

# The Burrowing Owl

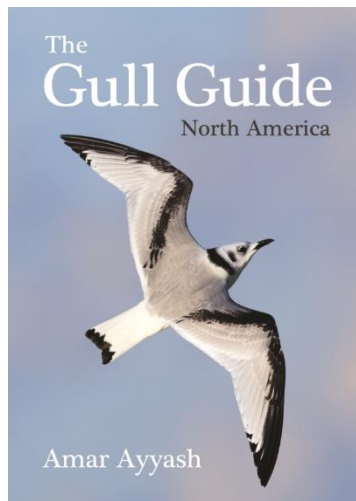
August  
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A Publication of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union

Dedicated to the study, appreciation, and protection of birds

## Fall meeting primer – are you ready?

NOU's fall meeting is coming at the end of September in Ogallala. The meeting will take place at the Quality Inn (308-465-4007), which is immediately northwest of the I-80 exit (see map below). A block of rooms is being held for NOU and there are several other hotel options available in Ogallala. While the Lake McConaughy area always has a lot of birding possibilities, this fall meeting will also have a very special guest speaker.



Amar Ayyash is both an expert on the gulls of North America and an evangelist for “gull recreation”. He coordinates the Illinois Ornithological Society's Annual Gull Frolic on Lake Michigan, hosts the popular website [anythinglarus.com](http://anythinglarus.com), and is often found speaking at birding events throughout the continent. Much of his free time is dedicated to traveling the world to photograph and study gulls. Ayyash has published several papers and articles on gull identification, distribution, and molt. He is the author of the popular book, *The Gull Guide*. Amar lives in northern Illinois where he teaches mathematics. Amar is the recipient of the 2024 ABA Robert Ridgway Award for Outstanding Ornithological Publication. Amar will be presenting both Friday and Saturday evening and a synopsis for each presentation is below.

### A Closer Look at Gulls

Among the world's “seabirds”, gulls are the most accessible to humans, invading our most immediate surroundings. Gulls are sometimes perceived as 2nd class avian creatures. This, along with the identification challenges they present and their readiness to hybridize presents a love-hate relationship for many birders. Yet some gull species are among the most coveted birds on any birder's list (think Ross's, Ivory and Sabine's Gull). This makes for an interesting juxtaposition. Do we like some gulls and look past



