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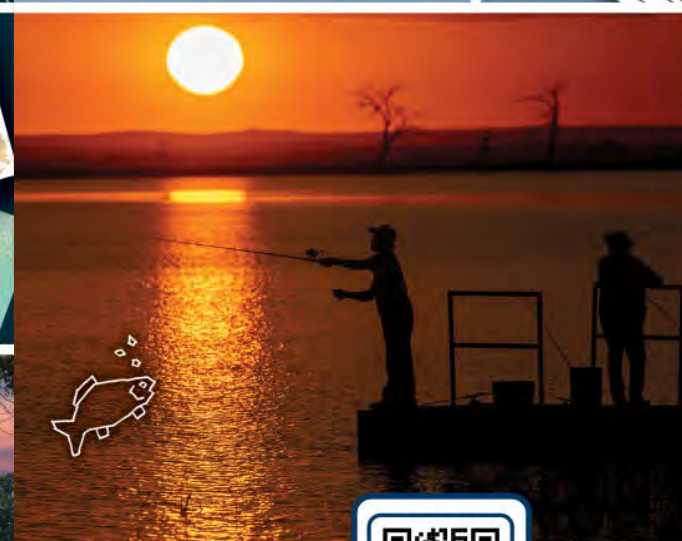
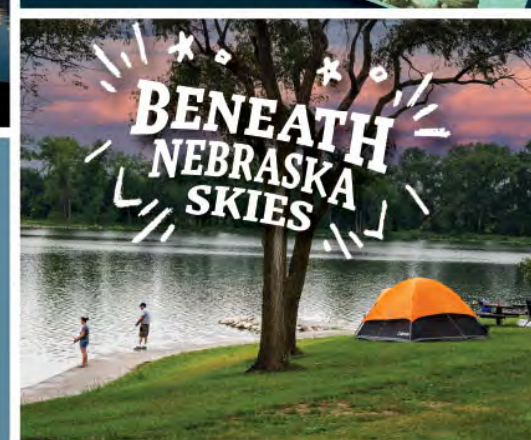
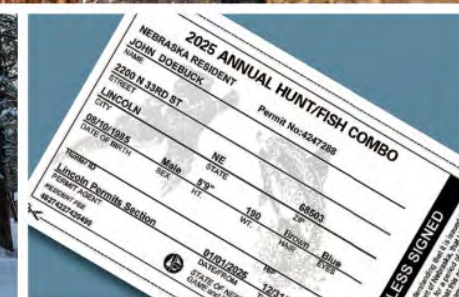
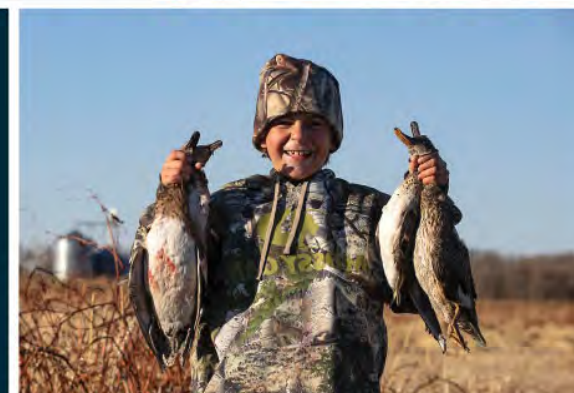


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Cover: Pronghorn, one of Nebraska's native species, move across a frost-covered grassland in Dawes County. See the story "What Is Nature?" on page 62.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

This page: The winds of winter blow as a snow drift engulfs snowflowers in Sheridan County.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926. The Commission is dedicated to the conservation and protection of all the state's natural resources and the people who use them.



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Look for bald eagles near open water.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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WINTER FROST

Hoarfrost formed by fog rising from Lake McConaughy, covering a grove of trees in a pasture south of the lake.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





Kevin Bergstrom and wife, Gwen, prepare to take a shot with an inline muzzleloading rifle. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

REASONS TO HUNT THE MUZZLELOADER SEASON

By Julie Geiser

The muzzleloading deer season runs the entire month of December, giving hunters more time in the field and a few other reasons to hunt this season.

Leftovers

You may see the “leftovers” from the firearm season when it comes to bucks, which may include smaller year-classes, or you might come across those big boys that have evaded high-power rifle hunters. Bucks that you’ve never seen before may have moved into an area from hunting pressure and as the second rut sets in.

Second Rut

Does not bred during the main rut will come back into estrus, typically in December, which sets bucks back into breeding mode. These bucks may start making new scrapes and using different trails in the search for unbred does. Using trail cameras in these areas will tell the story of who is using them. Some bucks will even come in to calls, rattling and scent lures.

During the second rut, key in on the does. Doe family groups will herd-up and are somewhat predictable in their movements from bedding to feeding and watering areas. Using more than one tree stand or blind is critical. Having a stand for morning and afternoon locations allows hunters to focus on morning bedding and afternoon feeding movements.

Re-Pattern

Fewer hunters will be in the field distributing less human scent and pressure on deer, but this doesn’t mean the deer weren’t educated by hunters during previous deer seasons. Whether hunting an area you know or one you haven’t hunted before, scout or re-scout areas as deer may follow different patterns during the December season. Look for food and water sources; all deer, including bucks, will be feeding heavily during colder months, and food sources will start to be depleted. Also keep in mind, as vegetation dies off, bedding areas may change to areas that provide more cover.

Hunt the Calm

If the weather is cold, use that to your advantage by hunting calm breaks in weather, focusing on a couple days leading up to a storm or right after a storm as deer will come out of cover to feed and water during those calm times. Deer will bed down at daybreak near feeding areas in tree or shrubby areas as they try to conserve energy in cold weather, which is the coldest time of the day. Cedar trees provide warmth for deer, so finding trails and setting up a stand near cedar areas may catch deer as they move from cover to feeding or watering areas. Many hunters yearn for the challenge of primitive hunting, and muzzleloader hunting is no easy task. Knowing the differences between hunting this month and other times of the year is crucial to your success.

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NEWLY DISCOVERED MUSHROOMS

By Gerry Steinauer

This past June, I spent a week collecting mushrooms with Northern Prairies Land Trust ecologist Chance Brueggemann and mycologist Derek Zeller at The Nature Conservancy’s Niobrara Valley Preserve, spanning Brown and Cherry counties. The preserve is home to a unique mix of western pine, eastern deciduous and northern birch woodlands, and no mushroom survey had ever been conducted here before. This offered us an exceptional opportunity for discovery.

Due to drought, we mostly found mushrooms in the heavily shaded, moist springbranch canyons that cut deep into the river’s south bluff, with few specimens in the drier upland pine and deciduous woodlands. Navigating these narrow canyons was challenging; we often found ourselves ankle-deep in cold water, climbing steep slopes and swatting away mosquitoes.



A golden pholiota mushroom sprouts from a log at the Niobrara Valley Preserve. GERRY STEINAUER

Despite these difficulties, over the course of the week, we collected about 100 species. Each evening in our cabin, Brueggemann and Zeller spread the mushrooms on drying racks and organized their field notes, while I, the project manager — exhausted from trying to keep up with the energetic younger duo — recovered on the couch.

Surveys and Website

This marked our second year of extensive mushroom surveys in eastern Nebraska. In 2023, Brueggemann and Zeller concentrated on the deciduous woodlands at Indian Cave State Park, where they gathered nearly 450 specimens. This past summer, efforts expanded to include Fontenelle Forest preserves near Omaha, Rock Creek Station State Historical Park and the Niobrara Valley Preserve.

Since many mushroom species look nearly identical, we use DNA analysis to help differentiate them. So far, we have conducted DNA analysis on 200 species collected in



Sliced open to reveal its fleshy, spore-producing interior, this truffle from the genus *Tuber* was collected at Indian Cave State Park. GERRY STEINAUER

2023, and the results suggest we may have discovered a few species new to science. Among our finds are five species of truffle and truffle-like mushrooms, groups never before reported in Nebraska. The spore-producing body of these species, the “mushroom,” develops and remains hidden underground. Once mature, they emit a pungent odor that attracts squirrels, deer and other animals, which dig them up, eat them and spread the spores through their droppings. Brueggemann discovered three truffle species by enlarging holes in the ground he suspected were made by animals searching for them.

One morning at Indian Cave, Brueggemann excavated a truffle from the genus *Tuber*. Without a collection bag handy, he placed the mushroom in his lunchbox. Unbeknownst to him, the scent of these mushrooms, which include the gourmet European white truffle and Oregon black truffle, can easily transfer to food. Unfortunately, his truffle emitted an odor reminiscent of foul broccoli, forcing him to toss his entire lunch.

One of our goals is to share our discoveries through creation of the Mushrooms of Nebraska website. Zeller and his collaborator Mitchel Pigsley developed and maintain this educational website, which serves as an online mushroom field guide.

It allows visitors to search for mushroom species by genus, type — such as toadstool or puffball, color and edibility. The website includes photographs of each species, along with details about its habitat, growth season and key identification features.

