



Republican River



The Republican River Adventure

Ivar sat down on the floor and tucked his feet under him. "See little brother, they have come from a long way, and they are very tired. From up there where they are flying, our country looks dark and flat. They must have water to drink and to bathe in before they can go on with their journey. They look this way and that, and far below them they see something shining, like a piece of glass set in the dark earth. That is my pond. They come to it and are not disturbed. Maybe I sprinkle a little corn. They tell the other birds, and next year more come this way. They have their roads up there, as we have down here."

—O Pioneers!



Willa Cather was one of the most eloquent writers about the beauty – even majesty – of the Nebraska prairie and the Republican River Valley, and somehow, starting this adventure at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie seems the right thing to do.

Willa Cather Memorial Prairie

The view of what Cather called "this hairy landscape" from the parking area alone is worth the drive, a vast undulating vista of prairie and sky, dropping away to a little pond, "shining like a piece of glass set in the dark earth." As we gather our gear, a Western Meadowlark voices his approval of a fine spring day, and then another joins him, and a third, faint but distinct. Redwing blackbirds are in abundance, and one perches on a nearby fence inviting us to admire his bright red bars.

A path mowed in the long grass leads off across the pasture and down to the pond. As we approach, a pair of mallards explode from the water and when we get under the giant old cottonwoods, the air is dense with tree swallows.

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.008651 N
-98.522944 S



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Down here you don't see the trappings of modern civilization, and it's possible to imagine the world Cather wrote about and to think, despite the hardships, that it wouldn't have been that bad.

A pre-adventure soiree

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.083161 N
-98.597317 S

We had actually arrived in Red Cloud, the town where Willa Cather came of age and wrote her seminal novels, *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* the previous afternoon. But before settling in for the evening, we decided to take the advice of a local naturalist and locate the Narrows Wildlife Management Area (WMA) a few miles north and west of town. From U.S. 186, County Road 800 heads south – rough but passable – about a mile down to the Republican River.

We stopped in a grove of trees where the road crosses a former railroad grade bed, the tracks ripped out and stacked in an unruly pile and the resulting trail disappearing in both directions. In the lengthening shadows, the air was filled with a symphony of birdsong and we are once more confronted with that frustration common to all birders: hearing birds is one thing and seeing them quite another. We still ourselves and our impatience and in time we are rewarded with sightings of a warbling vireo, a black-headed grosbeak and a yellow warbler.



When the road becomes rougher, we continue on foot down to the river. Massive old cottonwoods form a deep glade with dense undergrowth and it's a surprise when we break free of it and almost stumble into the river. This is just the kind of place where if you had a lawn chair, a good pair of binoculars, and plenty of bug spray and time you could make a good dent in any birding list. Especially during the migration season, this part of Nebraska enjoys visits from a wide variety of shorebirds native to other climes, and it's not uncommon to see black neck stilt, Hudsonian godwit and phalaropes. On this evening, however, hunger limits our patience, and after spotting a wood duck and a blue-winged teal, we return to Red Cloud for a hot meal and a good bed.

The McFarland Hotel and Cutters Cafe

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.090516 N
-98.523502 S



Mary Terry and her husband Steve purchased the 20-bed historic McFarland Hotel and restaurant in 2004. Built in 1893 and restored in 2005, Cutters Café in the McFarland is a charming step back in time. The woodwork gleams, the brass sparkles. Overhead a beautifully restored stamped-tin ceiling is trimmed with fancy crown molding. Antique lamps and other furniture complete the atmosphere.

But it's not tea and old lace on the Cutter's menu this evening – it's pizza, and ours is piping hot and as good as any "big city" pie we've had.

Although only a few of the rooms have been restored, they're being done to a very high standard, and we found our room to be comfortable and charming.

The River Road

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.062373 N
-98.519554 S

In the morning, we hit the trail early, arriving at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie while the dew is still heavy on the long grass. We've planned to cover a lot of ground today, from Red Cloud along the south side of the Republican River to the Harlan County Dam which forms Nebraska's second largest body of water, along the north side of the lake to Methodist Cove, then on to Oxford, where we've heard Thelma Lou's restaurant is the place for prime rib on a Saturday night.



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From U.S. 281, a well-paved gravel road leads west through the trees lining the river. This is beautiful country, and one can see where the pioneers of Cather's novels might choose to carve out a life here. We pass neat farmyards tucked beneath green hills and tan bluffs. Above, the sky is dotted with clouds, with the threat of rain gathering in the west.



Abruptly, we turn a corner and come upon a broad field of alfalfa, a distinctly deeper green than the surrounding crops. As we watch, we become aware of kingbirds and bobolinks fluttering a few feet above the plants then dropping into them. There are dozens of them, popping up at intervals all over the field like some crazy 3D game of Whack-a-Mole.

We argue a little over whether they are finding a breakfast of insects or engaging in some courting ritual, but when similar fields have no such activity we conclude the breakfast theory was probably the best one and speculate that the field we had seen may have been organic and thus not sprayed with pesticides.

A bit farther along, we see three hen turkeys feeding unconcernedly at the edge of the road, but when we stop, they amble away into the trees before we can bring the camera to bear. Although we didn't see the Tom, he was almost certainly nearby, keeping an eye on his harem.

An unexpected treat

Baltimore orioles are not native to Nebraska, but they occur in large numbers during the migration season. Their school-bus yellow and black bodies make them relatively easy to identify, and we aren't too surprised to see one perched in a row of bushes along the fence line.



