

For Johnsgard, and for anyone who has ever taken joy or solace from the wild rhythms of the seasons, it is a reverential moment. "I've seen this hundreds of times, and I still get shivers," he says. "It is a spiritual experience. It is renewal."

Spiritual experience and renewal are not words normally associated with a dispassionate scientist, and Johnsgard's use of them reflects a lot about his unusual career. He is widely recognized as a first-rate ornithologist, but he is as well a naturalist and writer with a passion for the creatures he studies and the places they frequent.

His 40 books include not only such works as the *Handbook of Waterfowl Behavior* (Cornell University Press, 1965) *and The Avian Brood Parasites: Deception at the Nest* (Oxford University Press, 1997) but also *Song of the North Wind: A Story of the Snow Goose* (Doubleday, 1974) *and This Fragile Land: A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills* (University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

He even wrote, with his daughter Karin — who was completing her senior year in high school at the time — a children's book, *A Natural History of Dragons and Unicorns* (St. Martin's Press, 1982). It purports to be a true account of fanciful creatures, complete with checklists and identification guides, but it is also a not-so-subtle plea for protection and understanding of all species.

"Our dragon and unicorn populations have declined precipitously in recent years," the preface begins. "Not only have dragons been excluded from all 'nice' neighborhoods and driven out of most states, but they are hated almost everywhere. ... Unicorns have suffered primarily from our unwillingness to leave enough wilderness and opportunities for personal freedom as are necessary for such an innocent and solitary animal to survive."

Johnsgard arrived at the University of Nebraska in 1961 as a young ornithologist with a Ph.D. from Cornell University and two postdoctoral years at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust in Slimbridge, England. He had been told of the job by his mentor at Cornell, Charles Sibley, who said Nebraska would be a good place from which to look for another job. He has never done so.

"I came to love Lincoln as a city and Nebraska as a state," he says, adding that the state had been generally overlooked ornithologically. "I had the whole state to myself." That love has taken him each year back to the site of the crane migration, and further west to the Sandhills —a 20,000-square-mile area that, he

says, is the nearest thing to wilderness remaining on the Great Plains — a place, he says, where "you can push the seek button on the car radio, and it goes round and round."

One of the few aspects of the state and the university that he doesn't love is the emphasis on big-time football. He delights in describing how campus police once towed his car when he was working at his office on the Saturday of a big game, and how he has attended only one Cornhuskers game in his 40 years in Lincoln. On that occasion — in 1972 — he went only as a favor to a nonfaculty friend who desperately wanted to see a game between Nebraska and its chief rival, the University of Oklahoma.

Johnsgard's visits to the cranes this spring have in some ways a special meaning for him. This is his last year of teaching at the university; he will become a professor emeritus at the end of the academic year. And while it is time to move on, he says, it is not time to stop moving.

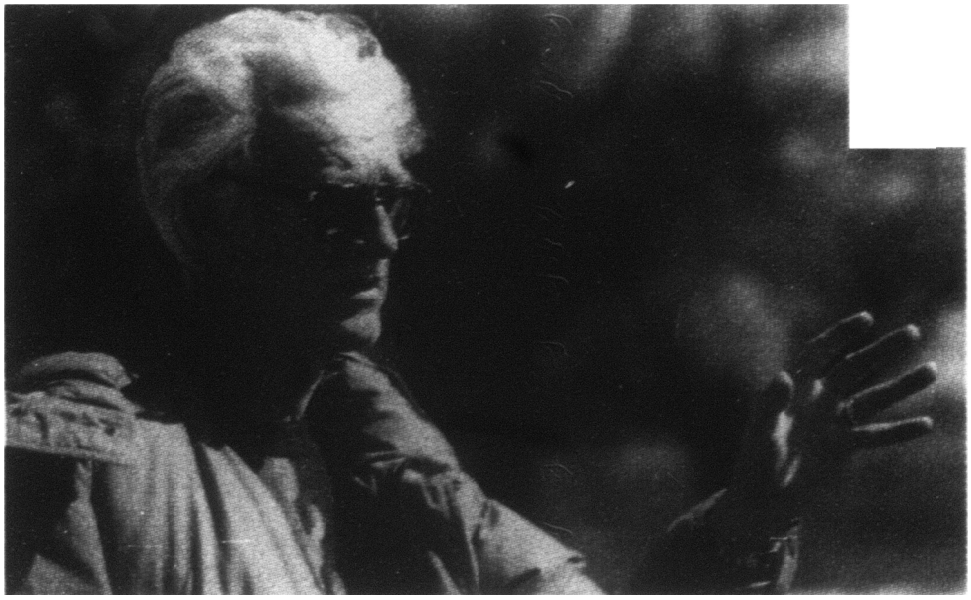
He plans to continue his role as an interpreter of the cranes and their migration, which draws a growing number of birders and tourists to central Nebraska each spring. In one week in March, he led a group of major contributors to the Nature Conservancy on a crane-viewing tour and received an award from the National Audubon Society for longtime service to conservation.

Whatever he does, he says, he will continue to take up the cause of the cranes, and to be an advocate for what wildness still remains.

In the preface to Crane Music, he writes that for him, "nearly three decades after first seeing sandhill cranes on the Platte, witnessing their return in spring is as much a part of my annual ritual as are Christmas and Thanksgiving, and perhaps even more rewarding.

"Like Christmas giving, I savor the sandhill cranes of the Platte Valley most completely when I can present them to others as a special gift, and detect in them the same sense of discovery and enormous pleasure that I know so well and feel so deeply."

Anyone who spends a few days with Johnsgard on the Platte will be reassured that he will continue to bestow those gifts, and that he will do so in the spirit of a quotation from Emily Dickinson taped to his office door: "I hope you love birds. It's economical. Saves going to heaven."



Paul A. Johnsgard loves the expansive Sandhills area of the Great Plains. "You can push the seek button on the car radio, and it goes round and round." (Photo: Jane Scully)

Migrating sandhill cranes feed in cornfields and wet meadows along the Platte River. (Photo: Brett Hampton)