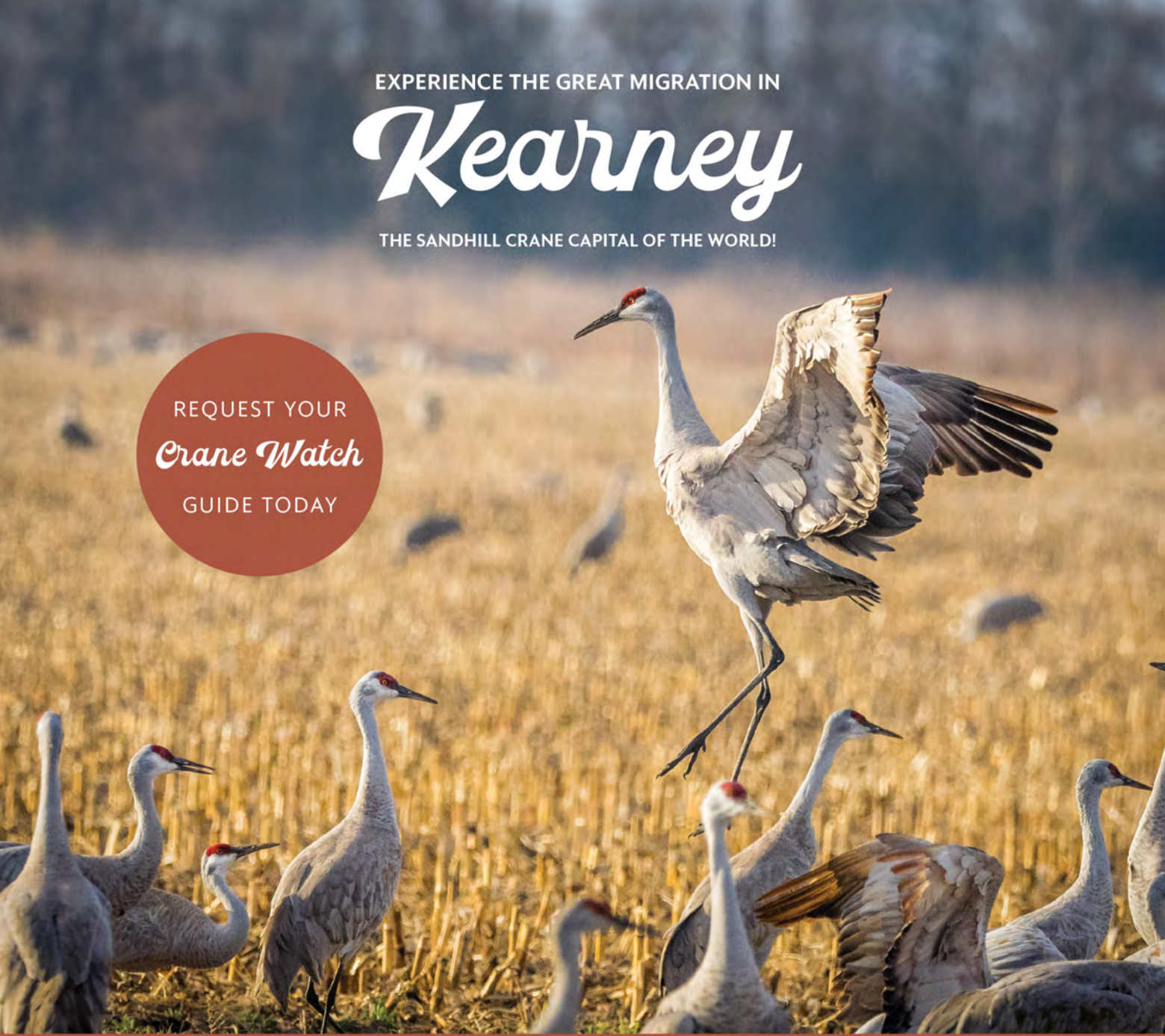
Currently, the site focuses on mushrooms from Indian Cave State Park, but we’ll soon be adding species from our other survey sites. You can explore it at nebraskamushrooms.org. Enjoy!

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'HEAT AND EAT' DEER SHANK ENCHILADAS

By Ryan Sparks

The past few years my ace-in-the-hole recipe for deer shanks has been “heat and eat enchiladas.” You can make a half dozen trays of enchiladas to freeze and have ready for days when you don’t want to cook or do dishes. Depending on how many shanks you have, you can double or even quadruple the recipe. We usually aim to put four to six trays in the freezer. Use this two-tray recipe as a base.

Servings: 5-6 per tray

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 3 hours

Ingredients:

- 2-3 tbsp. canola or vegetable oil
- 2 deer shanks
- 10 flour tortillas
- Enchilada sauce (see below)
- 2 (4-oz.) cans diced green chilies
- 2 white onions, diced
- 8 oz. shredded cheese, plus extra

Enchilada Sauce

- ¼ cup vegetable oil
 - 2 tbsp. flour
 - ¼ cup chili powder
 - ¼ tsp. cumin
 - ¼ tsp. garlic powder
 - 8 oz. tomato sauce
 - 1½ cups shank water
- Salt to taste

Equipment Needed

- 2 (9x13) aluminum baking trays
- Vacuum sealer and 15x18 vacuum sealer bags
- Aluminum foil

1. Coat the shanks with cooking oil and salt lightly. Brown the shanks on all sides in a cast iron skillet over medium-high heat or in a 425° oven for 10-15 minutes. Place the browned shanks in an electric slow cooker or



Deer shank enchiladas, “heat and eat” style. RYAN SPARKS

large stock pot and cover with water. Bring the water to a steady simmer, cover, and reduce the heat to low. If using an electric slow cooker, use the “high” setting. Cook until the meat easily separates from the bone.

2. In a 3-quart saucepan or large deep skillet, heat ¼ cup oil over medium heat. Once hot, add 2 tablespoons of flour and ¼ cup chili powder and cook until lightly browned. Stir constantly to prevent burning. Stir in cumin and garlic powder and continue cooking for 1-2 minutes. Gradually stir in the tomato sauce and water from your shank pot. Simmer for 10 minutes. Taste for salt.

3. When the shanks are very tender, separate the meat from the bones and tendons.

4. Create an assembly line with all your ingredients in individual containers (tortillas, meat, cheese, green chilies, white onion and enchilada sauce).

5. Pour enough enchilada sauce in the baking trays to lightly coat the bottom. Dip a tortilla in the enchilada sauce on both sides and then place it in the aluminum baking tray. Put a fistful of shank meat in the tortilla, along with a scattering of white onion, diced green chilies and cheese. Roll the tortilla up with the seam side down. Continue assembling until the tray is full. Repeat for the second tray.

6. Once both trays are assembled, use aluminum foil to create a tight seal over each tray. Place each tray in a vacuum sealable bag, label the contents and vacuum seal before freezing. The trays stack nicely and will last a year or longer.

7. To heat and eat, remove the tray from the vacuum sealed bag and place in a 375° oven for one hour or until the enchiladas are warmed through. Remove the aluminum foil, add extra cheese to the top and return to the oven until melted.

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Chasing Nebraska Skies

By Renae Blum

Photos by Matt Hollamon

After starting his day stormchasing in Denver, Matt Hollamon of Martell photographed this supercell in the Nebraska Sandhills.





Hollamon shot this scene at his home in Martell. “I love being able to walk out of the house and capture images like this one. This little shower rolled over the house, and the sun just lit up the sky,” he said.

When he was 46 years old, Matt Hollamon saw his first tornado — and was immediately hooked. Invited to tag along on a friend’s storm chasing excursion in Kansas, Hollamon found himself gazing at a storm “that looked like a spaceship,” he said. “It was just being in that position — hearing the tornado sirens going off in this little town. It was such a cool experience.” A lifelong Nebraskan, Hollamon lives in Martell and had been taking pictures for a couple of years prior to this. He already knew he loved photographing the sky, especially sunsets and lightning. But this wild evening in 2016 introduced him to something new — the art of storm chasing. And he hasn’t stopped since. Today, Hollamon estimates he’s

seen about 80 tornadoes — though tornadoes aren’t necessarily the goal. “I’m kind of a structure junkie,” he said. “I like a storm that looks like a spaceship. When the wind carves out something that has those layers on it and it looks like a stack of pancakes, I love that.” The immensity of these supercells leaves him in awe. “They go 50,000 feet in the air at the cloud tops. It makes you feel insignificant, like there’s something bigger out there,” he said. “I don’t feel like I have to go to church to be in church.” For Hollamon, photography and storm chasing is a vital part of life — the way he recharges from work as a nurse at Tabitha Hospice in Lincoln. “The job that I do, it’s a high burnout deal. I’ve done it for five years,” Hollamon said. “And if you last five

years doing what I do, you have to be able to take care of yourself. ... I need my photography for me, as much as anything else.” Working full-time means it isn’t easy to find time for storm chasing. Hollamon finds opportunities where he can and each spring, usually in May, he tries to take a two- or three-week “chase-cation.” During that time, Hollamon might put as many as 8,000 miles on his vehicle, hopping from Oklahoma one day to Colorado the next, sticking mostly to the Great Plains. He chases alongside a good friend and fellow photographer he met on Instagram, Justin Snead. While Hollamon knows some photographers who chase storms solo, he prefers having a chase partner. “I think it’s a big advantage,” he said. “I



Hollamon photographed this tornado near Farnam in May 2019.



On this day, Hollamon started chasing storms by Hebron, Nebraska. He then moved back northeast and noticed the lightning ramping up as storms merged. “As fate would have it, it chased me right to one of my very favorite spots,” he said. “Lightning was dropping all around me when I got there.”

have the utmost trust in him. I know that he’s going to keep us safe, and I’m going to keep us safe, too.” Strangely enough, the storms themselves aren’t the most dangerous part of what he does. It’s the other drivers, Hollamon said — people out doing the same thing he’s doing. “There are times in the spring where

the weather’s pretty targeted to one area and you may have 2 or 3 thousand people on the road just chasing storms,” Hollamon said. “It gets wild.” Road conditions and nearby lightning can also pose hazards. Asked how he balances the need for safety with getting a good shot, Hollamon said, “Safety first, because there’s no

shot if you’re not safe.” At the same time, he will admit to accepting some level of risk: “Sometimes you have to just risk it for the biscuit, so to speak.” Hollamon insists he’s not an adrenaline junkie — or even much of a risk taker. “I’m pretty reserved. I’m not a big roller coaster rider,” he said. “I

don’t chase storms for the adrenaline part of it. It’s the awe of nature — that’s what I do it for.” Most of his best shots come from timelapses, something Hollamon began doing in 2017. His goal in the field is to capture seven to 10 seconds’ worth of images — enough for a good clip in an eventual storm chasing film.

