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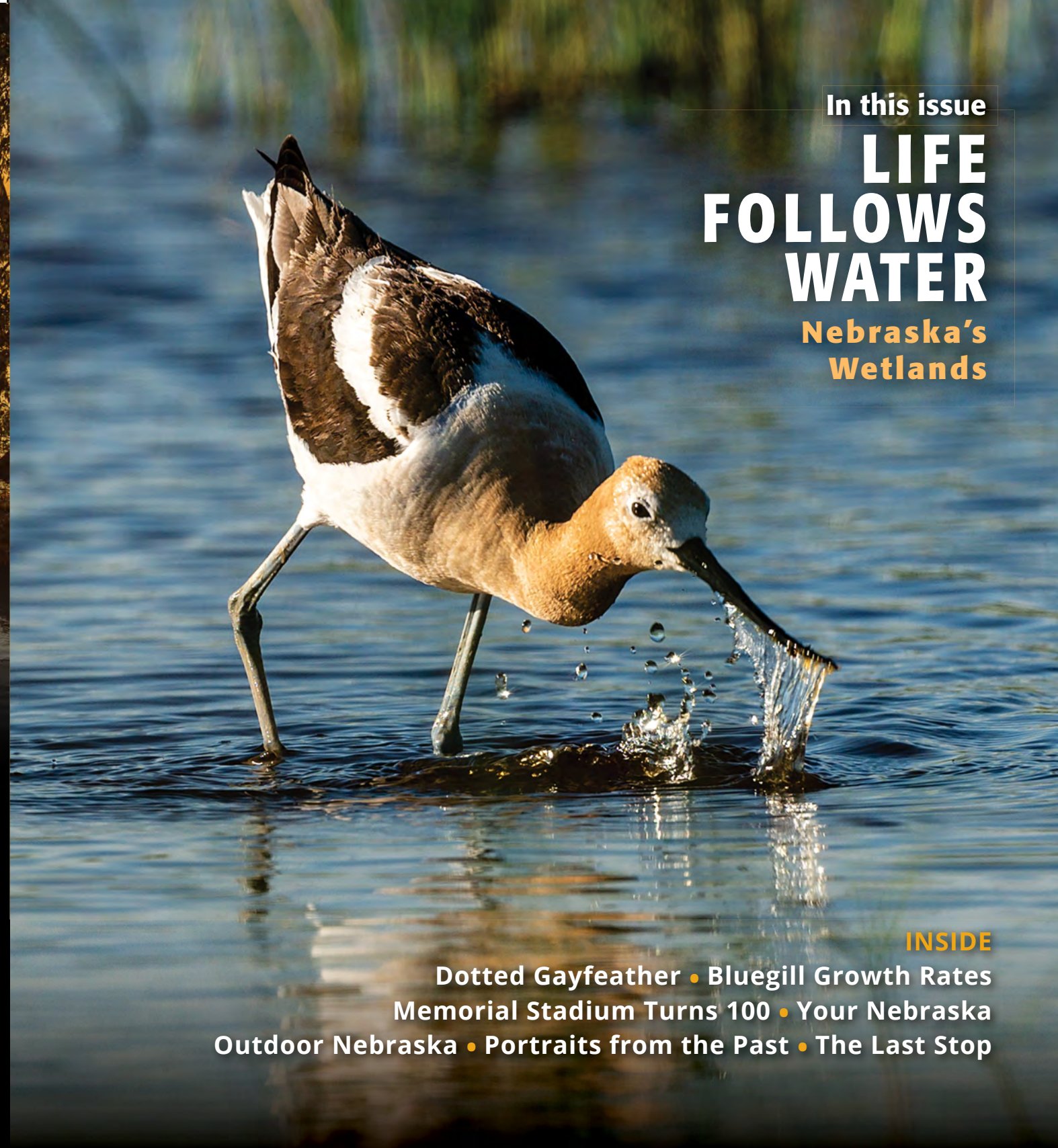
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MAY 2023

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Nebraska's
Wetlands



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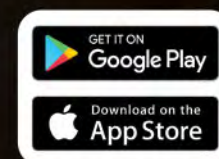
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Cover: An American avocet wades through a wetland in the western Nebraska Sandhills. See story on page 20.
MARIAH LUNDGREN

This page: A lone tree standing on a hilltop in Jefferson County is silhouetted against a sky painted orange by the setting sun.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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Nebraskaland
magazine

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Paper wasps begin building nests.

CHRIS HELZER

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PATHWAY FOR WILDLIFE

CREATING HIGH-QUALITY HABITAT THROUGHOUT NEBRASKA



Program Overview

Pathway For Wildlife (PFW) offers incentives to enhance wildlife habitat on cropland, working lands, and within local communities. Participants will apply specific wildlife and pollinator conservation practices to benefit pheasants, quail, grassland songbirds, monarch butterflies, native bees, and other wildlife. Additionally, the program aims to reduce soil losses, encourage soil health and improve water quality.

Program Highlights

- 1 to 3-year contract options
- 75-100% cost-sharing
- No cropping-history necessary
- Incentive payments
- Annual payment option



PATHWAY FOR GRASSLANDS

Plant native grasses and wildflowers to transition cropland or degraded grassland areas to working lands better suited for landowner objectives. Incorporate grassland management practices including brush management, prescribed fire, shrub thicket establishment, and chemical control.



PATHWAY FOR PRECISION AG CONSERVATION

Plant a diverse cover crop mixture as part of a cropping rotation with benefits of soil health, weed competition, grazing utilization, wildlife and pollinator habitat providing awareness and an economic incentive to farmers considering alternatives. Limited to Rainwater Basin.



PATHWAY FOR COMMUNITY HABITAT

Plant native wildflowers, including milkweed for monarchs, in backyard habitats and urban green spaces to provide wildflowers blooming from April to October. Eligible project sites include city parks, colleges, libraries, churches, and other frequently visited areas.

Eligible Land

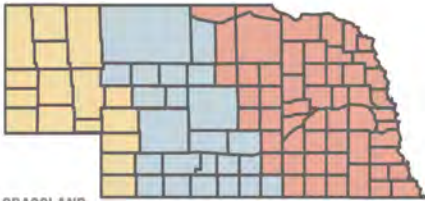
Land must be suitable for one of three program areas and its objectives. Cropland, grassland, community, business, and residential sites are eligible. Cropland must be in the Rainwater Basin area to be eligible for the Precision Ag Conservation project area. Pheasants Forever biologists will evaluate sites to determine program eligibility based on feasibility and other conservation programs available.

Contract Length

1, 2, or 3-year contracts are available.

Payments

Pheasants Forever provides cost-share assistance for seed and seed establishment. Additional cost-share is available for brush management, prescribed burning, and shrub thicket establishment. Annual payments for grassland projects are based on location.



PFW GRASSLAND PAYMENT RATES: \$30/AC. \$45/AC. \$60/AC.

Monitoring and Evaluation

To increase awareness and increased personal investment, participants will monitor project areas. Pheasants Forever will evaluate seeding success rate, management needs, and wildlife use.

Enrollment and More Information

Please complete and return a Notice of Interest form if you wish to join us in creating a pathway for wildlife. Pheasants Forever staff administers PFW and provides technical assistance. For more information about Pheasants Forever and its programs, visit NebraskaPF.com or contact your local Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist.





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

Kirk Pridell, Papillion
Neighborhood Turkey



Jim Gates, Worland, Wyoming
Northern Pike at Boxed Butte





MORNING BATH

A blue-winged teal
shakes the water
droplets off his wings
at a Lincoln saline
wetland.

CHRIS MASADA



Young birders playfully glass in all directions at the Nebraska Outdoor Education Center in Lincoln. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

THE NEBRASKA BIRDING BOWL

By Olivia DaRugna

In celebration of Nebraska Bird Month, a new, free event begins — the Nebraska Birding Bowl.

Simply register yourself or your team of bird lovers and do what you already do this time of year — watch birds. Then submit the birds you observe through eBird, a community science platform that uses your observations to inform bird conservation, for a chance to win prizes. Sounds like a pretty good add-on to what you already love to do.

Categories

There are several categories to choose from when registering:

- Fledgling Flock is for youth groups such as after school programs, summer camps and scouts that want to introduce kids to the amazing world of birds.
- Dabbling Birder is for those trying out birding for the first time or those who enjoy more casual, laid back birding.
- Backyard Birders is for households that enjoy observing birds that come to their yard.
- Competitive Birder is for those who like to explore different habitats and observe a wide variety of species.

Prizes

No matter your skill level, you have a chance to win great prizes.

