

FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

**KANSAS -
UNBELIEVABLE!**



American Avocet © Sam Fried

**SHOREBIRDS, LESSER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN,
RAPTORS & PLUS OKLAHOMA, COLORADO
AND A TEENSY BIT OF NEW MEXICO**

APRIL 28 – MAY 6, 2012

TRIP REPORT

Once again, FOFA journeyed forth to the wilds of Kansas, to sample both the migrants that were passing through on their way north and all the species that nest here. For ten participants, it was an eye-opening experience into the heartland of America and a trip that largely traced the path of the Santa Fe Trail.

We began in Wichita, a veritable crossroads of the continent for both birds and people. Here we reach the western limits for many eastern bird species and the eastern limits for many western birds. In a grassy field adjacent to the motel, dozens of clay-colored, savannah, chipping and white-crowned sparrows flitted about, while scissor-tailed flycatchers perched on nearby wires. Eastern and western kingbirds vied for space and we listened to the plaintive song of eastern meadowlarks, soon to be replaced by the happy bubbling of their western counterparts further along. Our first stop was at Pawnee Prairie Park, a preserved remnant of the once extensive tall grass prairie. Here we found Harris's Sparrows, singing sweetly before moving north to their sub-arctic breeding grounds. Dickcissels (which came to be known as "dicksicles") had just arrived and were loudly claiming their territory. Unfortunately, rain also arrived, making the trails impassable, so we moved west, with brief stops at Kingman Fishing Lake, and the town of Greensburg, which had been virtually obliterated by a tornado several years before. After a delightful picnic birding lunch at Meade Lake State Park, we continued west across the extremely flat prairie through a severe thunderstorm to the town of Liberal and the McCoid Lakes, visually unappealing but loaded with birds! There were shorebirds and water birds galore, highlighted by thousands of eared grebes in their striking black and gold breeding plumage, 10 species of ducks, including a flock of redheads plus 7 shorebird species. All were buzzed by a peregrine looking for lunch. We eventually arrived in Elkhart, during more heavy rain and after an interesting dinner at the local Pizza Hut, retired for the night.

Our primary goals in coming to the southwest corner of Kansas were two: see Lesser Prairie-chickens displaying on the lek and travel to the southeast corner of Colorado to Carrizo Canyon. Both of these ventures required extensive travel on dirt roads, which had now been turned into chocolate pudding by the heavy rainfall. Adjusting for these conditions, we decided to stay in the area an extra day while the roads dried out. We birded all around Elkhart, including the sewage lagoons, cemetery, Point of Rocks on the Santa Fe Trail and several paved back roads out in the prairie. The best finds were a rain-soaked Mississippi Kite in town, Burrowing Owl and Mountain Plover, both in extensive black-tailed prairie dog towns, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Chihuahuan Raven, a Rock Wren that sat in our laps, both forms of Yellow-rumped Warbler, Spotted Towhee, Cassin's Sparrow skylarking over the sand-sage country, accompanied by migrating flocks of Lark Bunting and nesting Grasshopper Sparrows. We witnessed quite a few pronghorn bounding over the empty prairie, as well as a number of black-tailed jackrabbits taking those enormous ears for a ride. Dining was elegant - after purchasing our excellent barbecued pulled pork dinners from either a roadside vendor or the local Dairy Kreem, we sat on the church steps and chowed down. The following day, off we went on an all-day trip to Black Mesa State Park in northwest Oklahoma. We had a wonderful time, finding some western species like Bullock's Oriole, Baird's Sandpiper, Greater Roadrunner right on the New Mexico border and Ladder-backed Woodpecker. On the way back, we even checked out the tiny Boise

(boys) City, Oklahoma sewage pond, which had a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds, a species we saw almost every day on the trip.

The roads finally dried sufficiently, so we started well before sunrise to get to the Lesser Prairie-chicken lek, where we were rewarded by several males gurgling, hooting, jumping around and otherwise pointing their pinnae feathers to attract females. After returning for breakfast, we set off to southwest Colorado and Carrizo Canyon. Other than the recent downpour, the area had been extremely dry for several years and the number of birds and species was somewhat diminished, but ride and scenery was fantastic. Covering 55 miles across the wild prairie, we found numerous Horned Larks, more Lark Buntings than ever, a few pairs of Long-billed Curlew, Swainson's Hawks, and a magnificent adult Golden Eagle perched roadside for excellent scope views. After a picnic lunch at the head of the canyon, we began our leisurely drive through one of the prettiest places I've seen in North America. Say's Phoebe was fairly common, Canyon Wren delivered its delicious descending liquid notes off the canyon walls, a Mountain Bluebird looked like a piece of the azure sky had indeed fallen and Cassin's Kingbird made an appearance along this remote riparian zone. At the canyon's ranch, a feeder attracted a Black-chinned Hummingbird. Unfortunately, by delaying the ride to this beautiful remote area, we now had to turn around and drive all the way to Great Bend for the night, with a break for dinner in Dodge City. It was a very, very, long day, but well worth it.