As we slow the car to a crawl, and roll down the windows, we spot another... and another...and another. In a moment, we realize the bushes are full of orioles – two dozen at least – fluttering nervously from branch to branch like jeweled, mobile flowers. We are enthralled. They are made nervous by our presence, but don't take flight; we stay in the car and they give us a floor show for several minutes.

We do get out of the car to walk across a picturesque old bridge over the Republican River at E-F Road, abandoned when the new replacement was built immediately adjacent. It gives us an excellent view of an entire neighborhood of mud swallow dwellings. By now the sun is high, though, and there is no activity to be seen. We hear the distinctive knock of woodpeckers in the trees lining the river and wish we had the skill – as some people do – to distinguish the species by the sound.

Harlan County Dam

The steep wall of the Harlan County Dam has been an increasingly prominent feature of the landscape as we travel west, and as we round the south end of it, the reservoir comes intensely into view as a broad, glistening gem almost surreal in the vast panorama. As we drive across the top of the dam, we get a seldom-glimpsed perspective of a turkey vulture, one that gives us renewed appreciation for these maligned creatures. On the passenger side, just at eye level and not ten yards away, a vulture glides, perfectly matching our speed for several long seconds, allowing us to admire his effortless flight before he banks away.

The Harlan County Dam and resulting reservoir are under the jurisdiction of the

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.05403 N
-99.209976 S



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Army Corps of Engineers, and they maintain a small visitors center at the north end of the dam. Here you can see displays of some of the local bird and wildlife and talk to people who know a little something about birds and can tell you what's been seen in the neighborhood lately. One species we didn't see but are told are common in January and February is the American bald eagle which stops over at Harlan County Lake in large numbers to dine on ducks and geese in the open water.

Methodist Cove



If you're a birder with an RV, the Harlan County Lake has six campgrounds and hundreds of appealing campsites. We took a quick drive through the North and South Outlet Parks immediately below the dam, then skirted around the north side of the lake, through the village of Republican City, which, we are told has not one but two good Mexican restaurants and a summer repertory theater called the Theater of the American West that puts on plays and musicals all summer long.

Methodist Cove Park is a beautiful wooded park with 155 campsites overlooking the lake about two miles West of Alma. As we sat on the bank in the sun, we saw a number of fishermen – Harlan County Lake is reputed to be one of the best fishing spots in the state – and numerous pelicans, pintails, pied-billed grebe and horned grebes paddling in the sparkling water.

We notice our binoculars are getting heavier and realize it's been a long time since breakfast and begin to think a steaming latte and a snack might be just the thing to tide us over until our Cajun dinner.

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40.086412 N
-99.328873 S

Joe Camera

As we drive on into the charming town of Alma, we stop to admire the Pheasant Ridge Trail, a three-mile paved and lighted trail along the shoreline. This trail is a favorite among local bikers and hikers, and we comment that it's an ideal bird watching venue for handicapped or wheelchair-bound birders as well.

On the main street we find the perfect spot for a midday pick-me-up – Joe Camera, an appealing, friendly spot with lots of exposed brick, a full menu of coffee and other drinks, and enough sweets to restore our energy. We chat with a few of the locals who gather there throughout the day and learn that in addition to coffee, Joe Camera does custom film processing and provides services and supplies to professional photographers all around the region.

Our coffee, cookies and brownies consumed, we get back in the car and head north out of Alma on U.S. 183, then west on U.S. 136 through Orleans and on to Oxford.

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.097599 N
-99.362508 S



The Village of Oxford

A number of small towns dot this region of Nebraska and although they all have their individual character, they share a calm, relaxed feel. Drivers drive slow, children play and ride bikes in the streets. The trees are big and shady, the porches broad and inviting.

One of the appealing spots around Oxford – to birders and local residents alike – is a large park at the south end of town. The north end has the requisite playground, picnic tables, ball field and bleachers – a little league game was in progress as we drove by – but the south end is left a little more wild. We park beside a small

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40.246892 N
-99.636984 S



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pond in the shade of towering cottonwoods and sit on a log to enjoy the last remnants of the day.

Sitting still and not talking, we take in the sound of the wind in the leaves, the distant crowd at the ballgame, the chatter of a squirrel, and a chorus of songbirds. We pick out the clear whistle of a Northern cardinal and soon spot his bright red body in the branches above us. Just sitting still for fifteen minutes, we saw many species of birds, including blue-gray gnat catcher, Eastern wood peewee, downey woodpecker, brown thrasher, and spotted towhee.

But we never had a proper lunch and the idea of spicy jambalaya finished off with beignets and coffee pushes aside the desire to see more birds. Enough birds for one day.

Thelma Lou's

Approximate GPS Coordinates:
40.248727 N
-99.633551 S

In a world where if you've seen one Chili's or Applebee's, you've seen them all, Thelma Lou's is authentic Americana. The jukebox is playing as we enter, and patrons look up from tables on a hardwood floor recycled from a bowling alley. Pink and blue fluorescent lights and the sound of kids playing pool give it a party atmosphere. This is clearly where the locals gather, and every new customer gets a wave and a howdy.

We order a beer and the prime rib (it looks as if just about everyone around us has ordered the same thing) and we aren't disappointed. Even the "small" size portion nearly fills the platter, and it is PRIME rib, too, the best we've tasted in a long time. In just a little while, a glow of contentment washes over us. We've had a fine day with a fine ending. That healthy meal will have to wait until next time.

As we sip our coffee, we reflect on the marvels we've seen and the adventure we've had. Spring and fall are fabulous times for watching birds in Nebraska, but even the native species are worth seeking out in their native habitat. We agree we aren't finished until we've done all the adventures along the Chicken Dance Trail.