- Fledgling Flock: Randomly selected teams will win a birding group kit.
- Backyard Birder: A randomly selected team will win a birdfeeder setup complete with a durable birdfeeder, pole and birdseed.
- Dabbling Birder: A randomly selected participant will win a pair of Vortex Diamondback Binoculars.
- Competitive Birder: The team that observes the most species wins a \$1,000 cash prize per team. The second place team to observe the most species wins a \$500 cash prize per team. The third place team wins a variety of prizes.

Winners will be announced in June.

There are endless opportunities to observe birds in Nebraska. Visit birdtrail.outdoornebraska.gov/birdingbowl/ to see more details and to register. This event is sponsored by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Audubon Great Plains, and the Wild Bird Habitat Store.

NEBRASKA LAND IS IN DEMAND



**KNOX CO, NE - 2 ± AC.
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This is a must-see! You won't believe this large church-converted to a home! Rare opportunity to own one of the most unique and historic properties in the area. The original church served the community for decades. Conversion to home began in the late 1990s. This acreage is 4 miles from Weigand Marina and Lewis and Clark Lake! The lake area has much to offer for recreational enthusiasts! The home has a two-car tuck-under garage, with a four-stall outbuilding to accommodate storing all your lake and acreage toys and equipment. The soaring ceilings on the main floor reach nearly 11', making way for some truly beautiful cathedral arch windows in most rooms, a large living, dining, and family room with an eat-in kitchen, hardwood floors and sun room, new furnace and roof in 2015. Canning kitchen, laundry, and shop in the basement, all with tons of built-in storage and lots of space! Plenty of room on the large acreage for gardening or an orchard. Do not miss out on your chance to own this beautiful and unique home!

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AUCTION TIME: 11:00 AM

AUCTION LOCATION: QUALITY INN & CONFERENCE CENTER | 7838 S US HWY 281 | GRAND ISLAND, NE

Spend the early fall mornings in the duck blind overlooking one of the multiple sandpit lakes on the property. As November approaches and the deer woods begin to heat up, trade the duck blind for a tree stand in the pinch between the crop ground and lakes. Once the woods cool down and the migration heats up, head back to the water for more waterfowl activity that will keep you busy well into the late winter! After the shotguns are cleaned and stowed for the season it will be time to get the camera out to capture the migration of the sandhill crane. This property lies in the heart of the "pinch in the hourglass" along their annual migration! Once the last of the birds have moved on and the sunshine of spring brings on new growth, it will be time to get the John boat out and dust off the fishing poles. Catch bass until your thumbs ache and let the kids catch bluegill until their arms are sore!



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A killdeer with chicks in Dawes County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

THE UBIQUITOUS PLOVER — KILLDEER

By Joel Jorgensen

Plovers are generally a group of shorebirds that typically go unseen by the average person. Mountain and piping plovers are both rare and state threatened with specific habitat requirements. Other species like the black-bellied and semipalmated plover occur briefly in our state during spring and fall migration as they travel between breeding and wintering sites. Of Nebraska’s seven species of plovers, the killdeer is the only frequently encountered member of the group and also happens to be the only one that does not have ‘plover’ in its name.

The robin-sized killdeer is ubiquitous and often obvious because it is often heard before seen. They are not only among the most vocal of all shorebirds, but it is safe to say they are also among the most vocal of all our birds. Their call has been described as a shrill wail and is how this species got its name because it superficially resembles the phrase “kill-deer.” Its namesake is not because of any pent-up hostility toward antlered mammals.

Unlike other plovers, killdeer is flexible in the habitat it uses. While it is a shorebird and routinely occurs along shorelines, it is just as likely to be found in agricultural fields, golf courses, ballfields and just about any large open area with bare ground or very short vegetation.

Killdeer place their nest on the ground and have a

propensity for favoring sites with some gravel, such as the edges of parking lots and even gravel rooftops. Often nests are near areas of human activity, and killdeer have no problem letting human interlopers know their presence is not appreciated.

If a person or other potential predator approaches too close to its nest, killdeer is one species that will cleverly behave as though it is injured. An adult bird will pretend to have a broken wing to appear like easy prey, fiendishly luring an intruder away only to fly away once the nest is no longer at risk of being plundered.

Killdeer are among the earliest-arriving migratory birds in spring with the leading arrivals crossing into Nebraska by early March and sometimes even by late February. After their breeding season wanes in mid- to late summer, birds gather in flocks at wetlands, river sandbars and areas where vegetation is kept nice and short by mowers in late summer and fall. Almost all killdeer spend the winter south of Nebraska, but a handful regularly winter downstream of Lake McConaughy where water management and river modifications provide open water even during the coldest of weather.

Whatever the season, the killdeer is our most familiar plover.



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Dandelion and honey fritters. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

DANDELION AND HONEY FRITTERS

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

The first time I tested this recipe, the fritters tasted a bit bitter. I got lazy and left the sepals — the green bottom part of a flower — which can impart a bitter taste. This time, I picked only the yellow parts and discarded the sepals, and voila — no bitter aftertaste! Picking dandelion petals can get tedious, but you only need a heaping cup’s worth. If you have kids around, put them to work. A little bit of green is unavoidable, and that’s OK. You just want to make sure to get most of it.

Servings: 6
Prep Time: 30 minutes
Cooking Time: 10 minutes
Ingredients:

- 1 heaping cup of dandelion flowers, sepals (green parts) removed
- 1 cup of all-purpose flour

- ¼ cup of demerara sugar, or to taste
- 1½ teaspoons of baking powder
- ½ to ¾ cup of whole milk
- 1 large egg
- ½ teaspoon of poppy seeds
- Vegetable/canola oil for frying

Honey-Lemon Glaze

- ½ cup of honey
- Grated zest of 1 lemon
- 2 teaspoons of lemon juice

1. In a deep-frying pan, heat oil to 350° Fahrenheit. While the oil is heating, combine dandelion flowers, flour, sugar, baking powder and poppy seeds in a bowl.

2. In a smaller bowl, lightly beat an egg and ¾ cup of milk. Add it to the dry ingredients and stir to combine — do not overwork the batter. Add more milk if the mixture looks dry. The

mixture should neither be as runny as pancake batter nor be as dense as bread dough — look for a wet batter that’s in between.

3. With a large spoon, drop batter into the hot oil, making six equal-size globs. Adjust heat as needed, trying to keep the oil temperature between 300-325°. The fritters shouldn’t touch while frying, so fry them in batches if necessary. When the first side turns golden brown, flip and fry the other side. Use a toothpick to check for doneness — if it comes out clean, it’s cooked through. Drain on paper towels or a cooling rack.

4. Combine glaze ingredients and microwave for a few seconds to warm through. Glaze the fritters all over. Serve warm with leftover glaze on the side. Since the fritter itself isn’t too sweet, I like to spoon on more honey with each bite.



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Life Follows Water

What makes a wetland a wetland? In Nebraska, a wetland is defined by three characteristics. One, a wetland must have a prevalence of water-loving plants adapted to grow in wet conditions. Two, the soil must be developed in these wet conditions. Three, a wetland must be saturated by water at some time during the growing season.

In Nebraska, there are five types of wetlands that fit these

characteristics: urban, playa, riverine, saline and sandhills, yet each of these do more than fit a scientific description. They provide life, not only for the myriad species that call these unique landscapes home, but also for the people whose work and personal lives are so intertwined with their day-to-day functions.

Because life follows water.



Researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln prepare to install a floating treatment wetland at the Cooper YMCA Retention Pond in Lincoln. Floating treatment wetlands filter chemical pollutants from fields, lawns and roadways. DAKOTA ALTMAN

Urban Wetlands

By Dakota Altman

When I started this project, the mention of urban wetlands did not conjure thoughts of a pristine wetland ecosystem. Concrete and uniformity were what came to mind. That all changed when I realized the beauty urban wetlands bring to a community of people and just how many plant and animal species share these urban wetland spaces.

Urban wetlands are stepping stones in a garden; birds, butterflies and more use wetlands, and a properly placed

wetland can provide opportunities such as walking, biking, fishing, ice skating and, of course, observing wildlife.

Over an approximate 200-year span, Nebraska has lost around 35% of its wetlands — 2,910,500 acres to 1,905,500 acres today. Much of the loss was contributed by major transformations of landscapes, from expanding agricultural productivity to the encroachment of townships and cities.

Yet this rate has lessened as more people are finding ways to protect and restore wetlands. Through education and on-the-ground collaboration with farmers, ranchers, city residents and everyone in between, a future for Nebraska's wetlands looks a little brighter — even near the city lights.



A Blanchard's cricket frog rests on a lily pad in a backyard urban wetland in the heart of Lincoln. DAKOTA ALTMAN



ABOVE: Countless species, such as the familiar bluet damselfly, spend much of their life in wetlands. They represent what we are protecting when wetlands are not taken for granted.

