One of the great spectacles of the natural world—the migration of 650,000 sandhill cranes—has begun.

From March through mid-April, trumpeting formations of these ancient birds fill the skies over Kearney. By day, the giant gray cranes forage on Nebraska cropland, but at night they converge by the thousands to safely roost in the shallows of the Platte River.

Bird enthusiasts from around the United States marvel at the sights and sounds of the migration. Numerous viewing opportunities are available, including roadside parking sites, hike-bike trails built over rustic railroad bridges, and a wildlife sanctuary and educational center maintained by the National Audubon Society.

“This migration has been occurring for tens of thousands of years and is truly an amazing sight to witness,” said Bill Taddicken, director of the Audubon Society’s Rowe Sanctuary east of Kearney.

“For birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts in general, this is definitely a must-see event,” he said.

Sandhill cranes leap and flap in mating dances as they feast in the fields on insect larvae and corn left from the fall harvest. The birds are resting and recharging as they anticipate the climax of their long flight from Mexico and the southern United States to summer nesting areas in Alaska, northern Canada and Siberia.

In all, 80 percent of the world’s sandhill cranes migrate through the Kearney area, but they are not the only species that rely upon Platte River roosting grounds and area wetlands.

Rare whooping cranes, ducks, geese, shorebirds and eagles are among the other feathered species that crowd the Central Nebraska Flyway during February and March.

The ability to witness such a variety of birds attracts experts and enthusiasts from around the globe, but a degree in ornithology isn’t necessary to be inspired by the mass migration. Many bird lovers simply motor into the Kearney area, follow gravel roads into the countryside, and park and watch when they encounter groups of foraging cranes.

Often, flocks are intent on feeding and socializing and will tolerate humans within 100 yards or less.

One option for viewing is following the hike-bike trail at Fort Kearny State Recreation Area northward to rustic bridges spanning the Platte River. It’s from the trail’s converted railroad bridges where hikers get their reward.

At dusk, cranes glide closely overhead. When the birds aren’t trumpeting, hushed observers can often hear the sounds of feathered wings slicing through the chilly spring air.

Sunset and sunrise spectacles awe visitors at the National Audubon Society’s Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary, about 20 miles east of Kearney. The sanctuary offers guided three-hour group tours.

Viewing blinds on the banks of the Platte allow close-up observation of crane roosting behavior.

Crane watching doesn’t require a lot of specialized equipment, but hikers or blind visitors need to dress warmly. Layering is a good strategy to preserve body heat on the hike-bike trail and in viewing blinds, and don’t forget warm headwear, socks, boots and gloves or mittens.

Sandhill cranes info

The spring migration population of sandhill cranes in the Central Nebraska Flyway is estimated at 650,000.

Other sandhill crane facts:

Height—3 to 4 feet
Wingspan—6 feet
Weight—8 to 12 pounds
Color—Gray
Migration—170 to 450 miles/day
Flight speed—38 mph
Mating—Begins at age 3 to 4
Eggs—Two per year
Lifespan—20 to 40 years