



After finding a photographer at the pasture gate instead of the feed wagon, a gray horse on an equally gray day near Broadwater on the North Platte River indicates that it's ready for spring to arrive.
Photo by Bob Grier.

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NEBRASKAland

March 2009



discovering
**Martin's
Reach**

PLUS SNOW GEESE - a conservation inaction • a walk in the WILD CITY
this DAM HOUSE • the arrival of Nebraska's RINGNECK pheasants • CARRION beetles
Sandhill CRANES at Lewellen



NEBRASKAland

Volume 87, Number 2, March 2009

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The sign next to the road says "Dead End." But what you'll find at the end of the road – Martin's Reach Wildlife Management Area – is far from dead.

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Sleeping atop a river is not for everyone, but for this family from Barneston, there's no place they'd rather call home.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

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When pheasants were first introduced in Nebraska will probably never be determined, but sportsmen and bird fanciers were rearing and releasing them into the wild at least as early as the 1890s. By JON FARRAR

42 Cranes on the North Platte

Most wildlife enthusiasts know of the annual spring rendezvous of lesser sandhill cranes that gather each March on a relatively short section of the central Platte Valley. Few know, however, of the smaller numbers of cranes that gather along the North Platte River near Lewellen.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BOB GRIER



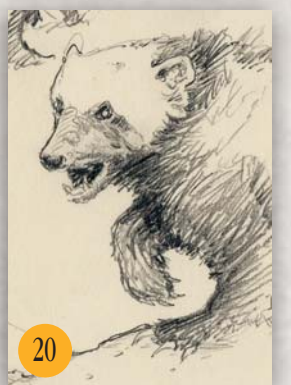
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Cover: In a demonstration of speed, grace and maneuverability, northern pintail drakes follow a hen on a courtship flight above the Platte River at Martin's Reach Wildlife Management Area on a March morning. Photo by Eric Fowler.

Opposite: In early-March, a great horned owl peeks from a cottonwood tree nest site in Lancaster County. Photo by Bill Hager.

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John Geistlinger poses with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Conestoga wagon in front of his house around 1966 in Lincoln.

NEBRASKAland in Afghanistan

I'm currently serving with a small group of nine Nebraska National Guard personnel supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in Bagram, Afghanistan. Our Unit; Detachment 43, OSA, is based out of Lincoln and is conducting aircraft transportation support of personnel and cargo. Since our arrival here, we've enjoyed receiving copies of the *NEBRASKAland Magazine* which we all peruse to remind us of where we come from and what we miss about home.

Recently, in the January/February issue, I noticed the article covering the *NEBRASKAland Calendar* and its inception and history. I observed the picture of "Neb" and "Raska" – the two oxen that were teamed to the Conestoga wagon. I was taken back to memories when I was five to seven years of age and my father, Dale (Bud) Geistlinger, would sometimes arrive home with a trailer loaded with a massive blue-and-white wagon pulled by a brown-and-white International Travelall truck. He, Bill Brazil and perhaps others would travel around Nebraska attending local city parades and promoting the Commission's charter.

What I remember the most was that I thought I was king for a day when the wagon was parked in front of our house prior to his departures.

A little bit of commonality is that my father helped construct animated

displays and sometimes incorporated taxidermy work that the magazine's current art director's father, John Reigert Jr., provided. Now a former Nebraska Army Guard aviator named William Hager, is providing excellent photography of our great state and its natural resources to the magazine [see page 2 of this issue], for which we search with interest in each publication.

It's a small world and we enjoy the great work of all the staff involved with the magazine. Their efforts do affect Nebraskans far away and provide positive memories and images of "Nebraska - The Good Life," which makes our home state seem that much closer to us because of their work.

Thank you!

John A. Geistlinger

CW4, AV, NEARNG

Aviation Safety Officer



From left: Kimberly Moore, Jeff Caniglia, Burdette Chappell, Jeremy Cutsor, Marty Adkins, John Geistlinger (myself), Matthew Greathouse, Penny Winterburn and Eugene Coppersmith.

Saving Fish and Money

A friend of mine, Charlie Long, a former resident of your state, passes along every *NEBRASKAland Magazine* when he finishes with them. I very much enjoy the writing. I have never been in Nebraska but I worked in fishery research laboratory at the USFWS Fish Genetics Laboratory at Ranch "A" outside Beulah, Wyoming between 1974-1980.

Your article, "Saving Fish for Fisherman" in the November 2008 *NEBRASKAland* hit a cord. I worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service between September 1955 and February 1984, and a few of those years I was on field duty. You mentioned seining crews pooling their money for lunch and to "buy a loaf of bread, lunch meat and pop."

When we worked in the field between 1957-1960, our lunches consisted of the same. Per diem was \$8 to \$10 per day. During one period we ate our meals with the hired man and his family for "3 squares" a day. Another time we brought our sleeping bags and slept in a farmer's hay shed.

Reg Morgan

Coulee Dam, Washington

Portraits from the Past

I really like reading your magazine, especially the portraits of the past section. I love seeing the old photos that you guys post. It gives a fun glimpse of what Nebraska's landscape, hunting and fishing used to be like. I hope to see more good pictures in the upcoming issues. Keep up the good work.

Ryan Ehrman

Omaha, Nebraska

Send your comments to:

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NEBRASKAland Magazine

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Lincoln, NE 68503

or e-mail doug.carroll@nebraska.gov

Please include your postal address and telephone number.

Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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Red Headed Woodpecker, Pheasant, and Gold Finch photos courtesy of Don Brockmeier



Duck and Dumplings

Jeff Kurrus

In November of 2008, the *NEBRASKAland* article “Wrapped in Bacon” revealed a small list of simple recipes for the layman chef. However, there wasn’t enough room to share all of my favorite recipes, and by this point in the year there are probably still a few pieces of duck, goose or fall turkey left to cook.

Warm the oven to 250 degrees and in it place the meat in a pan covered with aluminum foil. Allow the meat to cook for seven hours or until it easily falls off of the bone. Boil two cups of water in a medium pan and add a can of separated biscuits to the water, constantly stirring until thick. Add one teaspoon of butter, then pour in the meat and drippings from the goose pan, salt and pepper to taste, and stir constantly until the dumplings become thick. Serve.

Rivers and Wildlife Celebration

The 39th annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration will be held this year from March 20-22 at the Holiday Inn in Kearney.

Presented by Audubon’s Rowe Sanctuary, Audubon Nebraska and the Nebraska Partnership for All-Bird Conservation, the celebration includes presentations by world renown birders and nature photographers, including lifelong Nebraskan Joel Sartore, a photographer for National Geographic, as well as field-trips to a variety of local birding destinations, including Platte River blinds, to experience the sandhill crane migration.

For more information about the conference, contact the Spring Creek

Prairie Audubon Center at (402) 797-2301. Register on or before February 28 to take advantage of discount prices.

Two Rivers Trout Lake Opens March 14

Two Rivers State Recreation Area’s popular trout-fishing lake will open March 14 this year instead of the traditional April 1 opening day in order to give anglers more opportunity to catch these tasty coldwater fish before the lake’s water temperatures get too warm for them to survive. More than 11,000 10- to 11-inch rainbow trout will be available on the season opener.

The trout lake is open from 7 a.m. to sunset each day. To fish there, anglers must purchase a trout tag from the Two Rivers office. Each tag sells for \$4 and allows the taking of four trout. An angler may purchase a maximum of three tags each day and is allowed 12 trout in possession. Family tags are also available that allow an adult angler to be accompanied by two children under the age of 16, but the group bag limit is still limited to four trout per tag.

Two Rivers trout anglers age 16 and older must possess a current Nebraska fishing license and all vehicles entering the area are required to have a current Nebraska park entry permit.

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

I’m just starting on my state income tax return and the only good thing about it is that I can help the outdoors at the same time by giving back part of my refund to the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund. On the state form, there is a peregrine falcon logo – that’s where you can help fund projects that benefit our wildlife, fish and plant resources. Hunters and anglers contribute dollars for wildlife by buying permits, but by law that money can ONLY be spent for game



Joel Sartore

PHOTO BY KATIE JOSEPH



NEBRASKA Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever PRESCRIBED BURN WORKSHOPS

Burning for Better Habitat

PRESCRIBED BURN WORKSHOPS ARE BEING HOSTED BY SEVERAL GROUPS ACROSS THE STATE THIS YEAR AND ARE SUMMARIZED IN THIS LISTING. WORKSHOPS ARE DESIGNED TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE AND INSTRUCTION FOR BOTH PEOPLE WITH BURNING EXPERIENCE AS WELL AS THOSE WITHOUT ANY PREVIOUS BURNING EXPERIENCE. PLAN TO ATTEND ONE OF THESE WORKSHOPS TO GAIN MORE EXPERIENCE.