DAKOTA ALTMAN

LEFT: Urban wetlands in the 21st century have gone through drastic changes. Oak Lake in Lincoln, Nebraska, was once a beautiful saline wetland, then a dumpsite, to now a home for wildlife and recreation. This lesser yellowlegs searches for invertebrates, and the capital of Nebraska can be seen in the background.

DAKOTA ALTMAN

Playa Wetlands

By *Ethan Freese*

On a spring day, a normally dry depression along Interstate 80 was filled with water, and a massive group of snow geese descended into the water below. This was my first introduction to the Rainwater Basin, Nebraska’s largest playa wetland complex.

Playas receive their water from rain and snowmelt, and they are formed when wind scours out depressions, which are often circular shaped, in relatively flat landscapes. Over

thousands of years the downward movement of water has created a clay layer in the soil underneath. When wet, the clay ponds water on the surface of the playa.

In spring, a playa wetland may be filled with a myriad of migratory waterbirds. If you visit the same playa just a few months later, however, the wetland may be completely dry.

Deep pits on marginal cropland, to concentrate the water, undermine playa wetlands, as does sedimentation and invasive species like red canary grass. Yet farmers, ranchers and conservationists continue to work on playas so that the thousands of species of animals that use these ecosystems will have homes long into the future.



ABOVE: Four playa complexes are found in Nebraska — the Rainwater Basin, seen here, Central Table Playas, Southwest Playas and the Todd Valley Playas. Only 10% of the Rainwater Basin’s wetlands remain. ETHAN FREESE

BELOW: Playas are home to thousands of animal species, including common garter snakes. ETHAN FREESE



TOP: Nebraska’s playa wetlands and other wetlands in the state are a critical stopover point for whooping cranes during spring and fall migration. There are currently less than 800 whooping cranes left in the wild. ETHAN FREESE

ABOVE, LEFT: While many of the plants found in playa wetlands thrive, including smartweed, their seeds are unable to germinate underwater. Because of this, periodic dry cycles are necessary or these species would disappear. MARIAH LUNDGREN



ABOVE: Deep cracks form in the soil of a playa wetland. When water flows down these cracks, it helps to recharge underlying groundwater, including the Ogallala Aquifer. ETHAN FREESE

LEFT: Blue-winged teal researchers monitor this species across their flyway from South Dakota to Louisiana. The playas in Nebraska provide a critical stopover point for this species and many other species of birds and ducks. ETHAN FREESE

Riverine Wetlands

By Grant Reiner

Because water is a necessity for all life, rivers have driven the colonization and spread of human communities across the globe, including Nebraska. Communities were built around Nebraska’s river systems, allowing for easier travel, access to potable and irrigation water, and habitat for wildlife populations both above and below the surface.

With nearly 80,000 miles of rivers and streams in Nebraska, each with riverine wetlands, these ecosystems support a

diversity of life and exemplify that everything is connected. From river otters on a backwater slough of the North Platte River to freshwater mussels in the Loup River system, these wetlands are critical for so many species.

They support life, clean our sources of water, disperse impacts of flooding, and are these beautiful, sometimes underappreciated, landscapes and ecosystems. They may stink at times, be super muddy and difficult to move through, but once you take a step back, close your eyes, listen, breathe and use all your senses to immerse yourself into these riverine wetlands, there is no going back to looking at them as merely mosquito-infested swamp. They are so much more.



Nebraska’s riverine wetlands, including those along the North Platte River, get their water from three sources: snow melt in the Rocky Mountains, ground water from the Ogallala Aquifer and other aquifers, and precipitation. DAKOTA ALTMAN



Interior least terns historically made their nests along the sandbars of the Platte River adjacent to wetlands. Now, these federally threatened birds can be found nesting in sand and gravel operations as well as housing developments. ETHAN FREESE



A bluegill stands guard above its nest in a backwater slough of the North Platte River. Bluegill use the adjacent wetlands as shelter while they are nesting. GRANT REINER



LEFT: This is one of the hundreds of waterfalls that can be found in the spring-branch canyons along the Niobrara River. The cold water supports particular species that can survive only in this microclimate. Two examples are aspen and birch trees, ice age remnants that turn brilliant orange and yellow in fall. MARIAH LUNDGREN

ABOVE: Nebraska Game and Parks fisheries biologists are working to reintroduce pocketbook mussels into a series of streams throughout Nebraska. Acting as wetlands do, freshwater mussels can clean a tremendous amount of water, which in return provides cleaner water for humans and for the wildlife that rely upon those water sources. GRANT REINER

Saline/Alkaline Wetlands

By *Mariah Lundgren and Brooke Talbott*

One hundred million years ago, the North American continent was inundated by ocean waters and formed a vast, inland sea called the Western Interior Seaway. Fast forward to now, and those salts from the inland sea remain underground but are constantly being pushed to the surface — right outside of Lincoln — by pressure from the Dakota Aquifer. These are known as the saline wetlands.

They are now some of the rarest wetlands in the world. In the last 150 years, over 80% of an estimated 20,000 acres of saline wetland habitat has been destroyed by ditching,

draining and urban development.

Yet hope endures as rigorous restoration efforts are underway, resulting in the reappearance of rare plant and animal species adapted to live within the salt flats. One of these species is the Salt Creek tiger beetle, a federally endangered species found only in these saline wetlands.

But the efforts go beyond the beetle. With more wetlands, there is more habitat for other species in these unique ecosystems. More wetlands also means less flooding in the city, reduced erosion, improved water quality and more places for the curious to recreate — just a few miles from the Capital city.



The warm, orange glow from the sun casts through clouds giving the saltwort an ethereal tone across a saline wetland at Little Salt Creek Marsh near Raymond. Saltwort is an endangered plant species only found in saline wetlands. ETHAN FREESE



ABOVE: A feather suspended in the wind at sunset in a saline wetland. Many bird species rely on saline wetlands as stopover habitats on their north and south migration journeys. ETHAN FREESE

BELOW, LEFT: Two Salt Creek tiger beetles mating on a salt flat in a saline wetland. Female Salt Creek tiger beetles require specific soil moisture and salinity to lay their eggs. Once the eggs hatch, the larvae and eventual adults do not require such a narrow range of soil salinity to survive. BROOKE TALBOTT



Madeline Cass, a local artist, photographs the salt crust at a saline wetland north of Lincoln. DAKOTA ALTMAN



Species like muskrats at Marsh Wren Community Wetland benefit from work by the city of Lincoln and members of the Saline Wetlands Conservation Partnership to keep saline wetlands around for future generations. MARIAH LUNDGREN

Sandhills Wetlands

By Mariah Lundgren

There is still a wildness that remains in the heart of the Great Plains. The loss of prairies and wetlands is overwhelming, but the Sandhills are a place of promise and refuge where 20,000 square miles of mostly intact mixed-grass prairie-covered dunes reside. Beneath the ground lies the Ogallala Aquifer, which holds nearly one billion acre-feet of water.

Wetlands in the Sandhills are found where the aquifer meets the surface in the valleys and between the hills, along the shorelines of the many rivers and streams, and on the edges of lakes. Impressively, the Sandhills has more than one million



A marsh marigold in full bloom on a fen in the Nebraska Sandhills. A fen is a wetland fed by groundwater, which helps form the peat and muck soils that are indicative to fens.

ETHAN FREESE

acres of wetlands and is one of the last truly wild landscapes left in the Great Plains.

Water is a critical resource for the people, plants and wildlife inhabiting the Sandhills and those downstream who rely on the Ogallala Aquifer for drinking water, crop irrigation and other municipal uses. Ranchers and conservation organizations manage the land through grazing, fire and various other methods.

The Sandhills is the largest and most intact grassland left in the world, remaining relatively untouched since the westward invasion of European settlers. The sandy, porous soils make row-crop agriculture challenging, unlike how much of the Great Plains has turned to the plow. The amount of life and wonder that remain in this precious landscape is remarkable.



A top-down view of an alkaline wetland in the western Nebraska Sandhills. These wetlands are characterized by their unusual chemistry and salt content, as shown by the white crust in the image.

MARIAH LUNDGREN



An American avocet wades through a wetland in the western Nebraska Sandhills. This beautiful bird frequents shallow lakes and marshes, and they are particularly keen on alkaline lakes and wetlands.

MARIAH LUNDGREN



Ashley Forrester, an UNK graduate student, holds a mature Blanding's (right) and painted turtle (left) on a private ranch in the Nebraska Sandhills. While Blanding's turtles are listed as a species of conservation concern in every state of their historic range, they are thriving in the Sandhills due to the roadless expanses and quantity and quality of wetlands.