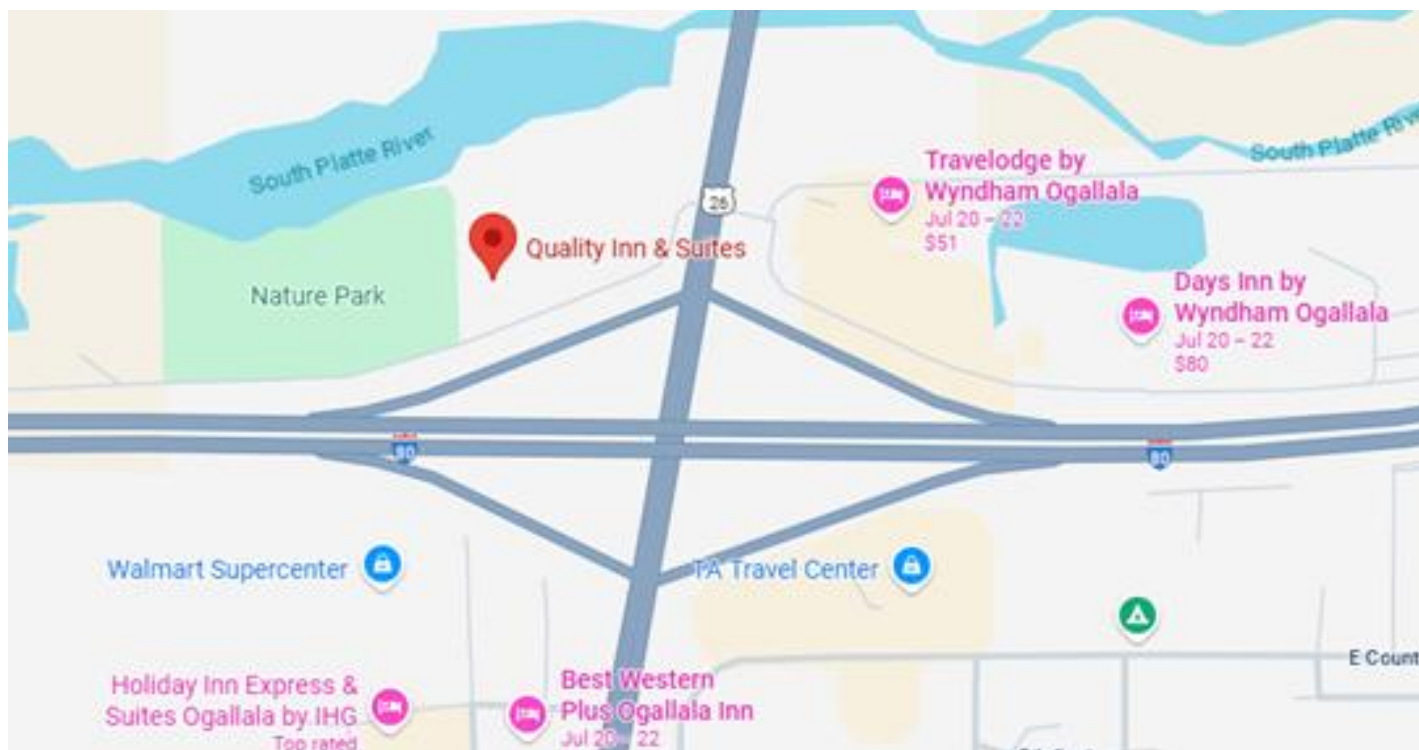
others? Amar Ayyash will take us through an entertaining and intriguing exploration of the natural history of gulls, including their thorny taxonomy and identification.

### Introduction to Gull ID

Often approached with apprehension, gulls have gained a love-hate relationship with many birders. Among these larids are some of the most coveted bird species in the world. Amar will highlight key identification field marks for separating our most common gull species, and he will also touch on some of the often-ignored topics in gull-study such as the aging process, plumage and molt. Learn why an increasing number of people are being drawn to this family of birds and are eagerly calling themselves “larophiles”.

A few other key pieces of information about the fall meeting

- **Discord:** There will be an introduction and primer about the Nebraska Birding Discord channel on Friday evening.
- **Presentations:** If you have a scientific presentation that you’d like to share at the meeting, please contact the NOU President Paul Pearson ([propearson@gmail.com](mailto:propearson@gmail.com)) to submit abstract. There are limited time slots.
- **Silent Auction:** NOU will be holding a silent auction at the fall meeting in Ogallala to help pay for our amazing speaker, Amar Ayyash. Items will be on display throughout the 2-day event and bidding will conclude following dinner on Saturday evening. If possible, send a picture of your donation item to Boni Edwards by text or email so we can promote this event over the next several weeks. Text 308-530-0162 or [boniedwards@gmail.com](mailto:boniedwards@gmail.com). Bring your item to the meeting for display.



*Meeting Registration form is included in this newsletter and registration for meals closes 15 September*



## Tri-state Meeting Recap

The Nebraska Ornithologists' Union joined members of the Iowa and South Dakota Ornithologists' Unions at the Salvation Army Western Hills Camp in South Sioux City for the Tri-state Spring meeting 16-18 May 2025. Approximately 180 individuals were registered. Friday evening's fun included an evening social and poster session that was very well received. Nine researchers from Nebraska and South Dakota presented information about their research projects.

Saturday was filled with field trips to hotspots in all three states. Popular destinations in Nebraska included Ponca State Park, Danish Alps SRA/Kramper Lake, the former Ashford Scout Camp (privately owned) and the Winnebago water treatment plant. Despite that infamous Nebraska wind that both brought birds in and then pushed some out, species highlights included Neotropic Cormorant (all 3 days at Kramper Lake), Red-necked Phalaropes, Ruddy Turnstone, Black-bellied Plover, Piping Plover, a Mississippi Kite (far northeast of its usual range in NE), eastward Lark Buntings, Gray-cheeked Thrush, and Veery, as well as solid number of warblers such as Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian and Mourning.