FEBRUARY 11, 2009 - 10:00 AM TO 3:30 PM CST
FRANKLIN COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS, AG PAVILION - FRANKLIN, NE

FEBRUARY 17, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM MST
OLE’S BIG GAME STEAKHOUSE, I80 EXIT 145 - PAXTON, NE

FEBRUARY 18, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM CST
DARN SMALL PUB, 102 WEST RAILROAD STREET - EUSTIS, NE

FEBRUARY 19, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM CST
OCONTO COMMUNITY CENTER, GRAND AVENUE - OCONTO, NE

FEBRUARY 20, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM CST
PLEASANTON COMMUNITY CENTER, 202 NORTH SYCAMORE - PLEASANTON, NE

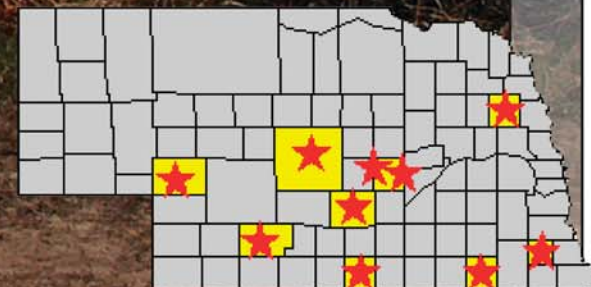
FEBRUARY 21, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM MST
VFW HALL, 2337 NORTH K - FAIRBURY, NE

FEBRUARY 24, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM CST
ELBA COMMUNITY CENTER - ELBA, NE

MARCH 3, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM CST
THE GATHERING PLACE - ST. PAUL, NE

MARCH 5, 2009 - 10:00 AM TO 4:00 PM CST
JOHNSON COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS - TECUMSEH, NE

MARCH 6, 2009 - 9:00 AM TO 4:00 PM CST
PIZZA RANCH, 245 SOUTH MAIN STREET - WEST POINT, NE



FOR DETAILS AND TO REGISTER: WWW.NEBRASKAPF.COM

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3 on 3 Basketball Tournament • Antique Car & Tractor Show
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species. Well, 95% of our wildlife is nongame, such as flying squirrels, river otters and bald eagles, so this tax checkoff is the main source of funding for those species. Only 2% of us taxpayers are pitching in. You can give as little as one buck – that's like sacrificing a few cans of pop a year! I think I'll put in ten.

Cornhusker Trapshoot Expanding

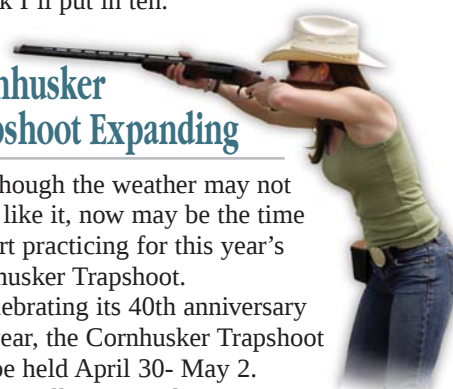
Although the weather may not seem like it, now may be the time to start practicing for this year's Cornhusker Trapshoot.

Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, the Cornhusker Trapshoot will be held April 30- May 2. Traditionally open only to 7th through 12th grade students who are academically eligible, go to school full time and who have successfully completed a certified hunter safety course, this year's shoot has been expanded to include sixth-grade students who are at least 12 years old and meet the aforementioned requirements.

Last year 1,681 shooters competed in the Cornhusker, making it the largest meet of its kind in the nation. The junior high meet (open to 6th through 8th grade students) begins at 9 a.m. on April 30 and consists of 100 16-yard targets. The senior high events (9th through 12th grade students) will be conducted May 1-2 and consist of 100 16-yard targets on the first day, followed by 100 handicap targets on the second, with the handicap yardage being determined by dividing the 16-yard score by four and rounding up any fractions. The minimum handicap yardage will be the 18-yard line.

More than 75 awards and prizes plus 172 medals will be presented at this year's meet. The deadline for entering is April 22, and there is a \$40 entry fee per high school shooter and \$20 entry fee for junior high contestants.

Anyone interested in participating should contact their local gun or 4-H club to find out if they are involved in the high school trap program. If there is no program in their area, they may participate as an individual or try to recruit enough nearby students to form



a 5-person team, but a parent or other adult must volunteer to be the team's coach. Many teams across the state participate in weekend shoots for the month or two leading up to the Cornhusker, and these are good opportunities to practice and pick up valuable shooting tips and experience.

For more information, write Rocky Hoffmann, Shoot Director, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 301 E. State Farm Rd., North Platte, NE 69101-0430, or call (308) 535-8025 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. You can also e-mail him at rocky.hoffmann@nebraska.gov.

Shed Hunting

Doug Carroll

If you're looking for a late-winter activity to get outside and perhaps get you some much needed exercise, why not try shed hunting?

Every winter, buck deer across Nebraska begin shedding their antlers around the first part of January to start getting ready for the new pair that will begin growing that upcoming spring. These "sheds" then lay around until rodents chew them up for the nutrients they contain, Mother Nature works her magic and causes them to eventually fall apart, or someone comes

along and picks them up.

Antlers make great decorations, can be used in a variety of craft projects and make great incentives to practice with your weapon of choice for next year's deer season. Shed hunting is also a great way to scout for deer.

While sheds can be found anytime after the bucks have started to drop their antlers, March is a great time to look because the ground is often free of snow and new vegetation has not yet begun to grow, which makes finding the antlers much easier. Don't get

discouraged if you don't find one right away – it's not as bad as finding a needle in a haystack, but it can feel that way sometimes. Here are some tips that might help:

Begin your search in areas you know bucks and other deer have been seen, especially deer wintering yards, feeding areas and the trails between feeding areas and bedding areas. The edge of crop fields and just inside tree lines are also good places to look.

When looking for antlers, don't look for the entire antler – part of it might be buried in grass, dirt or a snow. Most shed antlers are light-colored, so look for light-colored objects, the curve of a beam – anything that looks out of



place. Also, if you find one antler, the matching one is often nearby, so look around carefully. Mark areas where you find sheds on a map – chances are you'll find sheds in the same relative area on a yearly basis.

One you find one shed you'll want to keep finding more, so get outside and have some fun.

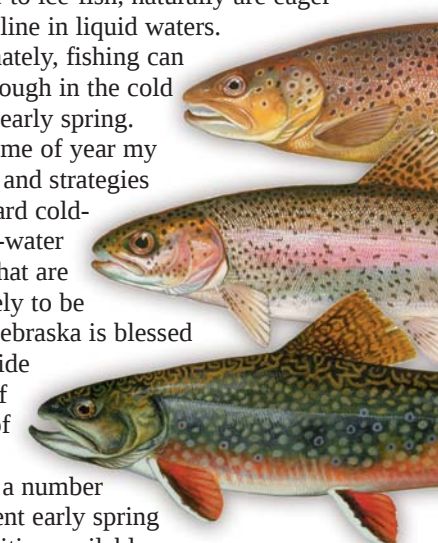
Spring Fever

Daryl Bauer

At the end of a long, cold winter everyone has spring fever in one form or another. Nebraska anglers, even those who love to ice-fish, naturally are eager to cast a line in liquid waters. Unfortunately, fishing can be very tough in the cold water of early spring.

At that time of year my thoughts and strategies turn toward cold- and cool-water species that are most likely to be active. Nebraska is blessed with a wide variety of species of fish, so there are a number of different early spring opportunities available.

Early spring is one of the best times to fish for wild brown, rainbow or



FISH ART BY DUANE RAYNER, UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



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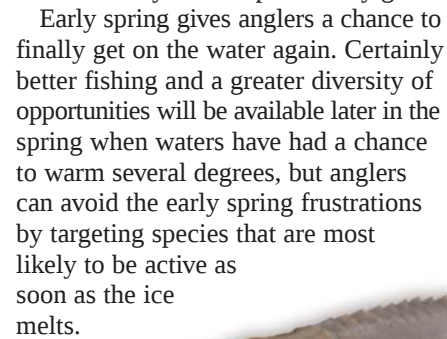
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– Dina Barta
Conservation Officer, Lincoln

STATE OF NEBRASKA Game, Forestation and Parks Commission RECORD OF ARREST							
Name <u>Banta, Otto</u>							
Address <u>Urbel, Neb.</u>							
DATE	REASON OF ARREST	SECTION	PLEA	FINE	COSTS	DAMAGES	
7-9-20	Operating illegal game	39-582	Guilt	\$10.00	3.65	none	
	Urbel - game						
Judge <u>John H. Gibson</u> Court <u>Banta</u> County <u>Kearney</u>							
Devices Confiscated <u>none</u>							
Disposition of Case							
Conservation Officer <u>Monnette, Hilkey, Jensen</u>							
Remarks							



Created through the release of additional water from Gavins Point Dam, the first rise is to be conducted in March, a time when the Missouri historically rose as snow melted and

While the March and May man-made spring rises were not conducted in 2007, high flows from rivers in South Dakota provided a natural rise. Intensive tracking of pallid sturgeon by Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and U.S. Geologic Service researchers confirmed two female pallids spawned in May – one in the unchannelized reach above Ponca State Park and the other in the channelized reach near Macy. While it was the first time spawning had been confirmed in either reach of the river, researchers cannot say whether enough young hatched and survived to add to the population.

