



The Burrowing Owl

April
2026

A Publication of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union

Dedicated to the study, appreciation, and protection of birds

Spring Meeting at Ft Robinson: 29-31 May

After last year's Tri-state meeting in South Sioux City, the NOU will return to northwest Nebraska this year and have its spring meeting at Ft. Robinson State Park. The meeting location will be the Buffalo Soldiers Barracks (location marked by the red star on the map). The meeting will take place at the end of spring migration at the very end of May. Field trips will focus on Pine Ridge and high plains specialties. There will no doubt be extra-special focus on any Warbling Vireos encountered following last year's split of the species into Eastern and Western Warbling Vireo. Status of the two warbling vireos in the panhandle is a bit murky and late spring should be a time when birds will be singing their hearts out. Song is the best and arguably only way to confidently distinguish the two warbling vireos, so spring meeting attendees should brush up.



Friday evening speakers will be Stephen Brenner with Audubon Great Plains and Lucas DeCicco of the University of Kansas. Both presentations focus on towhees in Nebraska. Saturday evening's speaker will be Kaitlyn Parkins of the American Bird Conservancy. Kaitlyn will be presenting on reducing avian mortality from window collisions.

Meeting registration can be done online: <https://noubirds.org/Meetings/Next.aspx> For those not able to register online, a form can be found in this newsletter that can be mailed to NOU Treasurer David Cunningham. Lodging at the park is apparently booked up, but camping remains an option. The Hilltop Inn (308-665-1144) is an option for lodging in nearby Crawford, as is the Sage Motel (308-665-5300) in Harrison. There are multiple lodging options available in Chadron. Cabins at Chadron State Park are also an option, visit <https://outdoornebraska.gov/location/chadron/>.

In addition, students hoping to attend may apply for a scholarship to cover partial meeting and travel costs. For more information, interested students should contact NOU President Paul Pearson at propearson@gmail.com.

CUT OFF DATE: Registration that includes meals must be completed or received by 10 May. Individuals hoping to attend the meeting without meals may do so up to the meeting date.



Prothonotary Warblings

4/14/2026

Paul L. Pearson, Ph.D.

President-Nebraska Ornithologists' Union



A very “Ruff” Crew, NP Dodge Park, Douglas Co NE 4/10/2026. From left to right: Jeff Alexander, Justin Rink (Ruff Finder), Thane Dinsdale, unidentified man, Michael Willison, Keegan Brown and Zach McMullen.

Cranes and Crane Watchers-Common and not so Common

It’s no surprise why Nebraska’s annual Sandhill Crane stopover is always a highlight of the year for so many locals and visitors from around the world. The irresistible ancient cacophony on the Platte with the chance to see a Whooping Crane pulls people year after year. An “almost albino” Sandhill Crane in Hall County was a cool anomaly in March 2026 that probably gave heart palpitations to some and fooled others.

I don’t know if ABA listers have fully caught on to an [ABA Code 4 \(casual, not seen annually\)](#) that is inching close to regular status in Nebraska and thus the ABA. This Eurasian species sometimes joins flocks of lesser Sandhills in Siberia. The [NOU Records Committee](#) criteria to move from casual to regular require sightings in 9/10 years. We missed a year recently, so we aren’t quite there for a few years, but as the spread of skilled and diligent birders continues there may come a day that Nebraska pushes the Common Crane up to a Code 3 bird. More than one of the 2026 records had 2 birds together. Do the few Common Cranes that have assimilated with the Sandhills flocks



find each other on the breeding grounds and make little Common Cranes that stick with the same flocks? Something worth watching.

One ‘celebrity’ that recently took in the spectacle was none other than [The Joy Luck Club](#) author Amy Tan. A departure from her previous works, [The Backyard Bird Chronicles](#) detailed her journey from a novice quarantine-era feeder/rough sketcher to an obsessed birder and avian artist. Her story shows the proven power of patience, careful observation and persistence in developing an appreciation and true understanding of nature. Pictures and video of her “side trip” including Whooping Cranes, popped up in my Facebook feed. I recommend the follow (see <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorAmyTan>) just to read the crazy turn her trip to Nebraska takes after that...it involves singing in a dominatrix outfit, Matt Groening (Simpsons) and a TSA invasion over protein powder.

