

## This River Beneath the Sky: A Year on the Platte

By Doreen Pfof. 2017. University of Nebraska Press. 198 pages, 18.95 USD, Paper.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of spending a couple of days in late March watching Sandhill Cranes (*Antigone canadensis*) along the Platte River near Kearney, Nebraska. I can still conjure up the sight and sound of tens of thousands of cranes flying in to roost for the night on sandbars in the river and leaving again at sunrise. It was deafening and exhilarating. In *This River Beneath the Sky*, Doreen Pfof's lyrical prose brings this grand spring spectacle alive for the reader, but goes beyond the cranes to describe a river that has undergone tremendous changes since Europeans arrived in the area and, more recently, limited restoration. This book is an ode to falling in love with a place where Pfof had despaired of finding magic to hold her (she admits to having hated almost everything about the area when she first moved there).

*This River Beneath the Sky* is a collection of 12 chapters (essays, really) roughly corresponding to the calendar year, starting with welcoming the cranes back in late March (Chapter 1: "Swept up in a wind-borne river"). In Chapter 2 ("Regarding the aftermath") Pfof discusses the impact of diverting over half of the Platte's flow for agriculture and power generation. This means not just less water overall, but also narrower, incised channels and fewer sandbars; no seasonal flooding of riverside meadows that the cranes depend on for feeding; changes in the timing of the flow; and more riparian forest and invasive weeds because spring floods no longer scour the seedlings away. Pfof goes on to describe these changes in other chapters, through careful observations during rambles throughout the seasons.

While historical anecdotes are sprinkled throughout, Pfof highlights the first impressions of emigrants on the Oregon and Mormon trails in Chapter 3 ("Trails and consequences"), and those of the early homesteaders in Chapter 4 ("Rooted in sand"). Unfortunately, the Pawnee tribe of Plains Indians is only mentioned briefly, in their relationship to bison: when the bison were extirpated, the Pawnee left, too. In the 25 years between 1841 and 1866, it is estimated that some 350 000 emigrants passed westward along the Platte River valley. The trails followed the meandering river through a sea of grass, a "featureless" landscape that drove many early travellers to despair. Within a decade some of the emigrants stopped to homestead in the area and all that grass has now been replaced by irrigated corn fields, towns, cities, and highways.

Pfof returns to the river itself in Chapter 5 ("Of legendary worth"), when she follows the North and South Platte rivers to their headwaters in Wyoming and Colorado. (The simple sketch map included in the book is useful, but a few more place names on it would have been helpful; for instance, Pfof frequently refers to The Big Bend, which I assume is just upstream of where the Platte joins the Missouri River, but it isn't labelled.) Along the way she encounters the series of dams and big irrigation projects that fundamentally altered the

river along its entire length. There is often "more river on the fields than in channel" (p. 81). Of course, the impacts from climate change are uncertain, but include less snow in the Rocky Mountains to feed the river and higher temperatures, which will increase evaporation from the fields thus requiring more irrigation water. These human needs will compete more and more with the needs of aquatic systems and wildlife.

Efforts at restoring the river's character, its flow and seasonality, are highlighted in Chapter 6 ("River walkers") and Chapter 7 ("Flickering light on the flyway"). Restoration efforts include removing trees, excavating sloughs, reshaping islands into sandbars, and changing the flow so that water runs through braided channels. Much of the restoration work started at the National Audubon Society's Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary, where Pfof volunteers. While in an airplane conducting Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*) surveys, Pfof notices the long, indented streaks where the ground dips in old river channels and writes that "No matter how much water humans take from the river or how much we forget about the Platte's old ways, the land remembers", and she imagines "spreading a great sheet of paper over the fields and rubbing them with chalk to preserve this channel's epitaph", like rubbings made of ancient art (pp. 113–114). In a short recounting of Whooping Crane recovery, Pfof likens the barely two dozen cranes that were the entire population in the 1940s to two cartons of eggs on the kitchen counter, "one sharp elbow away from destruction" (p. 105).

The next four chapters ("Outside home", "This living planet", "Teaching ourselves to see", and "Wonders close to home") are more introspective, perhaps befitting the time of year, late November through February. She takes short walks in nasty weather ... "sometimes even a short walk is enough to reset the mind's gyre" (p. 154). She joins other volunteers to count wintering Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – "when you share what you see with other people, you begin to notice more yourself" (p. 150), and writing observations down is also a way to observe more.

Finally, in Chapter 12 ("Swept up, still and again"), the cranes return. With them come tens of thousands of visitors, wanting to experience one of the last great migrations on the continent. When naturalists and biologists were fighting grand water diversion schemes in the 1960s and 1970s there was little notice of the changes happening to the Platte, but now the influx of visitors has drawn the attention of local communities, businesses, and chambers of commerce, "so the Platte River may benefit from the same principle that protects large flocks of vigilant migrating birds: anything is safer when many eyes are watching" (p. 15).

Ultimately, this is a book of hope, encouraging the reader to "travel not farther but deeper" (p. 170).

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