Now we were in central Kansas, the heart of the migratory route for millions of shorebirds. We spent the next three days shuttling back and forth between Cheyenne Bottoms State Wildlife Area and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. Water levels were somewhat lower than optimum, but there were large numbers of a variety of species, as well as some species not usually found. In the deepest pool at Quivira, we were fortunate enough to find a pair of Clark's Grebes. American White pelicans formed squadrons that circled both locations, often forming flotillas when a flock came in to roost. As we drove down one side road at Quivira, hundreds of White-faced Ibis, flaunting their sunlit iridescence, exploded out of a wet grassy channel to our delight and amazement! A few American Bitterns poked their heads out of the tall grass lining roadside ditches. Thirteen species of ducks, primarily Blue-winged Teal and Northern Shoveler, frequented the marshes, including Cinnamon Teal and quite a few Redhead. We found 21 species of shorebirds, highlighted by nesting Snowy Plovers, Piping Plover, Marbled Godwit and Hudsonian Godwits galore! In one pool at the Bottoms, we found a flock of 56 "Hudsos"! One of most common birds was Baird's Sandpiper, late migrants on their way to their arctic breeding grounds. We discovered a small group of Stilt Sandpipers foraging in a small pool at Quivira. Upland Sandpipers were fairly common along the back roads, frequently perching on fenceposts in classic form.

When we first arrived at the Cheyenne Bottoms headquarters, our first order of business was to walk behind the maintenance shed to see if the nesting pair of Barn Owls was home. We were rewarded with spectacular views as one of the owls emerged and slowly flew around before heading off to roost in the nearby woods. This was followed by watching an excellent presentation by Karl Grover, Superintendent of CBSWA, on the history, ecology, hydrology and

present challenges facing the area. Later that day, we stopped at the local dump/recycling facility and watched a young Great Horned Owl still in the nest. Numerous Franklin's Gulls, some of them sporting pink bellies, also frequented the dump's pools. A side road back to the dam on Wet Walnut Creek produced quite a few wonderful birds, including singing Bell's Vireo, Blue Grosbeak, beautiful looks at singing Dickcissels, Orchard Oriole, and Red-headed Woodpecker.

Certainly one of the most interesting things we did during the trip was a lunch visit to the Curtis Cafe' in tiny Stafford, Kansas. The 16-foot tall restaurant walls are covered from floor to tin ceilings with an array of old jigsaw puzzles, glued on semi-firmly. All were done by the place's original owner, who just loved her puzzles and obviously didn't want to break them up and put' em back in the box. Ruth Curtis was kind enough to prepare for us her special home made noodles and chicken dish, served over mashed potatoes. Enough starch for you? A second side-trip was to the Great Bend Zoo, not the greatest in the world, but entertaining nonetheless. A White-winged Dove made the day.

For our final day, we opted to arise early, drive the 100 miles back to Wichita and enjoy that visit to Pawnee Prairie Park which was denied us by rain our first day out. Not so this time, as the sun was shining and the birds were singing, including an Eastern Screech Owl., Carolina Chickadee, Indigo Bunting, Lark Sparrow and Brown Thrasher.

Overall, we encountered 167 species of birds, 9 mammals and a bunch of other interesting creatures, including an exceptional number of otherwise infrequently seen snakes. We had a great time, enjoying what can only be described as uniquely Kansan cuisine, fun picnic lunches and each other's company. I don't know if Flights of Fancy Adventures will get back to Kansas after six successful tours, but it has been a memorable run that I wouldn't have missed for the world. I've enjoyed the company of 60 different participants, made a bunch of new friends each year, and seen well over 220 species of birds.

Thanks to all of you who made the trip over the years and to everyone who has participated in a FOFA tour since its inception in 1998. I hope to see all of you back out on future tours in the coming years!

Best wishes and good birding,

Sam

Sam Fried
Flights of Fancy Adventures, LLC
www.flightsoffancyadventures.com
sam.fried@live.com
860-690-8599

WE HAVE FUN!