



Central Platte River



landscape includes the Platte River channel and the floodplain from central Dawson County eastward to central Hamilton County. The central Platte River is a large, shallow, braided stream. Sandbars and wooded islands are common within the channel. Much of the stream-bank is also wooded, with cottonwood and eastern red cedar as dominants. Sand pits are common along the river, many with housing developments. Most of the river floodplain is in cropland, though there are scattered wet meadows in areas. Sand dune grasslands occur on the south side of the river in areas.

The spring staging of sandhill cranes on the Platte River is a world-renowned phenomenon. Each spring more than 500,000 cranes concentrate on the central Platte, roosting in the tens of thousands at scattered sites and foraging in adjacent cornfields and meadows. The loss of Platte River staging habitat is the most significant threat to the mid-continental crane population. The central Platte River is also a key spring waterfowl and shorebird migration stopover point in the central flyway. Five federal and/or state listed species occur along the Central Platte, including the whooping crane, interior least tern, piping plover, bald eagle, and river otter. This reach of the Platte is designated as critical habitat for whooping cranes. The Platte River Whooping Crane Maintenance Trust, the Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission own and manage a number of protected areas within this BUL.

Natural Legacy Demonstration Sites

Lillian Annette Rowe Bird Sanctuary - National Audubon Society

Rowe Sanctuary is approximately 1900 acres in size and is located on the Platte River. It is dedicated to the conservation of sandhill cranes, whooping cranes and other migratory birds and their habitat along the Platte River in south central Nebraska. Nature-based education is a major focus at the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center. Recent channel restoration has resulted in nesting of several at-risk bird species. Rowe Sanctuary has two tracts of native prairie and two areas that have been restored using haying, grazing, and prescribed burns.

Platte River Prairies - The Nature Conservancy

The Platte River Prairies include approximately 2400 acres along a 10 mile stretch of river with public access and trails on a 1,200 acres prairie tract. The Platte River Prairies encompass a wide range of habitat types including riparian, aquatic and wetland, wet meadow, grassland and woodland. Most of the site is restored prairie which has lowland tall-grass prairie and other cordgrass wet prairie. Grassland diversity is enhanced using prescribed fire, grazing, and seeding. In addition to habitat management, this location has research plots

which function as a laboratory for professors and students to examine the role that plant diversity plays in maintaining ecological resilience and ecological processes.

Stresses Affecting Species and Habitats

- ❖ Specific livestock grazing and haying practices that may reduce native plant diversity and promote uniform habitat structure (e.g., season-long grazing, annual mid-summer haying)
- ❖ Invasive plant species in sandbars, meadows and woodlands, including reed canary grass, salt cedar, European phragmites, purple loosestrife, tall wheatgrass, smooth brome, and garlic mustard
- ❖ Eastern red cedar, and other invasive shrub and tree encroachment of river sandbars, woodlands and meadows
- ❖ Altered natural hydrology, particularly lack of high spring flows, low summer flows, and reduced sediment transport to maintain sandbars and fish habitat and to prevent channel degradation
- ❖ Sedimentation and drainage of backwater sloughs
- ❖ Continued cabin and home development on the Platte River banks
- ❖ Sandpit development, which eliminates native meadows, woodlands, and river channel
- ❖ Excessive recreational use of river (e.g., air boats, ATVs), which disturbs tern and plover nesting and other wildlife
- ❖ Conversion of wet meadows to cropland

Conservation Strategies

- ❖ Implement planned grazing strategies on private and public lands to reduce exotic cool-season grasses and improve native plant diversity and vigor. Spring burning and spring grazing, sometimes used in combination, should be implemented as initial management practices to reduce exotic grass dominance. When exotics are under control, other grazing systems can be implemented.
- ❖ Restore additional grassland habitat in the valley on private and public lands through high-diversity, local ecotype restorations
- ❖ Undertake eastern red cedar and other tree clearing to maintain open meadow habitat for sandhill cranes, whooping cranes, and grassland birds. Initiate programs to control other invasive species.
- ❖ Restore and/or maintain Platte River hydrology necessary to sustain biological diversity and ecosystem function
- ❖ Facilitate sediment augmentation to restore the river channel
- ❖ Acquire through voluntary fee title acquisition or place conservation easements on undeveloped reaches of the river, wet meadows, and woodlands to protect them from development

- ❖ Work with sand and gravel companies to site gravel pits away from ecologically-sensitive areas of the floodplain and to restore sandpits to wetland communities once mining is completed
- ❖ Expand shrub and herbaceous vegetation clearing on the river sandbars for water bird roosting and loafing habitat
- ❖ Develop and implement best management practices to control and manage invasive plant species.
- ❖ Restore wetland hydrology and connect backwater habitats to the river
- ❖ Conduct wildlife and plant surveys to track status and trends of Platte River caddisfly and other at-risk species

Tier I At-risk Species

Plants:

Western Prairie Fringed Orchid

Animals:

River Otter

Henslow's Sparrow

Interior Least Tern

Piping Plover

Whooping Crane

Platte River Caddisfly¹

Regal Fritillary

Married Underwing

Whitney Underwing

Plains Topminnow

Aquatic Communities:

Mid-order, Warm Water River

Terrestrial Communities:

Cottonwood-Peachleaf Willow Riparian Woodland

Cottonwood Riparian Woodland

Sandbar Willow Shrubland

Riparian Dogwood-False Indigobush Shrubland

Buckbrush Shrubland

Freshwater Seep

Northern Cordgrass Wet Prairie*

Cattail Shallow Marsh

Reed Marsh

Eastern Pondweed Aquatic Wetland

Loess Mixed-grass Prairie

Eastern Sand Prairie*

Sandhills Mesic Tall-grass Prairie*

Sandhills Dune Prairie*

Perennial Sandbar
Sandbar/Mudflat*

* Priority for conservation in this BUL

¹ This is the only BUL where the species is known to occur