For the lands portion, the new program



More information about the Open Fields and Waters Program can be found on the Commission's web site at www.OutdoorNebraska.org. Information is also available by request at Commission district offices in Lincoln, North Platte, Kearney, Norfolk, Bassett and Alliance. ■

Walleye and sauger are other species that spawn soon after ice out. Although

A photograph showing a polluted beach. The foreground is filled with dark, wet sand and numerous pieces of driftwood. Scattered throughout the scene are various pieces of plastic waste, including white and blue plastic bottles, a clear plastic bottle, and other unidentifiable plastic fragments. The water in the background is a deep blue, contrasting with the dark, debris-strewn shore.

MARCH 2009 • NEBRASKALAND 11

Martin's Reach

Photos and text by Eric Fowler

*The sign next to the road says "Dead End."
But what you'll find at the end of the road –
Martin's Reach Wildlife Management Area
– is far from dead.*



A trio of sandhill cranes flies over the Platte River at Martin's Reach Wildlife Management Area as the sun finishes burning its way through the fog of a March morning.

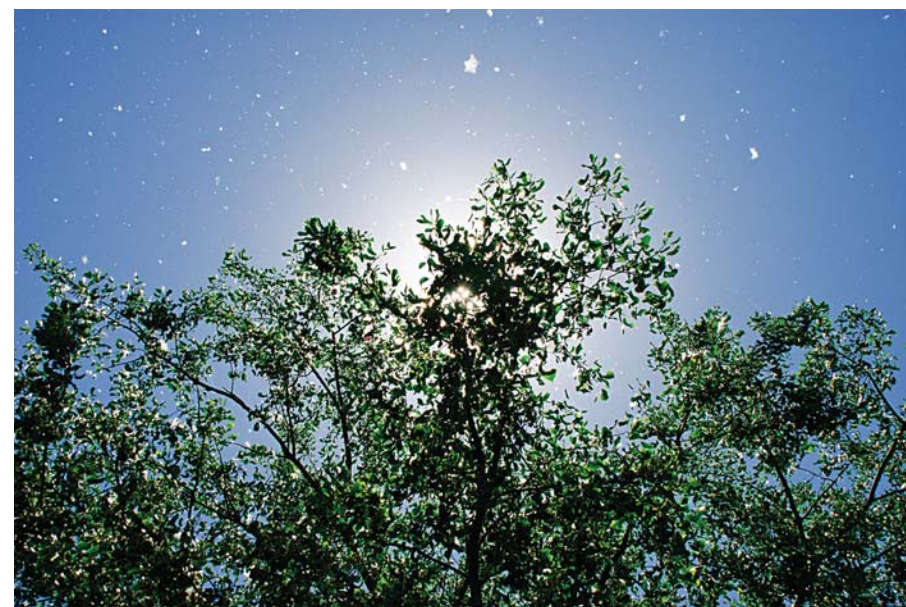
Step off what was once the high bank of the Platte River and into the riparian forest that borders the river at Martin's Reach and you enter a world much different than the one the area's namesakes grew up in. In 1864, Nathaniel and Robert Martin were working with their father in a nearby hay meadow when a band of Sioux Indians attacked. The boys, ages 15 and 12, fled on a horse with Indians in close pursuit. Nathaniel was hit twice by their arrows, one of which passed completely through his body and lodged in Robert's back, pinning the two together. Both survived.



LEFT: Beavers were forced to walk between ponds they'd built in a slough at Martin's Reach when the Platte River and adjacent groundwater levels were sapped by drought in recent years. Two sloughs on the area have been restored, one with the help of Ducks Unlimited.

ABOVE: Returning to Martin's Reach on a dreary March morning after feeding in cropland south of the Platte, a herd of white-tailed deer wades through the main channel and a gaggle of fowl that includes Canada geese and sandhill cranes.

RIGHT: Cottonwood trees that thrive on the area create a "snowstorm" on a June day.



Arrows still fly at Martin's Reach, where 18,000 vehicles whiz by each day on Interstate 80. Hunters fire most of the arrows at white-tailed deer, and a few at turkeys. Where cedars and shrubs were removed from the understory of the cottonwood forest that separates the grassland on the north edge of the property from the Platte River along the south, those species can now find grasses and wildflowers where they once found only cover.

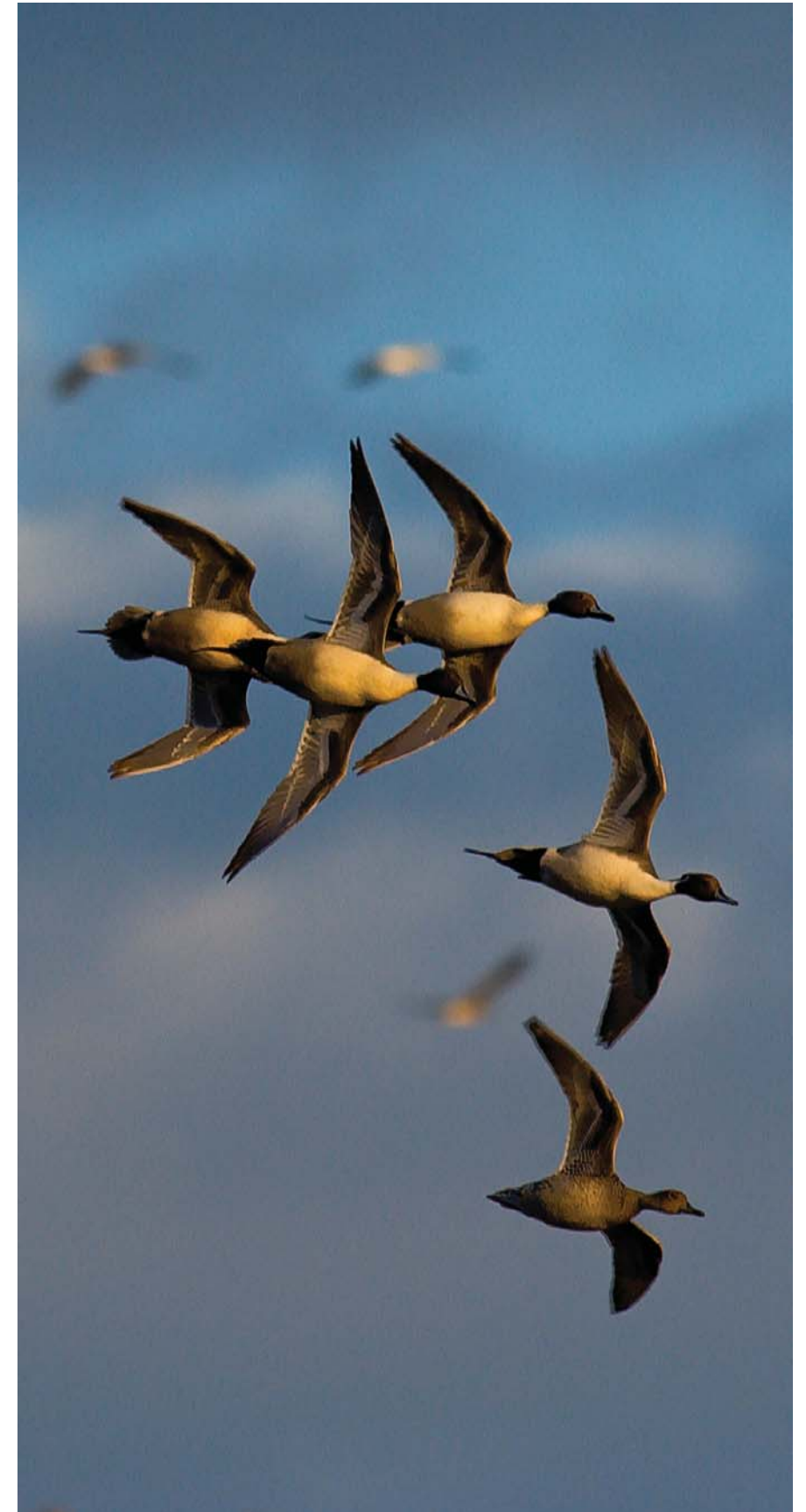


Cross the clearing and you'll find a restored slough. Step to its edge in late spring and you might flush a hen wood duck and her brood. Peer into its waters and you're likely to see tadpoles and minnows. You might even catch a glimpse of one of the beavers that have built several dams in the slough. If you didn't bring waders, those dams are the bridges on your trail to the Platte.

ABOVE: A mushroom-shaped cloud glows over the Platte at sunset on a February day, ironic considering the battles over water during the midst of a drought that sapped the river.

