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Cover: Red is one of those colors that instantly catches your eye in the wild — like with this plains milk snake *(Lampropeltis triangulum)* — and it rarely shows up by accident. See story on page 42.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

This page: Sunflowers grow on sandbars along the Platte River in Hall County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland magazine

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Once endangered due to harmful effects from the pesticide DDT, peregrine falcons were removed from the U.S. Endangered Species List in 1999 after major recovery efforts. Today in Nebraska, they nest on cliffs and buildings, the most famous of which is the Nebraska State Capitol.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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In addition, statewide habitat programs and cost share assistance through your local chapter might be available. For more information and access to these options, visit our website at:

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Boreal Chorus Frog ... and Mosquito



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Sunset on the Plains



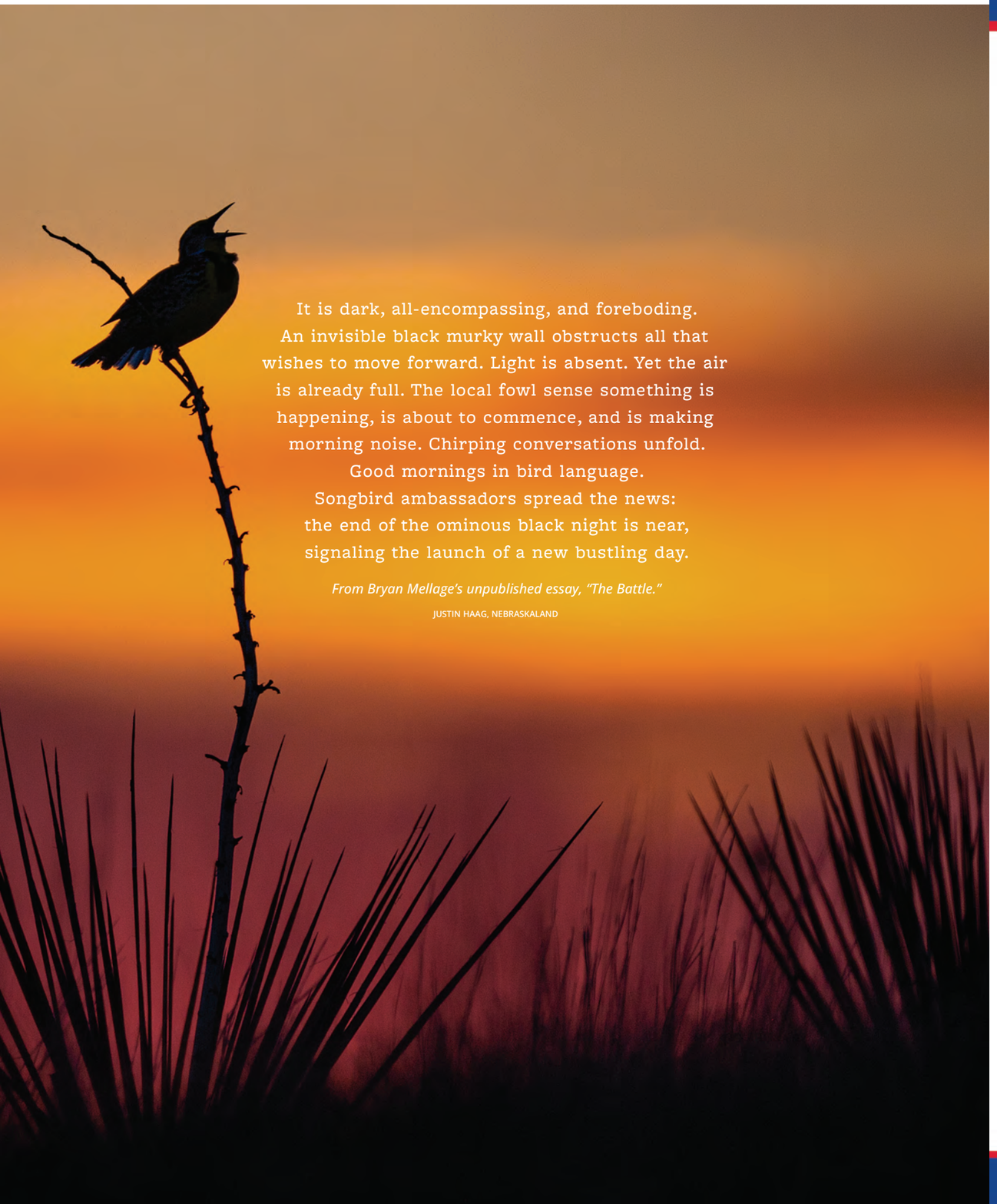
Jane Murray, Tilden
Great Horned Owl with Dinner



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Baird's Sandpiper

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Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited. Photographs are also welcome.



It is dark, all-encompassing, and foreboding.
An invisible black murky wall obstructs all that
wishes to move forward. Light is absent. Yet the air
is already full. The local fowl sense something is
happening, is about to commence, and is making
morning noise. Chirping conversations unfold.
Good mornings in bird language.
Songbird ambassadors spread the news:
the end of the ominous black night is near,
signaling the launch of a new bustling day.

From Bryan Mellage's unpublished essay, "The Battle."

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In the Field

Reasons to install trail cameras are numerous, including catching never-before-seen scenes on your land — like a common snapping turtle following a game trail between a sandpit and the south channel of the Platte River in Hall County.

See story on page 14.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Captured on Camera

By John Laux

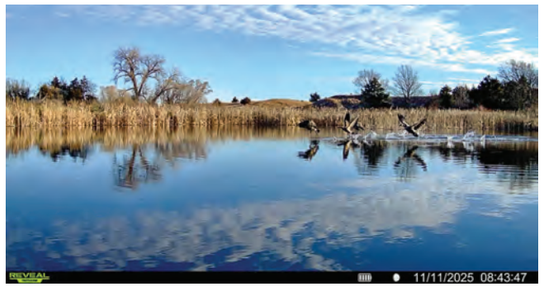
With the help of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pheasants Forever and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, my family and I completed a wetland restoration project on our property in Brown County.

In 2024, we installed a water-control structure and repaired the levees around our ponds, removed invasive trees and excavated sediment deposited in our slough channels along Plum Creek to enhance the habitat for migratory birds, native fish and other wildlife.

We were excited to see how wildlife would respond, but living several hours away created obvious challenges. My kids and I decided to set up a trail camera on one of the wetlands to keep tabs on the activity from home.

First and foremost, the camera has been a great scouting tool for waterfowl hunting, but the variety of wildlife using our property has been absolutely amazing. Plus, it's another outdoor activity to do with my kids.

Submit your trail cam photos to jeff.kurrus@nebraska.gov to be featured in a future edition of Nebraskaland Magazine.



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Raising Nature-Confident Kids

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist

If you've ever taken a kid outside and heard "it's too hot," "there's a bug on me" or "can we go back inside?", you're not alone. In Nebraska, we have so much open space to explore, but that doesn't automatically mean kids, or even adults, feel comfortable in it. That comfort must be built slowly and intentionally.

Nature confidence doesn't start with a perfect hike or some magical, screen-free moment. It usually starts small, and it can be a little messy.

Let Them Be New at It

A lot of kids aren't used to being outside for long stretches of time, and that's OK. The first few times you go out, don't expect much. Go somewhere easily accessible, like a local park, where the trails are simple and there's plenty to see without having to "work" for it. And then, let kids lead.

If a child wants to crouch down and study a beetle for 15 minutes, that's not wasted time — that is the activity. That's how confidence begins: Feeling safe to be curious instead of rushed.

I remember one hike with my daughter when she was still in a stroller. We planned to reach the top of a beautiful trail for the view, but we spent nearly two hours covering about 1,000 feet — and eventually had to turn back. Still, she talks about that hike all the time, because she got to look at the leaves, climb a tree and search for snails. Those moments built her confidence, even though it was frustrating for me at the time to adjust our plans. In the end, it was completely worth it.

The Truth About Bugs, Mud and Wind

Nebraska is not always gentle. It's windy, it's buggy, and there are mosquitoes — sometimes all at once. If you wait for the perfect day to go outside, you never will.

It's tempting to try to make everything comfortable so kids don't complain, but that usually backfires. Instead, be real about it.

"Yeah, it's windy today. That's kind of what the prairie does." Or say, "The mosquitoes are annoying, but we can handle it."

That honesty sets a different tone — it shows kids that a little discomfort isn't something to avoid. It's just part of the experience.



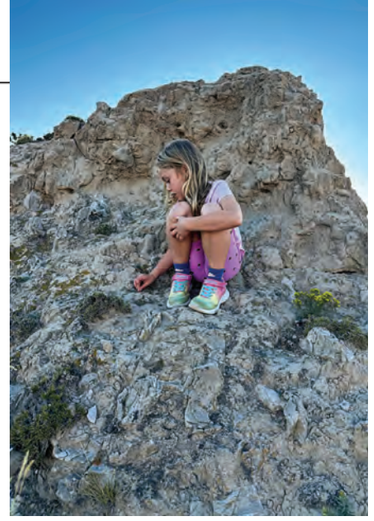
Third-graders at Rushville Elementary School participate in a field trip for the Trout in the Classroom program. JUSTIN HAAG , NEBRASKALAND

And when kids start to see that discomfort isn't a dealbreaker, something shifts. They begin to realize they can handle more than they thought, and that not everything has to be perfect to be enjoyable. A visit near the Platte River to see the crane migration is a perfect example: It's chilly, a little muddy, maybe not the most comfortable, but still unforgettable.

Those are often the moments that stick the most.

Teach Them to Feel Capable

You don't need to turn every outing into a lesson, but a little knowledge goes a long way. Show them what poison ivy looks like. Point out animal tracks. Talk about why certain animals and plants are found and grow where they do.



The author's daughter explores a rocky hill she climbed. MONICA MACOUBRIE



Families at a Homeschool Hike at Schramm Park State Recreation Area. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Places like Nebraska state parks or local nature areas make this easy because there's already so much to notice. The goal isn't to make them experts, it's to help them feel like they understand what's around them. That's what replaces fear with confidence.

My daughter has been going outside with me since the first week she was born and, seven years later, I can see how nature confident she's become. She picks up snakes on trails, avoids plants she doesn't know, and understands her limits when climbing trees. She still looks to me for advice on some things, but at this point, I'm more of a guide than a protector. Watching her explore, problem-solve and take careful risks on her own is one of the most rewarding parts of being a parent — and it all started with simply stepping outside together.

Give Them Freedom (Even If It Makes You Nervous)

It's hard not to hover, especially when you know all the things that could go wrong. But confidence doesn't come from everything going perfectly. It comes from trying, adjusting and realizing, "I can handle this."