First Quarter Stats and Highlights

Is anybody doing a Big Year in Nebraska in 2026?

I’m sure several of you are eyeing 300 again or for the first time, but it isn’t clear that anyone is going Big after Tobin Brown’s record-setting 2025. Given that April and May are the months to pile up the numbers, some more information may emerge. Judging by the Nebraska Birding Discord, I know there are a LOT of relatively new birders excitedly running up their state/life lists, which is great to see.

The top 6 all having >150 of 248 for the year (as of 4/20) are:

Dave Cunningham 184, Tobin Brown 183, Jason St. Sauver 172, Stephen Brenner 169 Jackson Bowman and Eugene Huryn at 166. The next update will reveal much more, as the number of potential species in April/May is huge for everyone who gets out there.

Now’s the time for everyone to hit those numbers in the month of May for the 4th annual Nebraska Birding Bowl! Sign up for it now! [Nebraska Birding Bowl](#)

Plan to finish your Birding Bowl strong on the last weekend of May at the [NOU Spring Meeting](#) at Fort Robinson State Park in the Pine Ridge. Check out the agenda and [register](#) now. Meals need to be purchased by 5/10/26. The Lodge rooms at Ft Rob are already sold out, but cabins, camping and other options remain available at the park. Chadron hotels and motels have rooms available but there are no special rates for the NOU meeting.

The birding is always the highlight, but we have 3 great speakers. Friday night is all about Nebraska’s two towhee species (Spotted and Eastern) and hybrids, including distribution in the panhandle and the genomics of birds in contact ranges in the Pine Ridge. Saturday night we’ll learn about the impact of glass collisions on birds. [See the agenda and speaker details on the meeting page.](#)

Some big changes are coming for the Nebraska Bird Review. More details will be shared at the annual business meeting, and we encourage you to share your thoughts.

One big surprise, Justin Rink discovered a female Ruff at N.P. Dodge Park in Omaha (Douglas Co) on April 10. She hung out with a Greater Yellowlegs eating worms long enough for the word to get out to a good number of birders within immediate driving distance and opportunity to pick up a state bird that few have gotten an opportunity to see. This Reeve would represent only the 9th record in the state and the first since 2005. Unfortunately, the birds’ workday apparently ended at 5PM when they spooked and flew north not to be seen again, leaving some disappointed birders that missed it by a few minutes.



Really good birds are starting to roll in hot and heavy in just the past week. Tax day is now officially Fish Crow day, as Joel J. found a pair of Fish Crows in a park in Fairbury in Jefferson County on April 15th. Not only the (BOOM!) 2nd state record, but subsequent twitchers found a nest with a 3rd bird!! Locals claim that they've been around for a couple years but they didn't know what was making that noise. More to come on that, I'm sure. Brody Biberdorf got a birthday present of a 2nd Lancaster County record Worm-eating Warbler in Lincoln's Wilderness Park also on April 15. A putative second state record (if accepted) Swainson's Warbler was reported on the NEBirds listserv on April 18 by Marsha Nyffeler at a private property near Osceola, Polk County. Judson Buescher found a Pacific Loon at Pawnee SRA, Lancaster County on April 19. An anxious columnist who is spending the weekend in Vegas with FOMO is hoping that the loon stays put for a couple more days and the crows remain with the nest...

What other rarities will the increased ranks of Nebraska birders turn up? Find out in the next Burrowing Owl...

Bird how you want to bird...mindfully.



A modest proposal: remove these species from the NOU official list

Joel G. Jorgensen and Stephen J. Brenner



One task of the NOU is to maintain the official list of the birds of Nebraska. This chore has been carried out brilliantly by long-time Records Committee Chairperson Mark A. Brogie since what seems like the beginning of time. The official list is essentially a product of the work executed by the Records Committee which has reviewed records of rare birds since 1987 (thanks to Wayne Mollhoff and others for forming this committee back in the day). While most of the rare birds included on the official list are supported by hard evidence (e.g., specimens, photographs or recordings), there are a few species included on the official list where this is not the case.