Hollamon has created six timelapse films, each about five to 10 minutes long. They feature stirring music set over clips of dramatic skies and are among his proudest creations. His most recent project, called “Finding the Light,” was his biggest challenge yet. A month after starting work on this project, tragedy struck: In August of 2023, Hollamon lost his youngest son, Trey. He was just 23 years old. “Parents aren’t supposed to lose their kids,” Hollamon said, wiping away a tear. “It’s been really hard. ... And it’s absolutely killed some of my creativity.” When he began working on the project again, he did so with Trey in mind. “Kind of what I tried to convey, even with the quote at the start of the movie, was just a lot of light and dark. He was a real light,” Hollamon said. “And that part of it, as a photographer, that’s what we strive for. It’s chasing light.” His work as a storm chaser and photographer has led to some bigger insights. “It shows me, more than anything, that we’re really not in control,” Hollamon said. “There’s bigger things at work.” As a setting for revealing truths like this, Nebraska is special, he said. “I wouldn’t change where I live for anything. I love Nebraska,” Hollamon said. Asked what suggestions he has for an aspiring storm chaser, Hollamon recommended educating yourself first. He and Snead use the National Weather Service to track storms, and “generally they’re very accurate,” Hollamon said. But you’ll need to learn how to read models and know which models to trust, he said. Websites like Tornado Titans are a good starting place. Friends of his began a grassroots movement called Girls Who Chase, another solid resource. Beginning storm chasers can also book trips with tour companies and see their process.



The photographer, shown here on a country road with mammatus clouds behind him, has been photographing storms since 2016. PHOTO BY JUSTIN SNEAD

“I kind of learned on the fly,” Hollamon said. “I went with experienced storm chasers to start with. If you know a storm chaser that’s experienced that you can get out with, that’s a great way to learn, too.” Does he have a favorite storm? Honestly, no, Hollamon said. “Every storm is its own. They’re all relevant on their own terms. “Man, I’ve seen some beautiful stuff,” he added. “So I’m lucky in that regard.”      To see more of Matt Hollamon’s work, visit him on Instagram, Facebook and Flickr. View his storm chasing films on Vimeo and YouTube.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Head outdoors to escape the rush and bustle of the holiday season. There, you can find wildlife watching opportunities, chances to hunt and even shooting stars. [N](#)



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Call raccoons

Late December and early January | Statewide

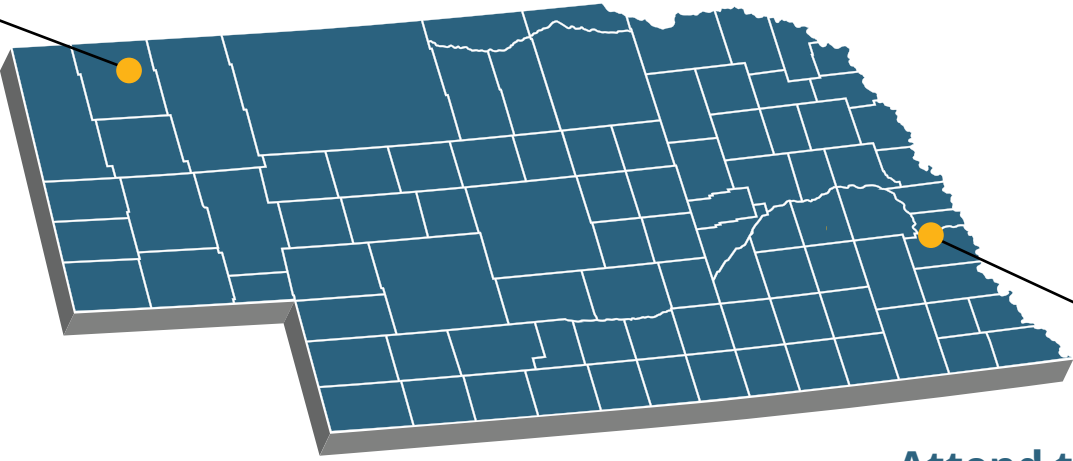
On beautiful, sunny mornings when the thermometer climbs above freezing, calling raccoons can provide some excitement. Action is best after calm nights when temperatures stay above 20 degrees. Use electronic calls that mimic young or fighting raccoons and look for locations with den trees — usually larger trees with hollows in them. Call on the opposite side of the hollow opening to bring the raccoon fully out. If you don’t see any raccoons in 4-5 minutes, move to the next likely spot. MIKE FORSBERG, NEBRASKALAND



Watch the Geminids meteor shower

Peaks the night of Dec. 13-14
Statewide

Take in one of the best meteor showers of the year, which is expected to produce up to 75 meteors per hour. Find a nice dark area away from city lights, like a state park. Dress warmly and bring whatever you need for an epic night of stargazing — lawn chairs, blankets and a hot mug of cocoa or coffee. Hope for cloudless skies and expect the best views to come just after midnight. GETTY IMAGES



Attend the Yule Log Festival

Dec. 21, noon – 5 p.m.
Platte River State Park

Get into this festive time of year with a fun event. The Yule Log Festival includes kid-friendly crafts, a cookie decorating contest, marshmallow roasting, camp games and pictures with Santa. Gather a team to compete in the yule log quest, then finish the day with a bonfire and free lighted hayrack rides. All you need is a park entry permit. See details at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

What To Do in December



Participate in Project FeederWatch

November to April | Nationwide

Turn your love for watching birds into data scientists can use. Join Project FeederWatch, a community science project by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada. Each year, from November to April, anyone can sign up to count birds from wherever you prefer to watch them. The schedule is flexible, too; you can participate as often — and for as much time — as you wish. Learn more at feederwatch.org. PHOTO COURTESY OF CURTIS BLUM





Experience
NEBRASKA'S
OUTDOOR **Venture Parks**

A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

EUGENE T. MAHONEY STATE PARK

.....

PLATTE RIVER STATE PARK

.....

SCHRAMM PARK STATE RECREATION AREA

.....

LOUISVILLE STATE RECREATION AREA



FROM A DREAM TO REALITY AT VENTURE PARKS

The Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation and Commission embarked on an incredible journey of collaboration — engaging with our park visitors, students, staff, and donors to dream up the future of our state parks. Over the past 100 years, these parks have welcomed tens of millions of guests, and we envisioned ways to bring even more people together to experience the beauty and excitement they offer.

Our park guests are as diverse as Nebraska’s landscapes, each seeking unique experiences beyond just a walk in the park. Today’s visitors crave excitement and adventure, serene escapes, meaningful interactions with nature, and educational experiences.

Nebraska’s Venture Parks — a four-park complex — is the most successful public-private partnership in the history of our Commission. This initiative has united donors, communities, schools, educators, park guests, staff, and volunteers to invest in our parks’ future, creating a vibrant complex that will attract visitors for generations. Each park within the complex features five zones designed for imagination, education, discovery, serenity, and adventure.

The improvements and new amenities added are remarkable. From a state-of-the-art education center to modern, family-friendly camping facilities, swimming areas, aquatic play zones, playgrounds, Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible parking, enhanced trails, and much more. The boost in lodging, visitor numbers, and economic impact from increased promotion by our tourism partners is significant. Some attractions have even been voted among the best in Nebraska by local communities and park guests.

Thank you for joining us on this remarkable journey, making our state parks even better. Together, we are creating spaces for everyone to learn, explore, and play.

ALL WITHIN A 15-MINUTE DRIVE

The Venture Park Complex sits on the Platte River. Each park is no more than a 15-minute drive away from each other.



Eugene T. Mahoney STATE PARK

UNLEASH THE ADVENTURE

Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, one of Nebraska’s top tourist attractions, is a bustling hub for family adventures and outdoor excitement. Recent improvements include an expansive addition to the aquatic center, a stunning group lodge for large events, a renovated conservatory and education center, and engaging features like a rock climbing wall, sledding hill, and aerial adventure ropes course.



The aquatic center expansion includes three new waterslides and a spacious pool deck area.



Visitors slip down the tubing waterslide at the center.



Two single-person slides are also featured.



A climber navigates the Go Ape Treetop Adventure ropes course.



Rental bikes are available at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park.



The Go Ape course offers challenging obstacles for all ages.

RIGHT, BELOW: Tables are decorated for a wedding at Mahoney State Park's Crete Carrier Riverview Lodge, the 11,600-square-foot, multi-function facility overlooking the Platte River.



Visitors navigate various elements of the Go Ape course.



The James Family Conservatory and Education Center is another option for large groups at Mahoney State Park.



The James Family Conservatory and Education Center.



ABOVE: Visitors celebrate International Mud Day at Mahoney State Park.

TOP: On-site snow machines assure winter visitors always have powder at Mahoney's sledding hill.

LEFT: A rock climber scales a wall at the activity center.



The bouldering wall at the activity center gives another option for climbers of all ages.

Platte River

STATE PARK



TOP, ABOVE: Kids play at Platte River State Park's two-tier spray park.

RIGHT: Attractions at the spray park include water shooters.

OPPOSITE: The mountain bike trail at Platte River State Park features trails for beginners to experts over various terrain.



FIND YOUR WILD SIDE

Platte River State Park is your go-to destination for connecting with nature and finding your wild side. Our first project here was an interactive stream, followed by glamping cabins, a natural playground, a two-tier spray park, modern cabins, and a new campground. We've expanded the well-known trail system, creating some of the best technical biking and hiking trails in the Midwest.