LEFT: Muskrats are one of many wildlife species that frequent the sloughs on Martin's Reach.

RIGHT: Four northern pintail drakes follow a hen on a high-speed, acrobatic courtship flight above the Platte River on an early-March evening. About a third of the continent's two to three million pintails stop on the Platte or nearby Rainwater Basin wetlands each spring.





ABOVE: The wide-open spaces created by an island-clearing project and ongoing clearing of the Platte River at Martin's Reach, which sits opposite a tract owned by the Platte River Whooping Crane Trust, have made the area one of the largest sandhill crane roosts on the river.

RIGHT: A project funded in part by the National Wild Turkey Federation's Southern Great Plains Riparian Initiative thinned cottonwoods and cleared an understory choked with eastern red cedar and gray leaf dogwood to restore an open, savannah-like grassland in the middle of Martin's Reach that benefits wild turkeys, deer, quail and songbirds such as orioles, goldfinches and bobolinks.

Cross a second restored slough and you'll reach the Platte. In the summer, you can kick off your shoes and explore a half mile of river frontage or go for a swim. In the fall and winter, a hearty soul can pack in decoys and have a good chance of bagging a Canada goose. In the spring you can watch tens of thousands of waterfowl and sandhill cranes fly past or roost on the river. You might even spot an endangered whooping crane, which was the impetus for clearing trees from a 17-acre island in the river, a project that also benefited all bird species that prefer a broad, open channel laced with sandbars. There are only a handful of places in the famed Big Bend reach of the Platte River where the general public is free to visit the main channel. The only trails here are maintained by boot leather and deer hooves. And there are no viewing blinds, only riverside brush. So be careful not to disturb the cranes. ■





ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT

THIS WILD CITY

By Lisa Knopp

A walk through the world of wolverines, wolves and wild men.

I walk. One of my favorite routes takes me to a street near the center of Lincoln where, many decades ago, the residents on both sides of the street planted honey locusts. These aren't wild honey locusts, whose trunks and branches bristle with clusters of single or branched thorns. Rather, these are smooth-trunked varieties created for city dwellers who want the locust's open, lacy shade without the risk of puncture wounds.

One spring evening as I was walking the sun-dappled street beneath the locusts, I saw an old man and a collie heading toward me. Each time I had seen this pair before, I had been walking my beagle. When the collie saw my dog, she barked and wheezed, pulling so hard on her leash that the old man dug in his heels and threw himself back, as if he were trying to control a rearing horse. As he yanked on her chain, the man barked at me: "Stay on your side of the road! Stay on your side of the road!" I always complied. But on

this day, I'd left my dog at home; the man and the collie were calm.

As we drew near, the dog stopped to sniff my shoes. I patted her on the head.

"This is Grace," the man said. "She thinks she's a guard dog." I greeted Grace and introduced myself. "My name's Roy," the man said. Roy was so bent that his chin was only a few inches above his trousers, which were belted just beneath his armpits. His jaws and chin were bristled with gray whiskers. The hairs around Grace's mouth were white.

"How old is she?"

"She's 12. She can't hear anymore," Roy shouted.

"You must feel safe with such a fierce and protective dog."

"She's not as fierce as she thinks she is." Roy looked at me over the top of his glasses. His eyes were cloudy and blue. "I don't know what she'd do if she saw a wolverine."

I was stunned. No one had ever

spoken to me of wolverines. "Grace doesn't have much to worry about," I said. "There haven't been wolverines in Nebraska for a long time."

"There used to be," Roy said, raising his wiry, gray eyebrows. "But when people came in and settled the place, the wolverines left. Now you have to go to Canada or Alaska or Siberia if you want to see one."

I tried to recall a picture of a wolverine. When my daughter was in sixth grade, she'd researched wolverines for her endangered species project. I had read her report and had seen the pictures of wolverines that she'd downloaded from the Internet. But now all I could call forth was a sketchy image of a bearlike creature. The only thing I remembered about the stuffed and mounted specimen in the Hall of Nebraska Wildlife display at Morrill Hall was the fierce expression on its face. If I ran into a wolverine, I might not recognize it as such.

"They only stand about this tall,"

Roy said, holding his purple-spotted hand mid-thigh. "Don't weigh as much as Grace does. But pound for pound, they're the meanest animal on earth. Wolves and cougars won't go near 'em. They're sneaky, greedy cusses. People call 'em gluttons 'cause they'll eat anything. They'll take the minks or beavers outta your traps and eat 'em. If their gut's full, they'll still take your game and cache up in a tree." Roy pointed to the locust branches overhead. "Then, they'll climb up and get it later. If you got food in your cabin, they'll break in and steal it and leave a foul odor so you'll know who did it. Skunk bears. People also call them devil-bears 'cause they rumble and growl like grizzlies." Roy paused. "But nothing can move through the snow like a wolverine. They hump along like this." His gnarled hand undulated through the air.

I supposed that the wolverine was Roy's totem animal. "You must really admire wolverines," I said.

"Oh, yes." Roy paused. "But the wolf's mine." He liked that wolves are elusive, hunt cooperatively and mate for life. But his description of wolves wasn't as wild or as vivid as his description of wolverines. Roy may love wolves, but wolverines inspire him.

We discussed the pros and cons of reintroducing wolves into national

parks. Roy didn't have much faith in anyone involved in the situation — environmentalists, ranchers or politicians. "Nobody will leave 'em alone," he concluded. I asked if Grace was better equipped to handle a wolf than a wolverine.

"She won't have to. Wolves are going the way of wolverines. It won't be too long before you have to go to Canada or Siberia if you what to see one."

I bid Grace and Roy good evening and continued my walk beneath the honey locusts. Perhaps when Roy walks this street he sees a landscape remarkable not for what is there but for what is not. Perhaps when Roy walks here, he sees carnivores hunting, breeding, howling, humping along, scavenging and thieving; wild men running traps and drying skins; mountain lions moving through the strips of woodlands, following the rivers and creeks; vast expanses of open land. Perhaps he sees himself and Grace as swift, supple and among them.

I turned and headed home. Rabbits fled at my approach. A pair of squirrels startled me when they dropped from a tree, tumbled on the grass before me and one chased the other up a pin oak. I crossed a cement-lined creek where I saw a snapping turtle the size of

a dinner plate moving through the water. I passed a yard where a great Dane, reposing sphinx-like near the feet of a woman sitting in a lawn chair, bolted when he saw two corgies walking a man on the other side of the street. The great Dane pulled its cord taut against the chair legs, toppling the woman and the chair. She cursed the dog as she brushed off her backside and righted her chair.

When I walk after dark I see owls perched atop utility poles, so still you'd think they were carved from wood. I see raccoons entering and exiting the sewers or padding down driveways in search of garbage cans. I see bats hunting and feasting on the wing. I see opossums waddling across lawns, scaling fences or trees, or smashed and split open in the street, a gang of crows picking their flesh. When I step outside in the morning to smell the air, I find partially eaten moles or mice or finches outside my back door, evidence of how my cat spent the night in this wild city. And I remember that not far from here is a person who has not banished wolverines to some far away tundra, but allows them to range freely in the forefront of consciousness. ■

Lisa Knopp is a teacher and writer who lives in Lincoln.

This Dam House

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

Sleeping atop a river is not for everyone, but for this family there's no place they'd rather call home.

There are plenty of Nebraskans who have houses along the Big Blue River. But only one family literally lives on the river like Bill and Kim Petersen and their son, Luke, who can look out windows on three sides of their home and see its waters below.

Of course, theirs isn't your average home. It was formerly the powerhouse on a dam near Barneston. A dam house, you might call it.

"We've heard them all," laughed Kim. "I'm the dam girl, and" The list goes on.

Bill bought the dam, powerhouse and 76 acres of land for \$36,000 from the Norris Rural Public Power District at auction in 1986 after the company decommissioned the plant and sold its two 450 kilovolt General Electric generators. "Originally I bought it just thinking I'd kind of fix it up a little bit for a place to hunt and fish, but I didn't have any plans on living in there," said Bill, a DeWitt native who was living and

working in Beatrice at the time. "Then when I got to looking at it, and I was single at the time, I thought, 'You know, this would be a great place to live.'"

Converting the cavernous building, measuring 42 feet by 31 feet with a 22-foot ceiling and 13-inch thick walls, into a home was a challenge, especially when it came to the round concrete bases that once held the generators. "That's all reinforced concrete, 2½- to 3-feet thick, and to bust it out of here to do something else would've been a major job," Bill said. "It was easier just to make something out of it or build over it."

So five steps lead from the ground floor to the kitchen, which was built on top of one of the bases. The other was faced with brick and wood and topped with a counter to form a circular bar that seats 14.

The home's second floor is suspended from the roof, with two bedrooms on one side of its H-shaped floor plan and a bedroom and bath on the other. None of the rooms have doors and the walls



While the exterior of the powerhouse is nondescript, the interior, including a kitchen built atop the concrete base that once supported a generator, is not.



