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NEBRASKAland

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Silhouetted by the setting sun, seed heads near Grand Island in Hall County wait for a soft summer breeze to set them free. Photo by Luke Kathol

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NEBRASKAland

Volume 89, Number 6, July 2011

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Cover: The Oglala National Grassland in far northwestern Nebraska had its beginning in the drought of the 1930s. Photo by Jon Farrar.
Opposite: Dew-soaked foxtail barley glistens in the morning sun along the North Platte River valley near Lewellen. Photo by Eric Fowler.

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An Unusual Happening

One morning this spring my wife and grandson were in our yard and heard a big crash. They looked toward our woods, saw that a large tree limb had fallen, then left for school and work. That evening we took a closer look at the limb and found a dead deer underneath! It must have been bedded there and didn't have time to react.

George Moon
Omaha, Nebraska



Pheasant Girl

We now have answers to our who, when and where questions last month regarding the young lady wearing a pheasant costume in our "Nebland Flashbacks." Les O'Donnell of North Platte informed us that the lady in the photo was none other than his wife of 49 years, Deanna (Nicholson) O'Donnell, whom he married soon after the photo was taken.

Les reports that the dress was truly a "labor of love" – it took a long time and a lot of pheasant pelts that were donated by hunters in the Benkelman

area to make the costume, which was worn at a 1961 hairdresser's convention in Omaha. The O'Donnells heard about the photo appearing in our magazine through an old friend in Battle Creek, who recognized Deanna and the dress. Oddly enough, just a day before the friend's e-mail, Deanna's cousin in El Paso had sent her a copy of a recent "50 Years Ago" column in the Benkelman Post and News Chronicle that had mentioned Deanna wearing her costume at the convention. "It was really an amazing timing thing," said Les O'Donnell. "That photo brought back a lot of memories. I kidded my wife that she hadn't changed much." Deanna's reaction to seeing the old photograph? "Oh my goodness!" -Editor

Larson Fan

I wait for my NEBRASKAland Magazine expectantly each month, but THIS month's blew me away! Thank you so much for highlighting Gary Larson! He is my all-time favorite cartoonist and teacher. Anyone who reads his work is drawn into his world; the world of insects, animals and ourselves! If we could all see the world as it is from his perspective, maybe we would be a little more concerned about getting along with it instead of trying to remake it. I believe God did an excellent job when He created it – it doesn't need to be changed! Thank you for this awesome article! Donna L. Decker/Gibson Hazel Green, Alabama

Nebraska Test Question #12

I enjoyed Roger Welsch's Nebraska quiz in the June 2011 issue. However, I believe the answer to question 12 is in error. (I am probably one of 1,000 to tell you this, so feel free to delete). The question concerned what town in Nebraska was bombed in World War II. His answer was Dix, as it was bombed by dummy bombs from a nearby airbase. Another answer is Omaha: A balloon bomb released by the Japanese off the Pacific coast floated all the way to Dundee, where it exploded. There is a

small sign around 50th and Underwood which documents the event. I remember this was a trivia question during one of my high school history tests. There was a story about the "Omaha bombing" on KETV. Here is the link: <http://www.ketv.com/station/3528737/detail.html>. Bruce Esser Omaha, Nebraska

I believe the correct answer is Tarnov. On a night practice bombing mission to the Stanton range, just south of Stanton, the bombardier or navigator was off on his timing and navigation and dropped his practice bombs on the small town of Tarnov. They managed to hit one of the occupied homes in town and the bomb, which had a small charge of powder in it to mark the hits or misses, went off in the living room of the unfortunate home owner, who was sitting in his easy chair reading the paper. He was startled, but uninjured. I don't think the lads were tipsy, just off in their navigation and timing. PJ Eddy Norfolk, Nebraska

Fishing the Weeds

In the May issue of NEBRASKAland in the "Old Angler's Almanac," Daryl Bauer mentions several state areas that he would consider fishing in the months of May/June. One of these was Wolf-Wildcat. I have found this area to have its ups and downs over the years, but weed growth has been an increasing problem to the point that I had not visited the site for some time. His comments encouraged me to return, but upon arrival I found the lake more infested with weeds than ever to the point of 50- to 75-percent choked. I wonder if Daryl was misquoted or, if not, does he have some special technique that allows fishing this type of water. Jim Heater Omaha, Nebraska

Our field crews found an excellent population of largemouth bass in Wolf-Wildcat last year and that is why I would rate it as one of the best places in southeast Nebraska for bass fishing this year. I realize the aquatic vegetation may make the fishing more challenging, but that vegetation is excellent bass

habitat and is no small part of the reason the bass population there is excellent. I hear reports from bass anglers that do quite well at Wolf-Wildcat. Most of them fish from boats or float tubes, and of course use a variety of weedless presentations to fish in and around the aquatic vegetation. Weedless rubber worms and other rubber baits, spinnerbaits and weedless jigs should work. Later this summer I would be sure to try some surface presentations, especially a variety of the weedless "scum frogs" that are on the market.

Those are some quick ideas. Let me know if you have any other questions I can help you with. Daryl Bauer Fisheries Outreach Program Manager

Clouded plant bug (Neurocolpus nubilus) adults are just under ½" long and mottled brown to yellowish brown in color. Their first antennal segment is noticeably thicker than the rest of the segments, and covered with short dark hairs. Immature plant bugs, called nymphs, are yellowish to green in color, with striped antennae. The clouded plant bug overwinters in the egg stage, having been oviposited within plant tissue by the female. Nymphs hatch in spring, and begin to feed on plants. They will molt several times before reaching full adult size a month or so after hatching.



www.bugguide.net is a good site for identification

– Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

Send your comments to: Doug Carroll, Editor NEBRASKAland Magazine P.O. Box 30370 Lincoln, NE 68503 or e-mail Doug.Carroll@Nebraska.gov Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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The spines that cover prickly pear are actually modified leaves designed to protect the plant from being eaten.

Who Needs Leaves?

Jon Farrar

Nebraska has three species of prickly pears. Call them prickly pear cacti if you want, although botanists do not, even though they are members of the cactus family.

Bigroot prickly pear can be found statewide on sites to their liking, but are most common in sandy soils and so most abundant in the Sandhills region. Plains prickly pear have more thorns and in Nebraska are most common in the Panhandle. Little prickly pear – also called jumping cactus because segments easily break away from the plant and seem to jump and stick to pant legs or the hides of cattle and wild mammals – is found in central and western Nebraska. It is smaller than the other two, often hidden away in grasses, and so less conspicuous.

Pages could be written about the interesting characteristics of prickly pears. For starters, the green pads or segments – the most conspicuous parts of the plant, at least until it erupts into yellow blossoms – are not leaves but enlarged stems. Photosynthesis, the process by which green plants create carbohydrates from carbon dioxide and water using sunlight as an energy source, is accomplished in these much enlarged flattened or rounded stems. The spines that cover prickly pears are

actually modified leaves. The spines are of two types, both emerging from areoles on the stems – large, smooth spines firmly attached to the plant, and hairlike prickles called glochids that easily detach and are what one usually finds embedded in fingers if the plant is touched.

The purpose of the spines is rather obvious – to protect the plant from becoming a meal for herbivores. The fleshy stems are water-storage organs and quite palatable, not just to four-legged browsers but to two-legged browsers as well – prickly pears were food for American Indians. Spines were removed by rolling the segments over a bed of coals to burn them off and make peeling the skin easier; or by boiling so the skin and spines could be peeled away. The flesh of prickly pear pads was eaten raw and said to taste like cucumbers. Despined stems remain a common food item in southwestern states and Mexico.

The mature, seed-filled fruits of bigroot and plains prickly pears have long been a food for indigenous people and Euroamerican settlers. They are spineless, may be eaten raw, and were once commonly used to make wine and preserves. Both the stems and leaves of prickly pears are rich in vitamins and minerals, and the compounds they contain are proven to have legitimate medicinal uses.

Upcoming Events

Here is a list of upcoming outdoor events across Nebraska. For more information about these and other events, click on the calendar at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

July 2-3

• **Ft. Atkinson Living History Days**
Watch and learn as volunteers portray life at an 1820s military fort. Living history days are the first weekend of the month from May-Oct, with interpretive hours at the center open from 10am-5pm each day.
Contact: Ft. Atkinson SHP
(402) 468-5611
ngpc.fort.atkinson@nebraska.gov

July 2-4

• **Ft. Kearny Living History Days**
Visit Ft. Kearny SHP for living history days, and view what life was like in the 1860's civilian and soldier camps. There will be a cannon firing each day at 2 p.m. for public viewing.
Contact: Ft. Kearny SHP
(308) 865-5305
ngpc.fort.kearny@nebraska.gov

July 16

• **First Shots Event – Platte River State Park**
The biggest challenge for new shooters is getting started, but First Shots makes that easy, and best of all it's free! At this First Shots seminar you will receive an educational introduction to the safe and recreational use of firearms.
Contact: Christy Christiansen
(402) 471-5547
Christy.Christiansen@nebraska.gov

July 22-23

• **BO-W Kayaking – Niobrara State Park**
This is a great opportunity to have fun kayaking with other women. Participants will take a trip down the Niobrara and Missouri rivers and camp overnight at Niobrara State Park.
Contact: Julie Geiser at (308) 530-6722 or Suzanne Ridder at (402) 471-1623. There is a registration fee for the workshop.

July 30

• **22nd Annual Kites & Castles – Lake McConaughy**
Check out the sand castle and kite flying contest at Martin Bay.
Contact: Stacie Coomes
(308) 289-1036

Pronghorn Numbers Highest in 30 years

Eric Fowler

Following five years of restricted buck harvest and nearly a decade of limited doe harvest, Nebraska's pronghorn herd appears to be as healthy as it's been since the early 1970s.

Hunters harvested 767 bucks in 2010, the most since 1976. The population was at its peak then, but a harsh winter in 1978-79 claimed half of the herd, and for a variety of reasons, recovery has been slow.

"Pronghorn herds are probably within 80 to 90 percent of what the best statewide population was (in the late-1960s and early 1970s)," said Kit Hams, big game program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. "It's looking good."

Limited buck harvest has improved the age structure of bucks, with only 11 percent of the bucks harvested last year being yearlings, compared to 25 percent in 2005. Additionally, new trophy records have been set for archery, muzzleloader and firearm the past three seasons.

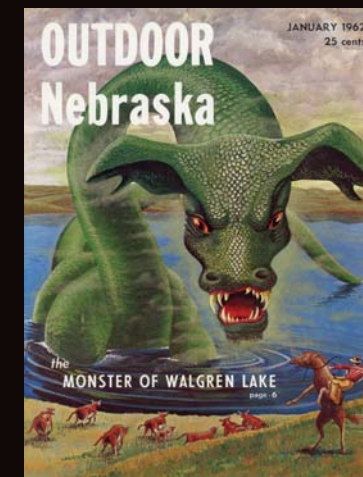
But as herds have increased, so have complaints from landowners about crop damage. In response, muzzleloader and most firearm units will offer either-sex permits this season rather than the buck-only permits that have been in place since at least 2003. An additional 47 firearm and muzzleloader permits will also be issued. Late-season doe/fawn permits, offered in the Cherry unit in 2010, will also be offered in Box Butte East, Dismal and North Sioux units this year, with a combined 177 permits available for the four units. Hams expects 110 does and fawns to

be harvested, far from the record 657 set in 1969, but easily the highest since 2002.

The health of the herd should bode well for youngsters taking advantage of the new \$6 Youth Archery Pronghorn Permits. Archery permits are unlimited and valid statewide, but the application periods have already passed for this year's muzzleloader and firearm permits.



Nebland Flashbacks



No doubt this January 1962 cover was one of the most captivating covers in *Outdoor Nebraska's* history (predecessor to *NEBRASKALAND Magazine* until 1964). The caption reads "Artist Frank Holub's Giganticus rears his head out of normally placid Walgren Lake." Frank Holub was a staff artist with the Commission and had rendered many illustrations for the magazine. To see and read the article "The Monster of Walgren Lake" by Jane Sprague, visit NebraskalandMagazine.com and click on "Nebland Flashback."

Peregrine Chicks Hatch

At least two of the three peregrine falcon eggs at the Nebraska State Capitol nest box hatched this spring and the chicks were expected to be banded in early June. The nest box can be seen through FalconCam – a video camera mounted on top of the Capitol building that provides streaming video to a television in the rotunda and to OutdoorNebraska.org.

See You Out There ... But Where?



Do you know where this Nebraska photograph was taken?
See answer at the bottom of page 11.

This photo was taken with a 1½ minute exposure, during which time the crazy photographer dashed into the tent, zipped the door shut, shone a flashlight around the interior, and then dashed back to close the camera shutter. Before attempting this, it's important to clear the path between tent and camera of any obstacles. Camera settings: ISO 500, aperture f-4, shutter speed - 91 seconds.



Star Photography

Chris Helzer

Taking star photos is easy. You only need three things – a camera, a tripod and a spectacular nighttime display. Fortunately, Nebraska provides plenty of opportunities for the latter, especially in the western half of the state where the lights from cities and traffic don't interfere.

Start by setting your camera's ISO or ASA (film speed) setting on your camera to at least 400 and use a wide open aperture (low f-stop number) so your camera can capture sufficient light for stars to appear in the photo. Next, set your camera on a sturdy tripod or other platform where it won't be jiggled around while you're photographing. Choose a foreground for your photo, remembering that you'll only see the silhouette of anything that sticks up above the horizon (unless you light it separately – discussed below). When you're all set up (and it's dark), simply open the shutter of the camera and leave it open for a few seconds or a few hours, depending upon whether you want pinpoint stars or long star trails.

