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Travel

What It's Like to Camp Out With 15,000 Sandhill Cranes

An intrepid Audubon staffer beds down amidst one of Earth's greatest migrations.

On any given day, the largest gathering of birds I'm likely to see is a few dozen pigeons darting among the Manhattan rooftops outside the seventh-floor window by my desk. So last month I jumped at the chance to view 400,000 Sandhill Cranes stopping mid-migration to rest and refuel along Nebraska's Platte River. What's more, I'd get to spend one night in a blind at Audubon's [Rowe Sanctuary](#), surrounded by the magnificent birds. I was ecstatic. Then I read the informational guide.

I'd be dropped off at 5 p.m., it said, and I wouldn't be allowed to leave the six-by-eight-foot wooden blind until someone collected me at 9 a.m. the following day. The structure has no insulation, and no heating apparatus is allowed—lest the shack catch fire and the blaze startle the birds. Human comfort wasn't entirely dismissed: Temperatures often dip below freezing this time of year, the guide said, so I should bring a sleeping bag rated for -10°F to stave off hypothermia. And there'd be a Porta-Potty—a detail I found reassuring but also somewhat confusing, given the no-leaving-the-blind rule.

People do this every March and April, I reassured myself. So what if my outdoor experience thus far has consisted of short day hikes and that one overnight trip in central New Jersey in middle school when I was surrounded by teachers and classmates? I couldn't pass up being smack-dab in the middle of one of the greatest migrations on Earth.

→ So in mid-March I showed up at Rowe with my photography equipment, the Mountain Hardwear [HyperLamina Torch](#) 0°F sleeping bag I was field-testing for *Audubon*, chemical hand and body warmers, and a day's worth of snacks. A volunteer bundled me and my gear onto an ATV and drove out to the blind—an unadorned wooden box—set about 30 feet back from the river. Before he left, he handed me a bucket. "Thanks," I said, "What is this?"