With its roots exposed by the scouring flows of the Big Blue River, a cottonwood stands on the bank downstream from the Barneston Dam powerhouse that Bill and Kim Petersen call home.

only extend four feet off the floor. While that doesn't offer much privacy, it does allow heat produced by a single wood-burning stove and circulated by five ceiling fans to warm the entire house. Only when they're away for days do they run their furnace.

The construction still causes challenges, particularly cooling. All but the south wall of the house were insulated and covered with oak paneling. In the winter, that wall soaks up sunlight, which radiates through the home well after sundown. But despite the insulation, the west wall forces heat into the home when the summer sun bears down on it in the afternoon. "We run our air conditioning six months or longer,"

Kim said. "This place isn't shaded. We just stick out here like a sore thumb."

The exposed brick of the south wall does add character to the home. So do the steel I-beams that served as a track that crane workers used to service the generators but which now support lighter ware, including books.

The thick walls insulate the home from the sound of water rushing through the dam's gates, but don't keep the residents from hearing an occasional bang or ping produced when logs bounce off the concrete pillars and steel gates during high water.

When the water is really high, simply getting home can be a challenge for the Petersens. During the flood of 1993 they

had to drive through two feet of water – past carp and catfish – to get to their garage, which Bill had thoughtfully built on a berm well above the high-water mark.

Remodeling was well underway when Bill met Kim in 1987. The two were dating when she and some friends crashed a party Bill was hosting. "We walked in and I'm like, 'Wow. I'd like to live here.' And I said, 'Gosh, Bill, do you want to get married?'" And he said "Yeah, I do." The words proved to be prophetic. In 1988, they were married and moved into the house, along with Kim's daughter, Jessie.

"Yeah, I thought this would be a great bachelor pad and then I ended up getting

married shortly after it was done, so it didn't work out quite like that," Bill joked. "If I would've built it with a home and family in mind, I probably would've done something with this big space other than having a big bar."

The powerhouse is the only home Luke, now a freshman at Southern High School in Wymore, has lived in. And as you might expect of someone who lives in something he can write about for a school history paper, Luke has a keen interest in dams and rivers. He spends time "flying" over rivers on Google Earth and locating dams. And he's spent many hours reviewing reports, blueprints and other information



Luke Petersen lands a flathead catfish while fishing below the gates with his father, Bill, who has caught a 77-pound flathead fishing there. At certain times during the year, fish moving upstream congregate in the hole below the dam. “One time when it was raining and cold and all I wanted was one to eat, I was catching 15- to 20-pound channel cats as fast as I could reel them in,” Bill said.

on the dam that Norris Public Power gave Bill when he bought it, as well as other resources, and is now the family’s expert on the subject.

“I like dams and rivers and lakes and stuff like that, and I just wanted to know the history of this one,” Luke said.

The village of Barneston was founded in 1884 on the site of the Otoe and Missouri Indian Agency by F.M. Barnes, who had operated a general store at the agency since 1873. Work on the powerhouse and dam, located west of town, began in 1919 and was completed in 1923.

“They got all of the rock from the west side to make the concrete,” Luke said, explaining the faded photographs the family has of the construction project. Steam engines powered the derrick and the rock crushers. “They had a derrick on each side and they had a cable that went across and they would fill this bucket with concrete and pour it.”

And they used a lot of concrete. The entire structure measures 404 feet between the retaining walls. The spillway

on the western portion of the dam is 250 feet long and 30 feet high with a base 30 feet thick. On the eastern end is the powerhouse. In the middle are four 24-foot-wide steel tainter gates supported by four-foot-thick concrete piers that rise 46 feet from bedrock.

Workers lived in a house on the west bank of the river, the foundation of which still stands. A swinging bridge spanned the river, making the walk to work a short one for those who toiled on the east bank. Barneston residents used the bridge to monitor progress of the work. Floodwaters claimed the bridge twice. It was rebuilt after the first flood, but not after the flood of 1941.

Planning the dam took much longer than the construction. A process that began in 1905 led to the formation of the Beatrice Power Company by local businessmen, including George Steinmeyer, and investors. It was delayed by a legal battle over who had rights to develop the site, thanks to the state engineer’s office granting those rights to two individuals. Work began on the

project despite the legal questions, and in 1921, the Nebraska Supreme Court confirmed the right of Steinmeyer, who was also the engineer for the project.

In 1921, the editors of the *Beatrice Daily Express* clamored for the completion of the project and the projected 3.8 megawatts of energy it would produce. Steinmeyer had built another hydroelectric dam 12 miles upstream at Holmesville in 1911. Its capacity, however, was about a third of what the Barneston Dam would produce. *Express* editors believed both plants would produce enough power to “make Gage County the manufacturing center of Southern Nebraska.”

Industry first harnessed the waters of the Big Blue River in 1957, the year Beatrice was founded and 10 years before Nebraska became a state. But most were dependent on the “coal barons,” their power plants and the whims of the miners and railroads and the propensity of their workers to strike. The Big Blue River, the *Express* said, would be more dependable, and

produce power “sufficient to run all of the factories, and more as they come along. Not only turn the wheels but light the cities, towns and farm homes, giving them a chance to cook with electricity.”

Barneston and its 258 residents – twice as many as the 122 who live there today – used only a fraction of the electricity the plant produced, including some to light the river for nighttime ice-skating parties at the dam that drew up to 200 people.

The plant also served Liberty, Rockford, Filley, Crab Orchard, Lewiston, Adams, Mayberry, Virginia, Odell, Krider, Diller, Lanham and Steele City, as well as Hanover, Kansas. Farms within five miles of the transmission line could also tap its power, allowing those folks to do away with gas lights and candles years before the Rural Electrification Act (REA), passed in 1933, began bringing power to much of rural America.

The remaining 98 percent of the power produced was sold to the Nebraska Gas and Electric Company, which delivered the power to its customers in eastern Nebraska, southwestern Iowa and northwestern Missouri.

“They had flash boards going over the dam to make water two foot higher so they could make just a little more power,” Luke said. Of course, raging floodwaters were not kind to the steel rods that held those boards in place. In photos taken during the flood of 1993, the dam’s spillway appears to be little more than a speed bump. “In 1941, it was higher than that,” Luke said, referring to one of the area’s worst floods on record.

The Central States Edison Company of Chicago bought the plant in 1927, ironically a year in which drought and low river flows forced a shutdown of the plant. Passage of the REA led to the creation of Nebraska’s public power system, the Norris Public Power District and its purchase of the Barneston Dam.

Maintenance problems required the dam to be shut down in 1978. Norris refurbished and restarted the plant in 1982, but soon after it closed for good.

It’s unlikely that the power dam would’ve been operational much longer without a greater investment, as its steel gates were showing their age. Unusually warm weather that followed a cold snap in 1993 caused the ice

behind the dam to break up and pile against the gates, crushing one of them.

It wasn’t the first trouble they had with a gate. The gate closest to the house was damaged and leaking, so Bill sealed it with concrete and built a deck over the top of it. Another was reinforced with a steel plate before it could break.

The two operational gates are now left open. Except when the river is running full tilt, water now rushes through those openings rather than forming an 18-foot-deep pool behind the dam and

gently flowing over the spillway.

“When it held water you could put a jet ski or a fishing boat on here and you could go at least three miles upstream and have deep water to mess around in,” Bill said. Now farmers upriver can no longer easily pump water from the reservoir to irrigate their fields. They also no longer call Bill and ask him to open the gates and drain the reservoir when the forecast calls for heavy rains.

The worst part about losing the gate is that the dam isn’t as aesthetically pleasing as it was when water was



Kim Petersen relaxes in the living room, which includes a bar built atop a generator support, a fireplace and a wood stove that heats the entire house thanks to the open design of the second floor.



A deck above the first gate on the dam, which was sealed with concrete after it fell into disrepair, provides the Petersens a place to relax.

flowing over the spillway. And having the water rushing past right below the deck instead of 100 feet away makes casual conversation more difficult.

“[Luke] would love to have [the broken gate] fixed, but it’s probably not going to happen unless we win the lottery,” Bill said. “I wouldn’t even know who you would call. If a guy was going to do anything, you would probably form it up and pour concrete in there to the level of the other gates and then

you still got two operational gates. One’s enough. For the life of me, I don’t know why they put four of them in here anyway. None of these other dams have any gates at all other than maybe a small one.”

The thought of living in a dam house didn’t scare her away, but Kim said raising kids on the river was a challenge. Luke “would’ve crawled right off the end” of the deck built over the first

gate if given the chance, Kim said.

“I still tell people, ‘If you fall into that hydraulic, we just can’t save you – there’s just no way. And you’d probably hit concrete if the water was low,’” Kim said. “That kind of scares kids and they know not to mess around.”

But as time passed, the kids grew up and took swimming lessons, and such concerns vanished. “I always tell people I’m not scared of anything he does out here,” Kim said of Luke. “He can go swimming or mess around in the dam or whatever, but when he was young it scared me to death to send him to town on a bike. It’s just what you grow up around.”

