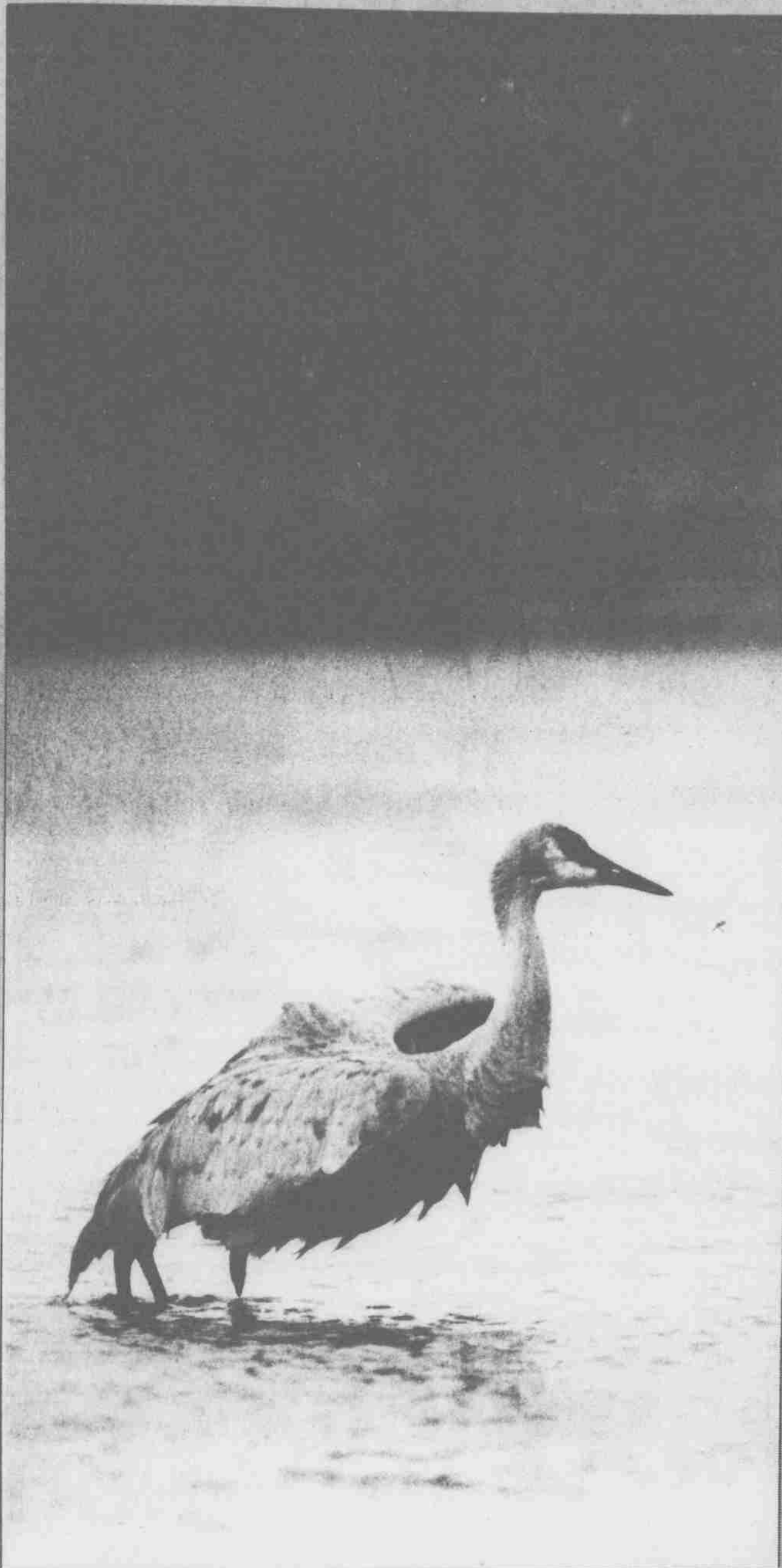


# Trip boasts birds, booze



Analysis by Eric Gregory  
Staff Reporter

I always thought bird watchers were sort of a separate breed. They wear a lot of tweed, eat granola for breakfast and carry those funny looking walking sticks that fold into chairs.

But DN photographer Mark Davis assured me that the UNL recreation department's "Birds! Birds! Birds!" trip was an event we couldn't miss. The brochure promised a weekend of canoeing and a chance to see "the dramatic annual gathering of thousands of waterfowl on the Platte River."

Between some gibberish about sandhill cranes and condors, Davis convinced me to go. A quick call to the rec department reserved us space on the trip.

On the evening of Friday, March 7, we were in the rec department, packing our gear into waterproof sacks and packing the sacks into rubberized "Bill's Bags" (for the first half of the trip I thought they were saying Bilge Bags).