Let them climb the slightly-too-high rock, even if it takes a few tries to find the right foothold. Let them figure out how to cross a shallow stream, testing which rocks are steady and which ones wobble. Let them wander a little ahead on the trail (within reason), so they can feel what it's like to lead instead of follow.

Those small moments of independence matter. They're where problem-solving starts to click. Where balance improves. Where decision-making begins to feel natural instead of scary. And yes, sometimes it means scraped knees, wet socks or taking longer than you planned. But it also means raising kids who trust themselves — who aren't afraid to explore, try again and keep going, even when something feels just a little bit hard.

You Don't Need All the Answers

One of the best things you can do is admit when you don't know something.

"What kind of bird is that?" "I'm not sure, what do you notice about it?"

That back and forth builds more curiosity than having a perfect answer. It shows kids that not knowing isn't a dead end — it's a starting point. And it gives them permission to wonder out loud, make guesses and even be wrong without feeling shut down.

It also changes your role. You're no longer the one leading with all the answers. Instead, you're exploring together. And that shared discovery is often what is most memorable and meaningful for both of you.

Make the Outdoors a Part of Your Life, Not a Big Event

The biggest shift happens when being outside isn't a big "special trip." It's just something you do. A quick walk after dinner. Ten minutes in the yard. A weekend stop somewhere familiar.

In Nebraska, the landscape changes constantly. Go to the same spot in spring, summer, fall and winter, and it will be completely different every time. Kids start to notice those changes, and that's when they really begin to connect.

Why This Is All Worth It

When kids feel comfortable outside, everything changes. They're more willing to explore, they become more observant and just more confident in general. And maybe most importantly, they start to care about the animals, the land, the seasons — everything that makes Nebraska what it is.

You're not just raising kids who can handle the outdoors. You're raising kids who feel like they belong in it. They learn that the outdoors isn't something to avoid — it's something to be a part of.

Catfish, Greens and Cheesy Grits

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Freshly caught catfish is a summer treat. Coat it in cornmeal to fry and then add tender greens and creamy grits on the side, and that's a great meal.

I can never make collard greens and grits as well as Southern cooks. A trip down to Savannah, Georgia, last fall taught me that — who knew grits can taste so transcendent. I also realized how difficult it was to find quality stone-ground grits at grocery stores near me, where the only options are typically Quaker Oats. So, I used Quaker Oat's Quick 5-Minute Grits when writing this recipe.

I recently found delicious dried hominy grits from the Miller Dohrmann Farm in Omaha. If you go this route, adjust the cooking time and method accordingly.

Bacon, not traditional ham hocks, are in my collard greens recipe. Perhaps it's sacrilege. But it's also a lot less fussy than simmering ham hocks for a long time.

Servings: 4
Prep/Cooking Time: 1 hour and 15 minutes
Ingredients
- 4 catfish fillets
- 1 10 oz. of Louisiana Fish Fry Breading
- 1 pint of buttermilk
- Frying oil
- Hot sauce
- Lemon wedges

Collard Greens
- 2 large bunches of collard greens
- 1 onion, chopped
- 4 slices of thick-cut bacon, chopped
- 1 tbsp. of olive oil
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced
- ¼ tsp. crushed red pepper flakes
- 2 cups of chicken stock
- ¼ tsp. white sugar, plus extra
- 1 tsp. white wine vinegar
- Salt

Cheesy Grits
- 1 cup of 5-minute quick grits
- 4 cups of water
- Shredded cheddar cheese, to taste
- Salt

1. Pull stems off collard greens and triple rinse leaves to remove dirt and grit. Roughly chop the leaves. Allow to drip dry in a colander.

2. Trim off dark or red areas on catfish fillets. Place fish in a zip-close bag and submerge with buttermilk. Keep cold in the refrigerator.

3. To make the collard greens: In a large, deep skillet or medium pot, add chopped onion and bacon and cook over medium to medium-low heat until translucent and rendered, stirring frequently. Then add garlic and pepper flakes and sauté for 30 seconds. Add chopped collard greens to the pot. If your pot or skillet isn't big enough, add the greens in stages as they wilt, and increase heat as needed. Add chicken stock, cover and simmer for 45 minutes to 1 hour until tender, stirring occasionally. Finally, stir in sugar and vinegar to help counter the bitterness of the greens — add more sugar if needed. Season with salt. Keep warm.

4. To make grits: Boil 4 cups of water in a saucepan. Gradually stir in grits and simmer until tender, stirring occasionally, about 5 minutes. Take off heat and stir in cheese to melt. Season to taste with salt. Keep warm. If needed, reheat on low with a splash of water to loosen grits.

5. Heat frying oil to 350°-375° Fahrenheit. Rinse off buttermilk from the catfish and coat with the fish fry breading. When the oil reaches temperature, fry breaded fish until golden and crispy on both sides. Serve catfish immediately with collard greens, grits, hot sauce and lemon wedges.



WILDFLOWERS TAKE ROOT IN NEBRASKALAND

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Although Nebraska is home to a diversity of wildflowers, it took nearly half a century for them to take center stage in Nebraskaland.

BACKGROUND FLOWER ILLUSTRATIONS
BY MICHELE ANGLE FARRAR

In 1926, when Outdoor Nebraska was first published, conservation in Nebraska and across the United States was still in its infancy. Following the Homestead Act of 1862, settlement of the state began in earnest, and in the decades that followed, game and fish were overharvested while their habitats were degraded by the plowing of prairies, cutting of woodlands and draining of wetlands. Many people depended on deer, elk, pronghorn, waterfowl, grouse and fish for food, and for some hunting and fishing was a form of recreation. As these wild animals declined, Nebraskans took notice and pushed for protection. Outdoor Nebraska reflected both public interest and the mission of the then-called Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission, and most of its content was devoted to game and fish.

At the time, nongame creatures — including wildflowers — drew little attention, receiving only a few sentences in the magazine. As their decline continued and ecological awareness grew, people began to take notice. As Outdoor Nebraska transitioned to Nebraskaland in the mid-20th century, those brief mentions gradually grew into beautifully illustrated feature articles.

A Drought of Wildflowers

For wildflower and other nongame enthusiasts, early issues of Outdoor Nebraska would have been a dull read. It was a sportsman's magazine, plain and simple. A 1927 issue, for instance, contained articles on new game and fish laws, pheasant stocking, muskrat farming and game fish propagation. Plants barely registered. People gave little thought to native plants, which were also in decline and in need of conservation. When plants were mentioned, it was almost always for their value as food or cover for waterfowl, deer, quail and other game.

Case in point: The 1944 article "Nebraska's Deer" discussed deer diet in the Sandhills and referenced several wildflowers. "The palatable shrubs [in summer] are redroot, sand cherry, choke cherry, sandhill willow, buckbrush and rose. ... Soapweed and prickly pear cactus are eaten during the winter months when other green feed is scarce." In another passage, the word "wildflower" appeared for the only time that decade in the magazine. Change, however, was on the horizon.

A woman's perspective brought the first wildflower articles to Outdoor Nebraska. In 1959 and 1961, associate editor Mary Brashier wrote two short pieces: "Flowering Fun," illustrated with line drawings, and "Prairie a Bloom," illustrated with small black-and-white photos. The former was a natural history piece; the latter encouraged travelers to enjoy the state's "varied" wildflowers: "The gay palette of colors along the road are as much a part of your Nebraska vacation as the first deer or strange bird sighted."

Shortly after, Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" drew attention to the dangers of pesticides, and in 1970, the first Earth Day brought national attention to environmental issues. Nebraskans were becoming more aware of the decline of nongame species, including plants and their habitats. The magazine followed suit, and by the early 1970s, after it had become Nebraskaland, wildflowers were finally taking root in its pages.



FLOWERING FUN

Indians once used many native plants as food. These same flowers abound in the wild today, for you to appreciate

by Mary Brashier

WHEN fishing pails and the shotgun is all ready for fall hunting, you could very well spend a Sunday afternoon taking a stroll through your favorite woods and pastures. Your purpose would be the visiting of Nebraska's most popular spring and early summer flowers. The wet spring has nurtured them gently, and the state has blossomed with color. Where you live in the state depends on what flowers are now in bloom. Look for them first in the Missouri River area, several weeks later in the northwestern part.

You might want to take a trowel along to bring back the more hardy varieties for planting in your rock garden or in that bare spot near the house. If you do transplant, plan to take plenty of the soil around the plant to insure bringing back a good root system. But if you don't have a green thumb, better leave the wild flowers in their natural home. Most of them have particular appetites, and will wither if planted in unfavorable surroundings. A humus-loving jack-in-the-pulpit will not survive a hot, sunny location, nor will a **Penstemon** from sandy soil thrive in a shaded spot. Furthermore, some of our wild plants are toxic or poisonous to many people, or have other undesirable characteristics.

The columbine, **Aquilegia canadensis**, with its scarlet trumpets, is one of the best known of our woodland flowers. A member of the buttercup or crowfoot family, it is likely found in rocky woods, ravine slopes, or the crevices of cliffs. You can identify columbine, also known as rockbells, readily by its scarlet and yellow flowers, the tubular petals of which extend back into long, hollow spurs or horns. These spurs contain a honey gland. Only hummingbirds and long-tongued butterflies can reach up into them to suck out the nectar, but bumblebees sometimes short-cut by biting through the petal and opening the glands.

Numerous stamens, the male part of the flower, hang out of the flower like clappers on a tiny bell. The stems are one to three feet high, and are very slender. The leaves are finely divided into thin leaflets, and the plant grows from a perennial root. Rarely salmon-pink or white columbines are found.

The name columbine comes from a word meaning dove. Long ago people fancied a resemblance between the spurred flowers and four doves around a shallow drinking dish. The scientific name **Aquilegia** pertains to the talons of eagles, also suggested by the nectar-spurs.

Mr. Gibbs, an explorer of 1833, wrote that the roots are edible, and were eaten by Indians. However, since the columbine has some rather dangerous relatives, you better leave it alone.

To enjoy the exquisite and airy beauty of the columbine you must seek it in its own haunts, for it will not submit to ruthless transplanting.

On a valley floor and moist slopes of open woods and thickets you may find Solomon's seal, a member of the genus **Polygonatum.** The generic name comes from the Greek, meaning many and knee, referring to the many joints of the rootstock of this perennial plant. The common name stems from the shape of the scar left by each year's stalk on the rootstock. These thick underground rootstocks are said to have been used as emergency food by Indians and early white settlers.

This plant is conspicuous because of its broad and waxy foliage. The flowers are attractive, though not colorful. The plant is a member of the lily family and has the characteristic long, somewhat oval, pointed leaves with the prominent parallel veins. The leaves are attached nearly opposite one another on the arching stem.