MARIAH LUNDGREN



Wetlands are a critical part of the Sandhills, where more than one million acres can be found.

MARIAH LUNDGREN

Visit NebraskaWetlands.com for additional content.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Celebrate the beautiful weather and get outdoors. Here are some entertaining ways to enjoy this time of year: watching wildlife, fishing, visiting an outdoor expo and more. [N](#)



Free Fishing and Park Entry Day

May 20 | Statewide

During this annual event, you can enjoy a Saturday of fishing or state park activities without the need to purchase a fishing or park entry permit for the day. It's a perfect occasion to give fishing a try, or to visit a state park you've always wanted to see. Make a day of it and bring a picnic basket!

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Third Annual Tyler Vanderheiden Memorial Run

May 20 | Cody Park in North Platte or anywhere

Go on a run for a good cause! This annual run is bringing awareness to mental health and suicide prevention, and proceeds benefit Nebraska state park trails. You can choose from two distances, 2 miles or 5 miles, and run in-person at Cody Park in North Platte or virtually from anywhere in the world. Register online at PlatteRiverFitness.com/PublicHealth.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

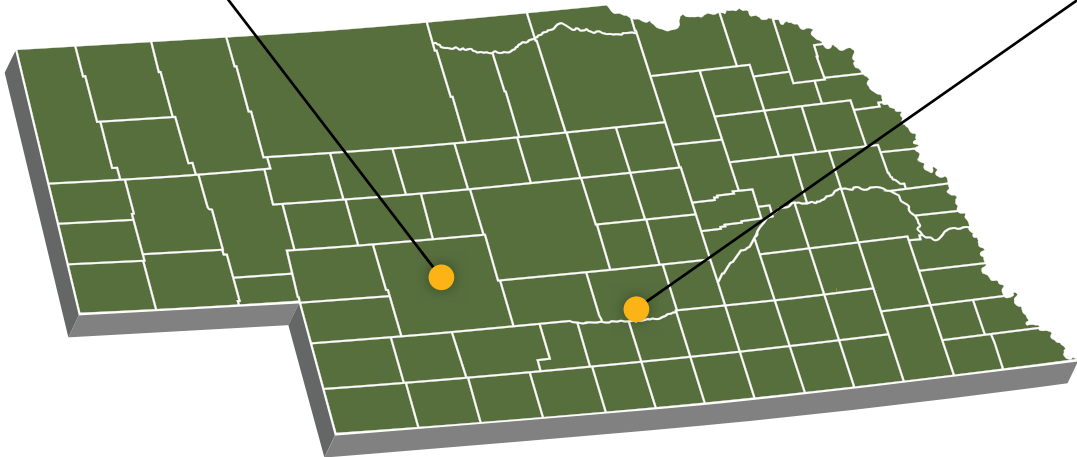


Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo

May 13 | Fort Kearny State Recreation Area

This fun event gives people of all ages and experience levels the chance to try their hand at archery, shooting sports, kayaking, rock climbing, fishing and many other outdoor activities. Additionally, various exhibits give visitors the chance to see Nebraska fish and wildlife species up close. While a park permit is required, all activities are offered free of charge.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND



Bluegill fishing at interstate lakes

All month; best in late May | Central Nebraska

Just off Interstate 80 in central Nebraska, particularly the Platte River Valley, lie several lakes that are popular spots for anglers. They also have great opportunities for bluegill this month, where they'll be hanging out in shallower water. To catch them, keep it simple — a bobber, a small hook and a piece of nightcrawler is all you need. [N](#)

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Put out hummingbird feeders

All month | Primarily eastern Nebraska

It's spring migration season for hummingbirds, so now is a good time to put out a feeder. A few things to remember: Clean the feeder every two to four days, consider buying an ant moat, and avoid pre-made nectar mixes with red dye. Instead, make your own, boiling water and adding sugar until you have a mixture that is four parts water, one part sugar. Store in the fridge.

ROBERT WINKLER



The Life of a Plover

1,500 Miles and Going

By Elsa Forsberg

I zoom in again on my computer screen, just to make sure the image is of a small shorebird called a piping plover. Two plastic bands decorate the bird's legs like bracelets, one gray and one blue. The combination of different colored bands serves as a coded name tag waiting to be deciphered. Squinting at the blue band, I read the white engraved text.

56A.

I sit back and gape at my computer screen. I know that bird. I held that bird in my left hand when I placed those bands on his legs. Now he's 1,500 miles away.

The last time I saw 56A was at a sand and gravel mine near Louisville, Nebraska. There, I watched him successfully hatch a nest of four chicks. That was in June. By July 27, plover 56A made a successful migration all the way to Quintana Roo, Mexico, where he happened to be spotted by another biologist. That's a pretty incredible journey for a bird that weighs only 50 grams. He'll do it again in a matter of months, making the return trip for the nesting season in the summer, when I hope to set eyes on him again and know that he's still alive.

As I record the sighting into a database, I wonder about 56A's future. Will he return to nest in the same place next summer? Will his chicks survive? What will be the next chapter of his story?

Banding Plovers

Piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) are listed as threatened on the federal and Nebraska state endangered species lists, and they live extraordinary lives. In the summer, piping plovers breed in a handful of regions across North America, including Nebraska. The basics for a piping plover nest are sand and water. Historically, that meant river sandbars. However, piping plovers have also found places to nest off the river: sand and gravel mines. As a by-product of the aggregate mining process, the mines incidentally provide flat expanses of sand surrounded by a small lake. With sand and water, the piping plovers find a spot to lay their nest and forage

Piping plover 56A on a beach at the Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna (APFF) Yum Balam in Quintana Roo, Mexico.

FRANCISCO CABB, APFF YUM BALAM





for invertebrates at the water’s edge. Some mines become lakeshore housing developments, which continue to host nesting piping plovers.

Amidst all the mining machinery and residential activity, the plovers hatch and raise chicks that will hopefully boost the declining population. The Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership exists to help, facilitating cooperation between the sand and gravel companies, developers, homeowners and researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As a graduate student at UNL, I work with the Partnership to protect and monitor piping plovers, their nests and chicks during the summer until they migrate south.

By using leg bands, researchers keep track of plovers like 56A. With only one year of records for 56A, we don’t know much about his life yet, but we do know more about many others. Most plovers from Nebraska spend the winter on beaches in the Gulf of Mexico and on the Atlantic Coast. If someone spots one of our piping plovers, the leg bands tell us which bird it is. In the summers, I record which birds return, some of them raising their fourth or fifth brood of chicks in so many years. Each time someone sees a bird, we add another line to its story.

Most of these stories are archived in a database and compiled in TPCP’s annual reports at ternandplover.unl.edu. Over the years, with more than 800 birds banded, we have compiled a lot of data. But it isn’t just data that can be summarized in a table. They are the life stories of piping plovers like 56A, who nest and raise chicks in unlikely places and migrate more than a thousand miles to do it all over again.

Piping Plover No. 89

Consider piping plover 89. Our first record of 89 comes from 2010, when he raised a nest at a lakeshore housing

development near Schuyler. The neighborhood was pretty quiet plover-wise that year, with 89’s nest the sole plover residence amid the houses being built on the sand next door.

In the second week of May, 89 and his mate chose a spot farthest from the home construction, dug a shallow depression into the sand and settled in. For four weeks, the pair took turns incubating four eggs and caring for their nest. During that time, the Partnership discovered them and placed a protective predator enclosure and informative signage around the nesting area. They also put colorful bands on 89’s

legs: metal, yellow and gray on the left leg with light blue, green and green on the right.

On a Monday in mid-June, the eggs hatched. Eighty-nine worked together with his mate to teach the chicks how to find insects in the sand and how to hide from predators in the small shadows under cottonwood seedlings. When the chicks were six days old, researchers weighed them — each about 7.2 grams — and gave them leg bands of their own. Marking chicks allows us to track the impact of plovers through generations.

We don’t know much about 89’s life in 2011 nor 2012. Our records pick back up in 2013, when the Partnership team found him on a Platte River sandbar near Ashland. While the researchers didn’t identify 89 with a nest that summer,

they observed him on the same sandbar three more times between June and July. The sandbar is about 45 miles, as the plover flies, from 89’s prior summer spot in Schuyler, and likely quite a different environment than the lakeshore housing development. Instead of home construction and human neighbors, 89 spent the summer of 2013 next to rushing river waters.

By 2014, plover 89 was back on the nest. This time, he made his summer home at a third kind of habitat: a sand and gravel mine. We don’t know what happened with 89’s nest that year. By June 17, the nest disappeared a week before its expected hatch date. Eighty-nine was still around by June 23, but no chicks were seen.