It's a good idea to check your battery power before starting a really long exposure. A cable shutter release, or the use of your camera's automatic timer, can help prevent the camera from moving (resulting a blurry photo) when you press the shutter.

If you want to play around a little, use a flashlight or other light source to "paint" portions of the foreground with light while the camera shutter is open. Just make sure you're in an isolated area, or you might end up trying to explain what you're doing to a skeptical uniformed officer.

You can find additional information on taking star photos from numerous sources on the internet (and in old-fashioned paper books), but a little experimentation can be just as useful. The ability to check the LCD display of digital cameras makes star

photography much more user friendly than the old days of film cameras. A couple of test photos can help you hone in on the right length of time to leave the shutter open, and also help you see whether the overall scene works.

Most importantly, get out and enjoy the night sky. Just be sure to schedule some nap time the next day.



The Milky Way shows up nicely in the Sandhills sky, far from urban light pollution. In this photo, a flashlight was used to "paint" the tree and fence with light while the camera shutter was open. Camera settings: ISO 500, aperture f-4, shutter speed - 61 seconds.

Think Skink

Dan Fogell, Biology Instructor, Southeast Community College–Lincoln

They look like torpedoes ... torpedoes with little legs, a tail, eyes and powerful jaws. They are called skinks, and they're lizards with shiny scales that often have ridiculously short legs in comparison to the body. In fact, some skinks have only remnants of what used to be legs, while others have no legs at all. Skinks have long tails and most can abandon their tails if they feel threatened by a predator – a behavior called "caudal autotomy" – allowing them to get away while providing a distraction. Skinks are found all over the world in tropical and temperate climates and demonstrate a diverse collection of sizes, colors, patterns and behaviors. The skink body design is actually described as cylindrical, but torpedo-like may be somewhat appropriate considering their locomotion. When not alarmed, skinks usually move around using only their front legs while their hind legs sort of just dangle. When they are distressed, however, they use all four legs and their body to wriggle from side to side, spastically plowing through ground cover like a terrestrial torpedo until they feel safe.

Just like birds, male skinks take on breeding colors each spring when their chins and heads turn bright orange. By mid-summer, however, their normal colors have returned. Female skinks actually provide maternal care by staying with their eggs throughout incubation and protecting them from predators. They will even move the eggs if environmental conditions become too extreme, and if a single egg goes bad they will actually eat it to prevent the other eggs from rotting. Skinks prefer to eat insects and other arthropods but will eat nearly anything they can catch.

Nebraska is home to four different skink species. In eastern Nebraska you might see the **northern prairie skink**, a brown lizard with gray to white longitudinal stripes down its back. The northern prairie skink is a tallgrass prairie species, but it also thrives in junk piles, along railroad tracks and in other disturbed areas. Throughout western Nebraska is the **many-lined skink**, which looks similar to the prairie skink but has a wide, white stripe down the middle of the back and has a slightly longer tail. Also a prairie species, the many-lined skink prefers short and mixed grass prairies but can also be found in the Sandhills. At the southern edge of the state along the Kansas border lives another prairie species – the **Great Plains skink**. Measuring up to 13 inches from nose to tail, it is the largest skink in the United States. They are gray to light brown with a black fleck on each of their scales, and they have very robust bodies with comically small legs. Their exceptionally strong jaws can deliver a healthy bite if provoked.

Finally, in the extreme southeastern corner is the rarest skink found in Nebraska – a woodland species called the **five-lined skink**. Much more common in the eastern United States, this skink prefers deciduous woodlands to prairies and will actually climb trees to forage or escape from predators. Young five-lined skinks are jet black with five bright white stripes down the back and an electric blue tail, but they lose these bright colors as they get older.

No matter where you are in Nebraska, chances are you are not too far from some kind of skink. Just look down on the ground for a living torpedo crashing through the vegetation.



Northern prairie skink



Many-lined skink



Great Plains skink



Five-lined skink

Great Nebraska Duck Hunt

Nebraska Ducks Unlimited chapters across the state are starting to embark on the Great Nebraska Duck Hunt, an expanded outdoor-skills program whose goal is to equip youth with the skills and knowledge needed to become successful waterfowl hunters and conservationists.

Open to Hunter Education graduates who are 12- to 15-years-old, the programs will get started this summer as participants prepare for the fall waterfowl seasons by honing wing-shooting skills, practicing on the duck call, prepping hunting gear and working their dogs.

If interested in this program, either as an aspiring young waterfowl hunter or as an adult volunteer, contact your local Ducks Unlimited chapter or DU staff at either (308) 380-1711 (Grand Island and west) or (402) 499-5515 (east of Grand Island).

THE OLD ANGLER'S ALMANAC®

BY DARYL L. BAUER

July and August can be the “dog days” of summer when fishing gets a little bit tougher. The warm water temperatures have nothing to do with a tougher bite – fish are “cold blooded” creatures whose temperature and metabolism are the same as the water. During the middle of the summer a fish’s metabolism is actually at its peak and fish are feeding as much or more as they do at any other time of year. Fishing gets tougher in the summer because there is an abundance of natural prey available to them at that time. Anglers can still catch fish by staying versatile and fishing a variety of waters for a variety of species. Expect feeding periods to be short but intense.

• Catching Numbers - Big Water

Mid-summer is white bass time! White bass in Nebraska reservoirs will be chasing young-of-the-year (YOY) gizzard shad all summer long. Anglers often can find these feeding frenzies by looking for gulls taking advantage of white bass pushing the shad to the surface. This often happens early and late in the day, but at times it can last throughout the day. Some of the best reservoirs for white bass this summer should be Davis Creek, Swanson, Calamus, Jeffrey and, of course, Harlan.

• Catching Numbers - Small Water

Panfish, especially big bluegills and crappies, tend to move off-shore during the summer. Anglers have to look deeper to find those fish, but drifting live bait rigs, small jigs or even flies can dredge up some of the biggest panfish of the year. Smaller bodies of water tend to be our best panfish habitats throughout Nebraska. Try some Interstate lakes, Summit, Maskenthine, or even Wehrspann for some nice bluegills. Whitney, Island or Wehrspann should be good places for some 10-inch+ crappies.

• Catching Big Fish

Anglers can find wipers, some of them big, chasing shad the same as the white bass in mid-summer. In fact, on waters where both exist they may be caught during the same feeding frenzy. Special care needs to be taken to catch and release big wipers during the warm water of mid-summer – try to land them as quickly as possible, keep them in the water, handle them only as much as you have

to, and release them as soon as possible. Calamus will offer up some big wipers along with white bass, as will Minatare, Elwood and McConaughy.

• Trying Something New

Staying with the white bass theme, a person can catch a bunch of white bass and predator fish by fishing after dark using lights. There are a number of submersible lights for sale that can be hung underneath the boat or from dock after dock to attract zooplankton, which then attract YOY shad and other baitfish, which in turn attract white bass and other predators. Light fishing usually works best on reservoirs with good water clarity that allows the light to penetrate. Anglers have caught a lot of white bass at Harlan using this technique, but it will work on other Nebraska reservoirs as well.

You also might want to try “vampire” fishing this summer. In July many Nebraska catfish will still be spawning and tough to catch, but by mid- to late-August those cats will be back on the prowl looking for food. Blood baits are one of the best ways to catch late-summer channel cats.

• Not Caring What You Catch

Anytime the discussion turns to just catching fish, regardless of species, Merritt Reservoir comes to mind. Merritt is one of the best multi-species fishing spots in all of Nebraska. By late-summer there is usually a good panfish bite, a person could drift blood for some big channel cats or try trolling crankbaits for walleyes and maybe some large-mouth or smallmouth bass, pike and even a muskie.

• Best Bet

Grab some Chug-Bugs, Pop-Rs, KastMasters, a variety of jigs and swimbaits and head for some white bass/wiper action. Calamus would be near the top of my list this summer, and if I was out in the Nebraska Panhandle I would be sure to fish Minatare. Fish hard early and late in the day, find a sandy beach and chill-out during the hot afternoons.

Stay tuned for Bauer's Fall Fishing Tips in the October edition of NEBRASKALand.

“The best time to fish is when you have time to fish.” — D.L.B.

Top Hunting and Shooting Equipment Brands

Southwick Associates has announced the brands that hunters and shooters purchased most frequently in 2010. This list has been compiled from the 41,923 internet-based surveys completed by hunters and target shooters who participated in HunterSurvey.com and ShooterSurvey.com polls in 2010.

• Top rifle brand: Remington (17.5% of all purchases)



• Top shotgun brand: Remington, Mossberg (virtual tie with 21.5% of all purchases)



• Top muzzleloader brand: Thompson Center (31.9% of all purchases)



• Top handgun brand: Sturm Ruger (16.7% of all purchases)



• Top scope for firearms: Bushnell (17.1% of all purchases)



• Top rifle ammunition brand: Remington (25.3% of all purchases)



• Top shotgun ammunition brand: Winchester (31.9% of all purchases)



• Top handgun ammunition brand: Winchester (22.0% of all purchases)



• Top blackpowder brand: Pyrodex (38.7% of all purchases)



• Top balls, bullets, or shot brand: Hornady (28.4% of all purchases)

• Top bow brand: Matthews (17.5% of all purchases)



• Top arrow brand: Carbon Express (27.6% of all purchases)



• Top fletching brand: Blazer (15.8% of all purchases)



• Top broadhead brand: Muzzy (20.3% of all purchases)



• Top decoy brand: Mojo (12.9% of all purchases)



• Top game call brand: Primos (33.5% of all purchases)



• Top reloading bullet brand: Hornady (31.7% of all purchases)



• Top reloading powder brand: Hodgdon (37.8% of all purchases)



• Top binocular brand: Bushnell (33.6% of all purchases)



• Top holster brand: Uncle Mike's (19.0% of all purchases)



• Top knife brand: Gerber (15.0% of all purchases)



• Top scent or scent covering brand: Scent-A-Way, Scent Shield (virtual tie with 14.7% of all purchases)



• Top shooting target brand: Shoot-N-C (31.3% of all purchases)



Group Hiking Back East

Erica Hengelfelt

In last month's NEBRASKALand, Tom Scheimo offered tips about finding public hiking opportunities in his article “Hiking with my Friends.” Here are a few more group hiking opportunities in the Omaha area available for our eastern readers.

Backwoods, an outdoor retailer located in Omaha, hosts “Real Chicks Hike,” an event exclusively for women, on the third Saturday of every month. Participants only pay applicable park entrance fees. Please visit backwoods.com/stores-and-events.html for a current schedule, list of trails and carpooling information.

In addition, the Omaha Hiking Club organizes excursions for adults over the age of 21, and all skill levels are welcome. For more information regarding the club and its events, visit members.cox.net/omahahikingclub/Schedule.htm.

NEBRASKALand Visitor Winner and Hint

Last issue's winner of the NEBRASKALand Visitor drawing was Scott Cooper of Stillwater, Oklahoma, who found the **clouded plant bug** on page 27.

Readers are encouraged to contact NEBRASKALand within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's “Visitor” – a bug found in Nebraska that just happened to find its way onto one of the pages of our publication.

We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a NEBRASKALand Magazine mug. To enter each month, write: NEBRASKALand Visitor 2200 North 33rd Street, Lincoln, NE 68503.

Or e-mail: Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov with “Visitor” in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on page 3, 5, 20, 21, 22, 23, 34, or 35.

Oglala Grassland

Text and photos by Jon Farrar



Not designated the Oglala National Grassland until 1960, the land was acquired during the drought and depression of the 1930s. Its 94,400-acre expanse is a glimpse of what Nebraska once was.

at a better-than-fair price for the depth of the Depression – in most cases from desperate sellers who were going to lose their ranches. Under this act, land for the Oglala National Grassland was acquired and assigned to the National Forest Service to administer and manage. The drought of the 1930s, and unwise use of the land before and during it, resulted in nearly incomprehensible erosion of fragile lands and so, in addition to financially aiding ranchers, the program was designed to keep vegetative cover on the land.

Some Great Plains ranchers sold their land to the government and moved away. For some it was not only salvation, it was a good deal. Ranchers decided what land they would sell to the government, and in the northwestern corner of Nebraska it was usually dry rangeland. The rancher kept the better adjoining land with creeks and flats where small fields of alfalfa or other crops could be grown. After they sold their land to the federal government, they rented back their old pastureland at bargain-basement rates.

It was Land Utilization Project Number One of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act that created what would ultimately become the Oglala National Grassland. The area was assigned National Grassland status in 1960 and named for the tribe of Sioux Indians that once lived in the area.

The Grassland's raw landscape tells a geologic story of the rise and fall of the Rocky Mountains, the retreat of an inland sea and the persistent erosive power of wind and running water. Just as the human history of the Oglala National Grassland is recent, so too is its geologic history relative to the history of the Earth.

About 110 to 70 million years ago during the Cretaceous time – the so-called Age of Reptiles – much of what today is the North American continent was under a vast inland sea geologists call the Western Interior Seaway, which extended from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. As the Rocky Mountains began to rise about 38 million years ago,

Most who vacation in the far northwestern corner of Nebraska spend their time at places like Fort Robinson State Park. Many make daytrips to places like Toadstool Geologic Park northwest of Crawford. It is worth the trip – the road to it is good, and the rugged eroded

badlands there are a miniature version of the even more rugged badlands of South Dakota. Visitors who only walk the trails, snap a few photographs and then drive back south to civilization, however, miss the more subtle rawness and vast expanse of the Oglala National Grassland just to the north. Spanning 94,400 acres, the Grassland, like the

Sandhills, is a good place to imagine what Nebraska once was.