The other campers were all there when we arrived, and I was glad that they looked like regular people, not the whole-grain yogurt suckers I had expected.

By 5:30, 19 of us were piled in a van towing seven canoes west on Interstate 80. It was a long van ride but Davis and I passed the time by talking to the other campers. I decided they weren't bonafide birdwatchers.

We stopped for dinner in York and laid in our final supplies at the York Bottle Shoppe. We left with a plethora of spirits ranging from Black Label beer to TJ Swan to Two Fingers Tequila. I think we made the owner's night. Any lingering doubts I might of had about my fellow campers were put to rest.

Now fully provisioned, we pushed on to our evening's destination, the Bassway Strip Wildlife Management Area which, though you won't find it on the map, is near Kearney.

It was dark when we arrived, but

with a little help, we got our tent set up while someone else started a campfire.

Someone pointed out a few constellations, we talked about Halley's Comet and settled around the campfire.

The campfire talk was top-notch. I felt right at home. We talked about other trips, about beer, which of course led to vomit stories, which somehow led to stories about dissecting animals.

And there were the inevitable marshmallows. One camper said, "You'd expect to find some mallow in marshmallows wouldn't you?" I'd never really thought about it before, but it made sense.

"You'd think they came from mallow trees that grow in a marsh somewhere, right?" he went on, "But no..." As he began to read the list of ingredients, another camper held his marshmallow in the flame and watched it slowly burn into a black molten blob. Seconds later I felt something plop onto my leg. Looking down to see a splotch of black and white, I thought maybe the cranes were flying overhead, and I got excited. Then I realized it was just the molten mallow from someone's roasting stick.

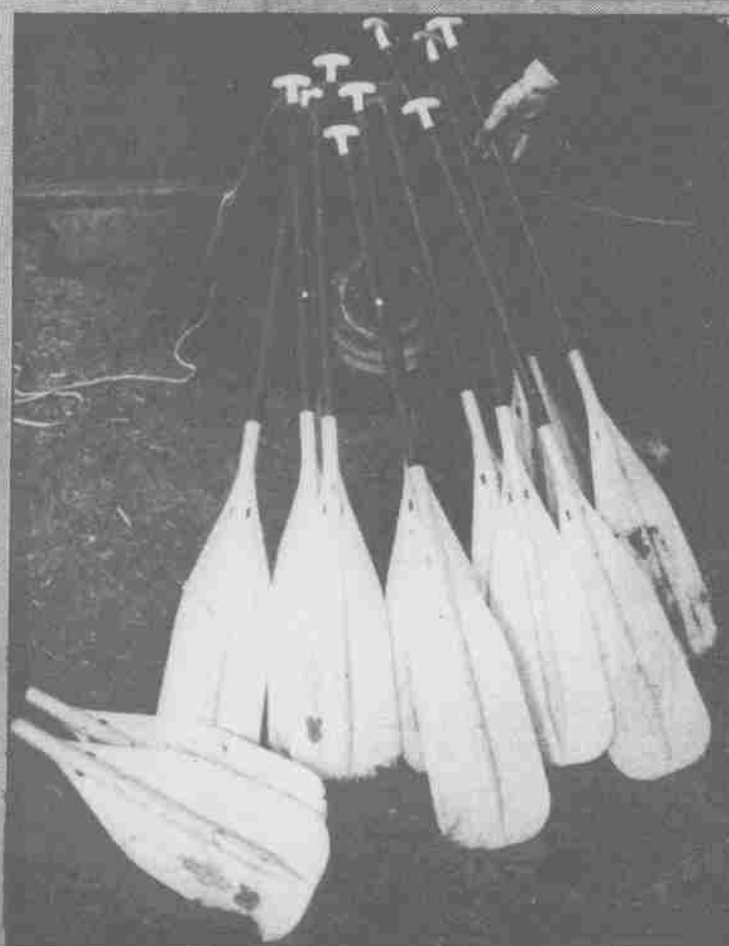
It was cold out. After two people scooted close enough to the fire to melt the rubber on their shoes, we decided to hijack the sack.

But before we went to bed we laid out a plan for a dramatic viewing of the migrating cranes. We would get up at 4 a.m. and be on the river by 5 a.m. or so. That way we could paddle our canoes right into the midst of the cranes as they slept. When the sun rose hundreds of them would wake up and take to the air all at once, making for some stunning photography.

The extreme cold forced me to wear almost everything I had to bed. I'd never slept with a stocking cap and gloves on before.

Anytime you go camping with a group there is always one person who overindulges and spends half the night making peace with his stomach. I've been that person more than once.

See TRIP on 10



(From top to bottom) A sandhill crane prepares to take to flight as canoes disturb its morning feeding; Del Stuefer laughs after another canoe is drenched in play; Canoe paddles are stacked by a trailer before being packed; A dead tree dams a channel.

Photos by  
Mark Davis