ABOVE: Plover held in the author’s hands, recently captured from the nest for banding. KATE ASMUS

OPPOSITE: A piping plover nest is a shallow bowl-like depression in the sand, which the parents line with pebbles. Most plover nests contain 3-5 eggs. The speckled eggs blend in with the sand, camouflaged from predators. ELSA FORSBERG



A day-old piping plover chick found in the nest, about to be weighed and receive leg bands. The white egg tooth, used to help the chick break out of the shell, can be seen on the tip of the beak. Plover chicks can leave the nest within 24 hours of hatching and start foraging. ELSA FORSBERG

So far in his life, 89 has spent time in several nesting habitat types: first a lakeshore housing development, then a river sandbar, then a sand and gravel mine. The Partnership identifies one other type of off-river nesting habitat: transition sites, a stage during which an old sand gravel mine becomes a lakeshore housing development. Eighty-nine spent the summers of 2015 and 2016 at a transition site near Ashland. As far as we know, he did not nest during those two years.

But, one day in May 2017, the team spotted a plover at this same transition site. Looking closer, the color band combination read: light blue flag on the upper left leg, yellow over gray on the lower left, metal band on the upper right, green over green on the lower right. The researchers continued to watch and observed the plover settle into a specific spot in the sand. That's when they knew: After two years, 89 was back on the nest. This time, 89 paired with

an unbanded plover, and together, they incubated 4 eggs. Interestingly, something happened with one of the eggs in the second week, and the pair decided to remove it and continue incubating the remaining three eggs.

On June 9, the researchers returned to find 89's nest empty. Eighty-nine and his mate were nearby protecting three chicks. The nest hatched! All three chicks were banded and named 738, 739 and 740. Eighty-nine and his partner took care of their young for several weeks, and all three chicks survived to fledge, earning their flight feathers for their first migration.

Eighty-nine has not been seen in Nebraska since 2017. However, we know that he is alive. While we aren't sure where 89 spends the summer months, we know where he spends his winters. His first winter sighting was in 2018,



Plover 89 looks for marine worms and other invertebrates along the beach on Matagorda Island in Texas. TAYLOR BENNETT, GULF COAST BIRD OBSERVATORY

when a researcher spotted him on the Matagorda Peninsula on the Gulf Coast of Texas. There, 89 spends much of his time foraging for marine worms and insects in the wet tidal sand without much disturbance from people. He returned in 2019, 2020 and 2021, where he was observed by the same researcher each time.

In 2022, we received a report that 89 was back on the Texas coast, having made the migration again. The researcher who observed 89 attached a photo to the email. I opened the image to find a plover and carefully matched the colored bands on its legs.

The incredibleness of 89's life hit me when I saw that photo. Since he was banded as an adult in 2010, that meant 89 was at least 13 years old in 2022. That's pretty old for a piping plover, a species with an average lifespan of 5 years. In

those 13 years, 89 had three nests at three different nesting site types and raised at least five chicks.

That's quite a legacy to contribute to the declining population of the threatened species. In seven summers, 89 experienced every nesting habitat that Nebraska had to offer: a river sandbar, a sand and gravel mine, a lakeshore housing development and a transition site. He's been seen by Partnership staff 18 times, and Texas coast researchers have seen him 11 times.

Wherever 89 is resting his wings now, it isn't the end of the story. 

If you spot a banded piping plover (or any other bird), you can help researchers by reporting the sighting to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory at pwr.usgs.gov/BBL/bblretrv/.

Bluegill Growth Rates

How long does it take to grow an 8-inch bluegill?

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

Pound for pound, or perhaps more accurately, ounce for ounce, bluegills put up a fight as good as any other fish swimming in Nebraska’s waters. Their abundance, the ease at which they are caught, and their quality as table fare make them one of the most sought-after fish we have. Creel surveys have shown that many anglers looking for fresh fish for dinner often have a self-imposed minimum length limit of around 8 inches.

Which begs the question: how long does it take to grow an 8-inch bluegill? That depends on many factors, including water quality, water body type, the other types of fish in the lake and even genetics. In the right circumstances, it can be fast. Sandhills lakes, some of the most fertile in the state, produce 8-inch bluegills in four to five years. At Lake Wanahoo, some fish reached a whopping 10 inches four years after the initial stocking. A Nebraska Game and Parks Commission study completed last year found that in southeastern Nebraska flood control reservoirs, it could take four to six years for bluegills to reach that length.

During their regular spring sampling using trap nets in 2021 and 2022, fisheries biologists collected five bluegills

in every 10-millimeter length category from four flood control reservoirs that have been built or renovated within the past seven years — Conestoga, Duck Creek, Flanagan and Stagecoach — and four other established fisheries — Czechland, Olive Creek, Swan 67 and Walnut Creek. In the lab, they determined their age by looking at the fish’s scales and their otolith, or ear bones, which both have annual growth rings.

The results weren’t surprising, but it did give a more precise breakdown in the differences in growth rates between new and established waters.

“At age 2, it’s about the same,” Matthew Perrion, the Game and Parks biologist who led the study, said of the growth in new versus old lakes. “At age 3 and 4, the fish in recently renovated lakes are growing faster.”

That faster growth meant that at age 4, bluegills in new reservoirs were nearly 8 inches long, compared to 7 inches in older reservoirs. “That’s important,” Perrion said.

The similarities in growth during the first two years could be related to fish density. Those fish live primarily on zooplankton, and there is only so much to go around.



Jerry Kane of Lincoln holds an 8-inch bluegill, the length many anglers prefer to keep.

Biologists may stock fewer bluegills in these waters in the future and see if growth rates of the younger fish increase.

At age 3 and beyond, fish feed on macroinvertebrates, primarily aquatic insects. These critters thrive in timber and terrestrial vegetation that is flooded when reservoirs fill, and also in aquatic vegetation that sprouts in both waters. That means there is plenty of habitat to produce food for the fish, and plenty to go around.

Those habitats decline as reservoirs age, and fish growth slows. At Swan 57, bluegills rarely, if ever, reach 8 inches.



Game and Parks fisheries biologists sampled five age classes of bluegills when they surveyed Stagecoach Lake in May 2022. The fish ranged in length from 3 to 9 inches.

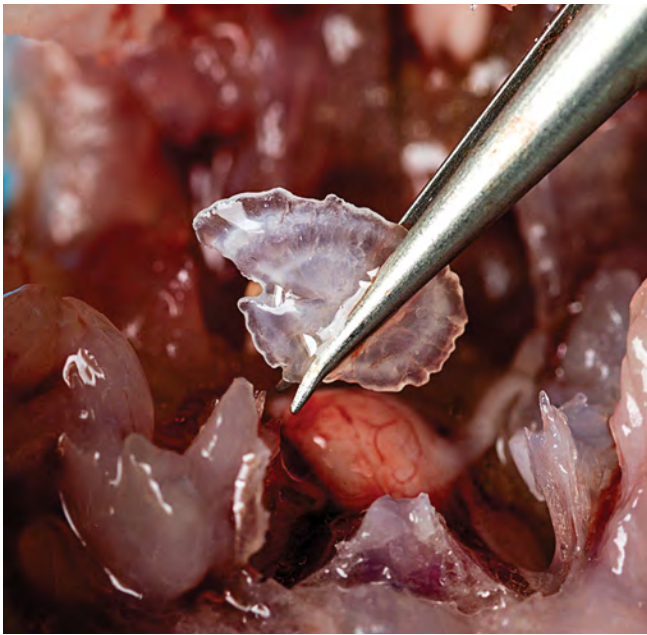
With common carp present, no aquatic vegetation, and poor water quality, there are few insects for them to eat. “They’re a sight-feeding fish, too, and its super-turbid water, so they can hardly see the food they’re trying to get,” Perrion said.

The findings reinforce the precept behind Game and Parks’ Aquatic Habitat Program. “The overarching theme is water quality,” said Aaron Blank, fisheries supervisor in southeastern Nebraska. “If you have good water quality, you’re going to have good bluegill growth. But usually, the bluegill fishery is never going to be better than it is in those first few years.”

The data also showed once bluegills hit 8 inches, no matter the age of the reservoir, growth plateaus. That might be another density-related bottleneck, with many fish competing for the same food resource. It may also be that the genetically superior, faster-growing fish are the first to be harvested, leaving slower-growing fish to reproduce. Flanagan Lake will be the first test in the state of an 8-inch maximum length limit on bluegills, something biologists believe will lead to more 9-inch and even 10-inch Master Angler bluegills.

“If we’re producing 8-inch bluegills, we’re pretty darned happy,” Blank said. “That’s what anglers prefer. I always tell people to keep what you’re catching the most of. If for every 15 7-inchers you’re catching, you get one 8-incher, just keep some 7 inchers.”