The Oglala National Grassland history is recent, its birth during the drought and depression of the 1930s when the market for cattle crashed because most people could no longer afford to buy beef for their dinner tables. Northwestern Nebraska was,

and is, cattle country. During the Depression there was no market for beef and so no profit in raising cattle. Loan payments could not be met and banks foreclosed on ranches and farms.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated a number of programs – such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Public Works Administration – to

put the jobless back to work. Under the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937, the federal government also began buying private land, usually land marginal for farming, or rangeland abused by overgrazing because of the drought, in an attempt to keep as many ranchers as possible afloat. Rangeland was only purchased from willing sellers

erosion began carrying gravel, sand and silt eastward, sediment that settled to the bottom of the inland sea, filling it from west to east.

Another rising of the Earth’s crust some 75 to 50 million years ago created the Laramie Mountains of Wyoming, the Black Hills of South Dakota and the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. Even while the land was rising, wind,

water and ice again began wearing it down. New rivers flowed from west to east across western Nebraska, depositing sediments that would solidify as shale, siltstone, sandstone and claystone formations exposed today in Nebraska’s Panhandle.

Until about two million years ago most of Nebraska was grassland, a savanna not unlike that found in Africa



Banks and bluffs of red-soiled clays exposed today on the Grassland reflect the color of ancient soils deposited by wind and running water.



Montrose Church, a landmark on the grasslands of northwestern Nebraska, was built in 1887 and is still in use today.

today, with herds of seemingly uncountable numbers of grazing animals, most of which are now extinct. Ice sheets pushed south, reworking the surface of the land until about 10,000 years ago, leaving behind a landscape not significantly different than that of today. Still newer rivers flowed from west to east across western Nebraska, carving out valleys, their feeder streams cutting down and exposing long-buried siltstone, sandstones and shale formations. Geologists call these deposits, from

oldest and most deeply buried to more recent and higher, the White River Group, the Arikaree Group and the Ogallala Group. This chapter of geologic history is exposed like an open book at Scotts Bluff National Monument. In the little badlands of northwestern Nebraska and the Oglala Grassland, the White River Group is exposed, the more recent deposits once residing above them having long ago been carried away by water and wind.

Much of the exposed rock on the

Grassland is whitish, but here and there are colorful exposures – bluffs and hillsides of bright red-brown clays, colors more expected in New Mexico than Nebraska. The colors of the exposed White River formation are as varied as the colors of the ancient, water-deposited soils from which they formed. Deposits were fashioned from particles of all sizes, from microscopic forming clays to coarser materials. Running water from ancient rivers sorted the material by size, the largest particles falling out first as the stream’s

velocity and slope diminished, and the finest particles being carried away downstream to the east. That, though, does not explain the now exposed beds of gravel, coarse sand and silt in relatively close proximity to each other. The explanation is evident in today’s prairie rivers, where coarser material is found in the stream channel, finer sand to the sides deposited during high-water flows, and even finer material deposited on the margins of the floodplain.

And it is in the White River deposits



Gumbo-lily, a member of the evening primrose family, might be found in flower from early-May into August, its time of blossoming seemingly more attuned to available soil moisture than a particular time during the growing season.

where fossils of ancient plains animals are found – camels, small rhinos, giant pigs, three-toed horses, saber-toothed cats and land tortoises with shells up to two feet long. Removing fossils from either Toadstool National Monument or the Oglala Grassland is prohibited. It is better to see them at the University of Nebraska Trailside Museum at Fort Robinson State Park or the State Museum in Lincoln.

Gumbo, perhaps the slipperiest, slimiest, gummiest of materials on the face of the Earth, is abundantly offered up for inspection after a rainstorm on

the Grassland. Gumbo soils formed from the weathering of volcanic ash deposited over western Nebraska some 10 million years ago. The main roads through the Grassland, though, are raised and graveled today, providing safe passage for car-window geologists. Precipitation from rain and snow is sparse in northwestern Nebraska, averaging about 16 inches a year, so vegetation suited to dry and infertile soils claim the Grassland. Most have a strategy for survival – grow short, expose little leaf area to drying winds, send roots deep or wide, or both; and flower and set seed early in the season

when moisture is usually most abundant. Botanists call this wonderfully eroded landscape of raw rock and grass northwestern mixed-grass prairie. In Nebraska it is found only in the drainage basins of Hat Creek and the White River in Dawes, Sheridan and Sioux counties. The Grassland’s soils are poorly drained, silty-clay loams and clay loams; the dominant grasses are blue grama, needle-and-thread, green needlegrass and western wheat grass. Threadleaf sedge, a grass-like plant in appearance, is also abundant. Especially in the Grassland’s western pastures, several species of sagebrush

are common, along with greasewood and rabbit-brush – woody shrubs more common west of Nebraska. The plant communities reflect the characteristics of soils and moisture availability, and how the land has been treated by man over the last hundred years or so. Overgrazed or formerly farmed tracts are often dominated by invasive and poor-forage plants such as Japanese brome, cheatgrass, crested wheatgrass and, as appealing as their sweet scent is on a dewy summer morning, yellow and white sweetclovers. But it is the showy native forbs, the wildflowers, that most draw the eye on

the Grassland. Most bloom and set seed early in the spring while soil moisture is still adequate. Wildflowers, particularly those drawn to the harsh rocky outcrops, have evolved strategies to endure the worst of conditions – infertile soils, scant water, frigid winters and scalding summer heat with desiccating winds. Many hunker down close to the ground. They conserve moisture by having narrow leaves, often with gray-green foliage or minute hairs to reflect the sun’s rays and maintain humidity, thereby preserving precious cell moisture. Some have deep taproots that siphon up subsurface water; others depend on a spreading network of fibrous roots to quickly absorb water from an April or May cloudburst before it evaporates. They are, by and large, tough plants, some even toxic if consumed in quantity, making them somewhat unpalatable to all but starving browsers. Their existence is miserly, their needs minimal. Self-taught botanist Claude A. Barr, in *Jewels of the Plains*, wrote of Hood’s phlox, a plant found on the Grassland: “There it is subject to all the winds that blow, to intense direct and reflected light, and to all the heat the rock can absorb; to whatever winter cold may come; to the naked situation with snow cover removed by wind; and to a moisture supply measured by the capacity of the narrow crevices.” Barr might have added: “And yet it prospers.” Compared to other parts of the state, spring comes late to the Grassland. On May 15 there is still a 70-percent chance of a late-spring freeze. But plants are not adverse to rolling the

dice, gambling it is better to risk an early frost than a spring so short or so dry they cannot complete flowering, and setting and spreading their seeds. Among the earliest wildflowers is the townsendia, a ground-hugging tuft covered over with daisy-like blossoms, often early enough they were used to decorate pioneer churches at Easter, hence their better known name, Easter daisy. Mountain lily, also called Star-of-Bethlehem or star lily, is even earlier, often flowering in late-April, its unopened white blossoms standing like small candles before spreading into star-like flowers rising from a whorl of grass-like leaves. And the procession of



Short-eared owls might be seen on the Oglala Grassland any month of the year. They prefer ungrazed and undisturbed grasslands and nest on the ground.

blossoms continues – Nuttall’s violet, leafy musineon, yellow wild parsley, plains phlox, alkali milk-vetch, plains prickly pear, draba milk-vetch, sandwort, miner’s candle, standing milk-vetch, soapweed and many more; some that might be found elsewhere in the state, but many not adapted to compete in

more moist prairies to the east.

The flowering of some wildflowers seems more attuned to adequate soil moisture than to the calendar, and so gumbo evening primrose might be found in flower from May into August. The abundance and lushness of some wildflowers almost maps soil moisture. Prairie buckbean, with its deep yellow, pea-like blossoms, is sparsely spaced on dry-soiled sites but gathers in

green, knee-high cool-season grasses – needle-and-thread, western wheat and Junegrass.

There are animals found on the Grassland not found in prairies to the east – short-horned lizards, desert cottontails and nesting McCown’s longspurs. But most of the animal life of the Oglala Grassland is what would be expected on a high-quality western



Desert cottontails are likely to be seen on the Grassland. They are slightly smaller in size than eastern cottontails, are paler in color and have larger ears. Both are characteristic of cottontails and jackrabbits of more arid regions.

dense patches where soil moisture is abundant, turning dry washes into blankets of gold after the runoff of milky-colored water from spring downpours has receded.

Others, such as red false mallow, seem oblivious to soil moisture or fertility and flower through spring and summer regardless of how unpromising their chances, their only concession being, perhaps, an adjustment in the lustiness of their growth or number of flowers. In wet springs, the Grassland is lush, belying its true, semi-arid nature, transformed into a horizon-to-horizon sweep of

Nebraska grassland. There are buck pronghorns still tending does, even though they are heavy with fawns, mule deer on the uplands, badgers, white-tailed jackrabbits that might weigh 10 pounds in their fat season and black-tailed prairie dogs. Cock sharp-tailed grouse stomp and drum the hard ground with their feathered feet, with tails raised and wings spread, running parallel along imaginary boundaries separating their little part of the lek from that claimed by the neighboring cock, both hoping they are the most desirable when hens come calling to mate. Golden eagles soar

overhead with eyes downturned in search of rabbits or inattentive young prairie dogs. Ferruginous hawks, the largest of North America’s buteos, a raptor diagnostic of the American west, nest here.

With perches at a premium – once no more than a pile of bison dung for a horned lark – fence posts seem appreciated by short-eared owls and long-billed curlews. Upland sandpipers alight on them, holding their wings arched over their backs like the trailing feathers of an Indian headdress, perhaps out of agitation, perhaps flashing caution to others of their kind. Seemingly sedated nighthawks doze through the daylight hours atop fence posts, too. Somewhere nearby their mate is nestled over mottled eggs resting in gravelly scrapes. Burrowing owls are on the Grassland, rearing their young underground in abandoned prairie dog or badger burrows. And there are prairie rattlesnakes, most likely to be seen soaking up the warmth of gravel or asphalt on roads at night or in the early morning, much to their peril. But the vegetation is so open, the rattlesnakes now so uncommon and more inclined to escape man than bite him, they should not discourage walking the land.

For a parched landscape, storm clouds rear up with unexpected frequency in late-spring and summer; sweeping in under spreading shelves from the southwest or bubbling up in towers to the east, racing so quickly across the land they leave little more than pockmarks in dust.

It is nearly impossible to walk the Oglala Grassland without thinking of the Sioux who once claimed this land. More than anywhere else it was in northwestern Nebraska that the Oglala were subdued, often brutally by a government far to the east and bent on westward expansion, the safety of white settlers, and passage to the gold fields of southwestern South Dakota. Sometimes, alone in this vast sweep of rocky grassland, the wind seems melancholy, perhaps the lamenting of those who once knew it so well. ■

Soft rock is exposed everywhere on the Grassland, and usually sparsely colonized by plants that have evolved to subsist in the most spartan of conditions.



The Value of Vervain

Often seen as a weed, hoary vervain is actually a very beneficial plant and common native wildflower.

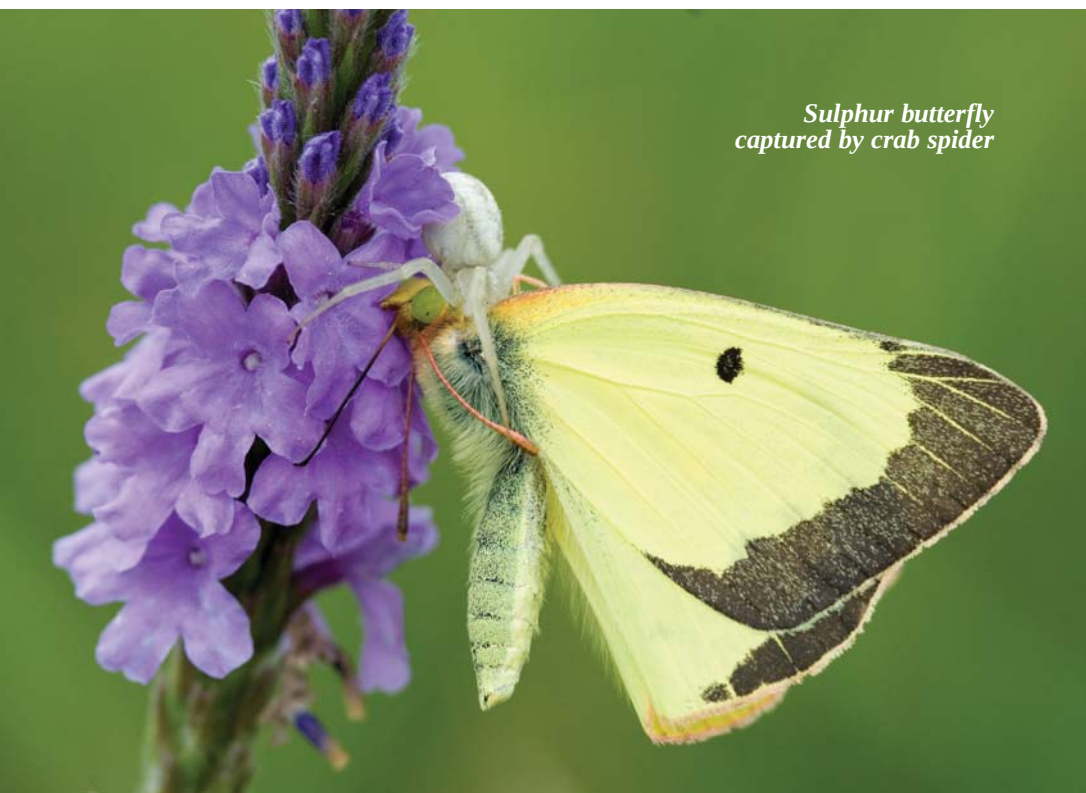
Text and photos by Chris Helzer

Hoary vervain (*Verbena stricta*) is a common native wildflower in many Nebraska pastures. Because cattle won't eat it and it moves easily into intensively grazed areas, it's widely seen as a weed. Its numbers can swell quickly enough that I usually get several calls a year from concerned landowners wondering what to do about it. However, it doesn't compete well with perennial grasses and other large prairie plants, and a year or two of lighter grazing pressure will usually reduce even very large patches of vervain to a few scattered plants. In other words, while it may be fair to call it "weedy," it only acts like a weed when the vigor of dominant plants in a prairie or pasture is greatly suppressed. It certainly isn't threatening to take over the world.