The flowers appear in clusters of one to two flowers, and hang as pendants from the junctions of the leaves and

stem. Their color is commonly greenish, and their long tubular base gives the appearance of being in bud even when the flower is mature. By midsummer the flowers have formed dark-blue berries.

False Solomon's seal, **Smilacina stellata,** is found in the same habitat as Solomon's seal. It is called false because its leaves closely resemble those of the Solomon's seal. It has the same alternate leaves, which are three to six inches long, and its stem zigzags in the same characteristic manner. Under ideal growing conditions the stem may reach three feet. Its berries turn red in the autumn and stand out prominently in the thinning foliage of the woodland.

The deciding character between the two plants is the terminal spike of false Solomon's seal. The greenish-white flowers appear at the tip of the leafy stem as a waxy and fragrant cluster. The flowers generally appear from May to July. These plants are closely related to each other and to your garden lily-of-the-valley.

Yucca, the most common species of which is **Yucca glauca,** appears in an entirely different environment than the preceding flowers. You won't find this plant anywhere in your woods but in prairie pastures, and the hotter and sandier, the better. And you'll be lucky if you see this sharp-leaved plant produce its gorgeous panicles of creamy-white flowers. The unopened panicle is conspicuous for a long time, appearing much like an overgrown three-foot high stalk of asparagus.

The stem of yucca lies partially on the ground with its tip upturned sufficiently to support a crown of sword-like leaves which are rigid and sharp-tipped. The leaves are the reason for the name Spanish bayonet sometimes given to this group.

Owning to the structure of the flowers, the plant cannot fertilize itself and needs some outside agent to insure the production of seeds. Thus yucca is completely dependent upon the activities of a little, white, night-flying moth, the female Pronuba. In return she uses the plant for food for her offspring.

She flies from plant to plant, gathering the pollen, which she rolls up into a ball with her feet. When she has

In 1959, associate editor Mary Brashier wrote Nebraskaland's first wildflower feature, "Flowering Fun," helping set the stage for native plants to appear more prominently in the magazine.



Earlier bloomers are red-root in top tier; dock and blue penstemon in next; yucca and puccoon; legumes in bottom

PRAIRIE a BLOOM

by Mary Brashier

Better knowlege of roadside's gay palette of flora will add extra thrill to next outing

MORE PEOPLE than ever before will discover Nebraska's wild flowers this summer. More, because camping trailers and tents are springing up like weeds themselves at state parks and recreation areas. More, because the campers are families, and flowers and kids, being much of a size, are naturals for each other.

The mat of grass on which you pitch your tent, the gay palette of colors along the road are as much a part of your Nebraska vacation as the first deer or strange bird sighted. Knowing a few of the more common plants can add more color to your vacation, make it more enjoyable.

Ecologically, Nebraska is one of the most exciting states in the Union. Its great breadth intensifies the sweep of the seasons—the first spring beauties may be out in southeastern woods when northwestern yuccas are still drifted with snow. Its width and central location, too, allow eastern varieties to meet and mingle with more western species. The Sand Hills, river lowlands of the east, high plains of the west all have their characteristic flora.

Let's start with the flower acclaimed the showiest of them all, the Cardinal-flower.

It is that spark of flame on low moist soil on the southern and south-central parts of the state. The tall spires of velvety red flowers appear in August, and are the brilliance of a cardinal's robe. The individual flowers are long-tubed and two-lipped. As with other long-tubed flowers, the cardinal is adapted to pollination by hummingbirds.

Very closely related to the cardinal but with bright blue blossoms is the blue lobelia, found in low

Prairie rose (close-up above) is itch-trap right, for underneath is bed of poison ivy

prairies and meadows across the state. As the cardinal-flower, the blue lobelia flowers cluster on a spire which may be a foot or more in length. Each flower is about an inch long with a thick straight tube which is split into two lips, the upper of two lobes, the lower of three.

Blue is the favorite color of bees, just as red is preferred by hummingbirds. Thus, the blue flowers of this lobelia are especially adapted for pollination by bees in that the stamens, the pollen producers, are contained within the tube of the flower where they can deposit pollen on visiting bees crawling down to the flower's nectary. Red blossoms, like those of the cardinal-flower, often have their stamens hanging out from the flower to brush the head of the hummingbird. Stamens down in the tube of the flower wouldn't be very effective; the pollen wouldn't stick to the birds' smooth beaks.

Flowers early-summer vacationers will see include the filmy clusters of red-root, the patches of orange flame along the roadside that are dock; tall regal penstemons, and the lively yellow puccoon. Handsome purple early-summer blossoms are those of the legumes, members of the pea family and highly beneficial plants. Then, of course, there are the roses everybody knows, in all shades of pink.

The giant flower of the prairies is the blazingstar, in favorable localities shooting to six feet. Before it flowers, the blazingstar is an unattractive plant with hairy stems and rough leaves. The bluish-purple flowers are clustered in globular heads about one-half inch wide scattered along an open spike.

Remember, though, that flowers in state-owned areas such as recreation areas or state parks are the property of all Nebraskans.

A more densely-packed flower and consequently, more showy, is the tall gayfeather or prairie button-snakeroot, very closely related to the blazingstar. The gayfeather produces brilliant rose-colored or purple flowers in a tight spike which makes a handsome winter bouquet. The gayfeather blooms in August and September and is found mostly in eastern and central Nebraska.

Another plant which placed on the top 12 showy plants of the nation was butterflyweed, or pleurisy root. Fiery orange-red to deep red flowers are flaunted in large clusters on this member of the milkweeds. Look for it in dry open areas and along roadsides in eastern and central Nebraska. It transplants well to gardens.

Although the Sand Hills seems hardly the place to discover an orchid, you may run into two species of this aristocrat. Eastern Nebraska has another orchid, the much lovelier ladyslipper, but it blooms earlier in the spring in rich dank woods. What you will find in the Sand Hills are the prairie fringed-orchis and the lady's-tresses.

The prairie fringe-orchis is our state's common orchid, and is found in wet (continued on page 24)

Brashier's 1961 article, "Prairie a Bloom," reflected her knowledge of native plants and their habitats. The magazine would soon recruit additional staff with similar proficiency.

BACKGROUND FLOWER ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHELE ANGLE FARRAR

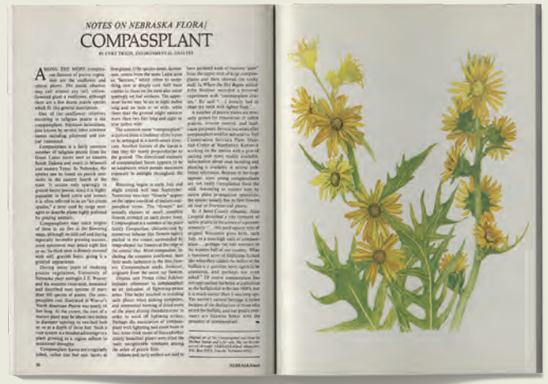

NOTES ON NEBRASKA FLORA . . .

BUTTERFLY WEED

by Jon Farrar

Pioneers called this flamboyant native pleurisy root, today it sets sleepy pastures afire with blossoms

From 1971 to 1989, “Notes on Nebraska Flora” appeared in Nebraskaland, alternating with the long-running “Fauna” series. BUD PRITCHARD


NOTES ON NEBRASKA FLORA/

COMPASSPLANT

After Pritchard’s retirement, Michele Angle Farrar’s colorful paintings became a hallmark of the series. MICHELE ANGLE FARRAR


NOTES ON NEBRASKA FLORA...

New England Aster

by Norbert Brut Lincoln

Named for the Greek word meaning star, these garden plants gone wild decorate woodland edges, waterways, and roadsides across state

Bud Pritchard’s detailed, lifelike paintings accompanied each “Flora” article until his retirement in 1974. BUD PRITCHARD


Jon Farrar’s lyrical text formed the basis of the “Flora” series, including the above article on blue-eyed grass. MICHELE ANGLE FARRAR

Digital cameras enable today’s photographers to capture wildflowers with extraordinary detail, such as prickly poppy (right) and wild senna (below right).


Scientific breakthroughs allow articles on subjects such as ghost plant, a chlorophyll-free plant with the bizarre ability to steal nutrients from soil fungi.


Pollinators, like this bumble bee, have become a popular topic in Nebraskaland.

BACKGROUND FLOWER ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHELE ANGLE FARRAR

Wildflowers Bloom

From 1971 to 1989, “Notes on Nebraska Flora” appeared in the magazine, alternating with the long-running “Fauna” series. These two-page articles, written by Commission staff, covered plants ranging from trees to wildflowers. Longtime illustrator Bud Pritchard’s detailed, lifelike paintings set a new standard for Nebraskaland artwork and filled a full page of each article. After Pritchard’s retirement in 1974, renowned Nebraska artist Michele Angle Farrar’s supple, colorful paintings, based on field observation, highlighted the series.

Her future husband, Jon Farrar, joined the magazine staff in 1970 and wrote for the Flora series. Trained as a wildlife biologist but with a strong passion for wildflowers, he devoured research papers and sometimes spent weeks in the field gathering photographs to accompany his precise, poetic prose.

His groundbreaking effort was the 1990, 98-page special issue “Nebraskaland Magazine — A Wildflower Year,” which he wrote and photographed. The issue took readers on a tour of Nebraska’s wildflower diversity, exploring species’ natural history and illustrating it with vibrant, naturally lit photographs. As he encouraged readers, “So pull on a pair of comfortable old walking shoes and stroll Nebraska’s four seasons: through the brown grass Before the Spring, into the Flower Fields of May, on to The Rush of Summer and The Race Against Frost — A Wildflower Year.”

In the same year, the Commission published Farrar’s “Field Guide to Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains.” His photographs — described as “works of art” by one reviewer — and detailed plant descriptions set the standard for plant field guides for years to come.

In the early 1990s, at a time when long features were more common, Nebraskaland published three unique 16-page lift-outs on rare plant communities: “Nebraska Saltmarshes: Last of the Least” (1991), “Sandhills Fens” (1992) and “Alkaline Wetlands of the North Platte River Valley” (1994). These lift-outs explored the threats to and conservation needs of native plant communities and their flora in new depth, as exemplified in “Sandhills Fens”: “Fens are among Nebraska’s unique natural features and contain some of the state’s rarest plants. ... [they] were thousands of years in the making ... and too valuable to lose in a century.”

Nebraskaland’s wildflower articles continue to evolve. Compared to decades past, today’s writers have greater scientific knowledge, the internet and digital cameras that capture plants in extraordinary detail. Early Outdoor Nebraska readers could not have imagined articles like my 2020 “Ghost Plant: A Thief in the Woods,” about a white, chlorophyll-free wildflower that survives by stealing nutrients from soil fungi, or Chris Helzer’s many pieces on the intricate relationships between native plants and insects.

