



The Burrowing Owl

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A Publication of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union

Dedicated to the study, appreciation, and protection of birds

Ogallala fall meeting wrap-up

The Nebraska Ornithologists' Union held its fall 2025 meeting at Ogallala September 26-28. The meeting yielded possibly a record turnout for the fall gathering with 80 individuals registered. Folks gathered at the Quality Inn Friday evening for presentations from University of Nebraska at Kearney students. Peggy Huss talked about the potential future split of Marsh Wrens in Nebraska, Eugene Huryn presented on ecological niche dynamics of White-breasted Nuthatches in the Pine Ridge. National gull expert and enthusiast Amar Ayyash was slated to be headline presenter both Friday and Saturday evening, but unfortunately, he experienced a death in the family immediately prior to the meeting and was forced to cancel his appearance. Our thoughts go out to Amar and his family.

NOU meeting participants scoping Lake McConaughy. Photo by the Editor.





The Sutherland Reservoir field trip group. Photo by Tobin Brown.

Saturday morning was, of course, a day of birding and fortunately it was a beautiful day, weatherwise. Field trips headed to Lake McConaughy, Ash Hollow State Historical Park, Cedar Point Biological Station, Sutherland Reservoir and north into the Sandhills. Saturday evening folks returned to our meeting place and enjoyed another dinner. Saturday evening's speakers included Keegan and Tobin Brown followed by Jacob Cooper, assistant professor at the University of Nebraska – Kearney. The Browns gave a primer and the Nebraska Birding Discord channel. Dr. Cooper discussed



The Sandhills tour along a roadside. Photo by Thomas Labeledz.

Nebraska's two new species – Eastern and Western Warbling Vireo. Warbling Vireo was split into two species earlier in the summer by the American Ornithological Society. However, the two new species are extremely difficult to identify by anything other than song. It appears there is plenty to figure out about the species' temporal occurrences and distributions in the panhandle where they meet. Cody McGregor filled in for Amar Ayyash and chatted the group up about bird response to woody plant removal in the central Platte River valley. This topic was the subject of Cody's master's research.

The fall meeting was also the first time the group used eBird's trip list capabilities to tally the number of species collectively observed during the meeting. Based on the trip report, available here <https://ebird.org/tripreport/415478>, the NOU fall meeting tallied 144 species. Highlights from the weekend include Great Black-backed Gull, Sprague's Pipit, Pine Warbler, and a nice mix of late September shorebirds.

One note about the trip list is that the overall numbers reported are inflated because multiple checklists were submitted for the same birds.



Field trip at Cedar Point Biological Station along the south shore of Lake Ogallala. Photo by Boni Edwards.



Prothonotary Warblings

11/12/2025

Paul L. Pearson, Ph.D.

President-Nebraska Ornithologists' Union

A sudden influx of juncos on the feeder and a few rando snowflakes in Omaha just ahead of the first true cold snap of a protracted hot/dry fall was the first sign that winter birding is nearly upon us. Early reports indicate that this could be a great year for those prized irruptive species like Evening Grosbeaks and Redpolls and the first reports of each were this week.

A Fall for the Ages?

Whether 2025's fall weather was different, anomalous, or the new normal, it produced steady good birding and several GREAT birds. August brought White Ibis (10th fall record) and Gray Flycatcher (14th fall record, Steve Mlodinow), Arctic Tern (5th fall record, Stephen Brenner), and two surprise Parasitic Jaegers (8th state record, Tobin Brown). Michael Willison struck gold twice at Pine Bluffs/Exit 1 with a Sagebrush Sparrow (2nd record if accepted) and later a Virginia's Warbler (8th state record). October also brought a 5th state record Pacific Wren (Brenner).