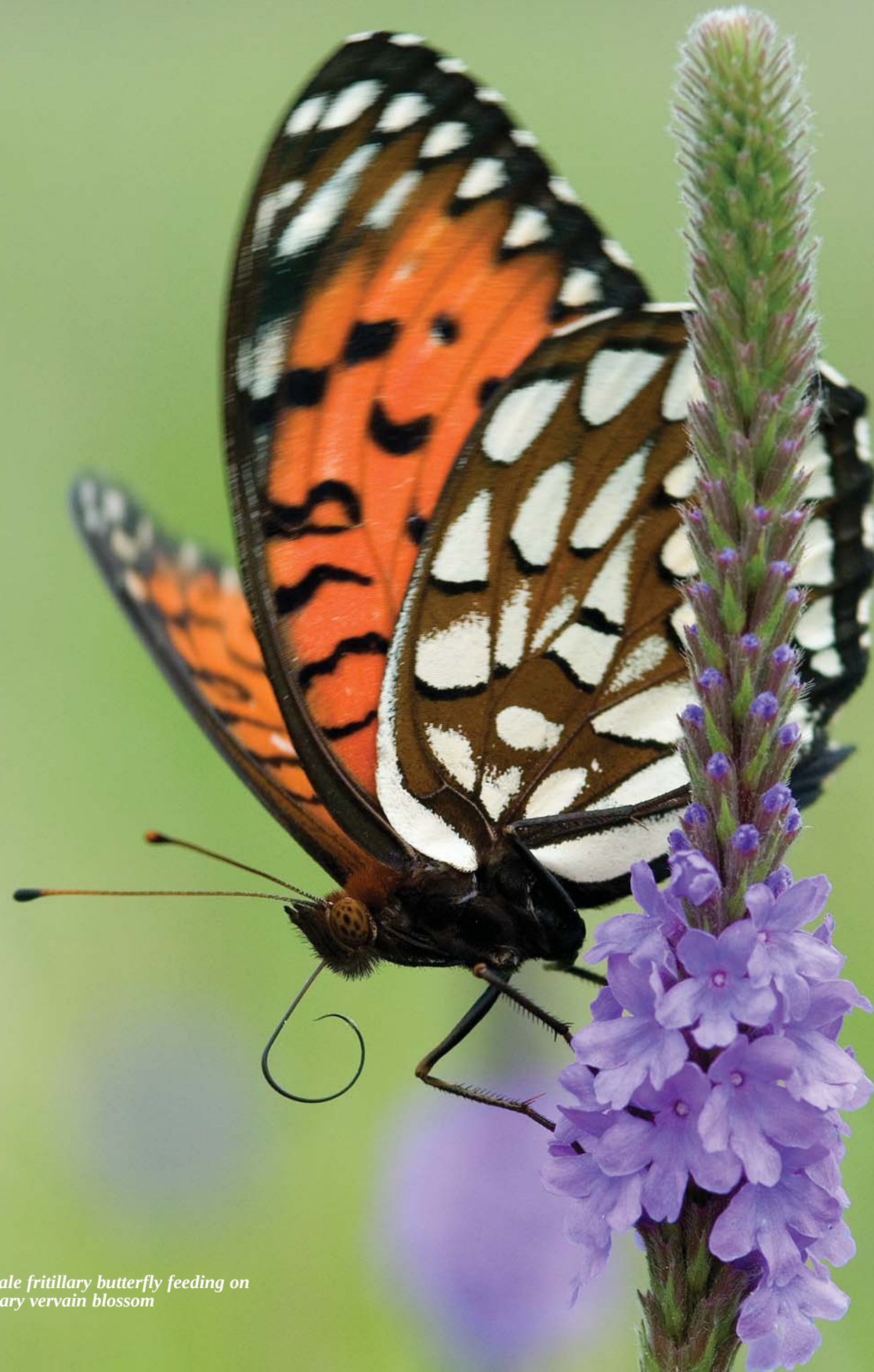
In fact, when you look at hoary vervain without bias, it's really an attractive plant. More importantly, it's an incredibly valuable plant to Nebraska pollinators. Because it's abundant across the state, has multiple blossoms on its long flower heads and blooms for a relatively long time – individual plants commonly bloom for more than a month – it's one of the most widely used pollinator plants in the state. In fact, in many Nebraska grasslands it appears to almost single-handedly support the populations of a myriad of butterfly species through the middle of the summer.

One of the butterfly species that feeds heavily on vervain in central Nebraska is the regal fritillary – a prairie species that is extremely rare in much of the tallgrass prairie region of the U.S., but is still abundant in the eastern one-third of

Nebraska. As a photographer who is known, at least in part, for photos of prairie insects, I'm expected to have lots of regal fritillary photos, but even though they're one of the more common butterflies on the prairies I manage for The Nature Conservancy, my photo collection of them has been pitifully small. I set out to remedy that situation one July afternoon by heading to one of our prairies that had a large patch of hoary vervain. I knew that a fair number of regal fritillaries and other butterflies had been nectaring in the patch, but I wasn't prepared for the staggering diversity and abundance of butterflies and other pollinator insects I saw during the hour and a half I spent crawling around a stand of flowers about the size of my house.



*Sulphur butterfly
captured by crab spider*



*Female fritillary butterfly feeding on
a hoary vervain blossom*



Orange sulphur

A Butterfly Nursery

The numerous regal fritillaries in my patch of vervain were there only partially because of the flowers themselves – the real draw was the abundance of violets in that part of the prairie. When tiny regal caterpillars hatch from eggs in the fall, they crawl through the grass until they either find a violet to feed on (their sole food source) or they die trying. The caterpillars feed and grow until winter, at which point they presumably find what shelter they can beneath insulating layers of grass litter until spring. My patch of hoary vervain was in the middle of a large section of prairie that had both abundant violets and plenty of thatch – essentially it was functioning as a nursery for fritillaries. Male fritillaries had emerged as adults in mid-June, and spent their next several weeks coursing back and forth over the same portion of prairie, waiting for females to appear – which usually happens in early July. The males fed very little during those weeks of waiting, because their most important job was to be the first to find, and mate with, freshly emerged female fritillaries. Those females had finally started to appear on the scene the previous week, and the males (and females) were now starting to feed – although they still chased each other around quite a bit between flowers.

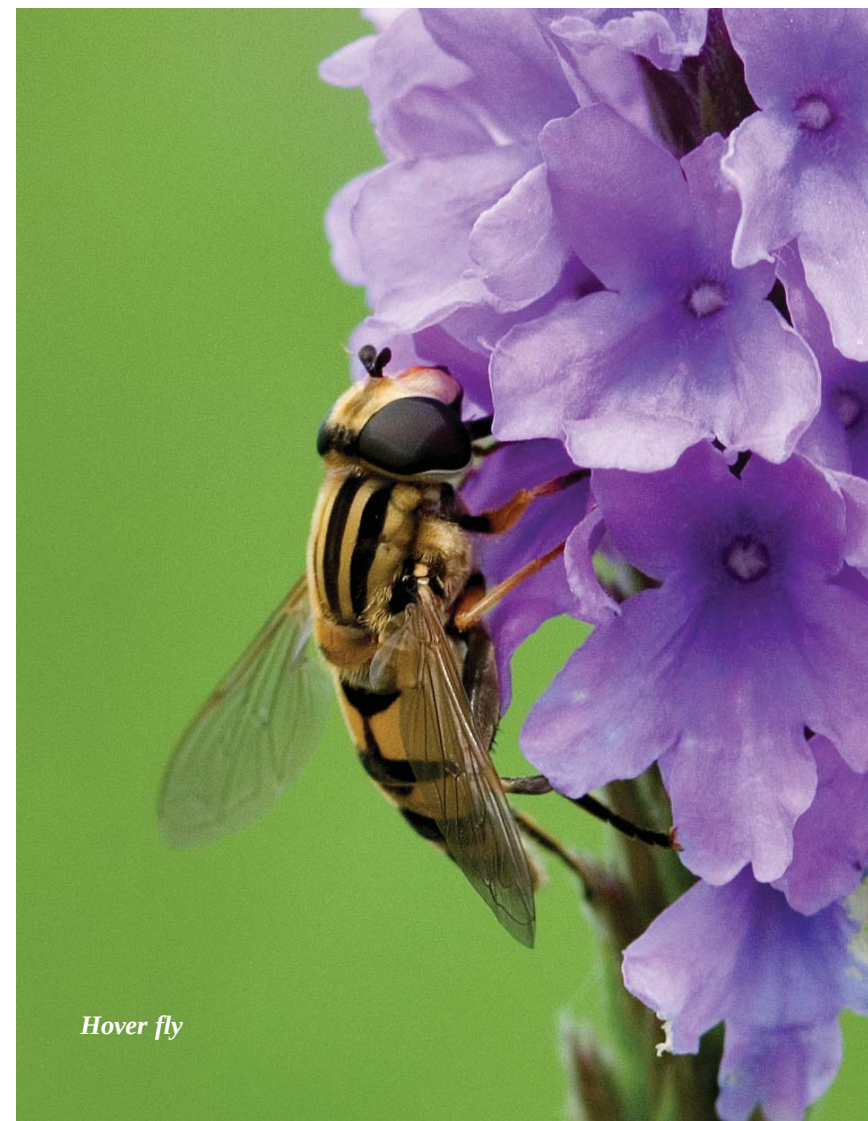
Abundant Subjects

I waded into the patch of vervain and began stalking regal fritillaries on my knees, camera in hand, and grateful that the flower patch was far from any public road where someone I knew might pass by. Most of the butterflies left the flower they were feeding on just as I got within photo range, but their sheer numbers – and dumb luck – led to quite a few good photos within the first half hour. Most of what I saw were males, ragged-winged and faded from weeks of patrolling for females and chasing each other around. Now and then, however, I’d recognize a female from its darker wing tips and more abundant white spots. The most striking characteristic of the females, though, was their deep beautiful colors: Most had emerged from their pupae only a few days previous and were so fresh they almost looked wet.

After I started feeling confident that I had some good fritillary photos, I began paying attention to other butterflies using the same patch. The second most abundant butterfly species was the orange sulphur which, notwithstanding their name, are primarily bright yellow or white butterflies with black markings on the edges of their wings. Other species at the party included the variegated fritillary, the pearl crescent, and several species of skippers, only a couple of which I could get near enough to identify. While butterflies were the flashiest in color, there were numerous other pollinators around as well, mainly bees and flies. One of the flies was particularly noisy, emitting a high-pitched buzz like a dentist’s drill as it hovered before each flower. About the time my knees and back were getting tired of photography, I spotted one more sulphur butterfly that appeared to be in an odd position on a flower, and didn’t move as I approached. When I got close enough to see it clearly, the reason became obvious – it was caught by a crab spider that had been lurking on a vervain flower, waiting like a crocodile at a watering hole for one of the abundant visitors to venture too close. Feeling good about having captured the whole circle of life in a vervain patch, I stood up, stretched my weary legs and back, and headed for home. ■



Variegated fritillary



Hover fly



Sachem butterfly



Common checkered skipper

Chris Helzer lives in Aurora and is the Eastern Nebraska Program Director for The Nature Conservancy. He has been a contributor to NEBRASKALAND since 1994.



BEYOND THE BRIGHTLY LIT CIRCLE

By Lisa Knopp

On hot summer days I often wait till sundown before taking my daily ramble. Besides the cooler temperatures, there are many other pleasures in evening walks: Hummingbird hawk moths sip nectar at curbside flower beds; moon flowers unfurl their generous white petals and fragrance in the dimmer light; and on cloudless nights I can pick out a swan, scorpion, lyre, archer, eagle, bears and dippers in the sky. But best of all, the bats come out.

I feel a surge of joy and fear whenever I see bats. What thrills me is knowing that something usually hidden from me has suddenly been revealed. The bats shoot out from their roosts in a flutter, rising, diving, weaving, hovering, abruptly changing directions and disappearing into the darkness of the trees. Rather than the forward gliding or undulating motion of birds, bats move through the air in a more up and down pattern like that of a swimmer or a person rowing a boat, so it's easy to distinguish them from other night fliers.

What makes me uneasy isn't the silly, dangerous stories about bats attacking people, sucking their blood, becoming entangled in their hair or passing rabies through their bites. Nor is it their canine-like faces and weird, leathery wings. Nor am I frightened by our similarities: they're warm-blooded; they're hair-covered; the female gives birth to one, perhaps two, offspring per season, which she suckles from her two (in most species) mammary glands; they have fleshy lips, 32 teeth, and four-chambered hearts; the bones in their wings are like those in my arms and hands, though the bat's "fingers" are greatly elongated and connected by a soft, elastic membrane.

What unsettles me is also that which delights me – their hiddenness suddenly revealed. While I was jumping out of the way of children racing their bikes on the sidewalk, these bats, hanging upside down in trees, chimneys, attics

and eaves, were stirring. As I was thinking about all that I needed to do once I arrived home, bats were opening their bright, black eyes, yawning widely enough to reveal their pointed teeth, and stretching their draped and folded wings until they looked like silk pulled tight upon the ribs of an open parasol. Perhaps at the very moment that I was looking up at the stars, these gentle bats fell into flight and became airborne, traveling at speeds of up to 20 or so miles per hour for little brown bats and up to 40 or so miles per hour for big brown bats.