More precisely, the entire proposition that a few select species have occurred in our state is based on a description by an individual observer. Even though a description of a bird can be quite compelling, the fundamental problem is that there



is no possible way for other people to independently examine what a person witnessed. This statement is not an indictment of anyone's reputation or a declaration that the bird observed was not the species claimed to be, just that available evidence is equivocal. For first and only state records, there should be a high burden of proof. An illustration of this problem is the case of the Scott's Oriole in Nebraska.

The Scott's Oriole is currently included on the official list of the birds of Nebraska based on two records: 20-24 June 1975 Hall County (Stoppkotte 1975; Brogie 1998) and 29 June 2004 Buffalo County (Brogie 2005). Both records are based entirely on written descriptions by individual observers. Both descriptions are reasonable for Scott's Oriole and the 1975 record also describes a song that is consistent with the species.

Scott's Oriole regular range includes much of the Southwest U.S. and with summering/breeding birds occurring as close as western Colorado with some recent reports also from south-central Wyoming. Scott's Oriole has a demonstrated pattern of vagrancy with a smattering of records across the central and eastern U.S. and even all the way to southern Ontario. The temporal pattern of vagrancy falls into two bins: birds appearing in late fall or winter and then primarily in April, the latter probably represents birds that are presumed spring "overshoot" migrants. A red flag for the two Nebraska records is that they are both from late June and there are no other records east of the Rocky Mountains in mid-summer (at least on eBird).

Also, a point of concern for the two Nebraska records is the similarities to two common oriole species, Baltimore and Orchard. Baltimore Orioles are typically orange and black but occasionally paler birds appearing more yellow-orange are observed. First-year birds, and even hybrids with Bullock's Oriole, can exhibit unusual plumage characteristics in summer. With Orchard Orioles, there are the infamous first-year males which are yellow and black that are routinely reported as Hooded or Scott's Orioles.

Another example is Nebraska's only accepted record of Canada Jay out of a dozen reports. Canada Jays occur as close to Nebraska as the Black Hills of South Dakota so it is certainly plausible a bird could wander into Nebraska's borders. The accepted record involved a sighting in the western Sandhills boomtown (now bust) of Antioch in 1930. The description below is from the NOU's Letters of Information, the predecessor of *The Burrowing Owl*.

(L.O.I. No. 49, p. 4)

Mr. F. J. Keller of Antioch sends, under dates of March 8 and 23, some very interesting notes on the February and March birds that were seen by him in his section of the sandhills. He reports that a flock of about 100 Tree Sparrows wintered in his locality, and that he has found them to be cheerful little fellows during the cold weather. On February 2 Mr. Keller had a remarkable visitor - a Canada Jay, or rather the western form of that bird known as the Rocky Mountain Jay - which remained over February 3 and 4 and then disappeared until February 26, when it was again seen. Mr. Keller describes the bird as about 12 inches long, a light slate gray, darker on the back and on the top of the head and neck, but very light above the bill for a width of about one-fourth of the way to the top of the head, the cheeks and about the throat whitish and the rest of the underparts brownish gray. The tail was rounded. A Northern Shrike was first noted on February 12, and a Crow on February 14, and these two were not friends. The shrike had pre-empted the trees west of the house, and

The description is compelling and we think it is possible, if not likely, Mr. Keller observed a Canada Jay back in the day. However, whether this is ample evidence to include a species on the official state list is a different question and we also believe it does not meet the mark.



While single observer sight records have the obvious Achilles' heel, specimen records are often the gold standard for establishing that a species has occurred in a state, especially those housed in museum collections. Typically, those specimens can be examined by anyone to ensure the identification is correct. Recent cases of specimen reexamination in Nebraska showed longstanding identification to species (Barnacle Goose; Jorgensen et al. 2021) and subspecies (Common Eider; Manning et al. 2024) were incorrect. Without tangible evidence, it seems possible, if not likely, these mistakes may have been perpetuated until the end of time. The two cases of specimen misidentification also strengthen the points above about single observer reports based on descriptions.