The stunning star attractions for twitchers were both in Lincoln and stayed long enough for everyone who wanted to see them and add them to their Nebraska/Life Lists. Shari Schwartz and John Carlini found Nebraska's 3rd modern record of Swallow-tailed Kite soaring above Lincoln's Pioneers Park in Lancaster County. As others flocked in to see this impressive aerialist, a second individual was spotted. They found a great spot to catch dragonflies for over two weeks in late August and September, sometimes joined by a Mississippi Kite, and allowing some crazy yard list additions.

Another cooperative mega record is Nebraska's 4th record Costa's Hummingbird in a backyard full of cannas in Lincoln, NE in October. It took a couple weeks for the homeowner to get pics and connect with Dina Barta and Joel Jorgensen to make the identification, but this little guy has hung around giving nearly everyone that wanted a chance to behold an amazing rarity over the past three weeks and even through a significant freeze.

Many have pondered the fate of this cute little wanderer. Will he finally feel the cold and head south to a more suitable climate or will he unfortunately succumb to an outcome that many people fear may be inevitable? I'd like to express sincere thanks to Jennifer Munson for being such a gracious and enthusiastic host to so many Nebraska birders and NOU members allowing us the opportunity to experience this special treat. This is a great opportunity to remind everyone to be ethical and respectful (and grateful!) while birding, especially when dealing with birds on/near private property. Be great ambassadors of birding!



Bill Huser, Paul Pearson, Ed Brogie at Lake McConaughy at the NOU fall meeting. Photo by Colleen Childers.



Fall Meeting Thanks

Thank you to everyone that volunteered, presented, guided and worked hard to make our Fall Meeting a great one. Despite our much-anticipated featured speaker Amar Ayyash unfortunately having to cancel due to a family emergency, we pivoted from gulls and took a deeper dive into the newly split Eastern and Western warbling-vireos, Marsh Wrens and White-breasted Nuthatches of the panhandle. Thanks to University of Nebraska-Kearney's Dr. Jacob Cooper, Peggy Huss, Eugene Huryn and Cody McGregor for sharing your research and insights. Boni Edwards knocked the Silent Auction out of the park and we raised around \$1500 for NOU's general fund. It is my goal that we use some of these proceeds to boost the "study and protection of birds" parts of our mission (see last issue). Lastly thanks to everyone that attended. Based on limited information, it was the biggest NOU Fall Meeting!

Now, onto the Big Year birders...

Nebraska 350 Big Year? Yes!

Congratulations to [Tobin Brown](#), the new Nebraska Big Year champion!

With a Sprague's Pipit in Cheyenne, Co Nebraska on Sept 26, 2025, as #348, Tobin broke the Nebraska Big Year record of 347, while birding with Pastor Paul Dunbar who impressively set the previous record in 2013 without the extensive eBird data available today. Pastor Paul assisted Tobin in planning his record attempt and fittingly was there to pass the crown just before the fall NOU Meeting in Ogallala, NE.

Following his first "Nebraska 300 Big Year" of 325 species in 2024, Tobin's goal in 2025 was to not only break the record but also hit 350. With a combination of excellent planning, many miles and hours, and a buffet of great birds this fall, he accomplished that goal as well. The Costa's Hummingbird has him at 352 with a month and half to go, and several of those irruptive species still possible.

You can follow his Big Year progress at his blog:

<https://brobin.me/blog>

Keegan Brown checks in at 334, which is the 7th all-time total and his first 300 big year. David Cunningham is still rolling strong at 327. Eugene Huryn also notches his first 300 Big Year at an impressive 320. Mark Brogie rounds out the top 5 at 306. Steven Mlodinow is knocking at the door with 298.

Bill Huser and Michael Willison (+4 this year!) both sit at 399 Nebraska life birds. Here's hoping you both hit that milestone soon!

Final Thoughts-The Nemesis

Birding Detective Cordelia Cupp from Netflix's [The Residence](#), describes a Nemesis as the bird "you can't find and can't let go." Hers was the Giant Antpitta. My unquestioned Nemesis was Nelson's Sparrow. Nelson's Sparrow is an elusive target, present for only a short time in fall migration (rarely seen in spring) and requiring specific marsh habitat. The longer our Nemesis eludes us, the more it gets built up toward obsession like Moby Dick. Nelson was my Orange Whale and my main target for 2025. I was determined not to have it there in 2026.