So, it's with both pleasure and uneasiness that I watch bats feed on the wing, using their mouths, the skin around their tails and their wings to catch beetles, flies, moths, wasps and mosquitoes in flight. From beginning to end, the process of detecting and locating their prey through ultra-sonic sounds we humans can't hear, then pursuing and capturing the insects, takes about one second. Each night, each bat catches thousands of insects, mostly mosquitoes. Around midnight the bats return to their roosts; before dawn, they emerge once more to hunt and feed.

We could live our entire lives without ever seeing or thinking about bats. If we observe indirect evidence of their presence – say if we find dark brown stains flecked with shiny, undigested bits of insect legs, wings and shells beneath the eaves or in the attic; if we hear squeaks, clicks and chirps coming from overhead places; if we notice that the cat seems more alert than usual around dusk – we ignore or explain it away. But then one evening, we lift our eyes in time to see dozens of bats emerging from our trees or spiraling out of the neighbor's chimney or that broken window in our attic, just-loosed secrets, flapping, hunting, echolocating just above our heads. Were the bats really there all along?

Early one spring morning when I

wheeled my garbage can to the end of the driveway, I noticed a dark, gray mound attached to the side of a curb. Like spiders, snakes and other creatures that carry a heavy burden of folklore, superstition and misinformation, bats frighten me only if they take me by surprise. When I saw that this protuberance was a bat, I gasped; then bent down for a closer look. The creature had silvery fur and was compact enough that it would have fit nicely in my cupped palm. Perhaps it was a hoary bat, a tree-dweller. Perhaps during the night, it had been washed out of the pin oak by the heavy rains. From photographs I'd seen of this bat, I knew that its gray-brown fur is white-tipped ("frosty"); that it has short, round ears edged in black; a blunt nose; a ruff of fur around its neck; and a yellow patch on its throat. But in the dim, early morning light and without my reading glasses, I couldn't make out the features that would have identified this frosty lump. Perhaps as I squinted to see the bat, it was trying to discern my identifying features – large eyes with blue irises; a prominent nose with an elongated tip; lobed ears; four limbs; short and extremely dextrous, unwebbed fingers. This bat and the several others that I've found in the light of day on sidewalks, in a shopping mall parking lot, near the stadium on the UN-L campus, and beneath front yard trees, as well as the countless bats I've watched zigzagging overhead, leave me wondering what else I might see if I look beyond the brightly lit circle where I carry on most of my life. ■

Lisa Knopp is an award-winning American essayist and author of introspective short stories, essays and creative nonfiction. She teaches creative nonfiction at UN-O and has been contributing to NEBRASKAland since 1992.



OLD-TIME FOURTH^{OF} JULY

ENTERTAINMENT WAS ONCE MOSTLY
HOMEMADE – AND PROBABLY BETTER

By Jon Farrar

While not universally true everything was better in the old days – think about laundry day – life did seem to move at a more measured and sane pace. And people were more self-sufficient, providing for themselves. Today, for example, entertainment is packaged and provided – you show up, pay your money and the entertainment is forthcoming. Entertainment was once

mostly homemade, and there is probably no better example of that than Fourth of July celebrations, probably the biggest social celebration of the year in many small towns. Looking back, celebrating the Fourth seemed more about the origin of the holiday and having fun a hundred years ago.

“Next Monday is Independence Day and it will be the occasion of unprecedented joy and patriotic

expression,” the *Northern Nebraska Journal* reported in its June 30, 1898 edition. “In Ponca, if the weather is favorable, an immense crowd promises to be on hand to help make every feature of the day a signal success. Let no one stay away, but let all sidetrack work and cares for the time and come with their children to Ponca and mingle with the pleasures of a splendid celebration and thus properly remember a most glorious event.”

“The weather was perfect on July 4th – neither too warm nor too cold, with no rain, wind or dust to mar the physical pleasure of humanity,” the same newspaper reported three days after the celebration. “On that day Ponca was the center of attraction in the county and here people gathered from near and far to celebrate the birth of our independence. They began arriving early in the morning and by the time the procession formed at 10 o’clock, Third street presented a surging, animated mass. The profusion of national colors met the gaze on every hand and the spirit of patriotic joy pervaded the atmosphere.

“The procession, headed by a gaily decorated steam engine and comprising a float loaded with young ladies representing the states and comprising the bicycle brigade and other attractive features, came down Third street promptly at the appointed time and was followed to the grove by a great concourse of people.”

The origin of the Independence Day celebration was always in the forefront in years gone by. The Ponca parade described above, for example, was followed by a program where the speaker “made an address that was intensely patriotic” and reviewed “American’s achievements and eulogizing America and her institutions,” devoting “liberal attention to the righteous and humane war now being waged against Spanish tyranny.”

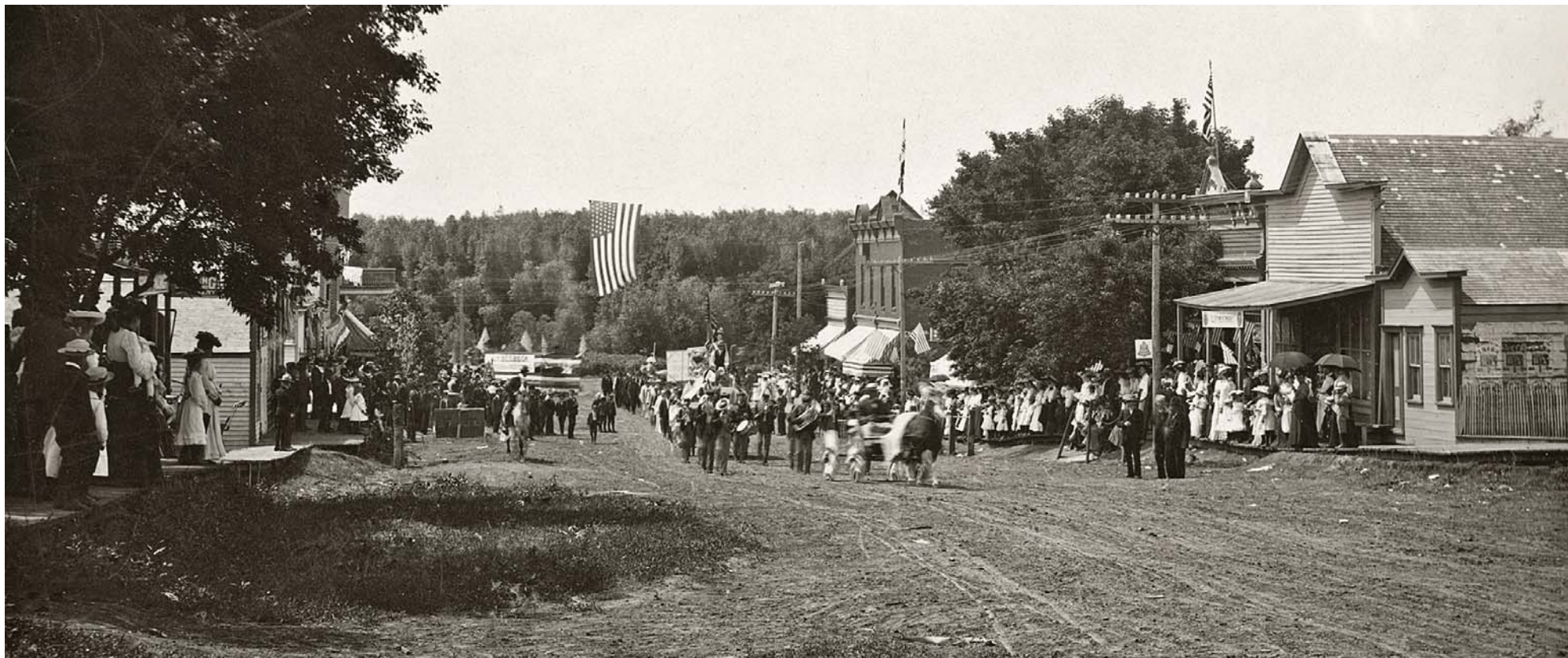
A basket dinner followed the morning proceeding, followed by a balloon ascension by a Prof. Winteringer who went up “several hundred feet and then soared to the northwest and made a very successful parachute leap.” Games and other competitions followed – a



Patriotic dress could be as little as a stars-and-stripes cap, or as much as a full skirt with an American flag pattern. Having fun was the mission of celebrating the Fourth.

Decorating the William Jennings Bryan house in Lincoln for the Fourth of July. Date unknown.





Small town parades were homegrown, such as this one in Snyder, composed of whatever could be mustered to walk, march or trot. Marching bands, military and fraternal organizations and children on decorated bicycles were standard fare.

clay-bird shooting contest, a bicycle race from Newcastle to Ponca, judging of the “best trimmed” boys’ and girls’ bicycles, foot races, boys’ wrestling matches, and egg and barrel races.

Not all small-town Fourth events were as well planned as Ponca’s.

“Sometimes it is hard to speak the truth and describe things as they really were,” the *Falls City Tribune* reported in its July 7, 1905 edition, “and still, if the truth be adhered to, it must be said that the celebration was not all that it should have been. The trouble seemed to lie in a lack of organization and of the preliminary work necessary to make it one continual round of pleasure. Instead of something doing every moment of the day, as there should have been, there was something doing only once in a while and the crowd spent most of the day wandering up and down the street amusing themselves as best they could.” The article continued: “Everybody looked forward to a display of fireworks in the evening but the crowd was forced to be satisfied with watching the numerous private displays in the different parts of the town.”

By the Fourth of July 1907, the *Falls*

City Tribune reported, the celebration was much improved: “If a noisy Fourth signifies a good one, then there is not a town on the map that surpassed Falls City this year. The noise began early and lasted til late – or early. There was an immense crowd all day, large numbers coming from surrounding towns.... The intense heat had no effect when it came to smothering Patriotic enthusiasm and the crowds seemed inclined to celebrate to the fullest extent. There were few accidents considering the quantity of explosives used during the day and evening.”

Most small-town Fourth of July celebrations included baseball games and those in ranch country often had rodeos. Races were popular – everything from horse, auto, foot, sack and wheelbarrow to spoon-and-egg races. A greased pole or greased pig contest was common, and some celebrations included ladies’ nail driving contests as well as “throwing the hammer” and “catching the guinea hen.” Prizes or purse money were frequently awarded. Neighboring town volunteer fire departments would square off in water fights where the objective was to drive the opposing

team back across a line. Anvil firings were popular, as all that was required were two blacksmith anvils and some black powder. One anvil was placed upside-down on the ground as the launching pad, its concave base filled with black powder. A fuse was laid to the powder and the second anvil gingerly placed atop the other. When the burning fuse reached the black powder the top anvil was projected into the air, often several hundred feet.

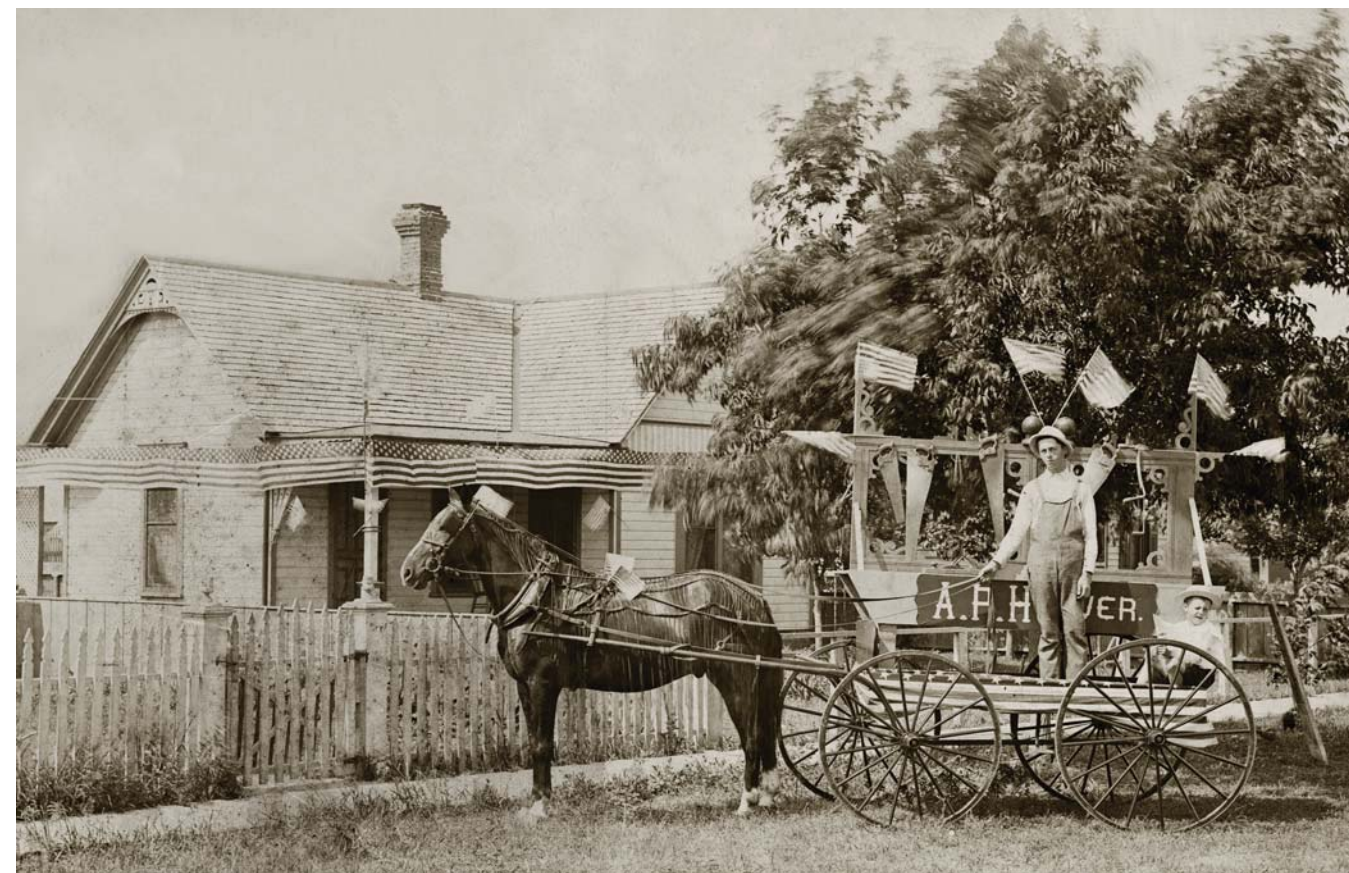
Patriotic, moral, educational and religious oratory was standard early day Fourth of July fare; and the Declaration of Independence was typically read aloud by a local man with a booming voice, followed by choral renditions of *America the Beautiful*, *God Bless America*, the *Star Spangled Banner*, *You’re a Grand Old Flag* or *Yankee Doodle*. If a nearby theatrical group was available, the celebration often included plays and productions. In addition to the expected fireworks, Independence Day evenings were typically filled with dancing, either in local dancehalls or “on the green” with music provided by local bands and orchestras.