Michael Forsberg presenting about Whooping Cranes. Photo by Ruthie Stearns



Late Saturday afternoon NOU members reconvened for the annual business meeting. The nominating committee put forward the slate of candidates to serve as officers for the upcoming (and now current) year. While most officers are familiar names and were re-elected, two very important changes occurred. First, David Cunningham was elected as Treasurer and Thomas Labedz was elected as Librarian. David replaces Jan Johnson who served as Treasure for eight years. Thomas replaced Anita Breckbill who served as Librarian for 16 years. The NOU gives a HUGE amount of thanks and gratitude to Jan and Anita for their collective 25 years of service.





Following Saturday evening dinner, the full group enjoyed a riveting presentation by Michael Forsberg about his new book, *Into Whooperland: A Photographer's Journey with Whooping Cranes*. The presentation focused on Forsberg's travels and adventures following and photographing Whooping Cranes in the Central Flyway. As would be expected from the renowned photographer, the images included in the presentation were visually stunning and provided glimpses into the lives of Whooping Cranes that few rarely have the opportunity to witness.

By all accounts, it was a very enjoyable meeting and do not be surprised if the NOU meets up with the IOU and SDOU again in the future.

## **NOU's Next Meetings**

**Fall Meeting:** Ogallala, 26-28 September 2025

**Spring Meeting:** Ft. Robinson 29-31 May 2026

## **New Members**

Anne Troyer, Wood River; Heather Hruskoci, Lincoln; John and Meagan Tripp, Omaha; Tyler Harms, Ames, Iowa; Kevin Murphy, Boone, Iowa; Jeremiah Ourada, Lincoln, Logan Sanders, McCook — Welcome!

## **Prothonotary Warblings – 30 July 2025**

Paul L. Pearson, Ph.D.

President, N.O.U.

eBird: propearson, email: [propearson@gmail.com](mailto:propearson@gmail.com)

### **NOU Kudos**

Congrats and a huge thank you to our new officers, Dave Cunningham-Treasurer and Tom Labedz-Librarian. We greatly appreciate both of you stepping up to help lead our organization.

Congrats to Cody McGregor who recently defended his Master's thesis entitled "A comparison of avian



communities between restored and unrestored areas along the Platte River" in the University of Nebraska-Kearney's ornithology program.

Shout out to the UNK "Big Day" team of Eugene Huryn, Cody McGregor and Tommy Childers who did a Big Day in May to raise money for the UNK Endowed Wildlife Biology Endowed Research Fund. Due to weather and bird patterns beyond their control, they fell well short of the Nebraska Big Day record of 203, but they did hit their 150 species goal with 153. Nice job and we look forward to seeing what next year's team does!

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/373276>

## **2025 Nebraska 300 Big Year – Halftime-ish Leaders**

Congrats to the Big Year leaders! As of July 31<sup>st</sup> and 350 species reported thus far (per eBird):

- Tobin Brown's run at the Nebraska Big Year record continues with an impressive 330 (94.3%!), adding a Lincoln County Rufous Hummingbird today. 17 to tie. 20 more to 350. Keep grinding!
- Keegan Brown notches his first Nebraska 300 Year with 310. Well-earned with 5 months to go!
- Dave Cunningham's 307 means a FOUR-YEAR streak, hitting 300. That's a lot of miles! Mark Brogie has the record at five consecutive years.
- Eugene Huryn is VERY close to his first Nebraska 300 Big Year at 297, including an amazing 10<sup>th</sup> state record Black-throated Sparrow on Henry Road (Sioux) in June.
- Rounding out the top 5 is Caleb Strand at 281. Of those, 205 species are just in Wayne County including 8 new county records and an amazing variety and quantity of migrants. Welcome back to Nebraska!

## **More Best Birds (so far)**

The third annual Nebraska Birding Bowl and our tri-state Spring Meeting coincided with a fairly spectacular Spring migration season that started hard in April and continued through June with some great birds in unlikely places and at crazy times. We'll start off with warblers, since they are always a popular spring highlight.