For three DRY years, I failed to get something more than a quick glimpse of this difficult but beautiful sparrow. I was with others when they saw it or heard it, but it eluded and frustrated me to the extreme. I lost count how many times I went to Marsh Wren near Lincoln and dipped. Even losing a Bluetooth speaker in those reeds wasn't enough of a sacrifice to the Birding gods to manifest this tick (and not the usual ticks you get out there).

One very early morning at the beginning of October, Keegan Brown and I set off to Lincoln for a hard target found at Little Salt Fork Marsh by Judson Buescher the previous day. Before leaving Omaha, we got rear-ended (lightly,



thankfully) in construction traffic...another sacrifice to the gods... but kept going. As we spent a good hour dipping yet again, a report came from Mark Brogie that he had 5 in Knox County near Niobrara State Park. Tobin took off immediately, but alas we both had to go back to Omaha for work obligations. Another NESP was found at Lake Flanagan in Omaha that morning, so we detoured and dipped again, collecting only weed seeds in our socks for the effort. Ultimately, there was no choice but to duck out of work early and go after the quarry for a 3rd time 3.5 hours away. Scooping Ed Brogie on the way, we beat dusk by an hour and Mark (THANK YOU!!) led us to the spot and produced multiple Nelson's Sparrows within a few yards of the car. We got long looks, nice photo opps and much redemption. Ahab wasn't nearly as lucky.

Bird how you wanna Bird...mindfully.

NOU's Next Meetings

Spring Meeting: Ft Robinson State Recreation Area, 29-31 May 2025

Fall Meeting: TBD

Christmas Bird Counts – dates and contacts

Christmas Birds Counts (CBCs) are around the corner and there will be a full line-up of CBCs this season. CBCs are always interesting events that seem to always turn up some good birds and a few surprises. Below are the dates and contact information for the CBCs we know about. If you are interested in participating in a CBC, send the appropriate contact a note in an email well in advance of the CBC date.



Omaha – 14 Dec; Contact: Bob Wells, rcwells@cox.net

Ponca – 14 Dec; Contact: Bill Huser, billfhuser@gmail.com

Scottsbluff – 14 Dec; Contact: Kathy DeLara, renosmom@charter.net

Seward/Branched Oak – 14 Dec; Contact: Joe Gubanyi, Joseph.Gubanyi@cune.edu

Ames – 16 Dec; Contact: Don and Janis Paseka, paseka76@gmail.com

Harlan County – 16 Dec; Contact: Joel Jorgensen, joel.jorgensen@nebraska.gov

North Platte – 17 Dec; Contact: T.J. Walker, thomas.walker@nebraska.gov

DeSoto – 20 Dec (WD 21 Dec); Contact: Kellie Hayden, xxkhaydenxx@gmail.com

Lincoln – 20 Dec; Contact: Jason St. Sauver, jstsauver@audubon.org

Grand Island – 20 Dec; Contact: Anne Kruse, gramsrakruse@gmail.com

Norfolk – 20 Dec; Contact: Dave Heidt, heidtdw@gmail.com

Kearney – 21 Dec; Jacob Cooper; cooperj2@unk.edu

Lake McConaughy – 27 Dec (WD 28 Dec); Contact: Stephen J. Dinsmore, cootjr@iastate.edu

Beaver Valley – 29 Dec; Contact: Jason Thiele, jason.thiele@nebraska.gov

Calamus-Loup – 3 January; Contact: Dave Heidt, heidtdw@gmail.com

Crawford – 2 Jan; Contact: Kathy DeLara, renosmom@charter.net

Harrison – 3 Jan; Contact: Kathy DeLara, renosmom@charter.net

Lower Platte River – 5 Jan; Contact: Joel Jorgensen, joel.jorgensen@nebraska.gov



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