

Destination: Central Nebraska

By Richard Edwards

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This project seeks to promote eco-tourism opportunities in Central Nebraska, namely Loup and Buffalo counties. Additional economic benefits may be expected in the counties between Loup and Buffalo through which visitors would travel, including Sherman, Valley and Garfield counties. The University of Nebraska's Center for Great Plains Studies recently named the Switzer Ranch and Nature Reserve in Loup and Rowe Sanctuary in Buffalo as among the "Top 10 Ecotourism Sites in the Great Plains."

Central Nebraska is becoming better known through word-of-mouth and local advertising for spectacular wildlife-watching – especially the observing of hundreds of thousands of sandhill cranes during their spring migration in March and early April and the experiencing of the mating dances of the greater prairie chicken in late March, April and May. However, there has been virtually no advertising of these opportunities in more distant but potentially fruitful locales such as Denver, Kansas City, or Minneapolis, as well as Omaha. This project would begin such promotion.

Nebraska has exceptional opportunities for building nature-based tourism; to do so it must displace its image as a boring, monotonous "fly-over" or "drive-through" state. This project promotes greater awareness of the exceptional wildlife of the Great Plains and of Nebraska in particular.

Nebraska's "Top 10 Ecotourism Sites." Nebraska shares with Montana the distinction of having three of the Top 10 ecotourism sites in the Great Plains (see attached map), two of which are in Central Nebraska. In 2012 NU's Center for Great Plains Studies conducted a survey of 51 naturalists throughout the region to determine the top sites. Based on this survey, three Nebraska sites – Switzer Ranch & Nature Reserve, Rowe Sanctuary/Crane Trust, and Ft. Robinson State Park were



Prairie chicken at Switzer Ranch

named as Top Sites. This project provides both promotional materials and market advertising of ecotourism opportunities in Central Nebraska around the theme of "Top Sites in the Great Plains."

Marketing Plan. This project is developing "Top Sites" promotional materials and images and promotes them in the Denver, Minneapolis, Omaha, and Kansas City markets.

Goals for the Project. Our principal goal is to increase the number of eco-tourists to Loup, Buffalo and adjacent counties, to increase their average length of stay and daily level of spending while in Nebraska, and to begin to create a more general image of Central Nebraska as a tourist destination and thereby enhancing the region as a tourist destination. Nebraska has not been as effective as other states in persuading potential out-of-state tourists that our state is a tourist destination.

Long-Term Benefits. Building a substantial eco-tourist base of out-of-region visitors is a long-run project that will require patience and continued commitment; South Dakota (or Napa Valley or the Ozarks) did not become tourist destinations overnight. However, this project contributes a beginning to that goal, and it will be in the self-interest of each participating enterprise to continue the effort.