Patriotism ran particularly high at Fourth celebrations when the United States was at war. The *Oakdale Sentinel* ran a large display advertisement for the National War Savings Committee in its June 21, 1918 edition, tying the celebration of Independence Day to the World War I effort: “Will you greet the Fourth of July with a free conscience? Or will you spend the Fourth in shame-faced guilt.” The plea for patriotism continued: “The pride of American citizenship is no longer cheap. A new hour has struck. The crash of war has ground all semblance of cheapness out of being an American. It is now a dear-bought honor. You must pay.” Readers were encouraged to respond to a “higher, more chivalric summons” and pledge to purchase War Savings Stamps.

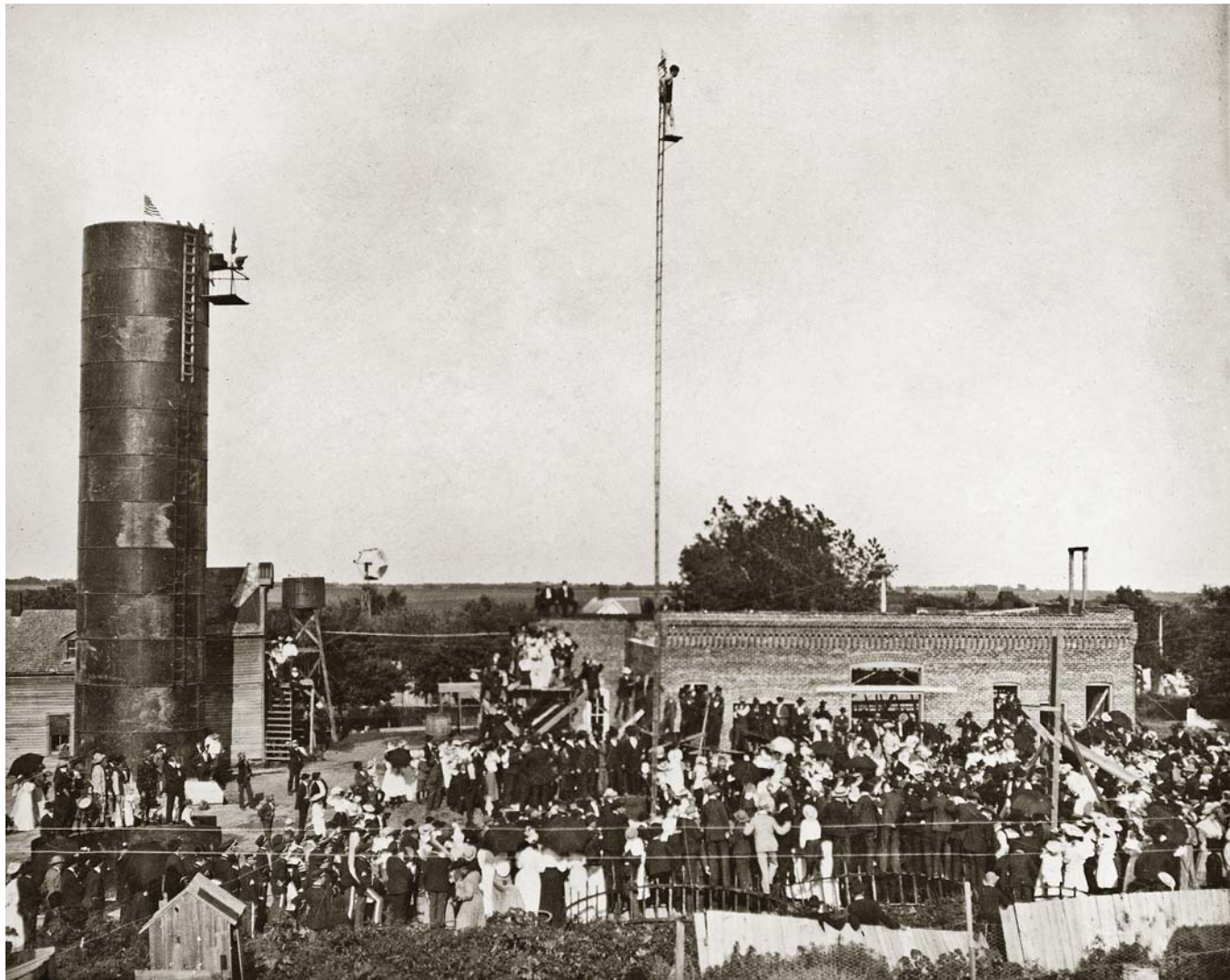
Larger towns were able to attract staged events for which an admission was charged or sponsored by the town merchants, such as carnivals, barnstormers or men diving into small

pools of water from great heights. In 1918, the town of Oakdale featured “Burk’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin Company,” billed as “A Mammoth Amusement Enterprise – Under a Palace Pavilion Theater” that included not only a “Grand Spectacular Production” but also “The Big Two Car City Show” along with a concert band and symphony orchestra.

Many small town celebrations began with parades composed of whatever could be mustered to walk, march or trot. Marching bands composed of high school music students were standard. And there were military and fraternal organizations, children with decorated bicycles, a string of men and women on horses led by a grand marshal, automobiles (particularly when they were still a novelty), local fire departments with their equipment, and floats on horse-drawn wagons decorated with streamers and flowers with riders dressed in patriotic costumes such as a pretty



In the early-1900s, floats were mostly horse-drawn wagons decorated with streamers and flags such as above from Custer County. Pretty young women often rode the float, sometimes in patriotic costumes such as the Goddess of Liberty.



In some small towns, merchants passed the hat to bring in entertainment, such as this high-dive into a small tank of water at Osceola. Carnivals, barnstormers, theatrical productions, fireworks displays and balloon ascensions were common.

young woman in a Goddess of Liberty outfit. In small towns with only a few streets the parade often passed along all of them so spectators sitting on porches could enjoy it, and finished with a second passing down the main street.

"Thedford has at last succeeded in having a great big booming celebration," the *Thomas County Herald* reported in its July 8, 1915 edition. "Not only Thedford, but Seneca, Mullen, Halsey, and Dunning celebrated with her. The parade formed immediately after the train pulled out, and marched through the main thoroughfares of our thriving little city. The most noticeable feature of the parade was the number of prominent young ladies in our town who, decorated for the occasion, marched behind the band almost at the head of the procession. These young ladies immediately formed on the court

house square, for the flag drill, with which they treated us."

The Fourth of July celebration at the small town of Brownlee was even bigger and better according to the *Thomas County Herald's* July 6, 1916 account and drew many celebrants from Thedford.

"There were probably two or three carloads of Seneca people, but Thedford went the limit and every car that could be pressed into service carried the patriots to the front. The big event that everybody wanted to see was the ballgame between Thedford and Brownlee." The newspaper reported that "besides a local contingent of horseback riders and teams hitched to buggies and wagons, there were in the neighborhood of six hundred people, from longer or shorter distances in autos and Fords. It was estimated that there

were right at a hundred cars ranged up in battle line to witness the sports."

Nebraska voters adopted the prohibition of alcoholic beverages in 1916 but it did not become law until May 1917, and national prohibition was not ratified by Congress until 1919. Still, attempts to curb its abuse at such celebrations were well along. The *Thomas County Herald* reported that at the 1916 celebration at Brownlee: "It was worthy of remark that, notwithstanding the large crowd, the behavior was first class. Barney McGuire acting as marshal of the day put a bar on the cup that inebriates and on other Kindred activities." The *Thomas County Herald* 1917 promotion of the Fourth events to be held in Thedford noted: "Bring your dinners and enjoy the day in Thedford, we have plenty of shade and now that Nebraska

is dry we will see that you have plenty of good cool water to drink."

Those preferring more sedate celebrations did so. The same edition of the *Thomas County Herald* reported: "A party of about thirty spent the Fourth in Archie Warner's grove on the Dismal [River]. After a sumptuous dinner was served, over an hours program was given. Different sports were indulged in and about 7:30 in the evening the merry folks departed for their several homes. Everyone reports a fine time."

The *Falls City Tribune*, July 7, 1905, noted neighborhood gatherings: "One of the most enjoyable of the private celebrations of the Fourth was held at the home of Chas. Heineman on North Chase street. The parents and children residing for several blocks around gathered at the Heineman home in the evening for the purpose of witnessing a very elaborate display of fireworks. Rev. Cronenberger of the Christian church was present and prior to the display addressed the company, referring in a pleasing nature of the occasion and addressing his remarks especially to the children present. Then, Mr. Heineman, J.F. Whetstine and Charlie Hargrave took charge of the program and delighted all with a profusion of sky-rockets, Roman candles, pin wheels and other pyrotechnic devices, to the great delight of everyone."

With the near constant barrage of fireworks, the Fourth of July and days preceding it were days of terror for horses and dogs. While adults were satisfied with nighttime aerial displays, young boys wanted noise. Fireworks were available everywhere, with few, if any, restrictions on type or their use. The most commonly advertised were sparklers, firecrackers, torpedoes (small firecrackers that explode when thrown against hard objects), rockets, Roman candles and pinwheels. The June 28, 1917, *Thomas County Herald* published a patriotic illustration of a boy stretching out to light an enormous aerial bomb with a young girl behind holding her ears with the following poem:

The dawn of the Fourth – the old annual story –

The nervous man's dread and the small boy's glory.

The east is yet gray when all the land rumbles,

And the small cannon pops and the big cannon grumbles.

And the torrid sun creeps through a blue haze of powder,

And the torpedoes snap and the cannons boom louder –

On the Fourth of July – The old fashioned Fourth of July.

Not unexpectedly there were accidents: "The celebration at Newport ended in something bordering on a disaster," the *Stuart Ledger* reported in its July 5, 1901, edition. "The fireworks were sent up from the band stand on Main Street and was managed by C. P. Wiltse and Bat Menney. In some way the entire box got set on fire and exploded in the box. The explosion was terrifying and



In Nebraska's cattle country, there was typically a horse parade, often led by a grand marshal and marshalette, as in this photo from Hyannis in about 1907.

Two young ladies from central Nebraska appropriately dressed to celebrate the Fourth and wow the young men.



the sound awful. Mr. Wiltse fell in a faint from the stand and was not revived for two hours. A rocket struck Will Layne, a bystander, injuring him seriously. He will probably die. Miss Brant was hit on the arm by a rocket and another lady slightly injured. The bunting [cloth drapery or streamers simulating the American flag] caught fire, and the stand was burned; with difficulty the Smith Bros. establishment and Al Willerling's store were saved from the flames."

The *McCook Daily Gazette* reported in its July 6, 1936, edition there were 408 deaths in the United States during that year's Independence Day holiday. Only seven fatalities reported were related to fireworks. More than half of the deaths were the result of automobile accidents and 111 were drownings. But injuries and deaths related to fireworks made more spectacular headlines, as the "...lighted firecracker thrown by a little girl into some oil rags in a garage" in Remsen, Iowa that caused a \$1 million fire. And there were accidents of a nature that were tragic only to young boys, such as the carelessly thrown firecracker that landed in a bushel basket of firecrackers, setting off the whole day's supply in minutes.

Local businessmen typically offered Fourth of July specials to lure customers from farms and smaller neighboring towns. The White House Grocery in McCook, for example, advertised the following specials in 1936: A one-pound bag of marshmallows for 15 cents, cans of tuna fish two for 35 cents, ripe olives in jumbo pint tins at two for 39 cents, and Maxwell House coffee at 53 cents for two pounds. The competing Safeway countered by offering a pound of Hills Brothers coffee for 28 cents a pound, two pounds of brown sugar for 12 cents, two pounds of peanut butter for 23 cents, and "fresh ground 100% pure" ground beef for 25 cents for two pounds.