And that, he said, could lead to more hard-fighting, big bluegills. [N](#)



Matthew Perrion uses tweezers to remove an otolith from a bluegill, the growth rings on which show it to be a 3-year-old fish. As part of their growth study, biologists aged bluegills using both otoliths and scales, and found they often underestimated the age of older fish using scales. The improved accuracy will make it their standard for aging bluegills and other panfish.

Memorial Stadium Turns 100

By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska

Memorial Stadium groundbreaking,
April 26, 1923. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2758-21-3



What's the proper way to break ground for the new home of the Cornhuskers? With a team and a plow, of course!

University officials broke ground on Memorial Stadium on April 26, 1923. An estimated thousand people showed up to hear speeches and watch Chancellor Samuel Avery ceremonially plow a furrow.

There was a recent precedent for this. A year earlier, Governor Samuel McKelvie had plowed a furrow to break ground for the new state capitol.

Naturally, these groundbreaking ceremonies were publicity stunts, but they had a greater degree of authenticity than modern-day groundbreakings in which executives don shiny hardhats and turn over pre-dug dirt with golden shovels. Both McKelvie and Avery had actual farming experience. McKelvie was a farmer and cattleman who edited *The Nebraska Farmer* before serving as governor. Avery's parents had farmed near Crete when he was growing up, and he was a professor of agricultural chemistry before becoming chancellor.

In the 1920s, driving a horse-drawn plow was a way of demonstrating that both the capitol and the football stadium were connected to lives of ordinary Nebraskans, and that the state's leaders were proud of Nebraska's agricultural identity.

The construction of Memorial Stadium was a risky move. The wooden bleachers of Nebraska Field were torn down to make way, but it was not clear that the new stadium would be finished in time for football season — or that fundraisers would bring in enough money to pay the contractors. They would have to do it without tax dollars.



No pressure here, freshmen! These signs adorned the Temple building on the university campus, 1923.

HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2758-21-3X



Memorial Stadium under construction, 1923. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2758-21-8

Fundraising began in 1920 for a grand World War I memorial that was to include a museum, stadium and gymnasium. But the economy fell on hard times in the early 1920s. The legislature not only refused to fund the project, but cut the university's operating budget. Meanwhile, opposition mounted across the state as local groups and American Legion chapters feared that fundraising for Lincoln would make it that much harder to build their own local war memorials.

The university scaled back its plans, dropping everything but the 30,000-seat stadium. As head of the university's alumni association, a man named Harold Holtz led an aggressive fundraising drive that used high-pressure tactics on students, faculty, alumni and communities.

"On numerous occasions Holtz stated that none of the students had been coerced into pledging, but the peer pressure must have been tremendous," writes Michelle Fagan in a 1998 issue of *Nebraska History*. She goes on to describe

how Holtz and his team threatened and even sued people who didn't fulfill their pledges.

Was the stadium finished in time for the first home game of the 1923 season? Close enough. Contractors warned that they would not be held responsible for injuries when the university opened the partly finished stadium on October 13, 1923. No fans were hurt amid the scaffolding — and a few even climbed atop the unfinished upper balcony — but the Oklahoma Sooners did not fare so well. The Sooners became

the first team to lose a game at Memorial Stadium, falling to the Huskers 24-0.

Memorial Stadium was officially dedicated the following week, when Kansas played Nebraska to a 0-0 tie. Notre Dame was the first opponent to score in the new stadium, but one touchdown wasn't enough for Coach Knute Rockne's "Four Horsemen"-led team, which fell to the Huskers 14-7 on November 10.

Who was the first team to beat Nebraska in Memorial Stadium? It's not easy to guess.

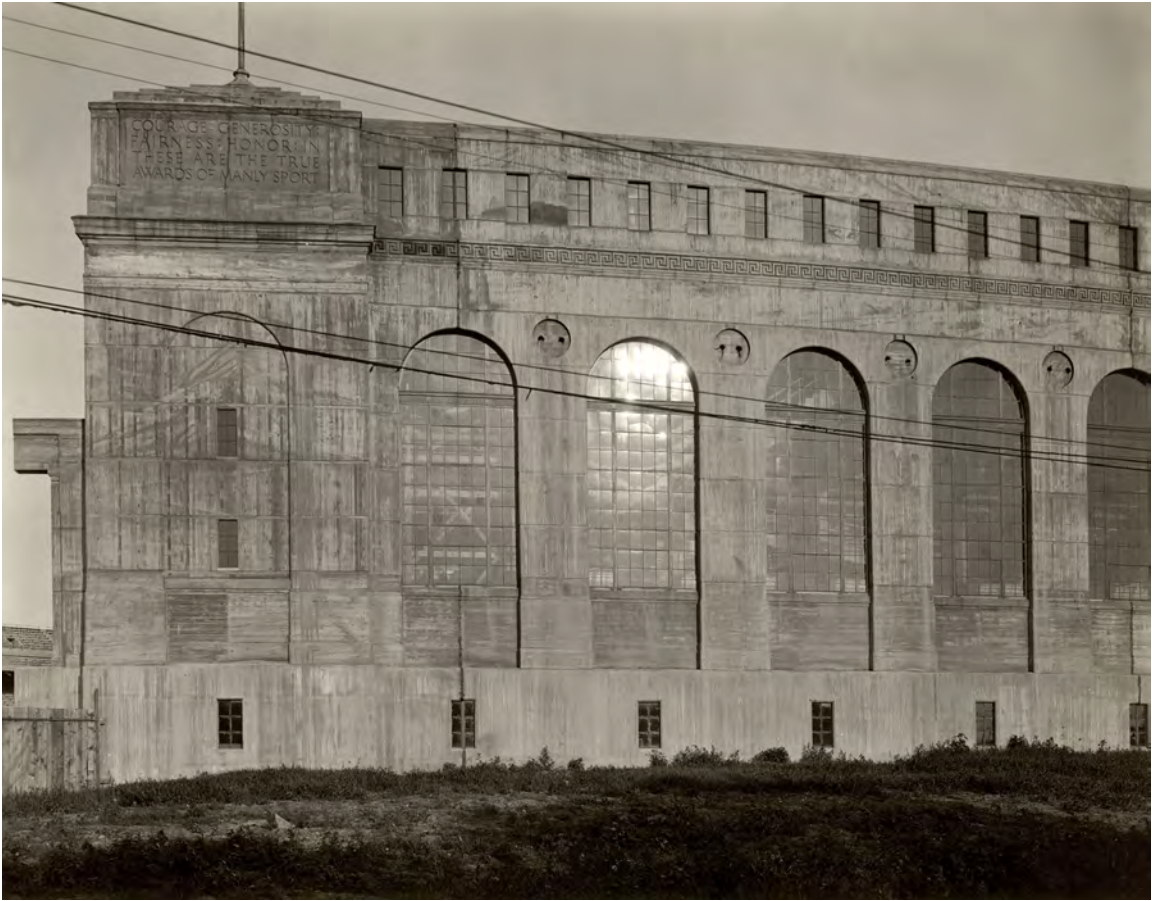
It was Syracuse. The Orangemen defeated the Huskers 7-0 on November 24, 1923, before an estimated crowd of 35,000. [N](#)

Visit *History Nebraska's website* at history.nebraska.gov.

RIGHT: Almost a year later, the outer walls are nearly complete in this August 18, 1924 photo.
HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2758-21-A

FAR RIGHT: November 1953. The stadium was expanded and enclosed starting in the 1960s.
HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2758-21-19

BOTTOM: An early view of the stadium, circa 1923-24. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2758-21-13



The Perfect Wildflower

Why Dotted Gayfeather is a Contender

Story and photos by Chris Helzer

What would you want if we were trying to design the perfect wildflower? On my list of attributes, I'd include beautiful blossoms, abundant resources for pollinators, and an ability to spread itself around the landscape — but not in an aggressive way. As a bonus, it would be helpful if it could withstand drought and heavy grazing pressure. We don't want to have to coddle our perfect wildflower, after all. It should be able to survive without any extra effort from us.

Gosh, wouldn't a plant like that be wonderful?

Yes, it is.

The incredible dotted gayfeather (*Liatris punctata*) doesn't get nearly enough attention, given its near perfection. Its only flaw might be that it doesn't do well in well-watered productive conditions. It scoffs at dark fluffy humus and ample soil moisture. Nutrients are for the weak. Dotted gayfeather thrives best in dry dirt the color of faded leather work gloves. Out here in the Plains, we survive on stubbornness and spite.