From the short blurbs and line drawings of Outdoor Nebraska to the feature articles and vivid photographs in Nebraskaland, wildflower coverage has grown — and the story is far from finished.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Jeff Kurrus

Some of the longest days of the year happen this month, and there is plenty of time to fit in multiple outdoor activities during the daylight. Take advantage of those daytime opportunities, but don't forget Nebraska's starlit skies offer recreational opportunities, too.

The last week in July is prime for night fishing, culminating with a full moon on July 29.





No Telescope, No Problem

Visit this year's Nebraska Star Party at Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area July 12-17. Even if you don't own a telescope, there will be plenty of people who do, and they will be more than willing to share.

Family activities are highlighted by a beginner's field school that will teach you how to explore the night skies — even in your own backyard.

During the day, the beaches of Merritt Reservoir offer places to dip your toes in the water or bring your own boat. Lodging is also available. Find the complete schedule at NebraskaStarParty.org.

NICK SAUVAGEAU, NEBRASKALAND



From Visit to Vacation

Only 15 minutes away from my house is Mahoney State Park, which I visit often with friends and family. But it wasn't until I stayed there overnight that I truly experienced everything the park had to offer. I encourage you to do the same. Think of a place you usually spend your afternoons and camp there overnight. Or stay at a cabin. It's an entirely different experience when you don't have to rush back home before sunset.

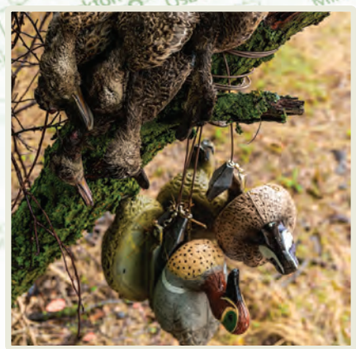
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Night Moves

You don't have to fish at night to catch fish during the summer, but it's certainly cooler. People often think fish stop eating during the summer, but they continue to consume even through the dog days. There is just so much to eat this time of year. While any night this month is a good time to fish, consider the week of July 27 when there's a full moon to make your transition into night fishing. The extra moonlight will be helpful.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Scout Now

Even though it's buggy in the woods and the wetlands, scout now. If you find a deer trail in the middle of the summer growth, get a trail camera on that path to preview what the archery season might look like. It's also time to start looking at public wetlands for teal hunting spots. Look for out-of-the-way locations that other hunters will likely miss. Areas that are holding water now stand a good chance to hold water on opening day.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Light Up the Lake

If you're looking for a family-friendly Fourth of July destination, take a trip to Johnson Lake on July 3 for a spectacular fireworks display put on by the Johnson Lake Area Chamber of Commerce. The show starts at 9:30 p.m., and while admission is free, all vehicles require a park permit. Plan ahead for camping and boating options.

If you're interested in shooting your own fireworks at a park, check OutdoorNebraska.gov for the latest information on permissible areas.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND













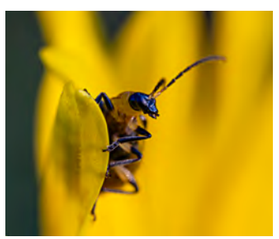












Within the square meter of prairie marked by these flags, the author found incredible beauty and diversity during his year-long project. He photographed more than 300 species and watched innumerable stories play out through the lens of his camera.

EXPLORING THE HIDDEN PRAIRIE

A Second Time

Story and photos by Chris Helzer

I spent much of 2018 staring into a small 1-by-1 meter plot of prairie in Aurora. My goal was to photograph everything I could find within a tiny area and show people how diverse and beautiful prairies can be. I was shocked by how well the idea resonated with the public, and even more surprised by how much of a passion project it became for me. I ended up writing a book, helping to design a museum exhibit, and even publishing an article in my favorite state wildlife agency magazine.

After 2018, though, I was done with that project. Whenever people asked if I was going to do it again, I was very clear that it had been a fantastic adventure, but I was looking for new ideas to explore. Then came the spring of 2024. Prairie Plains Resource Institute burned the little patch of prairie that included my square meter plot from 2018. Not long after the burn, I wandered past and decided it would be interesting to see if the remnants of my four corner flags were still there. I found them and replaced them with fresh flags, thinking maybe I'd stop by the plot a few times that year to see what had changed since 2018.



The author's plot was located in a skinny strip of prairie near the local animal shelter, a trailer park and the city waste site.

A little over a week later, I found myself lying on the ground, photographing dew drops on fresh grass blades in my old plot. A robin was hunting worms nearby, so I backed off a little, on the off chance it would work its way between those four flags. A few minutes later, the robin hopped right into the square and posed for a photo. I was well and firmly hooked. I spent the next 12 months swept back up in a joyous obsession. None of it felt repetitive. Every one of the 134 visits to my plot was a new adventure that yielded beauty, insights and inspiration.

I ended up photographing about 321 different species of plants, animals and fungi between May 5, 2024, and May 4, 2025. I'll probably never have an exact count because it is very difficult to identify some insect species from photographs. Regardless, it was a much higher number than the 113 species I photographed in 2018. I think the increase was partly because I visited more times (134 vs. 46) and partly because the prairie was recently burned this time, making it easier to see things on the ground. Most importantly, though, I think I saw more because my 2018 experience had taught me how to be a patient and keen observer. I started my 2024 project by building on what I learned in 2018.

This was not an inventory project, though. Photographing a lot of species was an important component, but the primary intent was to show people the diversity and beauty of prairies. As a result, the most crucial, and enjoyable, aspects of my second year with that plot were the many stories that played out in front of my eyes.

Within those four flags, I watched orb-weaver spiders spin webs and other spiders chase and catch prey without using webs at all. I followed ants as they patrolled sunflower stems looking for "extrafloral nectar" and photographed milkweed bugs and their kids sticking their long mouthparts into butterfly milkweed seeds. After all the gorgeous, fluffy milkweed seeds had popped out of their pods and floated away, I learned that open, empty milkweed pods close up after being soaked by an autumn rain — opening back up again as they dry. Who knew?

I held my breath as a male cobweb spider cautiously approached and mated with a female spider and then scurried quickly away to avoid becoming lunch. I congratulated predatory tiger flies and long-legged flies on successful hunts and later zoomed in on my photos of them to identify what they'd caught. After watching the wiggling "tails" of two spittle bugs encased in frothy bubbles and feeding on sunflower stem juice, I realized that a small brown bug I'd seen earlier might have been one of their parents.

In addition, I had a great time photographing glistening dew drops and framing wildflowers against morning light and once an evening rainbow. On one dark night, I waited for a full moon to rise above the distant trees so I could photograph it behind the empty seed heads of Maximilian sunflower. On another, I sat and waited for lightning bugs to flash their green lights at each other from within my plot and tried, moderately successfully, to capture a photo of them doing it.

When I wasn't at my plot, I found myself wondering what I was missing. Multiple times, I went home after an hour or so of photography and observation, only to return later in the day to see if a mushroom had wilted or if the first sunflower had opened. I scheduled meetings and appointments around weather forecasts, trying to make sure I'd have time to be at my plot when the light and wind were favorable for photos. Obsessed might not be a strong enough word.



Freeloader flies

One day in late June, I arrived to find a crab spider feeding on a captured honey bee. As I bent closer, though, I noticed those weren't the only two creatures involved in the story. A handful of small dark-colored flies were hanging around on the carcass of the bee. It wasn't immediately clear what they were up to, but some later research identified them as freeloader flies, also known as jackal flies.

Freeloader flies often show up to feed on prey caught and killed by predators like spiders, praying mantises and other invertebrate predators. They are most often seen on prey that release a strong chemical odor when attacked. Honey bees are a good example of that, often using airborne pheromones to warn their sisters of danger. Freeloader flies track down their food by following just that kind of olfactory signal.

Freeloader flies feed on the carcass of a honey bee captured by a crab spider.



A head-clipping weevil emerges from a girdled sunflower head, having just laid its eggs.

Head-clipping weevil

Head-clipping weevils girdle and partially decapitate the flowers of plant species such as sunflowers, purple coneflower and compass plant. They then lay eggs in the dangling heads so their larvae can feed on the soon-to-be decomposing plant matter. Eventually, the flower head falls to the ground and the larvae dig right into the soil below the plant to overwinter and reappear the following year to repeat the cycle.

By girdling the flower stems, the weevil dissuades other insects from laying their eggs in the flower because those competing insects want their larvae to be able to feed on seeds. Since no seeds will be produced from a partially decapitated flower, there's no reason for those insects to lay eggs there, reserving the flower for the weevil's own children.

I saw several examples of this in my plot, including one sunflower that looked like it had just been girdled. When I peered up into the interior of the hanging flower head, sure enough, there was a weevil! I laid down on the ground and photographed it from below, but then also got another photo as it crawled out — presumably finished with its egg laying. Over the next several weeks, I watched the flower wilt and, eventually, drop to the ground.



A female lynx spider feeds on a long-legged fly.



This female guarded her eggs until they finally hatched and dispersed.



A recently-hatched lynx spiderling.

Lynx prey and spider babies

I got numerous photos of female lynx spiders throughout the year. Some were hunting and others were just basking in the sun or sheltering in the shade. I didn't see a lynx spider every time I visited, but I saw one more commonly than not. I assumed they were all different individuals but hoped they weren't.

One morning, I discovered a silken egg sac stuck to a blade of grass and a female lynx spider clearly guarding it from danger. Several days later, the eggs had hatched, the mom was gone, and there were dozens of miniscule spiderlings climbing, dangling and floating through the air. I was inordinately happy for both mom and kids and had a great time photographing the little goobers as they started exploring their new world.



A spiderling dangles from its silken thread.



Yet another lynx spider baby.

Nightshade gang

Black nightshade showed up in my plot in 2024 but hadn't been there in 2018. I'm guessing it appeared in 2024 because the prescribed fire allowed light to hit the ground and stimulate germination of this annual species. I was happy to see it, partly because nightshade and its relatives have flowers that rely on "buzz pollination." When bees hang below the flowers and vibrate their wing muscles at the right resonance, the anthers release their pollen to shower onto the bee. I've never photographed that phenomenon and figured it would be pretty neat to capture it within my little prairie square.

Before I saw any bees visit the plant's flowers, however, a gang of blister beetles arrived in the plot and completely decimated the nightshade plant. Over the course of a couple of hours, they methodically ate every one of the leaves and flowers, leaving only sad-looking stems. It felt like they were staring at me while doing it, too, daring me to try and prevent them. When they left, the plant appeared doomed and it looked like my chance to photograph buzz pollination wasn't going to come. Oh well, I had enjoyed watching the gang do their work and didn't hold it against them.