A curved wall is available for experienced riders.



Explore



A family enjoys dinner in front of their camper at Platte River State Park's RV campground.



LEFT: The family cabins overlook the Platte River.

BELOW: The recreational vehicle campground at Platte River State Park features 48 full-hookup sites.



ABOVE: A visitor has a lot to share while playing at Crawdad Creek.

LEFT: Kids play in Crawdad Creek near Jenny Newman Lake.

RIGHT: A kid hangs on to the zipline at Platte River State Park's natural playground.

BELOW: The natural playground features various obstacles to climb over or through.



Relax

RIGHT: Each of the park's three glamping cabins features a bed that can roll onto the deck so visitors can sleep under the stars.

BELOW: A couple enjoys their time on a glamping cabin deck.



The natural playground.



Schramm Park

STATE RECREATION AREA



Schramm Park SRA's interactive stream offers hands-on educational opportunities for visitors.

AN EXCITING 'EDVENTURE'

Schramm Park State Recreation Area is where people connect with Nebraska's natural world. The new Education Center and Aquarium showcases native fish, interactive displays, exhibits on unique ecosystems, and indoor/outdoor classroom spaces perfect for field trips. A healing garden welcomes visitors, and the learning treehouse and interactive stream offer fairy-tale-style educational adventures. Additionally, improved canoe and kayak launches provide easy access to the Platte River for float trips.



Students learn about ornate box turtles at the Schramm Education Center.



Big Snap Daddy, the world's largest captive common snapping turtle, swims in a Schramm Education Center aquarium.



LEFT: At a school day event at the Schramm Education Center, a student reaches toward a shovelnose sturgeon in the touch tank.

BELOW: The Schramm Education Center.



A visitor does yoga at the Serenity Garden.



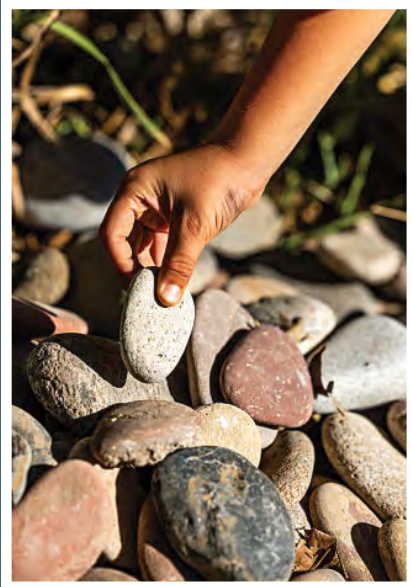
The natural playground is adjacent to the Schramm Education Center.

RIGHT: The round rafting adventure is perfect for families wanting to get on the water together.



BELOW, RIGHT, OPPOSITE: Students participate in a journaling activity at the learning treehouse.

BOTTOM: The learning treehouse features both indoor and outdoor education areas.



Rock-skipping on the river trail gives visitors another option during their family hikes.

Louisville

STATE RECREATION AREA

A NATURAL PLACE TO GET AWAY

Louisville State Recreation Area promises adventure, family fun, and water play. The floating playground, now a sensation, attracts swimmers of all ages to its obstacle course. Other water play features include rentable stand-up paddleboards and kayaks. The new Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible fishing enhancements including shoreline access and a fishing pier, king-of-the-hill play area, and river access enhance the overall experience.



TOP, ABOVE: At Louisville SRA, visitors can rent paddleboards and waterbikes.

LEFT: Visitors of all ages climb on the floating playground.





ABOVE: A visitor rides a pedalboard.



TOP RIGHT: Kids play at the park's Bounce Village.



Hikers take advantage of 2 miles of trail developments.



Fishing advancements include this accessible pier, providing opportunities for all ages to enjoy.



Anglers fish from one of the updated piers at Louisville SRA.



Play

All Parks

IMPROVEMENTS



Education is at the heart of what we do. Each park offers educational and naturalist programs, wildlife watching, guided hikes, the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program, field trips, fishing and fly-tying events, and more.

Students participate in a natural journaling workshop at the learning treehouse at Schramm Park SRA.

Kayakers access the Platte River from Decker Creek at Platte River State Park. The access point, a few yards from the creek's mouth on the river, serves as a stopping point on a water trail between Schramm Park SRA and Louisville SRA.



NEBRASKA'S OUTDOOR Venture Parks Projects

Safety, accessibility, and modernity were priorities in our improvements, leading to added IT infrastructure, fiber cables, additional restrooms, and Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible parking. More shelters and picnic benches now provide ample opportunities for rest.

Eugene T. Mahoney State Park	Opened in
Go Ape Ropes Course and Zip Line	Spring 2018
Indoor Rock Climbing and Bouldering	Fall 2018
Sledding Hill	Winter 2018
Go Ape Journey (Youth) Ropes Course and Zip Line	Summer 2020
Crete Carrier Riverview Lodge	Summer 2021
Rental Bikes	Spring 2022
Mudville Annual Event - National Mud Day June 29th	Summer 2023
James Family Conservatory and Education Center	Winter 2023
Mahoney Pool, Raging River Waterslides	Summer 2024
Mini Golf Course	Fall 2024

Platte River State Park	Opened in
Crawdad Creek	Spring 2017
Glamping Cabins	Summer 2018
Two-Tier Spray Park	Summer 2018
River Access Canoeing/Kayaking	Summer 2018
Full Service RV Campground with Dog Park	Spring 2020
State-of-the-art Mountain Biking Trail	Spring 2020
Natural Playground with Climbing Features, Rope Courses and Zip Lines	Spring 2021
Family Friendly Cabins	Summer 2024

Schramm Park State Recreation Area	Opened in
River Access Canoeing/Kayaking	Summer 2018
Schramm Education Center and Aquarium	Spring 2019
Naturalist Programs and Educational Programs	Spring 2019
Serenity Garden	Fall 2022
Picnic Facilities	Fall 2022
Education Trail	Summer 2023
Round Rafting Adventure and Kayak Cove	Summer 2023
Skipping Rocks on the River Trail	Summer 2024
Natural Playground	Summer 2024
Learning Treehouse and Interactive Stream	Fall 2024

Louisville State Recreation Area	Opened in
Floating Playground	Summer 2018
Watercycle, Paddleboard, Kayak Rentals	Summer 2018
River Access (Canoe/Kayak/Airboat Landings)	Fall 2019
Picnic Facilities	Spring 2020
Bounce Village	Summer 2023
King of the Hill	Summer 2023
Fishing Enhancements	Summer 2024
Trail Development and Interpretation	Summer 2024



THANK YOU TO OUR GENEROUS SUPPORTERS

Nebraska's state parks and natural spaces are treasures that make life here truly special. We must continue investing in these parks while caring for the spaces we've been blessed to manage. Your investments, visits, and support help us make one of the nation's best state park systems even better.

We've witnessed smiles, heard laughter, and shared countless first-of-their-kind moments in nature at our Venture Parks. These moments are possible thanks to our generous supporters, including donors, the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation, the Legislature, staff, and park guests.

Thank you for making our parks a place for everyone to learn, explore, and play.



TEXT BY CHRISTY FIRESTONE
LAYOUT AND DESIGN BY MEL SEVERIN
PHOTOS BY CHRISTY CHRISTIANSEN, CHRISTY FIRESTONE, ERIC FOWLER, JEFF KURRUS, JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY AND NICK SAUVAGEAU



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NSHS RG3542-95-34

John Nelson's Nebraska

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

John Nelson did not find much gold in Colorado, but Nebraskans are fortunate he found photography.

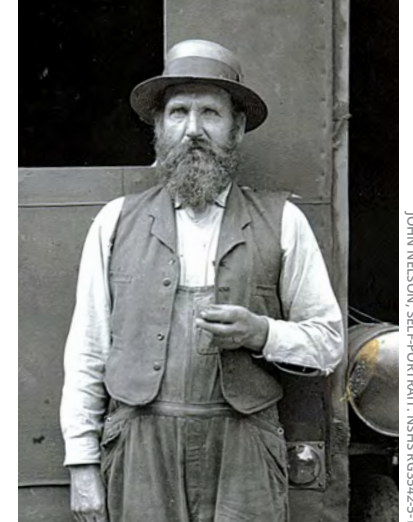
Born in Sweden in 1864, Nelson immigrated to Nebraska with his parents when he was 17. As a young adult, he homesteaded in Wheeler County, but later sold out and headed west to Colorado to prospect for gold. During his travels, he became interested in photography, opening his own studio when he returned home.

Nelson was a prominent resident of Ericson, Nebraska, until his death in 1942. In addition to his photography business, he served as county surveyor for more than 30 years and retained a strong interest in agriculture. A year before his death, the Wheeler County Independent reported

he was advising a local high school agriculture class on the finer points of judging calves.

As a professional photographer, Nelson advertised his studio portraiture, but most of his hundreds of photos in the Nebraska State Historical Society collection were taken in the field. Local businesses hired him to take promotional photos, and he photographed local events and scenes to sell as picture postcards. In 1928, for example, he offered "20 Kodak views of the Wheeler County Fair, including views of the grounds, the Indians, and the bucking broncos" for one dollar.

Nelson's photos also record changing technology in central Nebraska, with early photos of auto mechanics and the



JOHN NELSON, SELF-PORTRAIT. NSHS RG3542-5-1



Cutting ice from lakes and ponds was an important business in the pre-refrigeration days, but the presence of women indicates this is a gag photo.

NSHS RG3542-95-12



When the fishing is good. NSHS RG3542-141-10



L.C. Avery, veterinarian, Spalding, Nebraska. NSHS RG3542-95-9



Outside a general store, 1910s.