Independence Day celebrants in Superior could buy six rolls of toilet tissue for 25 cents or a pound can of Van Camps pork and beans for a nickel. Fourth specials in Superior in 1936 included one pound of "grasshopper

YOUR FLAG AND MY FLAG

By Wilbur D. Nesbit, *Thomas County Herald*, June 29, 1916

*Your Flag and my Flag! And oh, how much it holds –
Your land and my land – secure within its folds!
Your heart and my heart beat quicker at the sight;
Sun-kissed and wind-tossed, red and blue and white.
The one Flag – the great Flag – the Flag for me and you –
Glorifies all else beside – the red and white and blue!*

*Your Flag and my Flag! And how it flies today
In your land and my land and half a world away!
Rose-red and blood-red the stripes forever gleam;
Sky-blue and true blue, with stars to gleam aright
The gloried guidon of the day; a shelter through the night.*

*Your Flag and my Flag! To every star and stripe
The drums beat as hearts beat and fifers shrilly pipe!
Your Flag and my Flag – a blessing in the sky;
Your hope and my hope – It never hid a lie!
Home land and far land and half the world around,
Old Glory hears our glad salute and ripples to the sound!*

poison arsenic" for eight cents at Fisher's Drug Store. At the Hested Store men's cotton socks were only a nickel a pair. The Ben Hill store was selling Fritz overalls, limit two to a customer, for only 95 cents, marked down from \$1.10. Lyman's, which gave Red Stamps with purchases, sold a pair of woman's silk, knee-length hose for only 25 cents or "wash silk and crepe dresses for \$3.95. "Superior merchants are offering bargains that will make it worth your while to be here early," the *Superior Express* noted in its July 2, 1936 edition, a paper packed full of local advertising. As the Fourth fell on Saturday, merchants will "remain open as long on Friday evening as the people wish to stay and will be closed all day the Fourth."

Feeding the throng drawn to towns for the celebration was often a way for local clubs and organizations to raise money. Box lunches were sold by ladies aid clubs in some towns, and in others there were sit-down dinners. The *Brownville Advertiser* of July 11, 1857 reported: "The celebration of the Fourth at our sister town Nemaha City

was a grand affair – we say without hesitation it was the most magnificent affair of the kind we ever attended. The table was four hundred feet long, and perfectly groaned beneath the weight of eatables placed thereon. There were over two thousand persons present, and after all were abundantly fed, there was yet 'enough and to spare.'"

There is, of course, no turning back the clock to those more charmingly idyllic days of watching a blacksmith's anvil being blown into the heavens or cheering on youngsters in egg-in-spoon races. One has to wonder if a small town was to recreate a good old fashioned Fourth of July, how could it not become an overnight sensation, drawing hundreds of visitors every year. Grandparents would take their grandchildren to show them how things used to be on Independence Day. But, in the end, that would just be a quaint version of how most entertainment is today – packaged and provided. ■

Editor's Note: Appreciation is extended to Linda Hein at the Nebraska State Historical Society for locating the photographs used in this article.

The Grasshoppers

A Work of Fiction

By Jody Keisner

The cornfield was the place she wanted to be, where the corn was higher than her head, maybe even higher than her father's head, where she imagined she could vanish into the narrow path between the rows. Katie thought of the leaves of corn flapping under the sun and against her face, arms and outstretched hands. She wanted to be there, alone, surrounded by the sweet smell of dirt and vegetables. She imagined the quietness, except for the *shush* of the wind and the sound of the corn inhaling and exhaling. If only the rows were endless, if only she could walk away from the rest of them, if only they would never find her. If only.

Instead, Katie sat pressed against the passenger door, feeling exposed and vulnerable in the intimate space of her father's truck. It was early morning but humid, and her jeans stuck to her thighs. She stared down at her shoes, grass-stained and muddy. Empty bottles of Miller Lite rolled around and clinked on the truck floor as her father drove. The bottles and sound of her father's voice irritated her, both slicing through her thoughts.

"This is the worst damn drought I've ever seen," her father said.

"Mmm." Katie didn't take her eyes off her shoes.

"What?"

"I said 'yep.'"

"Nebraska is a raisin and all she can say is 'yep.'" Her father snorted.

"I know it's bad." Katie kept her voice even, unexcited, trying to avoid a fight.

That morning, her father had taken one look at Katie in her worn jeans, long-sleeves and thick socks – even though it was already hot enough for the wall air-conditioning unit to begin *klinkity-klanking* as it ground to life – and said, "It's about time you started smartening up."

She had not been so smart her first day of detasseling, almost a full month ago, when she arrived home with tic-tac-toe scratches on her arms, legs and face from the dry edges of corn leaves. Later patches of sunburn magnified the cuts, making her

skin raw.

Katie's father pulled up next to a school bus. "You can get out now." Katie slid out of the truck, knocking a beer bottle onto the gravel road. "Just leave it."

Katie closed the door on his blood-shot gaze. The beer bottle crunched under a tire as her father drove off. Hers was not like the families that played board games on TV commercials. She felt relief when she climbed into the bus and slid into an empty seat near the front. Outside the world was brown and dry, a seemingly treeless terrain full of ditches and abandoned farm houses. Her father had said that summer was like living on the

sun. When the bus arrived at the farm, Katie grabbed her frozen milk jug of water and her cooler with bologna sandwiches. She was glad to be near the field – she'd come to life walking down the long rows of corn, pulling the center of the dewy tassel in one swift motion towards the sky. There was order to it; each plant aligned with the next in something like harmony. The rows of corn would surround her so that she couldn't see her high school classmates, the dusty school bus with the faded words Springfield Mustangs on the



side, or the farmhouse. The only thing she saw then was the silky shimmer of the corn cob, nestled in each stalk, alone in its shroud. She tried to imagine the farmer and his wife waiting inside, facing their inevitable financial ruin and cursing the rain that never came, even after the town's pious praying.

"You're not scared of a little hopper, are you?" A boy from her class threw a grasshopper at her as he strolled toward the field. It was one of the few times he had spoken to her.

Katie yelped and brushed the brown grasshopper off. She hated grasshoppers and the way they fluttered their two back legs when they were airborne. She had told her father she feared the insects, but he usually drove with both windows down on the long dirt road that led to their home anyway. The hoppers would fly through the window, landing on her skin, sticking to her or propelling off. She would slide off her sandals and swat at them, pleading for her father to roll up his window. He'd

told her, "God doesn't love a sissy." When they had finally gotten home that day, her father had made her help him wash the truck. The windshield was covered with dead grasshoppers. It had been his idea, then, for her to detassel – to toughen her up and help her make friends.

Even before Katie approached the field, she could see it was infested with hoppers. Although her crew had been told about the effects of the drought, she hadn't seen much of them in her first week of detasseling. Just sickly looking cornstalks and rows muddy from desperate irrigation. This field was worse, much worse. The leaves of the plants bent down in defeat. They were ravaged with brown spots and holes; yet the tassels still pulsed green, vibrant life, shooting up in defiance. She took her first step into the rows. Hoppers thumped against her arm and pant leg as they jumped from the corn leaves to the ground. She took another step into the field. She grabbed the first

silky tassel and felt her muscles grow taut. The hoppers made a sound like when her father would make an "O" out of his middle finger and thumb and flick a bug off the kitchen table. They flicked against her. Katie froze as she felt one land on her shoulder, then her leg, her



arm, her chest.

The grasshoppers were a kaleidoscope of colors, some green, some yellow, some orange with flecks of gold and black. Their small, black dome eyes reminded her of aliens. As if from the sky, they seemed to descend upon her. Katie wondered if the hoppers left tiny prints on her body, like insect footprints. She felt the small moment of vibration before they cast themselves off of her. She hated the way they came at her instead of jumping the other way – like they were unafraid. For one horrible moment, she remembered the pictures of grasshoppers magnified in her biology book – with names like Redlegged, Spur-throated and Slant-faced, they sounded like gangsters. She had paid extra attention to the hopper named Two-striped – a Nebraska native.

It both scared and fascinated her.

She was vaguely aware that her crew was moving away from her, walking effortlessly through the fields, tossing female tassels onto the ground in their wake. She could hear a boy singing, but his voice sounded as if it was underwater. She shut her eyes. She saw her father's face, remembered how excited he had been when she hadn't given up detasseling, even when her hands grew blistered and raw from the friction of her work gloves. She had loathed him then and his sweaty grin. She heard the corn inhale and then become silent. It was holding its breath for her. In one violent movement, she shook the hoppers free. She took a step forward, watched the grasshoppers scatter, and disappeared into the middle of the morning. ■



Shooting Complex

Opens with a Bang

Text and Photos by Eric Fowler

Kevin McCarville had shot a BB gun a few years ago and an airsoft gun more recently, but that was the extent of the Omaha teen's shooting experience until this year's Memorial Day weekend, when he shot a .22-caliber rifle for the first time at the new Outdoor Heritage Education Complex at Platte River State Park (SP) near Louisville.

His first try at rifle shooting didn't start out very well. "I'm not accurate," he said, somewhat dejected after placing shots everywhere but the bulls-eye, and some even off the paper, during his first round of shooting.

But McCarville's experience didn't end on that sour note. With another ammunition clip in hand and trading a rifle equipped with a red-dot scope for one with a 4-power scope, he sat back down at the bench next to Rob Renner, one of several park employees who have been certified as Range Safety Officers. After a few words of advice from Renner, McCarville was soon placing shots in the 10-ring and just outside it, leaving both student and teacher smiling.

"That was fun," he said.

McCarville was at the range with his dad, Steve, and friend, Ben Martin. Ben had shot before and has aspirations of hunting someday. Steve had hunted when he was growing up, but hadn't shot a rifle for 20 years or so. But after a few shots, he was already talking about coming back to the shooting range, and not just when they are staying at the park. He even talked of buying a .22 that he and his son can start shooting together. "We'll come back," he said.

Sparkling that kind of interest among the nearly one million Nebraskans who live within 40 miles of Platte River SP is exactly why the Outdoor Heritage Education Complex was built. And

there was plenty of interest in the range shown on Memorial Day weekend, the first time it was open to the general public. And just as it had for all the education events it hosted since work was completed in April, the range drew rave reviews from kids young and old, who used adjectives like fun, great, cool, awesome and "sweet" to describe it.

THE NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION and others have launched a multitude of programs in recent years to introduce people to the shooting sports. Logistics, however, have often made it a challenge to include much shooting in those programs, and participants often lack a place to refine their skills once class is dismissed.

That hurdle has now been lowered thanks to the Outdoor Heritage Education Complex, which features indoor air-rifle and outdoor small-bore firearm and archery ranges. By fall it will also include a shotgun range, making the complex a showcase classroom for Commission educators and volunteers eager to pass their knowledge on to the next generation of hunters and shooters.

The complex hosted hundreds of people the first day it opened in April, when fourth- and fifth-grade students from across eastern Nebraska were at the park for an Outdoor Discovery Program. Hunter Education classes, Beyond BOW, First Shots and Becoming an Outdoors Family workshops have since been held at the complex, and many more are scheduled throughout the year.

The complex offers something for shooters of nearly every age, starting with its indoor, 10-meter air-gun range, which has several unique features.

There are five shooting stations for each of its two sections: One side is designed for plinking and features interactive targets, the other is used for target shooting, with custom, automated target holders designed by Commission operations and engineering staff that can be adjusted to the proper height for standing, seated and prone shooting positions.

On both sides of the air-gun range,

four of the shooting benches are shelves that can be adjusted to match the height of the shooter. A fifth bench is wheelchair-accessible and electronically adjustable for height. Ballistic curtains are hung from the wall and ceiling to stop pellets rather than using a pellet trap. Garage doors will provide ventilation during the summer, but during the winter a ventilation system will filter from the

air the small amount of lead that is emitted by the pellet guns.

Commission staff worked with the Crossman company, a world leader in air-gun manufacturing, to design a system that allows the Crossman 1077 air rifles to be hooked up to a central CO2 tank instead of individual cartridges.

"It's really slick. All you do is load them with pellets and pull the trigger.

It's very easy and very safe," said Jeff Rawlinson, head of the Commission's Outdoor Education programs. "The indoor air-gun range is probably one of the nicest in the Midwest.

Safety was also paramount in the design of the 60-yard small-bore and archery ranges. Forty-foot-high earthen berms provide a backstop on both ranges and also sit on either side of and between them. Range design



Kevin McCarville of Omaha smiles after hitting a bulls-eye with help from Ron Renner, a range safety officer at the Outdoor Heritage Education Complex at Platte River State Park on Memorial Day weekend.

standards only call for 20-foot-high backstops, with 8- to 10-foot-high berms on the sides.

On the 10-bench small-bore range, baffles create a “no blue sky” situation that makes it virtually impossible to fire a bullet out of the range from the shooting benches. To escape the range, any errant bullet would have to penetrate three inches of wood backed by two layers of kevlar-reinforced rubber belting. In testing, the design stopped both .30-06 rifle and .44 magnum pistol loads at near point-blank range, performing as well as other common designs made with gravel and metal, but at a fraction of the cost. The instruction and supervision at the range provided by Commission staff at all times, with emphasis on safe firearm handling, will in itself reduce the likelihood of an errant shot even hitting the baffles.

In addition, the height of the berms, baffles and trees left standing behind the range will all buffer sound, helping to keep the park quiet.

A unique aspect of the archery range, which has room for 14 shooters on the line, is its enclosed, 16-foot-tall shooting tower. “You’re going to be able to

shoot those angles to the ground at 15, 20, 30 or 40 yards and be able to see what your equipment can do just as if you were hunting from a tree stand,” said Rawlinson. “It’s going to be a lot of fun for a lot of archers.”

Both the archery and small-bore target stands are built on skids, allowing them to be easily set at the appropriate range for the desired audience. Small-bore targets can be set on pads at 10, 25 and 50 yards, and archery targets can be set at any range from seven yards for beginning youth programs to 60 yards for experts. The range also has 3-D archery targets.