The story doesn't end there, though. Annual plants only get one chance at life, so they are hard to kill. This one was no exception, and those sad stems started producing new leaves within a week, followed eventually by flowers and fruits. The production of fruits meant the flowers must have been pollinated, but unfortunately, I was never there at the right time to see or photograph that process. That's not the blister beetles' fault, I guess, but remembering the way they stared me down, I blamed them a little bit anyway.



Black nightshade flowers before the gang arrived.



Blister beetles demolish a nightshade leaf.



An upside-down blister beetle chews away on a leaf tip.



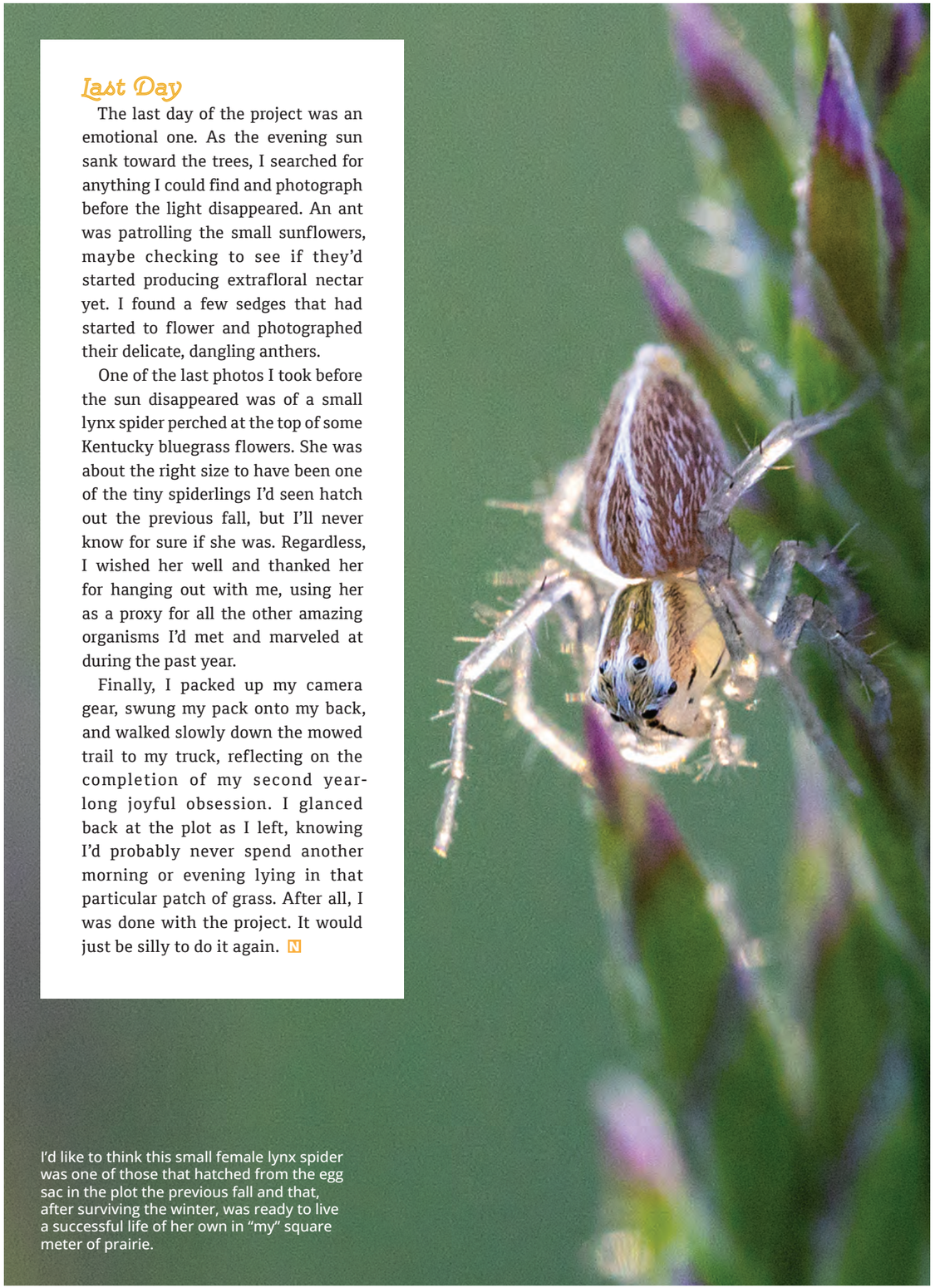
The aftermath of the gang's appearance.

Last Day

The last day of the project was an emotional one. As the evening sun sank toward the trees, I searched for anything I could find and photograph before the light disappeared. An ant was patrolling the small sunflowers, maybe checking to see if they'd started producing extrafloral nectar yet. I found a few sedges that had started to flower and photographed their delicate, dangling anthers.

One of the last photos I took before the sun disappeared was of a small lynx spider perched at the top of some Kentucky bluegrass flowers. She was about the right size to have been one of the tiny spiderlings I'd seen hatch out the previous fall, but I'll never know for sure if she was. Regardless, I wished her well and thanked her for hanging out with me, using her as a proxy for all the other amazing organisms I'd met and marveled at during the past year.

Finally, I packed up my camera gear, swung my pack onto my back, and walked slowly down the mowed trail to my truck, reflecting on the completion of my second year-long joyful obsession. I glanced back at the plot as I left, knowing I'd probably never spend another morning or evening lying in that particular patch of grass. After all, I was done with the project. It would just be silly to do it again.

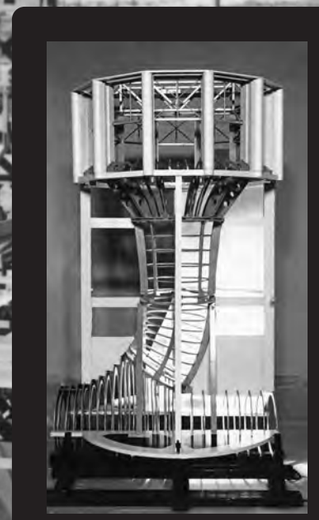


I'd like to think this small female lynx spider was one of those that hatched from the egg sac in the plot the previous fall and that, after surviving the winter, was ready to live a successful life of her own in "my" square meter of prairie.

Building Lake McConaughy

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society

Building the spillway tower at Kingsley Dam, Dec. 21, 1937.
NSHS RG2114-4-162



A model of the Morning Glory Spillway. NSHS RG2114-7-9

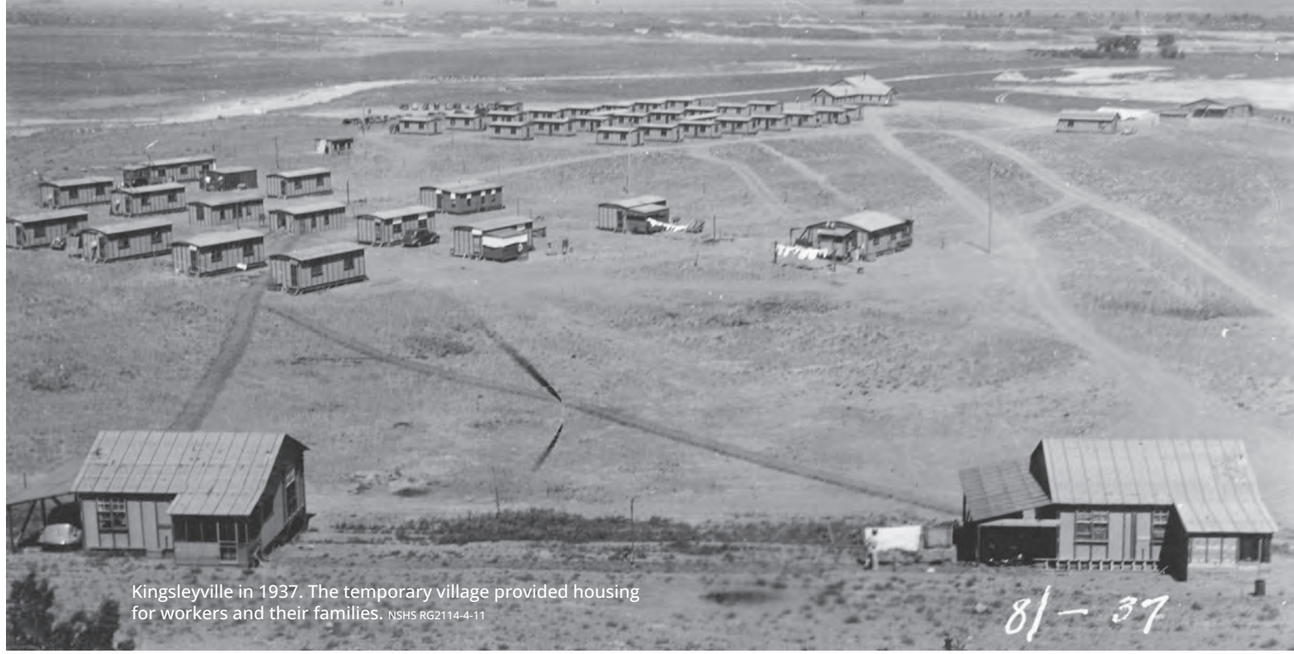
Kingsley Dam was the world's second-largest hydraulic-fill dam when it was completed, and it created Nebraska's largest lake. Its construction provided jobs for hundreds of men during the Great Depression. It brought irrigation, electricity and recreation, and displaced an entire town. But the chain of ideas that led to this massive project can be traced back to a few snow drifts in a Phelps County cornfield.

C. W. McConaughy was a grain merchant who also served as mayor of Holdrege. During a dry year he drove past a field covered with drought-stunted wheat. But in some spots the wheat grew tall and healthy. Curious, McConaughy asked the farmer, who explained that the wheat thrived where high snowdrifts had piled up the previous winter. Snowmelt had soaked into the ground and kept the wheat alive during the long, dry summer.

This gave McConaughy an idea. In 1913, he proposed building canals to divert Platte River water during the spring and fall when the river was high. The water would soak fields in south-central Nebraska, like the snowdrifts but on a larger scale. It was called "supplemental irrigation."

McConaughy was soon joined by Minden banker George Kingsley. The two men promoted the idea for years. It was not easy to build support, negotiate water rights, and secure federal money to build the Plum Creek reservoirs they wanted. As other people got involved, the plan grew and changed.

Construction of the first canals of the Tri-County Project finally began in March 1936. McConaughy fired a ceremonial "starting shot" for a huge dragline to begin moving dirt. By then, he was the last surviving member of the project's original boosters. Later that year, he resigned in protest from the Tri-County board of directors when they decided to prioritize a huge reservoir north of Ogallala rather than the Plum Creek reservoirs closer to Holdrege.