NSHS RG3542-95-33



Showing off the new "Pennsylvania Oilpruf Tire" at G. W. Morgan's garage in Spalding. NSHS RG3542-122-2



Waiting patiently for the photographer before digging in.

NSHS RG3542-102-17



Inside a bank. NSHS RG3542-5-1

local telephone exchange. In 1924, the Norfolk Daily News reported that Nelson listened to broadcasts from Norfolk's WJAG on a radio receiver that he made by mounting a tube and dials on an old derby hat.

In 1932, when Prohibition was still the law of the land, Nelson promoted his photography in the Ericson Journal in an article formatted as if were a radio broadcast with Nelson reading his customers' letters on the air. After a series of brief letters praising the quality of his work, he threw in a bit of self-deprecating humor:

"And here is one from my friend R. C. M., Chapman, Nebraska: Dear Friend John, what have you been drinking?

You got my pictures numbered so much different from the negatives ... I don't know just when you will get your money. Well, I will forgive you this time, but don't let it happen again, or I will be after coming up there."

Nelson replied, "This is serious. No, I don't mean to make

mistakes in filling orders, that is easily fixed. But as to my bootlegger, I hope to goodness, he don't give me any bad booze. What times! It is so hard to get good stuff and when you get it you can't quite trust it. I feel like swearing off."

Having a sense of humor, Nelson was remembered as

"a man of kindly and genial disposition." That disposition helped him earn the trust of his neighbors and allowed him to compile a vivid visual record of life in his community. [N](#)

Visit NSHS's website at history.nebraska.gov.



Seeing shapes in bark: This is the cow head profile or penguin feeding a baby penguin ... depending on who you ask.

Ponderosa Psychology

Photos and story by Chris Helzer

You’ve probably gazed at clouds and seen familiar objects or animals, right? (“Wow, that cloud looks like a squirrel riding a turtle!”) If you’re a fan of that game, I invite you to try “What’s that bark pattern look like?”

Based on years of experience, the game works best with mature ponderosa pine trees. If you can find some that have survived a recent fire, that’s even better, but not absolutely necessary. Once you’ve located your trees, all it takes is a little imagination and you’re set for hours.

It’s fun to play by yourself, of course, but it can also be entertaining and educational to engage with friends or family. You might learn a lot about people close to you and the surprisingly odd ways their brains work. Some psychologists use Rorschach inkblots to gain insight into people’s personality and emotional stability. Similarly, pine bark pattern interpretation seems like a completely valid way to assess those around you.

In a totally hypothetical example, let’s say you and your wife are looking at what is obviously a cow’s head in profile. The eye and nostril are clear as day, and you can even see a pretty well-defined horn curling upward. And yet, your wife insists she sees a momma penguin feeding a baby penguin. What does this mean? Well, in this very specific case, it means nothing. She’s perfectly within her rights to see a couple of penguins instead of a cow. Especially because she’ll probably read this (Hi Sweetie!).



This is clearly a face, right?



The giraffe/scorpion conundrum.

Even if you don't buy into the scientific value of ponderosa pine bark patterns, you can still enjoy them purely recreationally. If nothing else, they make a great distraction while hiking up steep hills in the Pine Ridge or along the Niobrara River, especially if your companions are in better aerobic shape than you. "Hey!" you might say, "Come back down here and look at this. What do you think it looks like?"

By the time your friends stop arguing about whether it's a giraffe or a scorpion, you'll have caught your breath and be ready to keep climbing. [N](#)

Chris Helzer is The Nature Conservancy's Director of Science and Stewardship. He is a regular contributor to Nebraskaland Magazine with his first story appearing in 1995.



Do you see the woodpecker chick peering out of its hole?



Ponderosa pines with fire scars at The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve.

What Is Nature?

How we communicate our interpretation of nature is a powerful question

By Grace Gaard, Aquatic Ecology Education Specialist

Fill in the blank. Nature is _____.

If you had to think of your top words, what would they be? How would you describe what nature is to you? Some of your answers may likely overlap, while others would be vastly different.

I know what my answers would be. And if you're reading this, it's likely that we share values like time outdoors and an appreciation for Nebraska's beauty. Our words for nature might look something like this.

Nature is:

- A part of me
- Beautiful

- Awe-inspiring
- Peaceful
- Safe
- Reciprocal

But what about those who answer differently? What about those who may never visit a park or take the time to watch the sun sink into color-soaked clouds because their definition of nature is much different? How would they fill in the blank? Maybe it would look something like this.

Nature is:

- A resource
- Separate
- Scary
- A place to recreate
- Inconvenient
- Something to consume or control

Everyone's thoughts here on nature are valid, based on personal experience and years of developing values based on those experiences. How we communicate our interpretation of nature is a powerful question to keep in mind.

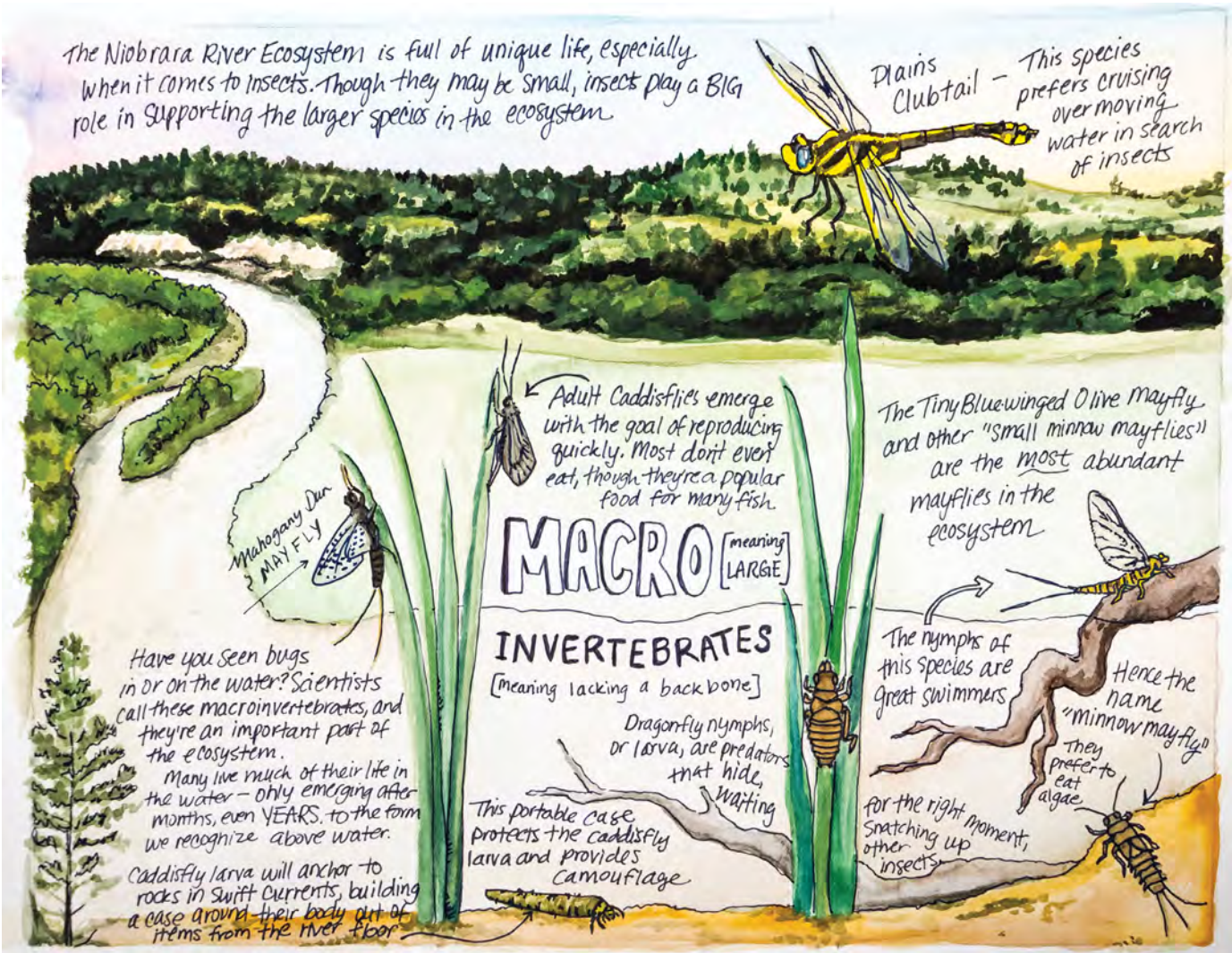
Your Ecological Identity

If you're unsure where you land on the "what is nature?" spectrum, I'd encourage you to explore your "ecological autobiography." This term was introduced to me recently by Dr. Ruth Wilson, but the concept has been around for a while. Essentially, what is your life's story through the lens of your connection to nature? This exercise can be a great way to explore your own "ecological identity" and awaken memories or past experiences that led you to where you are today. Whether you write it down or merely think it through, here are a few prompts to help you through the process:

1. Think of a species encounter or natural system that stands out in your personal memory.



Many children first experience nature at an event, such as this Outdoor Expo. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



The author works to honor her connection to nature through artwork that educates about Nebraska's species and landscapes. ILLUSTRATION BY GRACE GAARD