A kayak and johnboat sit on the bank below the house. Luke and his friends get plenty of use out of both. They fish, paddle and swim in the river. When high flows recede, they scour the bank for arrowheads and other artifacts. While seining minnows one year, they even snagged a buffalo skull which is now displayed in the family room.

Most of the land that came with the property is across the river from the house. There, near the site of Beatrice YMCA’s former Camp Otoe, which drew area residents for bible and nature studies and other activities until it closed in 1940, Bill keeps an area cleared and mowed for gatherings of family and friends. Bill and Kim drive to Barneston and across the Highway 8 bridge to the property. Luke usually takes the johnboat or kayak. “I don’t want to go six miles to get 100 yards,” he said.

It doesn’t happen often, but when the river is low enough, the family climbs down a ladder on the downstream side of the dam and sits in the tumble bays basin below the gates. The flowing water creates a soothing hot-tub effect, but isn’t for folks who don’t like fish bouncing off their legs and feet.

“There’s lots of wildlife,” Kim said of the property. “We’ve had snapping turtles in our front yard. I looked out one morning and there were 20 wild turkeys on our driveway. We’ve had beaver crossing the yard and of course the usual deer, fox and others. We had to trap coons last year because they were getting my chickens.” University of Omaha herpetologists tell them the area has the highest concentration of timber rattlers and copperheads in the

state. Bobcats are a common sight.

And there are plenty of channel and flathead catfish in the river. While fishing was one of the reasons Bill bought the place, he admits he doesn’t fish as much as he should.

“It’s one of those deals where if I didn’t live here, it’s the kind of place I would drive quite a ways to fish,” Bill said last fall. “But since I live here, I always think I can go fishing tomorrow, so I haven’t fished much at all this summer, partly because of high water and partly because like this time of year, when the yellow cats (flatheads) are biting, I’ve been hauling silage and just haven’t had time.

“But yeah, I really do like to fish here as much as I can, and we all like to eat catfish.”

Bill retired from banking and was a charter pilot until recently. These days, he works on a neighbor’s farm during harvest, takes care of a small farm the family owns, and keeps the woodpile stocked for winter. He has harvested several trophy whitetails on the place, mounts of which adorn the walls of the home, but work tends to get in the way of hunting these days, too.

“On the west side of the property,

that’s really good deer hunting. It’s heavily wooded. There’s lots of deer right around here, too. They cross the river down below this place every morning and every evening. I’ve never done it, but if you lay up on top of the roof with a rifle, that would probably be as good a deer stand as you could get.”

Bill hunts pheasants and quail when he has time. He doesn’t hunt waterfowl, but thinks he could do well on ducks and geese on the sandbar below the dam, especially after it gets cold and the area below the dam is the only open water around. Bald eagles like the open water in the winter, too, and a pair has nested in a dead cottonwood across the river in recent years as well.

Canada geese have nested on the sandbar, and a pair even nested on the crest of the spillway after the gate broke and water no longer flowed over the top of it. “She apparently got them out okay, but I wondered after they hatched how she was going to get those young out of there,” Bill said.

The novelty of the home has had its drawbacks. When they moved in, newspaper articles drew attention to the unique home. More recently the

home was featured on an episode of “reZONED” on Home & Garden Television.

“When we first moved here, every weekend you could just count on somebody just stopping in, which was fine when we didn’t have kids. We both worked, but we were young and the more the merrier,” Kim said. “But then things get busy and you’ve got to mow and you’ve got to clean house. Then you just get these people stopping by out of the blue. My husband doesn’t mind it, but I don’t care for it. You feel you’ve got to give strangers a tour of your home.”

Anglers once had open access to the property, but waking up to a yard full of pickups grew tiresome. The final straw came when they returned home to find people they didn’t know on their deck and someone riding their lawn mower. “The nerve of some people,” Kim said.

But despite the challenges, Bill is happy he chose to live in the dam house, and Kim’s happy she joined him there.

“It’s different and it’s not for everybody but there’s nowhere else I’d rather live,” Bill said. ■



Work on the Barneston Dam began with the base of the powerhouse on the east bank of the Big Blue River in 1919. Rock was quarried from the west bank for the concrete, which was mixed and hauled across the river on a cable strung between two derricks.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GAGE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Light Goose Conservation Action

10 years later and beyond

By Jeff Kurrus

“There will be a catastrophic die-off of light geese leaving denuded and useless Arctic nesting grounds that may require decades to fully recover and few young, strong birds to begin rebuilding the populations, or more drastic population controls such as commercial harvesting, trapping and killing large numbers of geese for food or other products, and harassment of nesting geese or destruction of nests and eggs will have to be implemented.”

Thus wrote P. Joe Gabig and Jon Farrar in their January/February 1999 *NEBRASKA*land article entitled “Hunting Solutions to the Snow Goose Dilemma.”

Ten years later and the problem remains with the mid-continent’s light goose (blue and white-phased lesser snow goose and Ross’s goose) population even after President Clinton’s 1999 legislation allowed interim population

control measures for mid-continent light geese for 24 mid-western and southern states. This “Light Goose Conservation Action” allowed, and still allows, the unlimited killing of light geese during their spring migration with unplugged guns, electronic callers and extended daily shooting hours. Yet ask how these birds should be managed now and in the future in a continual attempt to “save the tundra,” and the list of answers is long and varied – answers that force both hunters and nonhunters to draw lines in the sand regarding their ethical beliefs on how all wildlife should be managed.

A Large, White Problem

At the 2008 Central Flyway Waterfowl Technical Committee meeting in Great Bend, Kansas, Ray Alisauskas, a research scientist with Environment



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

A plethora of snow goose decoy designs cover hunting guide Keith Brown's Jefferson County field.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Snow geese use their serrated beak to uproot plants. At Hudson Bay, where the mid-continent’s population stages each year, less than 30 percent of the habitat remains.

Canada, estimated the mid-continent’s snow goose population to be 25 million birds, based on the total harvest of geese estimated by Canadian and United States federal agencies, divided by the harvest rate, which is determined from banding studies in the Arctic and hunter recoveries in both Canada and the United States. Robert Rockwell, American Museum of Natural History biologist and director of the Hudson Bay Project, said that while Alisauskas’ number seems high, it is not the most important issue with snow geese. “It’s not that there are too many geese,” he said. “Their total number is difficult to estimate. What we can monitor is what these geese are doing to habitat, and there are more geese than the northern habitat will support.”

Rockwell witnesses what most of the rest of the continent does not at

Hudson Bay, where the mid-continent’s snow goose population stages for a week or so each year before most of them move further north to their breeding grounds. One week too long according to Rockwell. “Originally at Hudson Bay, staging snow geese were supposed to stay in the salt marsh eating salt marsh grasses and sedges,” said Rockwell. “But these birds are starting to move inland, eating multiple freshwater sedges and other dicotyledonous plants. Theory originally had it that they would eat themselves out of a place to be. Instead, they have shown an unbelievable adaptability in their diet.”

Lesser snow geese use multiple feeding patterns, including grubbing and shoot pulling. Grubbing refers to digging and uprooting plants, then discarding the remainder of the plant. Snow geese do this in the spring when

the ground’s upper layers have thawed for a few hours each day or after snow melt. Shoot pulling refers to eating the white basal portion of the shoots, a part rich in nitrogen and carbohydrates. Because of these feeding patterns, less than 30 percent of Hudson Bay’s habitat is still intact.

In the place of these plants remains only moss, which snow geese will not eat, so they move on to other food sources. “Once 70 percent of the land is covered in moss,” said Rockwell, “the moss gains a competitive edge and will completely take over a landscape, even after the snow geese are gone.”

“By expanding into new locations, it is not just a snow goose or light goose issue,” said Dale Humburg, Ducks Unlimited biologist. “They are having an effect on shorebirds and other species of birds.” These species include

stilt and semipalmated sandpipers, Hudsonian godwits, American golden plovers, and various ducks, including American wigeon, northern shoveler, and lesser scaup. Each of these bird species migrates through Nebraska.

Snow goose expansion also includes their breeding grounds. “Before 1970,” said Alisauskas, “lesser snow geese were not known to occur in large numbers outside the west coast of Hudson Bay, Southampton Island and Baffin Island. Since then, they have expanded into the central Arctic and now about 90 percent of mid-continent snow geese breed around Queen Maud Gulf, Southampton and Baffin Island; while only 10 percent breed on the west and south coasts of Hudson Bay.” With this expansion, snow geese are now sharing habitat with Canada geese, cackling geese and white-fronts in

some areas.