I've long appreciated dotted gayfeather, but my admiration has grown even stronger in recent years as I've paid more attention to its toughness and resilience. The species grows abundantly in our family prairie in southern Hamilton County, flourishing even on previously-farmed loess slopes where mighty big bluestem tops out its growth below the height of my knee caps. During periods of drought, it seems to carry on as if nothing is happening, blooming prolifically



Dotted gayfeather in drought-stricken restored prairie at the Nature Conservancy's Platte River Prairies.

when most of its neighbors are wilted and brown.

Cattle will graze dotted gayfeather, but it's far from their first choice in most situations. It has stiff, narrow and pointy leaves that must not scream out "dinnertime" to

cattle, though deer, pronghorn, and sheep think it's pretty tasty. Unless it's grazed all the way to the ground, though, the plant still tends to send up a flowering spike. Even more impressively, after a long bout of heavy grazing ends, dotted

gayfeather often responds by shooting up extra flowering stems the following year. Sometimes, those post-grazing plants are humongous. I've counted more than 50 flower spikes on a single plant in a prairie that looked like a pool



Dotted gayfeather produces numerous pink florets.

table a year before.

Stubbornness and spite. Drought doesn't phase dotted gayfeather and grazing just makes it stronger. If that's not the essence of the Great Plains, I don't know what is.

At the same time, the toughness of dotted gayfeather isn't immediately obvious when you first encounter its late summer showy flowers. Whomever long ago named the plant after cheerful avian plumage wasn't commenting on the resilience of the plant in the face of stress. They were focused on its prolific and beautiful blossoms, densely clustered along

a long, slender stalk. The other common name for the plant is blazing star, which aptly describes the shape and vibrance of its florets. Dotted gayfeather is a conspicuously gorgeous wildflower.

The flamboyant flowers of dotted gayfeather are more than just window dressing. They attract numerous pollinator insects to feed from the plants' pollen and nectar. Bees, and particularly bumble bees, are drawn to the blossoms in huge numbers, along with butterflies and other insects. Of course, those hungry pollinators also benefit from the fact that



Bumble bees, like this brown-belted one, are particularly drawn to the blossoms of dotted gayfeather, as seen at the Nature Conservancy's Platte River Prairies. The plant's resilience makes it available regardless of weather, grazing or other challenges.

dotted gayfeather can grow under stresses other plants can't handle. During times of drought, grazing, or other difficult conditions, dotted gayfeather comes through for those who depend upon it.

I'm not sure dotted gayfeather is the perfect wildflower. There are a lot of contenders for that title, after all. Either way, the plant is a wonderful combination of resilience and beauty that's worthy of admiration. If dotted gayfeather was a person, we'd all want to hang out with them — or at least watch them on TV. Tough, stubborn, and spiteful, but also

flamboyant and generous? Come on! Characters like that make the world worth living in. [N](#)

Chris Helzer is the Nebraska Director of Science for the Nature Conservancy and is based in Aurora.

When he isn't searching for obscure subject matter to photograph and write about, he conducts research and captures lessons from the Conservancy's land management and restoration work.

Chris is a regular contributor to Nebraskaland Magazine.

CAMPING ETIQUETTE FOR BEGINNERS

By Julie Geiser

Camping is a great way to enjoy nature, recreate, and recharge, but while you're at a campground there is always some etiquette to follow to make sure everyone has a good time every time.

Not Too Early or Too Late

Try to arrive at your campsite well before dark. This gives you time to set up camp while it's still light out, which is much easier than trying in the dark. And when possible, don't pack up and leave too early in the morning.

A Little Privacy, Please

It's okay to be friendly and meet your weekend neighbors, but always respect their camping space. Don't cut through occupied campsites; stay on paths or roadways and give all your camping neighbors some privacy at their camping locations.

Limit the Shenanigans

Even though you're on vacation, and you may want to burn some midnight oil around the campfire at night, be respectful to others by abiding by

quiet time rules. Quiet hours in many campgrounds are from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. every day. You can still enjoy the crackling of the fire but keep the shenanigans down, turning off generators and music and keeping lights to a minimum.

Footprints

Leave only your footprints. Be respectful of the area and the wildlife by keeping food and trash picked up. Dispose of waste in proper receptacles and minimize your impact on wild places. Pick up after others if needed.

For Human Consumption Only

Don't feed the wildlife, for it encourages them to return for more food.

Always Extinguish

Never leave your campfire unattended and keep fires at a manageable size, preferably in fire rings provided in the camping area. Always completely extinguish or put out your fire before you go to bed or leave the area.

Leave the Firewood

Do not bring firewood with you. Transporting firewood can spread diseases and harmful insects such as the emerald ash borer that destroys trees and forests. Buy local firewood and leave any unused firewood at the campsite for others.

Minimal Barking Please

Camping with our four-legged friends can be awesome and sometimes difficult depending on the dog. Some dogs are mellow and well-behaved, while others are unruly. Always have you dog on a six-foot leash to keep them from wandering where they shouldn't be, and remember that no one wants to smell or step in the gifts your dog leaves behind. If your dog is a barker, leave them at home with a trusted friend or kennel. Don't leave dogs unattended to prevent any mishaps from occurring.

Part of enjoying your adventure in Nebraska's great outdoors is making sure the folks beside you are enjoying it just as much as you.



Tent campers, like these at Smith Falls State Park in Cherry County, enjoy good neighbors. JULIE GEISER

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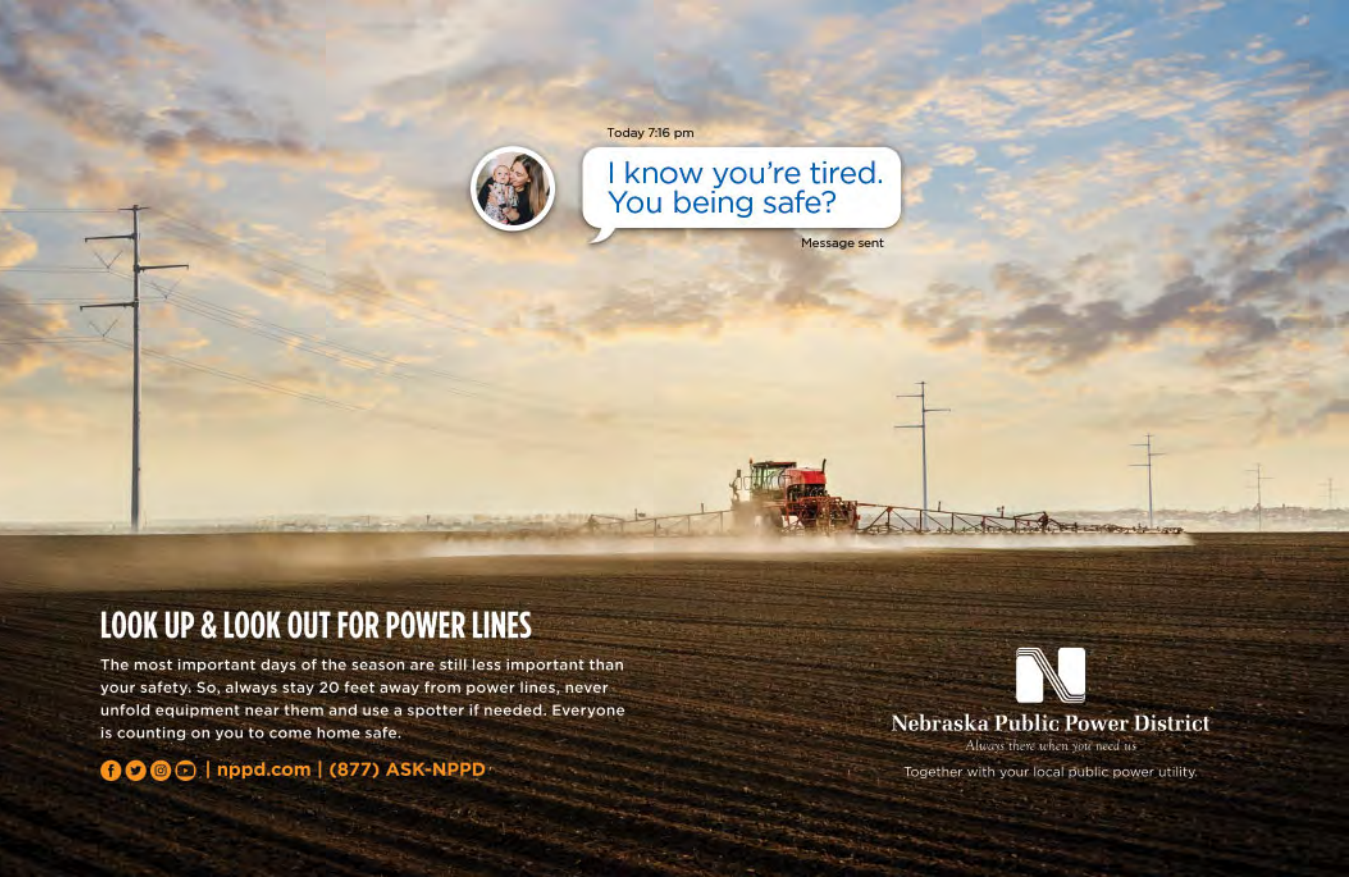
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.410 TURKEYS

By Ryan Sparks

Three years ago, I started taking my nephews turkey hunting on our family farm during Nebraska's youth season. The first year, they showed up excited and ready for opening day the following morning. My brother-in-law had bought a new 20-gauge shotgun and we set up a target so they could get some practice. Eleven-year-old Cole shot first. When he pulled the trigger he was thumped backwards. With tears in his eyes, he told us the recoil was too much. Excitement quickly turned to fear as he, and his nine-year-old brother Abe, didn't know if they wanted to hunt anymore.