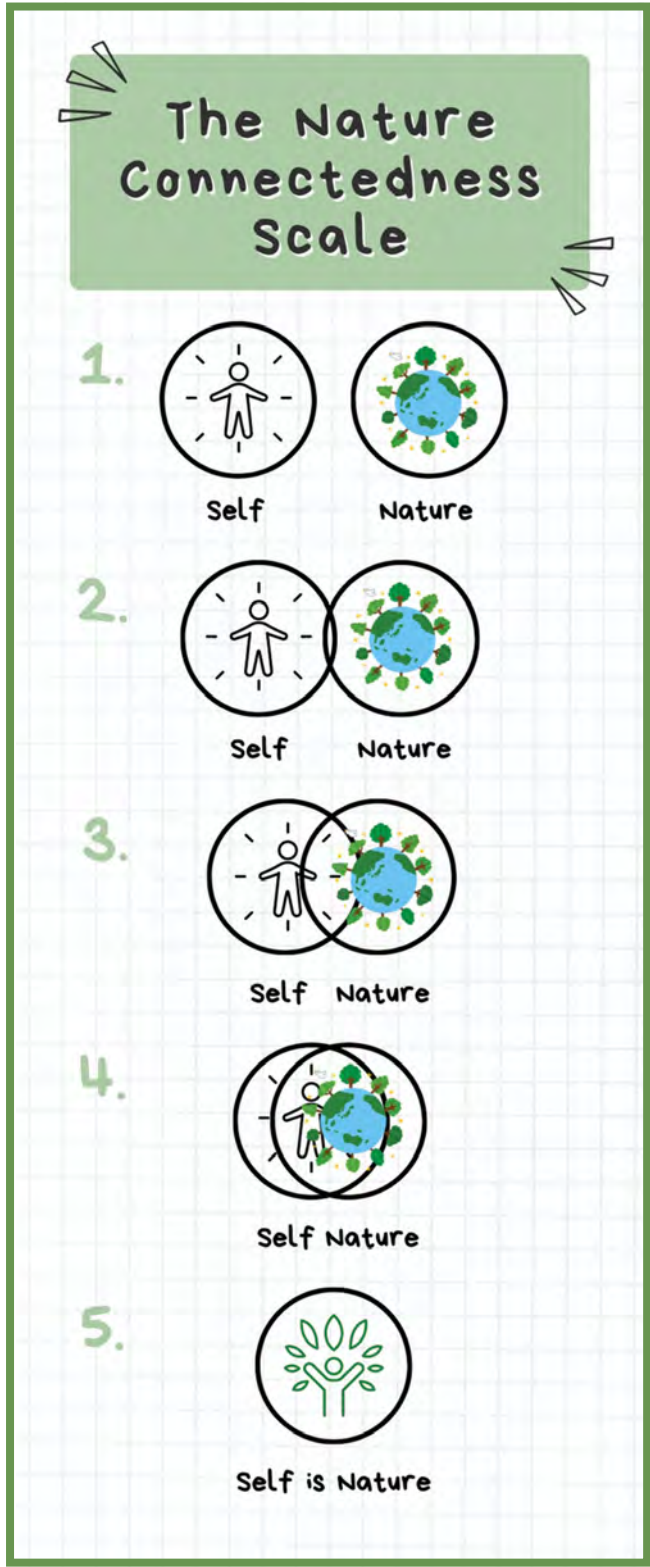
- a) Did you have a favorite tree growing up, or a special place you went to?
 - b) Did you have a close encounter with something, alive or not?
 - c) Was there a specific habitat you visited that had an influence on you?
 - d) This could be over a span of time or one particular experience that influenced you. For this prompt, focus on describing what you remember of the natural world.
2. Reflect on your experiences from the first prompt and now write about how they made you feel or what they made you think.
 - a) What influence did this have on your ideas or personal growth?
 - b) Have these places or species changed in any way since you last experienced them?
 - c) Have there been any big shifts for you since the experience?

Understanding our connection to nature from the past can be helpful in processing how we arrived at the beliefs we hold today. And while it is guaranteed that we're all different, I would take a bold guess and say that most of us will look back and find that nature gave us something.

Reciprocity

Nature is reciprocal. If you're not familiar with the term reciprocity, it's essentially the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. I learned about this concept from Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer. I recommend reading her essay, "The Serviceberry."

Additionally, Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a personal favorite, capturing nature, what it is, and how we interact with one another, better than most works I have read. An enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer blends her traditional ecological knowledge with incredible storytelling and accurate science flawlessly.



The Nature Connectedness Scale. INFOGRAPHIC BY GRACE GAARD

In her essay “The Serviceberry,” Kimmerer writes:

This abundance of berries feels like a pure gift from the land. I have not earned, paid for, nor labored for them. There is no mathematics of worthiness that reckons I deserve them in any way. And yet here they are — along with the sun and the air and



Birdwatching at the Outdoor Discovery Program leads to a nature connection at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

the birds and the rain, gathering in the towers of cumulonimbi. You could call them natural resources or ecosystem services, but the Robins and I know them as gifts. We both sing gratitude with our mouths full ...

Gratitude is so much more than a polite “thank you.” It is the thread that connects us in a deep relationship, simultaneously physical and spiritual, as our bodies are fed and spirits nourished by the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods. Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need, in respect for the generosity of the giver.

If our first response is gratitude, then our second is reciprocity: to give a gift in return. What could I give these plants in return for their generosity? It could be a direct response, like weeding or water or a song of thanks that sends appreciation out on the wind. Or indirect, like donating to my local land trust so that more habitat for the gift givers will be saved, or making art that invites others into the web of reciprocity.

Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy, and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource. I accept the gift from the bush and then spread that gift with a dish of berries to my neighbor, who makes a pie to share with his friend, who feels so wealthy in food and friendship that he volunteers at the food pantry. You know how it goes.”

Self to Nature

What has nature given you? A bunch of mosquito bites and muddy shoes, or is it something more? What is that reciprocal relationship with nature that you share? What kinship exists there, if any?



The author uses her “Grace’s Guide to the Outside” series to shine a light on species Nebraskans may encounter outdoors. ILLUSTRATION BY GRACE GAARD

If you are still unsure, let’s ask another question. How do you place your Self versus Nature?

The infographic on page 64 may help make this question clearer. When you hold yourself up next to nature, where do you sit in relation?

For me, nature has given me joy and beauty that I choose to reflect to others through art. It’s also given me opportunities to challenge myself, grow and pay attention. It’s been the place where some of my most important relationships have taken root.

Everything that sustains me comes from nature. I have a microbiome of bacteria and other living organisms inside my own body. Nature is a part of me, not apart from me. There’s a relationship there that is so much more than simply the word “nature.” Nature is our connection to self. For me, nature is everything.

Wherever you’ve landed along this journey, I hope you know that there are no wrong answers. Although I hope that you have a relationship with the sky and the river and the living parts of our world that leads you to advocate for it, not everyone is in that space yet, and that’s OK. I hope you take all the time you need to reflect on what nature is or isn’t for you.

In the end, I do hope you’ll find that a connection with nature is a connection with your soul.

What is nature? Fill in the blank.

Nature is _____. N



Many hunters and anglers admire being part of nature more than shooting a gun or catching a fish. The benefits they receive often mirror those of non-consumptive users. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

READY FOR THE HARD WATER?

Before you get on the ice, remember to complete these tasks.

By Julie Geiser

When the ice is right, your fishing equipment and safety measures should have been long since planned. Use our advice to prepare before venturing out on the ice the first time this season.

Checklist

- Purchase a fishing license and park permit (if applicable).
- Make sure auger blades are sharp. If not, buy replacements through the manufacturer, have them sharpened or sharpen them yourself. Bring plenty of gas or batteries depending on the type of auger you have.
- Replace line on reels and tip-ups. Monofilament should be changed every year, fluorocarbon lines about every third year, and braided line will last several years. Store line in cool, dry places to preserve its strength.
- Gather ice-fishing rod holders, a multi-tool, hook remover and small jigging lures.
- Purchase wax worms, trout eggs or PowerBait to tip your jigs.
- Find ice cleats to avoid slipping. Small and more aggressive cleat styles are available.
- Check your sled or ice shelter for holes and repair if necessary.
- Test your portable propane heater.
- Bring a cordless drill and ice stakes to secure equipment, including ice shelters, on windy days.
- Pack plenty of food, like soup and sandwiches and protein snacks like jerky and energy bars. Dehydration, because you simply don't see it coming this time of year, should also be safeguarded against by having plenty of water.

Safe Ice

Safety precautions should include wearing a personal floatation device,



Proper planning before the season can lead to results such as this once you're on the ice. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

testing edge ice with a spud bar, carrying ice spikes around your neck, and packing 50 feet of rope tied to a throwable flotation device in case someone needs assistance.

It's impossible to judge the strength of ice by its appearance, thickness, daily temperature or snow cover alone. Ice strength is dependent on all four factors, plus water depth under the ice, the size of the water and water chemistry, currents, and distribution of the load on the ice. Test-drill holes or use a spud bar about every 10 yards as you cross ice.

Moving water under the ice from rivers or springs can create weak spots in ice. Springs from groundwater flow is warmer and rises toward the surface, weakening ice from underneath. Many smaller lakes have open water on the west and northern portions caused by underwater flows.

In shallow water, sandy bottom lakes do not absorb heat like a silt or mud bottom lake. So, less heat is radiated back, making the ice above it thin. As the water gets deeper, there is less effect on the underside of the ice.

It takes a minimum of 3 to 4 inches of blue lake ice to support a single angler and about 6 inches of ice will support a group. Slush ice is only about one-half as strong as clear lake ice, so double the minimum thickness requirements when encountering such conditions.

Ice weakens with age, and honeycombed or black ice is unsafe. Stay away from objects that stick up through the ice like muskrat lodges, trees, and logs, which store heat from the sun and weaken surrounding ice.

Ice fishing remains one of winter's most exciting activities, so make sure your work is done before you head out. Your efforts will be rewarded.