Kingsleyville in 1937. The temporary village provided housing for workers and their families. NSHS RG2114-4-11



Early construction of the dam, Aug. 24, 1937. Construction involved moving more than 26 million cubic yards of earth. NSHS RG2114-4-21



Workers prepare for the dam to move massive amounts of water. NSHS 2114-4-117



An unusual crane used during dam construction. NSHS RG2114-4-72



The Kingsleyville school in 1939. NSHS RG2114-0-15



Enjoying Lake McConaughy, circa 1950. While boating and fishing were not the main purposes of the reservoir, the new lake established itself as "the undisputed king of Nebraska waters," in the words of a 1973 issue of this magazine. NSHS RG2114-1-7

The project had grown far beyond anyone's original ideas. In addition to the big reservoir, smaller reservoirs would deliver water through the summer along more than 500 miles of canals and laterals. And at the insistence of Sen. George Norris, publicly owned hydropower would help pay for it.

The big dam was to be named for George Kingsley, who had died several years earlier. Workers lived in a temporary construction site village known as "Kingsleyville." They spent years pumping clay and riverbed sand to build the 3.5-mile-long-dam, covering it with rock riprap and building the tower of the Morning Glory Spillway.

Several miles upstream, the town of Lemoyne was relocated to higher ground before the spillway closed. Buildings were dismantled and rebuilt at the new townsite. Only foundations remained — underwater except during times of extreme drought.

C. W. McConaughy died only a few months before Kingsley Dam was completed. Before the dam was dedicated July 22, 1941, the Tri-County board of directors decided to name the reservoir in his honor. Disagreements were forgotten as McConaughy was remembered as the "father of Tri-County."

Learn more at the NSHS's website at history.nebraska.gov

EYES IN THE WOODS

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Io moth. GERRY STEINAUER

Last June, while hiking a spring-branch canyon at the Niobrara Valley Preserve in search of rare plants, I was twice met by pairs of staring eyes. Fortunately, they were not those of a stalking animal, but the eyespots on the wings of moths.

One set belonged to an io moth perched against the trunk of an elm tree, its inner hindwing eyespots starkly obvious. The other belonged to a polyphemus moth, its eyespots more subtle — almost camouflaged among the streamside vegetation where it rested — and noticeable only when I bent close to examine a plant. These markings are designed to startle and deceive predators such as birds and small mammals — or even an unsuspecting botanist.

Named for its eyespots — patterns formed by pigmented wing scales — the io (eye-oh) moth inhabits woodlands across our eastern and northern counties. When at rest, the eyespots are hidden by the yellowish forewings, helping to camouflage the moth. When disturbed, however, it flashes those glaring "eyes" by quickly raising the forewings.

Startled by the sudden display, an attacker may think it has taken on something larger—perhaps even one of its own predators — than it bargained for. This "startle display" works because predators often hesitate before attacking to gauge risk, allowing the moth a split second to take flight or drop to the ground to escape.

The polyphemus moth, a giant silk moth, shares a similar range and habitat in Nebraska with the io moth. Its name comes from the Greek myth of the Cyclops Polyphemus, reflecting the vivid eyespots on its inner hindwings and smaller ones on its forewings. Like the io moth, it flashes these markings if alarmed. These bright yellow "eyes" may mimic the eyes of an owl — one explanation for their effectiveness, as owls often prey on small mammals and other moth predators.

Because the polyphemus moth's wings are thin and somewhat translucent, the eyespots show through to the outer surface, where they appear less bold. When the moth is at rest with its wings folded upright, only the outer eyespot on the hindwing is visible. If disturbed, however, it slides its wings apart, revealing its other "eye" and making the display more convincing. When perched in the open, it can fully extend its wings, exposing the larger, more startling inner eyespots.

That eyespots have evolved in other species — such as the luna moth, and the common buckeye and common wood-nymph butterflies — demonstrates the value of this strategy. The next time you see eyes in the woods, don't be alarmed — it may only be a harmless moth or butterfly trying to deceive you. N

The Science Behind Wildlife Colors

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist







OPPOSITE LEFT: An American bullfrog *(Lithobates catesbeianus)* sits on a log. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

OPPOSITE RIGHT: A male indigo bunting *(Passerine cyanea)* perches on a yellow wildflower bud. JACK CURRAN, NEBRASKALAND

ABOVE: A western meadowlark *(Sturnella neglecta)* sings on a strand of barbed wire. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

RIGHT: A plains milk snake *(Lampropeltis triangulum)* slithers in the sand in the Game and Parks studio in Lincoln. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Have you ever stopped to wonder why some animals are the colors they are? In nature, color is rarely just for looks, and nature never does anything by accident. Coloration is a tool, a messaging system and sometimes, it's a clever disguise.

Across Nebraska's prairies, wetlands, forests and streams, animals wear their colors like survival gear — and each color tells a story.



LEFT: An American bullfrog *(Lithobates catesbeianus)* hunts on a private pond in Sarpy County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

BELOW: The greater angle-wing *(Microcentrum rhombifolium)* is a large, leaf-mimicking katydid. BRIANNA NUGENT



Vibrant Greens

All around Nebraska, you'll find green popping up on insects, reptiles, amphibians and even some birds. It's a color that blends beautifully into our landscapes, perfect for hiding from predators, sneaking up on prey, or sometimes just standing out to say, "Hey, I'm toxic — don't eat me."

Take the katydid, for example. These leaf-mimicking insects are one of the best examples of natural camouflage. Their green coloration doesn't come from pigment alone. It's a combination of yellow pigments and blue structural coloration. Their bodies are built in such a way that they reflect light in the green spectrum, making them nearly invisible among grass and foliage. Evolution has turned them into little plant imposters.

Then there's the American bullfrog, a widespread amphibian found throughout Nebraska's ponds, lakes and slow-moving streams. While not as boldly patterned as some frogs, bullfrogs often display a green or greenish-brown coloration that helps them blend into the surrounding vegetation and murky water. This camouflage is thanks to specialized skin cells called chromatophores, which layer pigments to produce their earthy tones. The upper layer reflects blue light, and when combined with yellow pigments underneath, gives the bullfrog its characteristic green appearance. It's an ideal adaptation for staying hidden from predators, such as herons, raccoons or larger snakes.

But here's the strange thing — there are no green mammals. None. Sure, some animals like sloths look green because of algae and moss growing in their fur, but that's more of a superficial coloration than natural pigmentation present in their fur. Scientists believe it comes down to the way mammalian hair is structured and how pigments like melanin work. Unlike feathers or scales, fur just can't pull off a true green hue.

Brilliant Blues

Blue may be rare in nature, but when it shows up in Nebraska's wildlife, it dazzles, often thanks to clever tricks of light rather than pigment.

For example, the electric blue of a male indigo bunting underneath the summer sun would make anyone pause. But here's the wild part: Indigo buntings aren't blue. Their feathers don't contain blue pigment at all. Instead, their coloration comes from microscopic structures in their feathers that bend and scatter light called structural coloration. It's kind of like how bubbles or oil slicks can shimmer with rainbow colors depending on how the light hits them. Underneath, those feathers are actually black or brown.

Even the bluegill sunfish, a common freshwater fish in Nebraska lakes and ponds, shows off flashes of iridescent blue, especially during spawning season. Males develop a striking blue sheen along the gill covers and cheeks, along with a deep orange belly, to signal dominance and attract mates. In the water, that shimmer isn't just beautiful, it's a status update, a territorial warning and a love song, all rolled into one.

And then there's one of my favorite unexpected flashes of blue in Nebraska — the blue mud dauber, a wasp. These solitary wasps are harmless to humans as they rarely sting, and they happen to be stunning little insects. Their bodies shimmer with a metallic blue or blue-black sheen. You'll often see them hovering near porches, sheds or barns, searching for spiders to paralyze and stash in their mud-built nests.

This brilliant blue comes from, you guessed it, structural coloration. Just like birds and butterflies, their shiny appearance is due to the way their exoskeleton is built. It reflects and refracts light to produce that vivid, iridescent color. There's no blue pigment involved at all.





A bluegill *(Lepomis macrochirus)* is held by an angler at a farm pond near Tekamah. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



ABOVE: Mud dauber. GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: An indigo bunting *(Passerina cyanea)* perches on a limb at the Lee G. Simmons Wildlife Safari Park in Cass County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Bold Yellow





ABOVE: Crab spider on upright yellow coneflower *(Ratibida columnifera)*. CHRIS HELZER

LEFT: A western meadowlark *(Sturnella neglecta)* calls at Box Butte Reservoir State Recreation Area. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

When you think of yellow in nature, you probably picture sunshine, flowers or maybe buzzing bees. Yellow in animals usually comes from carotenoids — pigments they get from their diet. Birds like the meadowlark and goldfinch wear yellow thanks to these plant-based pigments. In insects and amphibians, yellow can also come from pteridines, or pigments made in their bodies.

But yellow can also be the perfect disguise, especially if you're a predator waiting to surprise your dinner. Enter the goldenrod crab spider, a master of camouflage that uses bright yellow to vanish in plain sight. These little spiders are named for their ability to walk sideways like a crab, but it's their color-changing ability that makes them stand out or disappear.

Goldenrod crab spiders can shift between white and bright yellow, depending on the color of the flower they're hiding on — usually goldenrod, black-eyed Susans or sunflowers. That yellow isn't just for show; it's for stealth. While a bumble bee or butterfly sips nectar, the spider lies in wait, its yellow body blending seamlessly into the petals until it grabs its prey with lightning-fast front legs.

And who could forget the western meadowlark, Nebraska's state bird? With its bright yellow chest and bold black "V" necklace, the meadowlark stands out among the tall grasses where it nests and sings. Unlike camouflage or warning, this yellow is all about visibility, especially during the breeding season when males belt out their flute-like song from fence posts or shrubs. In the bird world, that bold coloring says, "This is my territory!" and also helps to attract a mate.

Radiant Red

Red is one of those colors that instantly catches your eye. In the wild, it rarely shows up by accident. Whether it's a flash of warning, a signal to attract a mate or a clever form of camouflage, red is a powerful color that Nebraska's wildlife uses in some fascinating ways.

Red coloration usually comes from pigments — compounds that absorb some wavelengths of light and reflect others. One of the most common is carotenoids, the same pigments that make carrots orange. Animals can't make carotenoids on their own, so they get them from their diet. That's why birds, such as cardinals or house finches, with richer red tones are often healthier and better-fed. That brilliant red is a signal of health and vitality — only the strongest males can maintain such vivid coloring, which helps them attract mates and defend territory.

Insects and reptiles might use other pigments like pteridines or ommochromes, which naturally produce red, orange or yellow hues. Unlike blue, which is often a trick of the light, red is usually true pigment — color built right into the body.