Even with their 10 percent yearly mortality rates, snow geese numbers continue to grow. According to Alisauskas, the annual rate of increase at the Queen Maud Gulf Bird Sanctuary was 8.9 percent from 1993 to 1998. From 1998 to 2007 that number was 4.5 percent. While the rate of growth has declined, habitat is still being damaged beyond repair (see sidebar) as the geese continually expand their staging and breeding grounds and migration routes. Some lesser snow geese, traditionally linked to the mid-continent, are being recovered in both the Pacific and the Atlantic flyways. In addition, greater snow geese, historically linked to the Atlantic Flyway, are now being recovered in the mid-continent as

far west as Texas and Alberta. These examples provide a glimpse of what further expansion could look like. In 1997's *Arctic Ecosystems in Peril: Report of the Arctic Goose Habitat Working Group*, it was reported that the then-population of mid-continent lesser snow geese was between 4.5 million and 6 million birds. Lesser-snow goose populations had been indexed annually since the mid-20th century, and the mid-winter index for lesser snow geese rose from 0.8 million in 1969 to 2.9 million in 1998. Around the early 1990s, a major portion of this mid-continent population started migrating through Nebraska during the spring. Numbers have increased for multiple reasons since the mid-century. Outside of the birds displaying the capabilities

to expand their wintering habitat, the increase in cultivation gives them areas to forage continent-wide. Because stored reserves are extremely important at determining breeding success, the birds are well suited to survive through the midwestern and northern prairies that are laced with corn, wheat, barley, oats and rye cultivation. In addition, there are more refuges continent-wide that offer protection and food supplies nearby. Yet their migrations are also starting with stronger breeding classes. Because of a general warming trend since 1961, the mid-continent snow goose population increase positively correlates with early spring melts, translating to more southerly nesting colonies and additional young.

Conservation Inaction

With this increase in numbers, liberalization of shooting regulations and the introduction of the Conservation Action, biologists hoped that 1.4 million snow geese could be killed per year (from both the regular and Conservation Action seasons) for five years. At that point, their numbers would start to be controlled. Yet since the inception of the Conservation Action, there has never been a year with a light goose harvest of 1.4 million.

Tactics that experts thought devastating to snow goose populations only offered short-term results. "Many hunters and commercial hunting guides are convinced that permitting the use of electronic calls would greatly enhance the harvest of snow geese ... it is not known if snow geese would learn to avoid electronic calls after several years of use," wrote North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologist Michael Johnson in 1997.

In the spring of 2008, however, waterfowl guide Keith Brown was sitting in a Jefferson County blind with hundreds of snow goose decoys at his back and an electronic caller sounding off at every flight of geese that passed. Above the blind, what seemed like millions of white specs moved across the sky, yet few slowed, and even fewer circled the shooters below despite the electronic snow goose cackles filling the air. "Times have changed in the last 10 years," he said, another group ignoring his spread. "The first year of the Conservation Action, we killed

1,800 birds. Nowadays we'll shoot a couple hundred a year."

"Snow geese have concentrated in larger numbers on refuges," said Humburg. "They nest colonially and are highly gregarious in migration, tending to be in large flocks. A flock of 10,000 snow geese has 20,000 eyes and a high proportion of adults. The impact of day in and day out harvest pressure has affected their behavior."

"The first years they came to the electronic callers so easy," said Brown. "It seemed like every one of those flocks came in. Or you'd go out and cowboard and shoot 100 birds in one shooting. Nowadays, it isn't happening unless you're a young fellow using a layout blind."

One of those fellows is Eric Moran, who hunts in Squaw Creek Valley, the Rainwater Basin and near Tecumseh. "Staying hid is our number one priority. Speaking with Mike Remund, biologist from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, he said it was amazing how easy blinds and decoy spreads could be spotted when conducting aerial surveys." This is where Moran's layout blinds, as well as more life-like decoys spreads, come in. "We include a lot of dark geese in our spreads. All-white spreads look like decoys. Mixing darks and lights, and spreading out little groups throughout a spread, makes them look more real." But Moran's time allows him the most success. "I am fortunate that I have a job that lets me hunt a lot of days during the season. I sit through many birdless days each year, but also have several days when they really want to work."

Those days, however, are anomalies. Overall, shooters are just not killing enough snow geese. "Since the Conservation Action began," said Commission waterfowl biologist Mark Vrtiska, "there hasn't been any new revelation in techniques. In the predator-prey relationship, the prey runs faster, does something better. The predator needs to either run faster too,



PHOTO BY MARK VRTISKA

Thousands of snow geese pass through Nebraska each year, including this large population of birds on Grandpa's Pit near Kearney.

or change tactics to catch the prey. Snow geese have adapted; hunters have not."

Of the 7,000 to 8,000 snow goose hunters in Nebraska, more than 80 percent are using decoys, yet many are experiencing the same results of Brown. "Hunters are starting to use more realistic decoys to kill snow geese," said Vrtiska, "trading quality over quantity. But it's still not enough."

The Killing Season

Either because of expense or the inability to decoy birds, some hunters elect to stalk large quantities of geese, shooting into massive groups when within range. However, this practice has its opponents, even among fellow hunters, who worry that these shooters are wounding unnecessary amounts of birds, possibly killing other species of waterfowl intermingled with snow geese, or are not cleaning the massive amounts of birds that can be killed from a single shoot. Should people care about any of these points, or is the Conversation Action supposed to be about killing snow geese, and nothing more?

"I don't think that's the way you approach this thing," said Vrtiska. "You have to try to control these birds in a

very smart way." Because Nebraska has a number of regulations regarding its Conservation Action light goose season, Vrtiska has come across multiple hunters who fail to understand why there are any restrictions at all, regardless of what public ground is hunted. "'Don't you want me to just kill these things?' they'll ask. Some hunters act as if they should be allowed to machine-gun snow geese down," said Vrtiska. "But we're not at that point yet. I didn't, and I don't think many people did, anticipate that shooters would feel justified to do anything they wanted regarding this season."

Recently, a group of hunters on an online forum posted the following messages concerning the light goose conservation season:

From Hunter No. 1: *Hunting is not about numbers of birds killed. It's about fair chase and the quality of the experience. It's about watching thousands of geese spiraling out of the sky toward your spread and anticipating the call of "take em."* Jumping up over a dam or fence line shooting 8 to 10 shots at a wall of [snow] geese isn't a sport in my book.

From Hunter No. 2: *I think you need to understand that the spring snow goose season is not about "fair chase." It is about slaughtering as many as*

Potential Recovery

While less than 30 percent of the habitat is still intact at Hudson Bay, Rockwell recently stated that not all may be lost. In 2005, Rockwell and his crews built enclosures to see what would happen if snow geese were not allowed inside. He was told by other experts that he needed someone to come back in 25 years to evaluate these areas, but Rockwell said the areas were already experiencing recovery in only two years – much faster than the unfenced spots.

"There is definitely a potential for recovery if we get rid of the geese," he said. "And it's not the resident geese that are the real problem. It is the migrants. In 2009 we are hoping to build 20 meter by 20 meter plots to check recovery potential."

Steps like this are not long-term answers to recovery, for there is not the manpower or resources to fence in the entire Arctic. But it does give an answer to the potential for recovery. If, and only if, as Rockwell would say, the snow geese can be eliminated or reduced to carrying-capacity levels.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT ROCKWELL

Hunters are playing a key role as it pertains to snow goose population management. We constantly stress the need for people to respect their role and stay within the ethical boundaries and respect for waterfowl resources. I understand why people are concerned. Very easily it could be a black eye for waterfowl conservation because the snow goose issue approaches that ethical boundary very quickly.

— Dale Humburg, *Ducks Unlimited* Biologist

possible by whatever legal means are at hand. [Do you think] the Feds have decreed the season with unlimited kill, unlimited magazine capacity and electronic calls for the purpose of "fair chase"? Get real here! The object is to eliminate the surplus.

The banter went back and forth, each hunter interrupted by a list of other hunters wanting to state their own opinion. Then one of the hunters made this statement: *Shot over 300 birds jumping them. How many have you killed during this season to do your part? Kill them to save the tundra.*

What Now?

"At this point in time, we probably have gone as far as we can go with traditional methods of control," said Humburg. "We have probably utilized all available methods that are socially acceptable. As we approach the intersection between biologically effective and socially acceptable, we challenge ourselves in ways that the wildlife profession and citizenry have not been challenged in many instances."

"Someone has to make a simple decision," said Rockwell. "Snow geese are going to continue degrading northern habitat. They are destructive,

opportunistic foragers. They have a serrated beak and know how to use it. They are survivors. So if hunting can't control it, then someone has to decide if they want to preserve habitat."

Commercial hunting has been discussed, but can the number of birds support a commercial venture? "It is going to take cooperation with native

communities up north for people to go in and harvest huge numbers of geese," said Rockwell. "Most native communities are of a mixed mind about commercial harvest. Because the Canadian government has pulled commercial polar bear hunting away from those native communities, those people are going to say, 'Why is it okay to kill geese and not polar bears?'"