As tough as 2024 was for warblers, 2025 kept giving from April through June with variety, numbers and rarities from East to West. A Hooded Warbler on April 18<sup>th</sup> at Towl Park (Douglas) foreshadowed a month and a half of great activity - uncommon birds showing up in more than 1's or 2's for a day or so. Multiple sightings of the elusive and secretive Connecticut Warbler, including a singing, long-staying bird at Wilderness Park in Lincoln (Lancaster), got many birders a difficult life/state bird. Western traps proved fruitful for Eastern species including Worm-eating (Lake Minatare, Scotts Bluff) and Pine Warbler (Cedar Point, Keith) in May. Some species that are annual but not in big numbers, like Chestnut-sided Warbler seemed to be everywhere, including the smallest tree you'd expect to see a bird in at Kramper Lake 10 feet from my head. Just when everyone was satisfied, massaging/icing their necks and sleeping in for the first time for a month because it was "over", the best warbler of all was a THIRD state record Grace's Warbler that appeared briefly and was photographed at a home in Lincoln County on June 3<sup>rd</sup>. Sadly, it didn't stick around for anyone but the homeowner to see, but it put a nice bow on Warblers 2025.

Warblers definitely weren't the only story this migration season. Eugene's Black-throated Sparrow is mentioned above. Shorebirds were a thing for sure and Whimbrels had a minute. A mini "[Patagonia Picnic Table Effect](#)" of sorts at was kicked off at a WPA in Clay county as a routine shorebird search by the Brown brothers included a once-in-a-lifetime close



encounter with a Whooping Crane family that landed just yards away. A couple days later, Dave Cunningham successfully found the cranes plus a surprise Whimbrel. More birders went there to see the Whimbrel and the next day Joel Jorgensen found the 10<sup>th</sup> state record White-Tailed Kite. Congrats to Joel on, as he put it in his checklist notes, a “reasonably adequate find” for your #420!!

Honorable mentions: A Dakota County first Mississippi Kite from Keegan Brown and strong west wind-aided Lark Buntings in multiple spots/states were nice spring meeting weekend finds in the Northeast. Shout out to the Neotropic Cormorant that hung out at Kramper Lake (Dakota) for all to see.

Brandi Craiglow added another western rarity to her resume with a Varied Thrush in Gordon Co. in April.

Red-throated Loons in breeding plumage are not typical in Nebraska, but Steven Mlodinow found one at Cedar Point (Keith) on June 25, beating the latest spring record in almost a month. It cooperated with many birders (but not all...grrr) over the next few days.



### **Fall Meeting Donation Request and Call for Research Presentations**

Don't miss the Fall Meeting in Ogallala Sep 26-28. Our special guest and featured speaker Amar Ayyash is North America's foremost gull expert and author of *The Gull Guide*. This promises to be an amazing event as Amar will give two presentations and host gulling sessions on both Saturday and Sunday at Lake Mac.

To keep meeting registration costs for this special event low, we are asking for donations to cover Amar's travel expenses and Honorarium. Several generous members have donated already to cover approximately half of the costs. Please consider a donation of \$10 or more to help fund this amazing opportunity and future programs. If you would like to donate to the General Fund to support this program and/or the Scholarship Fund please go here:

[Donate](#)

Students, especially those in grades 9-12, are highly encouraged to apply for a scholarship to attend the fall meeting. For more details, check here: [Nebraska Young Birders](#) and send your application to me at the email above.

The Fall NOU meeting will also feature a few scientific presentations on Friday Night. Talks will be 10-15 min including questions. Preference will be given to projects related to Nebraska bird topics. Researchers are encouraged to submit a short abstract of their work to the NOU president (email above) for consideration. Student presenters may also qualify for a full or partial scholarship to attend the meeting.



