

Birding Salt Marshes

By John Carlini, Wachiska Audubon – October 2015

"What in the world is that strange plant that looks like it should be growing in an ocean?" was the question that came to mind when I first laid eyes on saltwort, an odd, knobby little plant found in Nebraska's Eastern Saline Wetlands.

It was a surprise to encounter a completely unfamiliar plant in Lincoln after hiking local parks and trails for decades. My initial treasure hunt in the local salt basin had been for unusual birds but the unusual salt plants diverted my attention. The salt flats of Lancaster and Saunders counties showcase salt-loving plants like saltwort, sea blite, and inland saltgrass that grow in concentric rings around bare patches of saline soil in relation to the amount of salinity they can tolerate.

Some of the wetlands most valued for outdoor recreation have been lost over the years to draining, development, and landfills. Forty-nine out of every fifty acres of saline wetlands have been obliterated. The precious few that remain preserve one-of-a-kind species like the salt creek tiger beetle as well as the origin of Lincoln's history. Many Nebraskans have never ventured into the historic salt basins where local salt mining created job opportunities for residents of what would later become the capitol city. Salt was collected commercially during the latter part of the 19th century in a "salt boom." The briny wetlands are the reason Lincoln is not located along a main river way like other cities. A visit to a salt basin can reveal a layer of frosty white salt crystals covering the ground after seeping to the surface from the underlying Dakota sandstone.

Awareness for rare species that rely on this unique ecosystem has prompted more responsible stewardship in recent years, with many organizations coming together to form the Saline Wetland Conservation Partnership. Its goal is to preserve and restore the roughly 4,000 acres of "the Great Salt Basin" that still exist.

The most famous inhabitant of this salty landscape is one of the rarest insects in the world. The salt creek tiger beetle with a population that struggles to reach a few hundred individuals has become the poster child for saline wetland conservation. Funding committed to habitat protection for the little tiger beetle will also benefit other saline species while preserving our local history and the expansive basin views.

Birdwatchers like myself have discovered other treasures in the highly desirable saline habitat. October brings colorful migrants such as Le Conte's sparrows with butterscotch faces and smoky gray cheeks. They're one of many bird species that use the native habitat as a rest stop during their long journey south. But fall's not the only time of year to find great birds in the Saline Wetlands. This summer, interesting marsh birds like least bitterns and soras found conditions to be ideal and decided to spend the breeding season in a wetland right in the middle of Lincoln. Sputtering diminutive sedge wrens made their homes in the tallgrass prairie on most of the saline units, and prairie blackbirds called bobolinks also utilized these habitat oases to raise their young and sing their bubbly songs.

Fueled by this season's copious rains, adjoining stands of apricot-colored indian grass and big bluestem tallgrass reached towering heights of 5 to 9 feet.

If you've never explored a Saline Wetland before, October is a great time to visit. You don't need a forest to enjoy rich fall colors; the salt marshes turn many shades of orange and gold this time of year. Sweeping views of the wetlands are often complemented by wind moving through the grasses. Our Eastern Saline Wetlands offer a facet of Nebraska's natural scenic beauty and deserve to be protected for future generations to enjoy.