Take the common milkweed beetle, for example. These bright red beetles with black spots are a striking sight on milkweed plants during the summer. Their vivid coloration isn't just for decoration — it's a classic example of aposematic, or warning, coloration. Milkweed beetles feed on toxic milkweed, and their bodies store those chemicals, making them taste bad to predators. That red color screams, "Don't eat me!" to birds and other hungry animals, who quickly learn to avoid them.

And we can't forget the milk snake, one of Nebraska's most striking reptiles. With its bold bands of red, black and cream or yellow, the milk snake is a true showstopper. This pattern is a classic case of Batesian mimicry, where a harmless species imitates a more dangerous one. In this case, the milk snake's red and black bands resemble those of the venomous coral snake, which doesn't live in Nebraska but is well-known in other parts of the country.





ABOVE: A female milk snake photographed in the Nebraskaland Magazine studio. *(Lampropeltis triangulum)*. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



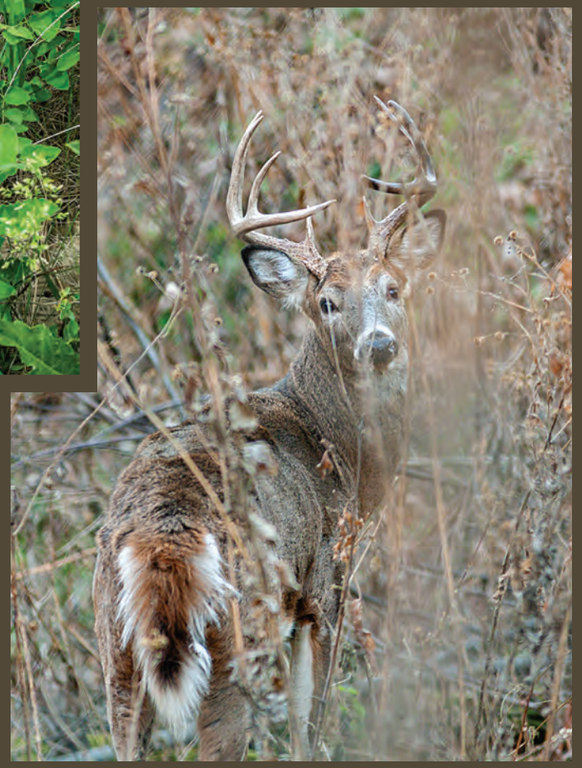
LEFT: A house finch *(Haemorhous mexicanus)* stands at a feeder in Chadron. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

BELOW: A red milkweed beetle *(Tetraopes tetrophthalmus)* sits on common milkweed *(Asclepias syriaca)*. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



LEFT: A fawn mule deer *(Odocoileus hemionus)* hides in the Pine Ridge of Dawes County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

BELOW: A white-tailed deer buck *(Odocoileus virginianus)* peers through tall grasses. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Earthy Browns and Tans

Not every animal needs to stand out. In fact, for many Nebraska creatures, blending in is the name of the game and that's where earthy browns and tans come in. These colors are the unsung heroes of survival, helping animals disappear into the grasses, soil, bark and leaf litter that make up their homes.

Brown in animals usually comes from melanin, the same pigment that gives human skin and hair their color. Melanin is super versatile. Depending on the type and concentration, it can produce shades from light tan to deep black. Most mammals, birds and reptiles rely on melanin for their browns, which is why it's one of the most common colors in nature.

Take the iconic white-tailed deer. Their coats shift with the seasons, from a rich reddish-brown in summer to a grayer, duller tan in winter, perfectly matching the changing colors of the landscape. This seasonal camouflage helps them hide from predators, such as coyotes or mountain lions, and sneak through dense woods or open fields without being noticed. Even their young fawns come covered in spots that mimic dappled sunlight filtering through the trees — a perfect natural disguise for staying hidden while mom forages.

Then there's the eastern cottontail rabbit, whose mottled brown and tan fur blends effortlessly with prairie grasses and fallen leaves. Their coloration helps them stay undetected from hawks overhead and foxes on the ground. When danger approaches, these rabbits rely on their camouflage and speed to escape.

Even birds use these muted colors to stay safe. The mourning dove sports soft browns and tans that let it fade into fields and open woodlands. When it's perched or nesting on the ground, those subtle earth tones reduce its visibility to predators.





ABOVE: Cottontail rabbit *(Sylvilagus)* at Toadstool Geologic Park in Sioux County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

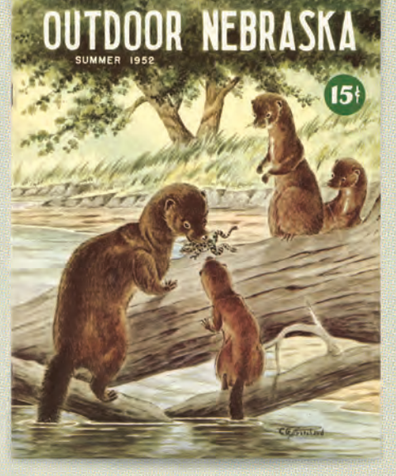
LEFT: A mourning dove *(Zenaida macroura)* stands on a fence post in Dawes County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

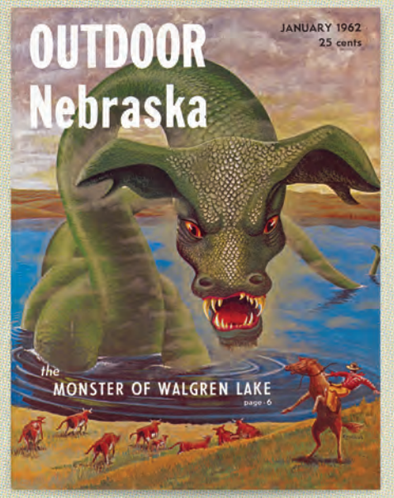
So, Why Does it Matter?

Color in the animal world is never just for show. Whether it's a warning, a disguise, to attract a mate or a trick of light, each hue has a purpose. As we hike through grasslands, wade through wetlands or sit quietly in our backyards, taking time to notice these color clues gives us a deeper appreciation for how perfectly tuned Nebraska's wildlife is to the world around them.

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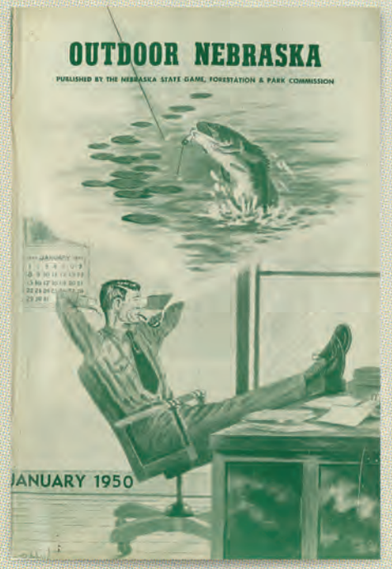
















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Mixed Bag

Eastern Kingbird: This bird illustration, along with many others, was featured in John Janovy's first story in Nebraskaland Magazine that ran in the August 1976 issue, sparking his journey to write several books. *See story on page 52.*

JOHN JANOVY



Nebraska's Parasitologist — John Janovy Jr.

By Julie Thomas

John Janovy Jr., professor emeritus at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is a world-renowned parasite ecologist. He arrived at UNL in 1966 and began running a laboratory at the university's Cedar Point Biological Station near Ogallala, where his students spent most of their time conducting field research. Their work included studying the movement and effects of parasites on amphibians and reptiles, Monogenoidea flatworms on minnow populations in flowing water, and gregarine parasites of beetles.



Janovy grew up in Oklahoma City and spent much of his youth "messing around" outdoors, stealing away to explore vacant lots and bike riding to Lake Hefner where he fished and ran traplines with friends. His father, a petroleum geologist, often invited him on oil well survey trips — and fishing opportunities in nearby ponds along the way. Janovy's mother, a voracious reader and artist, kept the house full of books and art supplies to support her son's interest in drawing birds. But of all his scientific and creative opportunities as a child, it was a toy microscope that opened Janovy's world.

Recalling the time his father soaked some hay in a water jar until it was full of paramecium, a single-celled organism found in water, Janovy said, "When I first looked through that lens, I was hooked, and I've looked at something through a microscope pretty much every day since."

The scientist also continued his interest in drawing and painting birds and is no stranger to Nebraskaland Magazine. On a whim, he showed his paintings to editor Lowell Johnson, who liked his work. Janovy's first Nebraskaland story appeared in August 1976 — a six-page spread "Birds of the Field," complete with words and illustrations.

Afterward, Janovy realized, "I could write a whole lot more about these birds," which led to the publication of his first book "Keith County Journal" in 1978, a recounting of his adventures with graduate students while studying parasitic life cycles at Cedar Point. "Janovy is hauntingly reminiscent of Thoreau," his book editor noted at the time.

As a professor, Janovy did not separate his efforts from his students, whom he finds enormous privilege in interacting and working with. In his 1994 book "Dunwoody Pond: Reflections on the High Plains Wetlands and the Cultivation of Naturalists," the parasitologist wrote, "Students are what makes academic science one of the truly noble professions."

Janovy is remembered among students for his introduction of "Big Talk." During these informal sessions, professor and students shared ideas and concerns in relaxed, open-ended discussions that encouraged unique perspectives and forged students' confidence in their abilities to ask and answer questions. For he believed that students who can confidently ask questions may be saved from "parasitic ideas."

Janovy is not only a respected, award-winning scientist among his peers, he's also a diligent author. Though retired, the Varner professor emeritus has published more than 100 scientific papers and written 32 books, and he continues to write daily.

Julie Thomas is a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor emerita and a Nebraska Master Naturalist. To celebrate our history of conservation storytelling, Nebraskaland will feature experts who have made a difference for Nebraska's wildlife and wild places. Without their work, Nebraskaland writers would have fewer stories to tell.







Prairie Rattlesnakes

By Justin Haag

It's one of the most feared, and surely misunderstood, animals in Nebraska.

The often-persecuted prairie rattlesnake *(Crotalus viridis)* is one of four venomous snake species that call Nebraska home, and the only one in the western part of the state. The prominent reptile resides in areas of short grasses, rock outcroppings and shrublands, primarily on the Great Plains and eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains. In Nebraska, they inhabit the western two-thirds of the state and a few northeastern counties.

In most circles, when these creatures enter the conversation, so will well-worn anti-serpent statements such as "the only good rattlesnake is a dead rattlesnake."

Those who are well-informed take a more accepting approach to these creatures we'd never see if they could just slither away from us a little faster. Undoubtedly, they have even less desire to have an encounter with people than humans want to have with them.

Thankfully for people, this snake, which can grow to 5 ½ feet long, was gifted with a tool for letting us know it's near, and it will usually do its best to give a person fair warning.