A 5-station, single trap shotgun range is under construction and expected to be completed by fall.

While it is still being finalized, the schedule at the range will be set so some days and times are reserved for education programming and some for open public shooting. A nominal fee will be charged to use the range. That will include use of bows, .22 rifles, airguns and shotguns (when that range opens), as well as any ammunition needed. While there may be opportunities to do so in the future, individuals are not allowed to bring

their own firearms to the range, except during education programs where it is an option.

While the firearm range is fully capable of handling muzzleloading and high-powered rifles and handguns, the use of those weapons there will be limited to special educational programming only and not to open shooting.

“We’re just going to start small and move our way up,” said Christy Christiansen, the outdoor education specialist with the Commission who will be conducting many of the programs at the center.

The shooting complex addresses several needs identified in the Commissions’ Recruitment Development and Retention (RDR) plan, including the fact that more public shooting ranges and more educational programs are needed. Completed in 2008, the RDR plan will guide the Commission’s efforts to attract and retain hunters and anglers for the next 20 years. With participation in both sports slipping in recent years, doing so is vital to the mission of the Commission, because permit fees and excise taxes paid by hunters and



Sterling Reeves of Louisville shoots from the 16-foot-tall tower at the complex’s archery range.



Rod Badberg of Lincoln watches as his grandson, Taylor, of Damiansville, Illinois, shoot a pellet rifle in the indoor air-rifle range.

anglers fund the majority of fish and wildlife conservation work done in Nebraska and throughout the nation.

The shooting range is but one aspect of a grander plan in place to make outdoor education a centerpiece of Platte River SP. Planning is underway for angler access and aquatic habitat improvements at Jenny Newman Lake that will benefit both fish and anglers. Plans are also being developed to build a canoe launch on Decker Creek that will allow people to make a short paddle down the creek, under the Burlington Northern Railroad tracks and into the Platte River and then head downstream to the Commission’s boat launch at the Highway 50 bridge north of Louisville or, if the river channel shifts, at Louisville State Recreation Area on the river’s south bank. Like the range, these improvements will benefit both park visitors and individuals participating in education programs. The \$162,000 shooting range and the work to come was made possible by an anonymous donation to the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation.

Jim Swenson, east regional parks

manager with the Commission, said the education complex is the logical next step to follow programs like Ponca State Park’s Missouri River Outdoor Expo, the Outdoor Discovery Program held in three locations across the state, Becoming an Outdoors Woman, and others that introduce people to outdoor skills. “When they get a taste for it, they want to do it more, but there are really not a lot of places for them to go,” Swenson said. “So developing shooting ranges is the next step in the program. Now they’ve got an area where they can actually go and practice those talents and develop those skills, which will hopefully lead them to the outdoors to be permit buyers and successful hunters and fishermen.”

That very well may happen with the McCarvilles. For others with a hunting background, its another activity to take in while visiting the park. “It’s a nice safe shooting environment, so you can’t beat that,” said Kris Phillips of Palmyra, who visited the range with his wife and three sons while staying at the park Memorial Weekend.

“Yea, this is fun,” said Lisa Phillips. ■

Outdoor Heritage Education Complex

For hours of operation:

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Earn-A-Buck Expands

Deer regulations continue to target antlerless whitetails.

By Eric Fowler

A trial run at Earn-A-Buck regulations in the Elkhorn and Wahoo management units in eastern Nebraska went so well in 2010 that it is being expanded to the Blue Northwest, Blue Southeast and Missouri units this year.

That change is one of a handful of new deer regulations approved by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in May, changes intended to increase harvest pressure on antlerless whitetails in eastern Nebraska and throughout much of the state while protecting mule deer in some areas.

Earn-A-Buck requires hunters to check in an antlerless deer before they can check in a buck. Antlerless whitetail harvest more than doubled in both the Elkhorn and Wahoo units during the November firearm season last year, and harvest was up 3,600 in these units combined in all seasons.

"These numbers are on track to do what we are trying to do, which is

reduce those herds," said Kit Hams, big game program manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Hams said in order to reach the Commission's goal of reducing whitetail numbers by 25 percent in eastern Nebraska, total antlerless harvest in the five units where Earn-A-Buck will be in place this year will need to increase from the combined 23,000 taken last year and remain high for about three years.

"In order to respond to landowner desires to have less deer in the east, we need to kill a lot more deer," Hams said. "That's our target, and then we'll see if we're getting complaints from large numbers of hunters and landowners about the lack of deer, but we need to take that first step. We think maybe we can accomplish what our goals are in three years and then we'll put Earn-A-Buck back on the shelf."

Earn-A-Buck, an expanded October Antlerless Season and other changes last year, helped boost statewide whitetail antlerless harvest above buck harvest, which itself was a new record. Total deer harvest and permit sales were also records.

Mule deer buck harvest was down last year, but that was partly by design following the creation of the Mule Deer Conservation Area (MDCA) that includes the Buffalo, Frenchman, Platte and Republican units in southwestern Nebraska. It could have been lower if not for the number of mule deer bucks harvested on Youth Deer Permits in the MDCA. That unforeseen consequence of a price cut on youth permits led to a new restriction that limits all hunters to one permit that allows them to harvest a mule deer. In order to continue to allow youths to purchase two discounted permits, the commission created a Youth Whitetail Permit.

In another move to improve mule deer populations, antlerless mule deer will now be protected on the more than 180,000 acres of heavily hunted state

Major Changes for 2011 Deer Seasons

- Earn-A-Buck requirements expanded to include Blue Southeast, Blue Northwest and Missouri firearm units.
- Hunters limited to one permit that allows them to harvest a buck in the four management units that make up the Mule Deer Conservation Area. This includes Youth Deer Permits, and led to the addition of a Youth Whitetail Permit to allow young hunters to purchase a second permit.
- The harvest of antlerless mule deer is now prohibited on all state- and federally-owned lands in the Pine Ridge Management Unit.

and federal land in the Pine Ridge Unit, expanding protection that has been in place since 2008 at Fort Robinson and surrounding wildlife management areas. While mule deer numbers are stable throughout much of the region, "There's room for a lot more [mule] deer there," Hams said. "The whitetail are holding up pretty well, but in our opinion, we think mule deer numbers could be higher."

Antlerless mule deer harvest has been prohibited in several central Nebraska management units for 15 years or more. "In some years it helps, and some years it doesn't," Hams said. "It depends on weather, disease and predation issues whether the herds are going to increase. But we've got more mule deer in the Keya Paha Unit than we've ever had. It should be effective in the Pine Ridge."

Deer permits in all but the Republican Mule Deer, Republican Whitetail and DeSoto December units, which were issued during a June drawing, go on sale at 1 p.m. CST July 11 and are available to both residents and nonresidents on a first-come, first-served basis. Permits can be purchased from any Commission office, from select permit agents and online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org. ■



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Pressure will continue to be applied to the antlerless white-tailed deer population in order to reduce the whitetail population to more manageable levels.

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Farm Bill Wildlife Biologists

These biologists are available through a partnership with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and the Natural Resources Conservation Service and offer landowners one-stop-shopping for technical assistance on the available conservation programs and incentives in the state. Landowners may contact them for site visits and program enrollment options.

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Deer's Ears

Frostbite, ticks, barbed-wire – it's tough to be an ear.

By Eric Fowler

At first sight, I nicknamed her Droopy. The mule deer doe was standing in a CRP field north of Keystone, her big, namesake ears flopped over about mid-way up, giving her a cartoon-like look. Chuckling to myself, I snapped a few photos before she bounded off into the tall grass. A few years later, I saw another mulie doe missing the top half of her ears. And then another. Which got me to thinking: It must tough to be a deer's ear. And what, exactly, had happened to make those ears look the way they did?

Frostbite, said Alan Doster and his colleagues at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Veterinary Medicine. "We see all kinds of weird things," said Doster. "We see it in calves. I think we've seen it in cats, too. So it's not unusual."

But a quick poll of eight long-time wildlife biologists with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission revealed that damaged ears are certainly more common in mule deer. Of the eight, only Todd Nordeen of Alliance had seen the malady in whitetails, and he'd also seen it in bighorn sheep. Most of the biologists had seen mule deer with cropped ears, and Ben Rutten of Bassett even went so far to say that it's worse in the Mullen area than other

parts of his district.

Considering the type of habitat where each species lives, it makes sense that frostbite would be more common in mule deer. Whitetails typically bed in thick cover, where they are mostly protected from cold, winter winds. Mule deer, on the other hand, are more apt to bed in the open, usually on the downwind side of a hill, and sometimes with a rock or soapweed at their back. This helps keep the wind off their bodies, but not necessarily their ears, which are ever erect and alert for approaching danger.

Doster said in extreme cold, mammals will conserve heat in their body core by sending less blood to the ears and other extremities. That makes ears, with thin tissue and little hair to protect them, susceptible to frostbite.

"I don't know about you, but I can't wear just a cap when it gets cold – I've got to wear a stocking cap, or my ears just really, really burn," said Doster.

Those big, oversized ears of mule deer are susceptible to other damage, too, as are a whitetail's. Biologists across the state have seen deer with tears in their ears, likely from barbed wire, sticks or some other sharp object. They have also seen bucks with ears damaged in breeding-season battles. Tom Welstead in Norfolk has even seen



A mule deer's big ears are vulnerable to a variety of issues, including frost-bite, which can cause part of their ears to flop over (above) or fall off (below), and tearing by barbed-wire fences or bushes. (bottom left).

holes in deer's ears that he suspects were made by errant rifle shots.

It's a tough life that deer lead, living in the heat and cold, rain and snow, not to mention insects and parasites (I've seen deer grossly infested with ticks). But as hard as it must be to be a deer, just be glad you're not a deer's ear. ■



PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

Monitoring Flathead Catfish

Study intended to reveal more about this top-tier predator.

By Jordan Katt, Fisheries Biologist

Fisheries biologists with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission are currently conducting a study to assess the flathead catfish population in Branched Oak Reservoir near Raymond. The study is designed to gather such information as population numbers, size and age structure, growth rates, annual mortality and recruitment of flathead catfish in the reservoir.

Flathead catfish at Branched Oak are being sampled weekly this summer from June to September at several sampling locations throughout the lake. These sampling locations include several different habitat types, such as rock riprap found on the dam and jetties, the A-jack structures located throughout the lake, and flooded timber. The flatheads are collected using an electrofishing boat. By adjusting the controls so that a low-amperage, pulsed DC current is emitted, biologists can target flathead catfish specifically and avoid affecting other fish. The electrical current temporarily disorients nearby flathead catfish and brings them to the surface, where they can be captured by netters on the front of the boat.

Each flathead catfish that the biologists collect is measured and weighed. In addition, a pectoral spine is removed from a few catfish of varying lengths. This spine is later examined under a microscope to determine how old the fish is and estimate how fast it is growing. A tag with a unique identification number is then attached to each fish below the dorsal spine, and the flathead is released near where it was captured.

Anglers that catch any of these tagged catfish at Branched Oak should leave the tag in the fish and report their catch to the Commission's fisheries division. Note the tag number, general location of capture and, if possible, the length and weight of the fish. Anglers that provide their name and mailing address will receive a copy of any



Using a low-amperage, pulsed DC current that specifically targets flathead catfish, biologists in an electrofishing boat cruise Branched Oak Reservoir last fall.



After weighing and measuring one of the flathead catfish that were caught, fisheries biologists Larry Pape (right) and Jordan Katt attach a tag to its back before releasing it.

information biologists have about that particular fish. Anglers also need to remember that current regulations require catch-and-release-only fishing for flatheads at Branched Oak, so all information should be gathered as quickly as possible so that fish can be released unharmed back into the reservoir.

Biologists tagged 264 flathead catfish of all sizes in Branched Oak in 2010, from as little as six inches long and weighing only an ounce to as large as

48 inches and weighing 50 lbs. The largest numbers of flathead catfish have been found around the jetties, A-jack structures and along the dam. Several of the larger flatheads have been found in the flooded willows near the shorelines throughout the reservoir.

If you would like more information about the study currently underway at Branched Oak or would like to report the capture of a tagged flathead catfish, call (402) 471-7651, or e-mail Jordan.katt@nebraska.gov. ■



PHOTOS BY DOUG CARROLL

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◀ My father, Dan Seibold, grew up trapping and hunting on our farm west of Papillion. The pelts displayed later contributed to his University of Nebraska student expenses. In this photo from about 1917. He is holding his Stevens XL44 single barrel shotgun. "Shep" is on faithful duty, but the cat shows its disdain.

– Danny Seibold, Papillion, Nebraska

▶ This photo was taken in 1928 in the Pleasant Dale/Crete area. Left to right are: Joseph E. Hejl; Ermine Klima; Josef Hejl, father of Joseph E.; and Steve Klima, father of Ermine.

Josef J. Hejl immigrated with his family to America in 1903 from Moravia, Austria.

He is the grandfather of Ernest and Francis Hejl, who reside in Denton.

– Francis Hejl, Denton, Nebraska



◀ Fishing on the South Platte River four miles west of Big Springs, Nebraska about 1914.

From left: Alyce Wostenberg, Agnes Wostenberg Sattler, Herbert Sattler, Christian Wostenberg, and wife Wilhelmina (Minnie) Wostenberg.

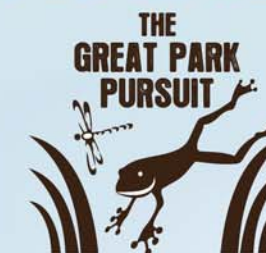
The automobile is a 1912 EMF [Studebaker] which was driven from Omaha to Venango in 1914 by William (Bill) Wostenberg.

– Ward Sattler, Stony River, Alaska

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