A more vexing issue with specimens is not necessarily related to their identity, but when there are questions regarding the provenance of said records. Unfortunately, there is some murkiness surrounding historical specimens housed at the Hastings Museum. Concerns have been raised that multiple unique specimens representing many mega-exceptional Nebraska records in the Hastings Museum were essentially manufactured by obtaining voucher specimens that were collected somewhere outside the boundaries of the state (See Sharpe et al. 2001, page 24 or the Introduction to Silcock and Jorgensen 2026). Records of Lesser Prairie-Chickens purportedly collected in Red Willow County in the early 1900s (See Silcock and Jorgensen 2026), subspecies of Bewick's Wren purported collected in Garden County and others have been called in question (see Silcock and Jorgensen 2026). It seems that if any of the significant historic specimen records housed in Hastings Museum that are associated with certain individuals are on shaky ground, others from the same collection and who originated from the same individuals are also on the same footing.

Nebraska's lone Boreal Owl record involves a single specimen purportedly collected near Inland, Clay County, on 5 October 1916. Boreal Owls are found in the Rocky Mountains as close as Colorado and Wyoming, as well as northern boreal forests as close as northern Minnesota. The species does wander occasionally with the closest records to Nebraska from eastern South Dakota and northern Iowa. This usually occurs in seasons when high numbers of owls disperse southward in what are called irruption years. However, records of Boreal Owl outside of its normal range occur during winter or early spring, with detectable southward movements and increased numbers occurring in late autumn within the southern reaches of their typical wintering range.

While this specimen was purportedly collected by a third party not directly associated with some of the questionable records in the Hastings Museum, the date and location of the Nebraska record should immediately provoke questions about provenance, or at the very least, accuracy of the associated details of this specimen. The 5th of October would be an exceptionally early date for a Boreal Owl to be found so far away from its normal or even irruptive range, and the location itself is an unlikely spot for one to occur. A specimen taken in January in Dixon County or even the southern panhandle would be far more plausible. The case for the records would be enhanced if 1916 was an irruption year when it was known birds were wandering wildly. However, this is not the case. This record does not pass a basic smell test and therefore should be set aside.

The only accepted record of Black-capped Vireo for Nebraska is also a specimen in the Hastings Museum. Black-capped Vireos breed south of Nebraska in Texas and Oklahoma, and formerly in Kansas. It is always possible for a migratory passerine to overshoot during spring migration, so it is completely in the realm of possibility for a Black-capped Vireo to show up in our state. However, Black-capped Vireo surprisingly has almost no pattern for vagrancy north of its breeding range – there are only three additional records north of Kansas, and all have occurred since increased management actions (i.e., cowbird control) began in the late 1980s. This one also seems too good to be true considering the shroud of suspicion engulfing these specimen records.

Whether the American Dipper has occurred in Nebraska is a combination of both questionable specimens and single observer sight records. Two birds, housed in the Hastings Museum, were purportedly collected near Wauneta, Chase County, in June of 1903. Dippers can wander and there are at least six records from northeast Minnesota, for example.



However, the collecting of two individuals of this mountain stream dweller in June in southwest Nebraska should immediately raise doubts (see Silcock and Jorgensen 2026). It might be perplexing if it was an isolated case, but the other sketchy records mentioned here are also a pattern. The other two records of dipper involved brief sightings (Turner 1968, Erwin 1970). While interesting and possible, neither report is unimpeachable nor supported by photographs.

Purging these questionable records from Nebraska's official list would elevate the NOU by only including records in which all reasonable people have full confidence. The purpose of re-examining many of the most exceptional records in Nebraska is also not as revolutionary or outrageous as it seems. Indeed, previous reckonings have occurred (see Sharpe's 1993 review of Aughey's records). For the many exceptional and dubious Hastings Museum records, some corroboration from similar dates, nearby locations, regional habitat or population shifts, or documented records from modernity or even within the last 100 years would go a long way. These do not exist for Boreal Owl or Black-capped Vireo.