## And finally...what does NOU \*REALLY\* do?

Ending a successful spring meeting on a very high note with Michael Forsberg's spectacular and emotionally moving "Into Whooperland" presentation and starting year 2 as president, I was inspired and excited about the future of NOU. The feedback from the meeting was 99% positive. Subsequent conversations with our leadership team and other members since then have sparked many ideas for how this organization can not only survive but thrive. For NOU to continue to fulfill its mission, the reality is that NOU needs to change and evolve. To do that we need to be more visible and more active. We need to recruit more members, new members and engage them to retain them. That means we need to update our digital presence, as well as our physical presence. There are many things we can do to make this happen if people step up to use their time and talents for a variety of things we need to ensure that NOU is around for decades to come. As I'm pondering these topics, NOU member Matt Hansen sent a well-timed email that both smacked me in the face and unlocked one of the big things that I was thinking, but not realizing.

**"Question is this as an organization, what do we do for conservation in Nebraska, seems like we spend a lot of time recording birds seen and putting them in a nice book, but what do we actually do for the birds we watch, if anything?"**

Thank you so much for this astute observation Matt!

What is NOU doing and what does NOU want to do and be as an organization?

This is a fundamental question that needs to be answered by our members and leadership. NOU's stated mission is "Dedicated to the Study, Appreciation and Protection of Birds." It's a really good one. There's no better place to start than right here, as everything about NOU is contained in that concise mission statement.

Matt's email led me to reflect and bluntly conclude that the current NOU is largely a state-wide birding club with a nice publication and extensive state bird records. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that. I know that many of our current and long-time members enjoy that part of our mission the most, as do I. The birding IS the thing that we get together for. We do a great job at the "Appreciation" part of our mission. Every meeting we have is chock-full of birding opportunities and the Nebraska Bird Review mainly revolves around bird records. But, as Matt said, what do we DO for the birds we watch, if anything?

That brings in the "Study" portion of the mission. Our scientific poster session at the spring meeting was an unqualified hit based on the positive feedback I got. The posters were strong and the presenters were talking to meeting attendees for hours on Friday night. My plan is to continue featuring and promoting research at our meetings and in our communications. NOU was founded as a scientific organization and it should continue, in part, as one. We have a long history of data and checklists to support research into Nebraska birds. My thought/hope is to start a fund to create small NOU grants to sponsor bird research in Nebraska. It could be at the college level, it could be non-governmental orgs, or even at the high school level. What else are we doing to promote "study" to benefit the birds we watch?

The third area of our mission is where Matt's point really hits the mark. "Protection" What *are* we doing to protect those birds we love so much? NOU members do, and have done, great things individually volunteering and educating and working in conservation-related positions or activities. Many have done this for decades, served the organization, and have brought us to this point. They should be commended and if they don't have the capacity or desire to take a more active role, that's OK too.



But NOU as an organization isn't officially attached to any of those activities. We don't sponsor our own community bird hikes or do public outreach. NOU does not partner with other organizations very often. We don't actively fund-raise so that we can sponsor studies or fund education or conservation projects. The birds need us now more than ever. There are many paths that NOU can choose to walk in the future. Passion and participation could transform NOU from a statewide bird appreciation club to a powerful advocate for birds and birders in Nebraska. We can Protect birds by helping others Appreciate and Study birds. The three parts of the mission feed each other.

What do you want NOU to be, to do and to represent? What will you do to help us get there?

Until next issue, give those questions and observations some thought and Bird how you wanna Bird...mindfully.

**P.S.**

Please like and share:

[Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Facebook Page](#)

Join the new "Nebraska Birding" Discord Server (email for invite after setting up your account)

Please send me your comments, questions, feedback, recommendations, goals/milestone, Nemesis Birds, Spark birds, Target birds, profiles of yourself and/or fellow NOU members(!), or tales of Nebraska birding gone great or totally awry. New members, introduce yourselves. Long-time members...PLEASE share your stories or your best checklists from decades past.

## The Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Board

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September 26-28, 2025

**Location:** Quality Inn, 201 Chuckwagon Rd, Ogallala, NE 69153

**Total:** \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate any special dietary requirements (all requests may not be met, but all attempts will be made):

**Students** may apply for scholarships to assist them in attending; please send a request to NOU President Paul Pearson at [propearson@gmail.com](mailto:propearson@gmail.com)