True to its name, the rattlesnake has a segmented rattle at its tail. It adds a new chamber to the hollow keratin rattle each time it sheds its skin, which happens about twice per year. The rattles often break, however, so it's not an accurate way to determine age.

The cold-blooded creatures are most active in warm weather and gather with other snakes in hibernacula during winter. They can't dig and must take advantage of holes and cavities existing on the landscape. During this period of brumation, they don't sleep but rather just become lethargic.

Now, to address the rattlesnake feature that people fear most. Rattlesnake bites are placed in two categories: defensive and predatory. The rattlesnake is a pit viper, meaning it has a heat-sensing organ on each side of its triangular-shaped head between the eyes and nostrils. This capability makes them proficient ambush predators. Their diet consists mostly of creatures such as mice, ground squirrels, juvenile prairie dogs and ground-nesting birds which are swallowed whole after being incapacitated by venom.

Snakes are smart enough to know humans are too big to swallow, and most bites to humans and other large mammals occur when the snake feels trapped and perceives danger. In these situations, it coils up to protect itself and strike if need be. Prairie rattlers don't chase. If people hear one, they can usually locate it and walk around and away from it.

It's believed that rattlesnakes often produce little, if any, venom in defensive bites, saving it for when the need to actually kill something for food arises. Reportedly, at least 25 percent of bites to humans are "dry" with no venom, and only 1 in 600 bites are fatal.

That's not to say a rattlesnake bite is a pleasant experience, especially those producing venom. Venom damages tissue and, depending on the person, the bite can lead to death in two to three days, or even less, if left untreated.

Many myths and tales about what to do in the rare case of a rattlesnake bite exist, so people who spend time where the snakes do would be wise to study up. The most important thing to do is move away from the snake, stay calm and get to a doctor as soon as possible, even if that means calling an ambulance.

As with most wildlife encounters, one with a rattlesnake will end peacefully if it is given space.



A prairie rattlesnake *(Crotalus viridis)* assumes a defensive position when approached on Pinnt Road east of Chadron in Dawes County.
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Celebrate Nebraskaland's 100 Years

By Renae Blum

Not many print publications accomplish Nebraskaland's 100-year milestone. Following are seven ways you can continue to enjoy the anniversary celebration.

Visit Nebraskaland's Durham Museum exhibit

See the highlights of Nebraskaland Magazine in person. From June 20 to Oct. 18, 2026, The Durham Museum in Omaha will host a special exhibit, "Nebraskaland: Celebrating 100 Years Outdoors."

The exhibit includes stunning photography, historic magazine covers, interactive displays and original field objects culled from Nebraskaland's archives. Learn more at DurhamMuseum.org.

Wear your support with Nebraskaland merchandise



Check out our new collection of Nebraskaland Magazine merchandise. This includes outdoor-themed hats, shirts and hoodies that are perfect for showing your outdoor pride. Browse the collection now at StockandRod.com/ne-game-and-parks.

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Portraits from the Past

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Gravel Pit Fishing, 1987 or 1988 ▲

These photos are of my father-in-law, Julius Weverka, and me taken in the fall of 1987 or 1988 after an afternoon and long evening fishing a gravel pit in Loup County. The smallest fish on the stringer weighed over 6 pounds, and the ring on the stringer, where it was wrapped around the pole, gave out just after the picture was snapped. I remember discussing, somewhat prophetically, after one such trip how someday we'd look back on those trips as "the good ol' days," and we were right! Julius passed in April 2004.

The second photo was taken the same night. Most folks throw carp back, but Julius knew a guy who worked at Joe Tess Place in Omaha who taught him how to "score" carp for cooking. My mother-in-law, Lucille, also canned them, and we used the meat like tuna or salmon.

– Jerry Davenport, Sargent

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Jenny.Wheatley@Nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 2000. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Text may be edited and photos adjusted for reproduction. All photos will be returned. Please send ORIGINALS if possible for best reproduction.



◀ **Turkey Hunting in the 1960s**

My father Duane Jones (on the right) and Vance Toline show their bird after a successful turkey hunt in the mid-1960s near Chadron.

– Mark Jones, Osceola



Coon Hunt near Bradshaw, 1928 ▲

The "Harlow Boys" at the end of a coon hunt on the family farm near Bradshaw on Feb. 11, 1928. From left to right are twins Dean and Dewey, age 10; Glenn, my father-in-law, age 6; and Russell, age 12. The dogs, from left to right, are Joe, Jack and Tommy. Notes on the back of the photo indicate that one raccoon was 18 pounds and the other was 19 pounds. Glenn talked about the coon hunts from when he was a boy and that he used a double-barrel .410 shotgun. I still have that old shotgun. They sold the hides to a man in York.

– Tom Seidl, Lincoln

Deer in the Dark

By Justin Haag

Having started my career using 35mm film, I have a lot of appreciation for the conveniences of digital photography. Some photographers get nostalgic about film, but this dunce still has frightful memories about returning from an event and toiling in the darkroom to learn every photo was shot with the wrong settings. Or, even worse, accidentally opening the back of the camera and ruining a whole roll. At least once, I didn't even have film in the camera.

Along with those situations being largely remedied with digital, the greatest advancement in my career has been a camera's capabilities for capturing scenes in low light — surely evident by the flood of images that comes to social media whenever the Northern Lights make an appearance this far south.

This photo of some pretty whitetails isn't going to win any awards, but I'm amazed I was able to capture it.

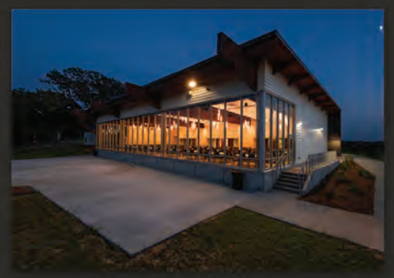
When shooting for my college's newspaper in the 1990s, film with 3,200 ISO was the most sensitive we could get. It was expensive, and the result was grainy. The standard was 400.

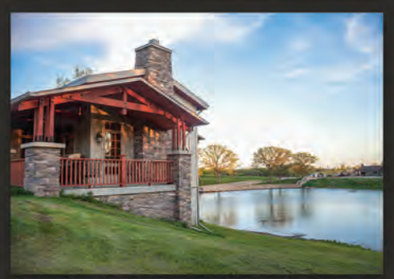
This image, captured as the deer caught a whiff of me while approaching my blind about 15 minutes before sunrise, was shot at 25,600 ISO. That's eight times greater than what we had in the '90s. In the past, I wouldn't have wasted the effort of pushing the button. Yes, this image has some noise — formerly known as grain — but it's usable ... especially if placed on black-and-white newsprint as my first published photos were, and certainly if using the advanced denoise capabilities of Photoshop as we've done here. In fact, this photo is probably better than anything I shot in the "glory days" of film.

Makes me wonder where technology will lead us. Before long, we may be shooting wildlife photos, sans flash, at midnight.













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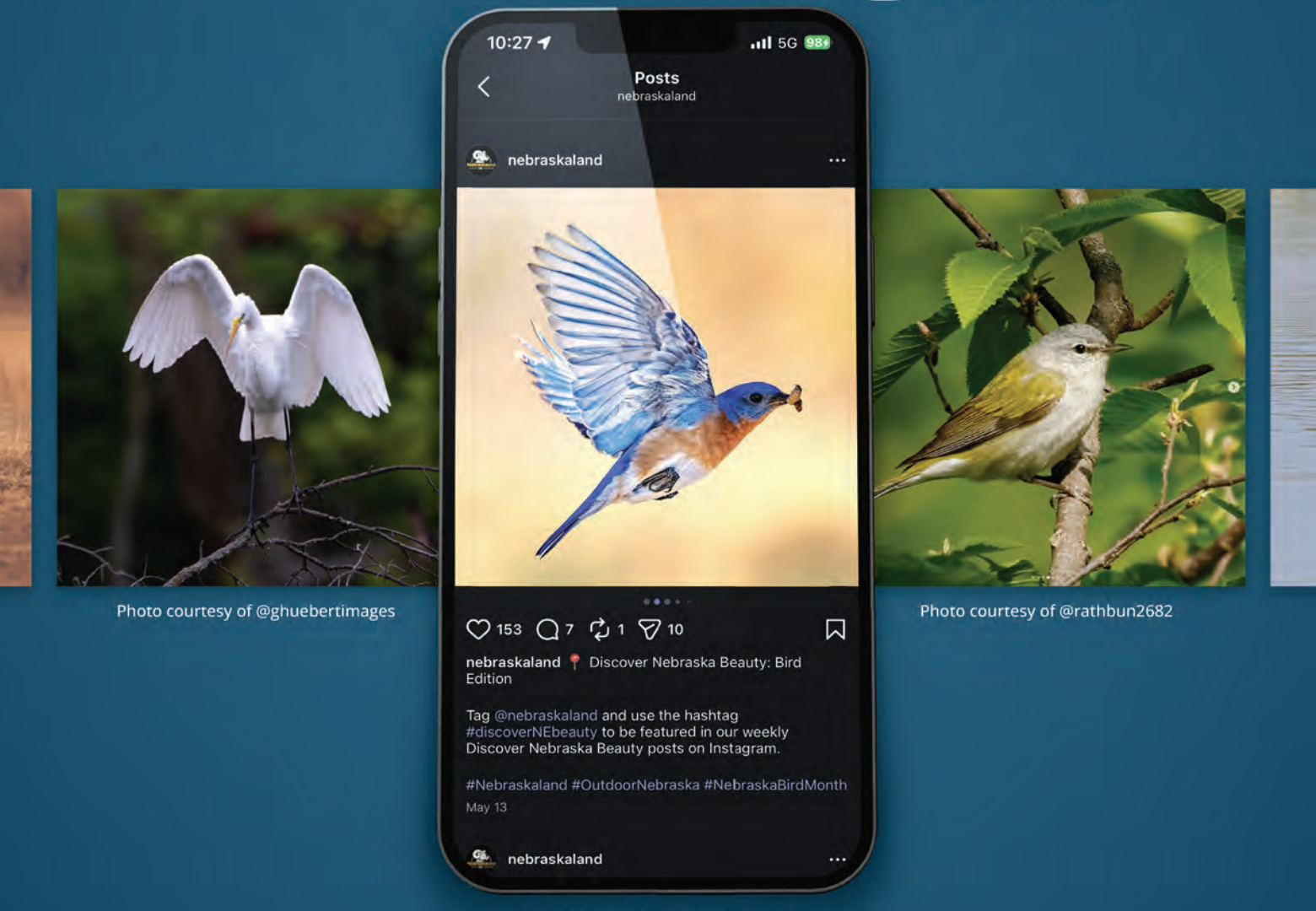


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