PORTRAITS OF SURVIVAL
by David Radler

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CURIOSITY KILLED THE PIKE

By Eric Fowler

I love to fish for northern pike, one of the most aggressive, hardest-fighting fish swimming in our state. And I love to eat them, but that requires removing those pesky Y bones while cleaning the fish. A tip from a friend has proven true: Clean fish shorter than 26 inches and you end up with little scraps of meat after removing those bones, but bigger fish are worth the effort.

That said, I wouldn't normally keep a 20-inch pike. But one such fish I caught from Hackberry Lake on the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge forced me to break that rule. This fish had a bulging belly, and I just had to know what it had been eating. What I found when I opened the fish was what was left of two meals: a small bluegill that had measured 5 or 6 inches when it was whole, and the back half of a baby muskrat.

All fish are opportunistic feeders. If they see it and can catch it, they will eat it. The larger members of the genus *Esox* that we have swimming in our waters — northern pike, muskellunge and their hybrid, the tiger muskie — are no exception.

An apex predator that swims at the top of the aquatic food chain, pike are built for hunting. Their pointed head, for which they are named, slices through the water, leaving a clear path for their torpedo-like body. Their olive-green bodies, covered with drab yellow spots, provide the camouflage they need to hide in vegetation and wait for any unsuspecting fish, mammal or reptile to swim by. When that happens, they can accelerate like they've been shot out of a cannon, reaching speeds of 8 to 10 mph or more — a bit faster than the 5.1 mph average speed of American swimmer Caleb Dressel when he set the world record in the men's 50-meter freestyle.

The canine teeth that ring their lower jaw and the brush-like teeth on the top jaw almost guarantee no prey will escape its bite. That includes mammals, whether they are born around water, like muskrats, or any prey that happens to

pick the wrong spot to go for a swim. Daryl Bauer, a fisheries biologist at Nebraska Game and Parks, tells me he has seen or heard of both northern pike and channel catfish eating muskrats, as well as largemouth bass eating kangaroo rats and smallmouth bass eating mice. A Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources report lists unlucky squirrels and sandpipers as occasional entries on a pike's dinner menu. Occasionally, their eyes and appetite are bigger than their gullet, and pike will choke to death on their prey. They aren't



Pike are opportunistic feeders. This one had eaten a bluegill and muskrat. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

afraid to eat their brethren, either. I once landed a pike that had the tail of a smaller pike hanging out of its mouth. I'm not sure how he thought he was going to swallow my crankbait.

Pike eat five to seven times their weight each year for their first two years and three to four times their weight afterward. Their appetite, and that of other *Esox*, has led to the creation of some creative fishing lures, the list of which includes rats, bats, mice, ducklings, birds, snakes and yes, even muskrats. "Remember, big baits equals big fish," Bauer likes to say.

I think I will ask Santa for one of those fancy, and pricey, muskrat lures for Christmas, and head to the Sandhills next spring and test it out. If I'm lucky, I'll catch a pike longer than 26 inches and have a fish fry.

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CARING FOR LEATHER HUNTING BOOTS

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

From dew-soaked upland fields, to January blizzards, to the muck of the late-season thaw, our hunting boots continually take a beating. While synthetic boots can be easier to clean and maintain, leather boots are the top choice for many hunters and hikers because of their durability, natural waterproofing and support. A good pair of leather boots can be serviceable for years — provided that you take care of them.

Water, dirt and heat are enemies of leather. They draw out natural oils, which makes leather dry, brittle and less resistant to moisture. Also, ignored stuck-on dirt, mud and grit can penetrate deeper into leather as you walk, which adds further wear. Without care, leather boots will eventually crack and lose their waterproofing.

Leather Care Products

To keep your boots in tip-top shape, you will need a leather cleaner and a leather conditioner. Leather cleaner is a solvent that removes dirt, mud and debris, which is a necessary step before applying conditioner. Leather conditioner is typically made of a combination of oils and/or wax to restore leather’s suppleness and water repellency. Conditioner does not work as well on dirty leather.

As a hunter, equestrian and former backcountry backpacker, I’ve tried a variety of products over the years, and my favorite by far is made by a German company called

Effax. The Leder-Combi leather cleaner is a thin liquid that, when applied with an old rag or sock, easily dissolves mud — and is strong enough to dissolve horse muck.

To follow-up, Effax’s Leder-Balsam is a versatile wax-like conditioner; I’ve used it on hunting boots, hiking boots, tall riding boots, horse tack and even my leather furniture at home. Although the conditioner is pricey, I’m still using the same jar from 2016.

Additionally, a hard bristle brush is useful for scrubbing off caked-on mud. To apply leather conditioner, I prefer round disposable sponges, which are about 3 inches in diameter; they fit perfectly inside a jar of Effax’s Leder-Balsam.

When to Clean

After every hunting season, or every spring, clean off mud and dirt and condition leather boots before putting them away for the summer. Before the hunting season, wipe off the dust and condition your boots again to make sure the leather is still protected.

Throughout the season, clean and condition boots as needed. You don’t have to treat them after every outing, but make sure you’re not neglecting them either. Clean and condition your boots sooner rather than later, especially following wet or muddy hunts, to make sure they last long into the future.



A good pair of leather boots can be serviceable for years — provided that you take care of them. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

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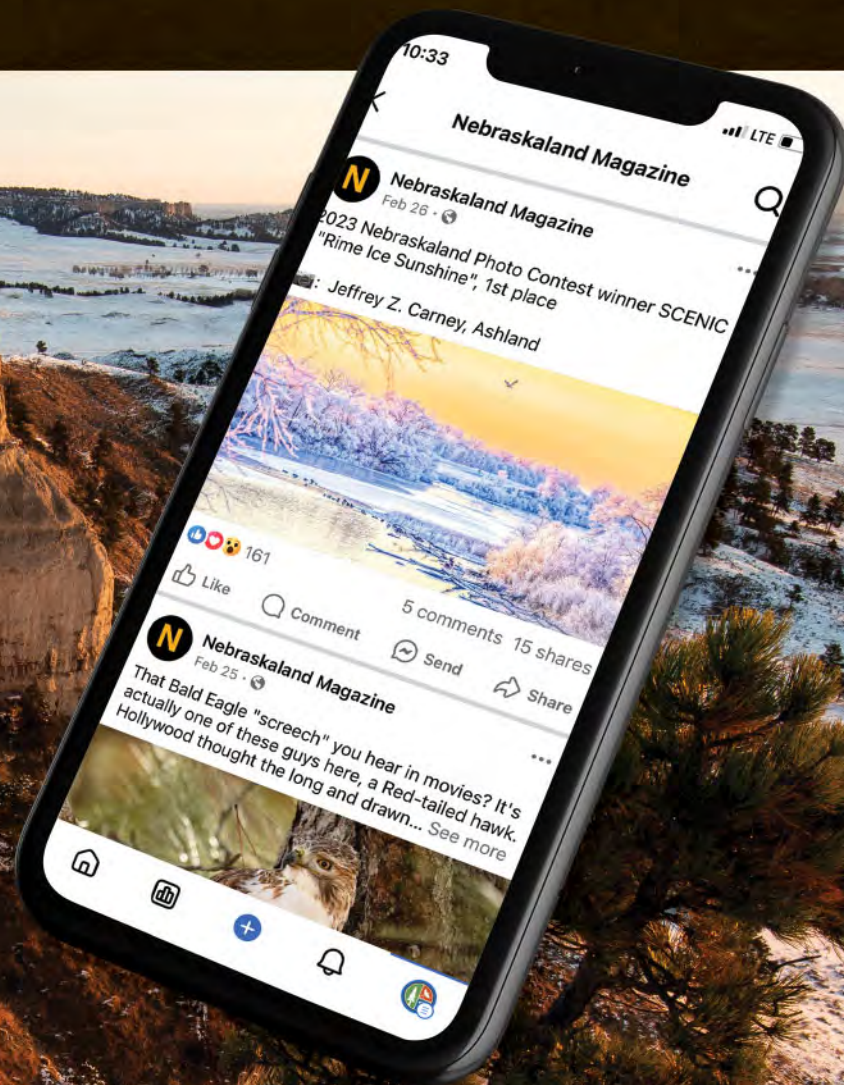
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FISHING WITH FORWARD-FACING SONAR

By Eric Fowler

Some call it video game fishing. That it’s cheating. They say fish don’t have a chance, and it will ruin fishing. Others say it’s just another tool in the tacklebox. Whatever the case, most will agree forward-facing or live-imaging sonar is one of the most debated advancements to enter the fishing world.

Forward-facing sonar gives anglers a live, real-time view of the lake bottom, structure and fish under and around their boat or ice hole, as well as their bait or lure. Those who really know how to use it can judge the size and species of the fish, put their bait right in front of its nose and catch it.

All three major marine electronics companies offer their own version of the technology. Garmin was the first, introducing Panoptix 2015. That was followed by Lowrance’s Active Target in 2019 and Humminbird’s MegaLive in 2021. The technology isn’t cheap, with transducers alone running \$1,500 and the screen to display it starting at around \$750. But each year, more anglers are jumping on board.

Anglers using it to locate big walleyes are dominating the leaderboards of most tournaments on the professional circuits. The same was happening on the pro bass circuits, and late this year, one circuit announced a ban on FFS for 2025, and another limited how much of this technology anglers could have on their boat next year. This is a sport where some boats carry \$30,000 in electronics and as many screens as your local sports bar.

Younger anglers who have been immersed in technology throughout their lives have been quick to adopt FFS. And many believe it is attracting some kids who had preferred to stay home and play video games rather than go fishing with mom or dad: Now they get to do both.

Yet whether this technology really helps anglers catch more fish, and whether that additional harvest affects fish populations, is still in question.