We would hope for similar corroborations from individual sight-only records without documentation, such as with Scott's Oriole. If a Scott's Oriole observed by only one individual were reported in 2026 without a definitive photograph or recording, it is highly unlikely that this record would be accepted. This is because digital photography has become widely accessible, inexpensive, and understandably the 'norm' in the internet age dominated by social media and eBird. Even those without a camera usually have a smart phone or cell phone, which can record nearly anything or at least get the word out instantaneously to other observers who may be able to corroborate. While rare bird photography in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s was not a common or accessible practice, more modern records should be held to a higher documentation standard.

Common Raven, for example, had not been documented for nearly 100 years in Nebraska, and many contemporary (2010s) reports were rejected for not having photographic evidence and for originating in unlikely locations. This was for good reason as many reports with photographic evidence proved to be crows. This is not to say Common Raven did not wander into our state occasionally, only that hard evidence was not available. It was not until unequivocal photographs and recordings were obtained in 2021 that this species was back on the Nebraska avian menu. This initial sighting was followed by many sightings at different locations, including confirmed nesting within five years (Huryn and Cooper 2025), which aligns with a true, albeit minor, range-expansion in the state.

Likewise, Nebraska's first and only Pink-footed Goose record was well photographed but initially rejected for questions about provenance. However, in the ~15 years since this report, the numbers of Pink-footed Geese throughout North America have increased dramatically, matching the increase in population of this species at its western breeding range. The case was also supported by the origin of other neck-collared geese in the same flock the Pink-footed Goose was associated with. Why not impose a similar standard for exceptional specimen records that have questions of provenance? Should a Boreal Owl appear in October in Lincoln, or even in southern Iowa in the near future, we can reevaluate the veracity of this specimen in the Hastings Museum. Should a well-photographed Scott's Oriole crop up in early June somewhere in state or elsewhere in the central Great Plains, we can look at the first few records with a different perspective. But until we have information to the contrary, questionable and poorly documented records should be purged from the state's official list.

NOU's Next Scheduled Meetings

Spring Meeting: Ft Robinson State Park, 29-31

May 2026

Fall Meeting: TBD



Acknowledgement

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Registration Form: NOU Spring 2026 Meeting

Ft. Robinson State Park

May 29-31, 2026

Registration Deadline: To reserve meals, registration must be received by **10 May**.

Register online at <https://noubirds.org/Meetings/Register.aspx?mtg=141>

Location: Ft. Robinson State Park near Crawford, Nebraska

	Price/person	# of People	Total
May 29 – Friday Supper – 5:30 PM	\$28.00	_____	_____
<i>Caesar salad, Parmesan cheese, house-made croutons, Caesar dressing, Parmesan herbed garlic bread Penne Marinara (vegetarian) Crispy Chicken Parmesan * vegetarian option available</i>			
May 5 – Sack Lunch, pick up – Friday evening PICKUP	\$17.00	_____	_____
<i>Turkey & cheddar cheese sandwich Chips in a bag Water in a bottle Cookies (2)</i>			
May 6 – Saturday Dinner – 5:30 PM	\$28.00	_____	_____
<i>Burgers Hot dogs, House made chips, Vinegar Coleslaw (vegetarian), vegetarian option available</i>			
Registration (required even if not reserving meals)	\$10.00	_____	_____
Would you like to become a member? Dues:			
Active household	\$25.00	_____	_____
Sustaining household	\$40.00	_____	_____
Student	\$10.00	_____	_____

Fees include all taxes and gratuities.

Total: _____

Name(s) _____ Address _____

City/State/Zip _____ Phone _____ Email _____

Please indicate any special dietary requirements: _____

Please send registration forms and checks to: David Cunningham
10431 S 105th St.
Papillion, NE 68046

This form must be received by 10 May if you are reserving meals! No refunds after 10 May. Thanks!

Non-members are welcome and encouraged to attend!

Students may apply for scholarships to assist them in attending; please send a request to NOU Paul Pearson at propearson@gmail.com