Trying to find a solution, we drove to Cabela's and purchased a heavy tripod that would help reduce the recoil. Shooting was still not a fun experience for the boys, but it made it manageable, especially since we switched to target loads during practice, saving the higher-recoiling shells for the moment of truth. Abe was able to shoot his first turkey from the tripod, although he was nervous to shoot when the time came.

The next year, I did some research and bought a .410 shotgun specifically made for turkey hunting. I could tell my nephews were skeptical, but with the first shot, Cole center-punched the pop can he was aiming at. Better yet, he smiled and said it barely kicked more than the .22 rifle he hunted squirrels with. Abe quickly had a try and agreed. Even their younger brother Luke, age seven at the time, thought it was a piece of cake. Cole shot a pair of turkeys with it the following week.

The experience taught me that .410 shotguns are a great

option for getting kids into the turkey woods before they can handle the kick of a larger shotgun. And now with the introduction of Tungsten Super Shot (TSS), ethical shots with a .410 extend out to 40-yards. TSS is over 50% denser than lead, doubling the downrange energy and allowing hunters to drop three shot sizes with equal lethality. Dropping shot sizes means more pellets in each shell, 28% more to be exact. The effectiveness of TSS played a large part in changing Nebraska's minimum shot size for turkeys several years back. In fact, a three-inch .410 shell loaded with #9 TSS shot will outperform many lead turkey loads of a larger shot size. These days, you could shoot your first turkey with a .410 and never have any reason to switch to a larger bore shotgun.

It's the reason many gun manufacturers are now making turkey-specific shotguns chambered in .410. These shotguns are also generally inexpensive, with several models selling for around \$300. Also, don't let the focus on turkeys fool you; they work great on squirrels, rabbits, quail, and pop cans.

Expense has been the main objection leveled at TSS, with

some manufacturers selling boxes containing five shells for over \$40. I agree that shells costing over \$5 a piece are expensive, but how many times is a youth hunter going to shoot during a turkey season? If you practice with considerably less expensive target loads, and save TSS shells for hunting, an extra \$5-10 a season is well worth it to get kids in the turkey woods without any fear or apprehension of pulling the trigger.



Abe Lovewell of Maquoketa, Iowa, is all smiles after shooting his first longbeard. RYAN SPARKS

A TURKEY MULTITASK

By Jeff Kurrus

The majority of the turkeys I've shot have come between 10 AM and 2 PM. Lunchtime is primetime, that time of the day when more than a few gobblers find themselves alone and insecurity begins to creep in.

Sometimes, though, it's hard to stay in the woods that long. From real-world obligations to simple impatience, it's easy to leave the woods and re-enter normal life during some of the most productive turkey hunting hours of the day.

Here are a few ideas to keep you afield, just make sure you're occasionally calling as you multitask.

Shooting Lanes

If you'll be hunting the same areas during deer archery season, carry a handsaw in the woods and start cutting shooting lanes. The same greenery you see in May will still be there in early September. Also, clear brush along the path to your stand so you can walk in quieter during the fall.

Cameras

This also remains a common-sense time to re-start your trail cameras. Replace batteries and set the new cameras along the shooting lanes you're creating.

Tree ID

Knowing the difference between a mature bur oak, cottonwood, walnut and the rest of the trees in the woods will not only aid your deer hunting, but it will also help your squirrel hunting. Knowing which trees will be dropping food, and at what time, will help plan fall hunting trips.

Shed Hunt

Why not look for sheds while turkey hunting? I'm sure I've ran off a bird or two traipsing through the woods, but I'm sure I've killed many more just because I found something to do. Shed hunting is one of those activities. Walk trails and also look near fence and creek crossings.

Just Be

If your world is like everyone else's I know, it's in constant motion. I know parents of young children, like myself, who rarely have a quiet moment to themselves and retirees who don't even know how they ever held a job because of how filled their lives now are. But in the turkey woods, you can just be. Listen, watch, or close your eyes. I've been awakened more than once by a gobble from a nearby tom.

On one of my best turkey hunts, my then 8-year-old son and I found a broken tree limb and a couple of old walnuts from the previous winter and started a very competitive

game of baseball. After a really nice hit up the middle by my son and a controversial play at the plate, I pulled the box call from my pocket and gave a scratch.

The tom's reply was distant, so we continued the inning. Yet when he gobbled again, we postponed the at-bat and hunkered down. Ten minutes later, we were posing for photos with the year's first tom.

Find some reason to stay in the woods this time of year.



When turkey multitasking, hunters should always have a box call nearby. For both its noise level and ease of use, it's an ideal call to periodically use when hunting. JEFF KURRUS



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Pheasant hunting, 1979

Pictured is my brother-in-law Kipp Petersen (left) and myself with my Brittany spaniel, Rusty. Taken in my backyard in Lexington in 1979 with five pheasants. I was 26 years old and hunting pheasants before the pivots came and changed the landscape of pheasant hunting. I am 69 now and miss those good old days.

– Jeff O'Donnell, Hastings



Upland game hunting, 1983

Hunting with the McKeone clan, October, 1983, Cozad.

Pictured with birds are (top, left) Dave and Shirley Martin from Florida, front row (left) Mark, Joe, Tod, and Kert McKeone and Tom Morrison who worked for Nebraska Game and Parks and ran Buffalo Bill Scouts Rest Ranch.

Joe McKeone was Dave Martin's best friend from high school in Hastings, class of '48. Two day hunt was one of the last for the two, first for Shirley. Limited both days.

– David W. Martin, Hernando, Florida

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, Nebraskaland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to Tim.Reigert@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.



First deer, 1963

This is a photo of my dad, Wyman, and me taken in 1963. First deer taken for both of us! We were hunting in Nance County, near Palmer. These two mule deer does were taken on the last day of the season. Back then, it was buck only, but you were allowed to shoot a doe on the last day. I shot mine with a new Model 70 .270 Winchester and dad was shooting a standard, un-altered 1903 Springfield 30-06 service rifle.

– Steve Stedman, Beatrice



Deer hunting near Alma, 1982

My dad, Charles Small, lived in Alma and loved to hunt and fish. In 1982 he took his grandsons Denny and Mick deer hunting. The photo shows that it was a success. Denny lives in Kearney and Mick in Hastings. They are my nephews. Dad bagged his last deer in 1986 when he was 80.

– Gary Small, Vermillion, South Dakota



THE PRAIRIE CHICKENFOOT PHOTO

By Gerry Steinauer

Several years ago I was taking closeup photos of bird feathers, mainly those of game birds, for a Nebraskaland photo spread. While photographing a greater prairie chicken I took several shots of its feet, and they looked interesting in the fading sunlight. I thought that maybe I could tie one of them into the photo spread, for the upper foot is feathered. The photo did not make the cut, but Jeff Kurrus, Nebraskaland editor, said he liked the photo: “Find a way to use it in the magazine.”

The big question, however, was how? How does one wrap a story around a photo of a prairie chicken foot?

I thought about doing a short natural history article on prairie chicken feet. I discovered that the feathers on the upper foot helps the native grassland bird retain warmth during the cold of winter, the tooth-like projections of skin on the toes help it walk on snow,

and the long toenails are used for scratching and digging for food, but that’s not enough information for an article.

I then showed the photo to a hunting friend and he suggested I do a photo spread on the feet of game birds — ducks, geese and pheasants — similar to my feather photo spread. I had my doubts that Kurrus would go for a photo exhibit on birds’ feet, and to make it a moot point, I never got around to photographing other birds’ feet.

I was out ideas. Then, a while back, Kurrus mentioned that he needed photos for “The Last Stop” in future magazine issues. I started pondering and the prairie chicken foot photo popped into my mind. The Last Stop is a one-pager and includes little text; I wouldn’t need much of a story.

Enjoy the photo.



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