Aaron Blank, the southeast district fisheries manager with Game and Parks, has been using the Garmin system for four years. As an angler, he said it’s a game changer, especially when targeting fish that suspend in cover or open

water. As a fisheries biologist, he has concerns. With it, he said he has caught more than 1,000 crappies in a year from one of the Salt Valley Lakes near Lincoln, releasing all but a few for the occasional fish fry.

“It changes the way you present your bait and how you approach different structure,” Blank said. Now, instead of ripping his jig through a tree pile blindly, hoping to not get snagged, he can downsize to a 1/32- or 1/64-ounce jig, walk it over the top of a tree he knows is holding fish “and hold it right where the fish are.”

One of the top concerns for Blank and fisheries managers across the country is how the technology will affect bluegill and crappie populations. Considering FFS is still in its infancy, only a handful of studies have looked at its effectiveness.

Kansas conducted one of the first in December 2021, dividing 32 biologists into teams on the 6,800-acre Cedar Bluff Reservoir to fish one side of the lake with FFS on one day and the other side without the next. Anglers caught one

more crappie, 2 more fish and slightly larger crappie while they were using it than when they weren’t, a difference deemed statistically insignificant.

Creel surveys in Texas and Arkansas found crappie anglers using FFS caught twice as many fish as those who didn’t, but didn’t harvest twice as many fish. Arkansas’ study also found the length of crappies harvested similar in both groups, showing anglers weren’t using live sonar to “cherry pick” big crappies. The Texas study also surveyed bass anglers and found those using FFS caught only a few more fish, and very few anglers harvest bass.

Blank said that while some aspects of these studies might apply in Nebraska, one part doesn’t. “Down in Texas or Arkansas, where you can grow a 10-inch crappie in a year or two, that’s a lot different than in southeastern Nebraska where it takes 4 to 5 years to grow a 10-inch crappie,” he said. “If people are more successful in catching them, and if they harvest more of the larger crappies, it just takes longer for us to catch up.”

Game and Parks fisheries staff is preparing to launch its



A Garmin LiveScope shows panfish suspended in and above a tree pile in Wildwood Lake.



Aaron Blank of Ceresco reels in a small crappie he located using forward-facing sonar on Wildwood Lake. PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

own forward-facing sonar study, putting its own spin on what Kansas did. Each of the five districts now has a FFS unit, and biologists are learning how to use them. Starting next spring, they will meet at 225-acre Flanagan Lake in Omaha. Like Kansas’ study, they will spend a half day fishing one side of the lake with FFS and a half day fishing the other side without. The exercise will be repeated in the summer, fall and on the ice, giving them a look at how catch rates could differ throughout the year.

“A lot of studies have been done on 2,000-acre reservoirs or bigger,” Blank said. “FFS likely will not have as big of an effect on a larger body of water as it does on a 100-acre reservoir in the middle of Omaha where you’ve got a big population, heavy pressure and it’s easier to break down water and find fish. What we want to see is in smaller bodies of water what effects will live sonar have?”

Technology has come a long way since the sonar flasher was introduced in 1957 and began replacing a weight on a rope as the depth finder of choice. That flasher allowed anglers to not only know the depth, but also “see” fish beneath them.

More recently, high-resolution down-scan, side-scan and 360-degree sonar have painted an even clearer picture of what lies beneath the surface. Similarly, GPS technology has led to better lake contour maps and helped anglers easily revisit a stump, creek channel or rock pile that seems to always hold fish. Each of these advancements have made it easier for anglers to find fish, but they haven’t always helped them catch more fish.

An old adage in fisheries management says that 10 percent of anglers catch 90 percent of the fish, due in part to time spent on the water learning when, where and how

to catch them. Some adopted the technology, and some continue to catch plenty of fish without live sonar. While the 90 percent might catch the most fish, it doesn’t mean they harvest the most fish, said Tony Barada, assistant fisheries administrator at Game and Parks.

“Forward-facing sonar might just catch somebody a limit faster. It doesn’t mean they can keep more fish by any means,” Barada said, noting bag and possession limits still apply.

The technology is a regular topic in monthly Zoom meetings among the heads of fisheries managers nationwide. Some states have discussed outright bans of the technology.

“When it’s reaching that level of decision makers, it is a pretty hot topic,” Barada said, “because we, as agencies, are hearing it from both sides.”

Barada doesn’t see a ban coming due to the simple fact that it would be hard to tell anglers who invested in the technology they can’t use it. But he could see more regulations coming, be it in bag or length limits. Just this year, Mississippi reduced bag limits on five of its prime crappie waters in response to increased use of live sonar, which jumped from 20 percent of anglers in 2021 to 70 percent in 2023.

Game and Parks creel surveys began measuring FFS use in 2023. With only four lakes surveyed, use has ranged from 9 percent of boat anglers at Cunningham Lake to 21 percent at Sherman Reservoir. As those numbers increase, fisheries managers will be keeping a close eye on the resource.

“It’s a technological advancement that we can manage and overcome through regulations if we view it as having a large impact,” Barada said.

Fishing Lake McConaughy, 1972

I was fishing with an Abu-Reflex from the bank near Paul Petersen's cabin around dusk. The walleye was an 8-pound, 8-ounce Master Angler. I was a very happy guy that day!

– Tru Connealy, Boise, Idaho
(Formerly of Lincoln and Ogallala)

Incidentally, Paul Petersen is a Marine, a retired Ogallala school teacher and is 102 years old! He still resides in Ogallala.

Love *Nebraskaland*!

– Leslie Walt Connealy, Tru's wife
Boise, Idaho



Deer hunting near Oakdale, 1967

This photo was taken in 1967 in the Elkhorn unit outside of Oakdale. Left to right is Daryl Bretz, Donnie Marsh, Raymond Crosier (Dad) and Jim Kopish. All have passed except for my dad who is 97 and still hunting. He has had a permit for the Elkhorn unit every year since its opening.

– Steve Crosier, Castle Rock, Colorado



Duck hunting at Bell Creek near Craig, 1989

Pictured is me (right) and my cousin Kevin Olson, aka Little Buddy. Kev was a gentle giant who loved the outdoors and would do anything for you.

The hunt was south of Craig on Lefty Moeller's farm. We still live south of Craig on a farm and run an auction business. Still enjoy hunting — not so much about limits anymore, but about a dog working well and someone harvesting a bird who hasn't had opportunity to in a long time or even better yet, a kid getting his first bird.

We would hunt on Bell Creek in November and saw some mallards tucked

up by the bank one-fourth to three-eighths of a mile off the road. We dumped three drakes but they all went down on the other side of the creek. Dink the Lab wasn't a year old. She wasn't sure what to do and not sure where they went down. We took a corn cob and threw it to the other side of the creek. First time she brought back the cob! But she got it figured out and retrieved all three mallards. One of my favorite stories of Kev when I was just old enough to hunt. I stayed out with them and wanted to go duck hunting. The ponds were frozen and probably not a duck in the state but Kevin chopped a while in the ice, and we duck hunted. A book could be written about him for sure. Kevin passed away two years ago. I miss him, but I can think back to time spent, and it always makes me smile.

– Ed Olson, Craig, Nebraska

Fishing and camping at Lake McConaughy, 1986

We enjoyed many weekends of camping and fishing at Lake McConaughy when we lived in Ogallala. Here we have a nice stringer of white bass. In the photo are Pamela Scheinost Pavek, Sandy Scheinost and Vicki

Scheinost Barry.
– Steve Scheinost,
Lincoln, Nebraska



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Snow carved by the wind decorates the landscape at the historical site of the Red Cloud Agency at Fort Robinson State Park. The monument marking the site was dedicated in 1932. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

RED CLOUD AGENCY MONUMENT: A SILENT SENTINEL

By Justin Haag

Fort Robinson State Park is most popular in summer, but visiting in the depths of winter seems to trigger the most profound experiences. When there's nary a tourist to be found, one is given time to ponder and reflect on the fort's storied history. Such pondering happened last winter as I photographed this old monument surrounded by snow in freezing temperatures.

After capturing this image, I was compelled to research the marker's origins. The monument, signifying the location of the Red Cloud Agency, was commissioned for construction by the Daughters of the American Revolution chapter and dedicated in 1932.

First, a little history about Indian agencies. They were created by stipulation of the Fort Laramie Treaty. This one, assigned in the 1870s to issue supplies to about 13,000 Native Americans in the region in exchange for land, was the forerunner to the Pine Ridge Reservation to the north.

It was the site of prominent tensions between Native Americans and whites. During its operation, a military camp — Camp Robinson — would be established. The military post would soon move 1½ miles west to what would become the busy outpost Fort Robinson.

According to newspaper accounts, the monument's 1932 dedication was attended by Red Cloud's only living child,

Mrs. John Kills Above, and other living relatives. Red Cloud's grandson, Chief James H. Red Cloud, spoke through an interpreter to represent the Sioux, and was joined by teen daughter Agnes Red Cloud in unveiling the marker which had been covered by an American flag.

From a front-page story in the Crawford Tribune, May 13, 1932:

"The marker contains foundation stones from the old agency buildings, around which three tons of petrified wood is laid, the whole forming a pillar 4 feet square at the base, about 7 feet high, tapering toward the top. A marble tablet giving the duration of the agency's location at the spot, 1873-1877, and the year of the monument's erection, is set in the face of the marker."

During sunrise and sunset, I often find myself gravitating to this area of the park. It provides a great view of the Red Cloud Buttes — another of the park's features named after the chief — with a vantage above the White River. I'm sure those selecting the agency's location in the 1870s made note of the same view. And, the site has surely prompted countless others to reflect on the region's often troubled past.

Just like the buttes, the marker seems to be holding up well as it transcends generations.

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