Another alternative is the destruction of breeding ground nests. Steps have already been taken to control "nuisance" species in multiple cities, including Canada goose and white-tailed deer populations. But those who have seen these areas in lean years can only shake their heads at these thoughts. "We spend all this time and money to bring these species back," said Brown, "and now because we don't want them in our cities and golf courses, we get rid of them."

Yet Humburg sees the snow goose dilemma as altogether different. "We have seen instances locally where Canada geese have been controlled through oiling of eggs, eliminating nests, and capturing during the post-nest period," he said. "But with all of these instances, we are talking about local influence where the impacts are clear because the effects are proximate to people. Snow geese are different because these birds are in remote locations and most people are absolutely unaware of their impact."

"But we still want to avoid the concept

of waste," said Alisauskas. "We do not want to cheapen the birds. So there are two options. Accept what we are doing now, pursuing geese all year-round, or go to direct control."

"Killing a female is like stomping on a nest for 8 years, or equivalently, killing 8 nests," said Rockwell. "An adult female is worth about 32 eggs because of the length of time she lives. By randomly killing females across all age classes, the snow goose population could be stabilized. However, let us assume that Ray's [Alisauskas] numbers are correct at 25 million, and the population is growing 6 percent a year. That means hunters would have to shoot 6 percent of 25 million, or 1.5 million geese each year, just to hold the population at 25 million, 20 times larger than the environment can maintain. That number has not been achieved for even one year yet, so hunting as it is currently being done is not the answer."

Despite the ongoing discussions regarding this issue through the years, it is still difficult, as Humburg stated, for many to analyze a situation that is not in their face on a day-to-day basis. It is probably even more difficult to comprehend how large the Arctic is and how detrimental these birds are to this polar region. Yet how snow geese are managed continent-wide now and in the future could become precedent for how other wildlife species are managed both locally and internationally.

"For most of the last century, conservation's emphasis has been centered on increasing species, not decreasing them," said Humburg. "With regard to deer management, snow geese, etc, we are dealing with animals in excess. We don't have much of a history of dealing with the social and biological conflicts that go along with this. We have now passed the biological concerns. It is more of a social issue."

A current look at Nebraska wildlife reveals that there are at least two species that could provide, in the longterm, issues similar to the ongoing snow goose dilemma seen continent-wide. Nebraska's deer and turkey permit regulations reveal a gradual liberalization of seasons and a continual increase in harvest, each species breaking records annually. For example, Nebraska's 2007 buck harvest was 35 percent higher than in 1997 and 100 percent higher



Nebraska snow goose hunter Eric Moran uses a layout blind during the Conservation Action to kill snow geese, and is very successful using this technique.

than in 1987; similarly, Nebraska's turkey harvest was 200 percent higher than in 1998 and 400 percent higher than in 1987. Both species numbers are at an all-time high.

If these populations continue to increase, and the number of hunters does not, then how will officials deal with these issues? It is quite simple to come across more than one Nebraska farmer who has expressed an interest for hunters to "kill them all" regarding deer and turkey populations. Issues with these same two species, as well as urban Canada geese, have also been

experienced in other parts of the continent. How long until agencies have to answer more socially polarizing questions with species that are not just passing through? "Keep killing until the habitat is recovering," said Rockwell concerning the mid-continent's snow goose population.

Pay close attention to whether Rockwell gets his wish. How the snow goose dilemma is handled in the coming years might just lay the groundwork for state and national agencies that have been just a little bit too successful with their management of other wildlife species. ■



Despite the large amounts of snow geese killed each year, the desired continent-wide harvest, since the inception of the Conservation Action, has never been accomplished.

ARRIVAL OF THE RINGNECK

by Jon Farrar

When pheasants were first introduced in Nebraska will probably never be determined, but sportsmen and bird fanciers were rearing and releasing them into the wild at least as early as the 1890s. The game commission did not rear and release pheasants until 1911.

The story of how pheasants were introduced into the United States from Asia has been written many times. When and how pheasants were introduced to Nebraska has been told less often, for good reason — records of the introduction and spread of ringnecks in

this state are sparse, if recorded at all. Often they are no more than passing mention in old newspaper articles or family memoirs about or by a grandpa who raised and released a few birds. But the Nebraska account needs to begin with the wider, better-documented story.

The first ring-necked pheasants apparently were brought to the United States between 1728 and 1731 to New York state. That attempt to establish pheasants failed, as did many others (all apparently in northeastern states) over the next 150 years. The first successful transplant was in Oregon, where the landscape more closely simulated the bird's native habitat. W.L. McAtee, in his 1945 book *The Ring-Necked Pheasant and its Management in North America*, summarized the introduction:

"The Chinese ring-necked pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus torquatus*) was successfully transplanted to Oregon in 1881 through the gift of 28 birds by Judge Owen N. Denny, then United States Consul General at Shanghai, China. Judge Denny was accustomed to having these birds served on his table, as they were abundant generally in Chinese markets. Impressed by the similarity of the climate at Shanghai with that of Linn County, Oregon, where he lived before going to China, he conceived the idea of obtaining some of the birds from these markets and shipping them to his brother's farm in the Willamette Valley."

Several shipments of pheasants left Shanghai, McAtee wrote, but: "According to rumor, one lot was eaten by the ship's crew for a holiday dinner just before reaching the Pacific Coast of the United States." Subsequent shipments arrived safely and the birds were taken to the old Denny homestead and liberated. The transplanted pheasants and their offspring "thrived and later provided stock that was transferred to other parts of the Northwest and even distant sections of the United States."

So successful were the pheasant releases that by 1892 Oregon held its first hunting season, lasting two and one-half months. It was estimated that more than 50,000 pheasants were shot the first day of the first season. With native game birds (prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse in particular) declining in the face of expanding agriculture, rudimentary game departments across the country were scrambling to find a replacement and pheasants seemed to fill the bill as not only did they co-exist with agriculture, they flourished.



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

Pheasants prosper when no more than three-fourths of the land is in crop production, and they require weedy or grassy areas.

Among the early releases by game departments was California in 1889, Colorado in 1894 and Utah in 1895. Pheasant stockings by game departments in the Great Plains states did not become widespread until the mid-1910s.

Published accounts invariably give 1900 as the year ringnecks first appeared in Nebraska, when privately released birds in northern Kansas drifted, or proliferated and spread, into several southeastern Nebraska counties.

"A male specimen of this beautiful bird was shot near Barneston, Nebraska, December 3, 1900," Myron Swenk reported in the *Proceedings of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union*, 1901. "It was in thick brush when shot, the man having no idea of what he was shooting other than that it was a bird of some kind."

When pheasants were first introduced into Nebraska is unknown, but the revision of state game laws in 1895, stating it was unlawful to "shoot or otherwise destroy any English pheasants, China pheasants, Mongolian pheasants, English Partridge, Belgium Partridge, English Black cocks or any other variety of imported game birds," suggests sportsmen had attempted to stock birds prior to that time.

"It would be interesting to know with what success the sportsmen of Hastings have met in their efforts to stock the valley of the Little Blue with that gorgeous game bird, the Mongolian pheasant," outdoor writer Sandy Griswold wrote in the February 2, 1896 edition of the *Omaha Bee*. Griswold

noted the 1895 statute was passed "in behalf of the parties at Hastings" but he did not know if the stocked pheasants had prospered. "Why cannot the legislature at its next session," he continued, "make a small appropriation providing for the introduction of the pheasant in different localities in this state? The birds are extremely hardy, breed like sparrows, and the pursuit of them affords the most capital sport."

"Ten years or so ago it was no uncommon occurrence to encounter one or more ring-necked pheasants in the brambly thickets northwest of [Fort] Calhoun," Griswold reported in the February 12, 1905 edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*. Griswold noted that in the fall of 1896, while hunting quail there, he had "flushed a flock of seventeen of these beautiful game birds, and later on inquiry developed that they were the product of several pair liberated there in '94 by Dr. George L. Miller of this city. It is now more than probable that the plant has long since been exterminated, but the experiment demonstrated that with proper safeguards thrown around the birds they could be successfully propagated in various localities in this state."

A letter from Dr. Harry M. Elsner of Loup City to *NEBRASKALAND* in June 1966 related: "I am enclosing a picture which I took in 1897 of Mr. Aaron Wall of Loup City. It is my understanding that Mr. Wall was the first in our area to raise ringneck pheasants which are so much in the news today. Raising pheasants was a hobby with



NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY RG2055-17

By the 1920s, pheasants were as abundant as jackrabbits in some regions of the state. Nebraska's first pheasant season was in 1927.



From the late-1920s through the 1940s, Nebraska farms were small, diversified, dotted with idle areas and thick with pheasants. Above, J. McGinis, F. Norman, P. Powell, H. McGinis and H. Vierson hold a string of pheasants shot near Ord in 1928.

PHOTO COURTESY OF M. E. VIERSON

Mr. Wall and he continued it until about 1905.”

Just how many game fanciers or sportsmen were importing, raising and releasing pheasants in the state prior to 1900 is unknown, but such anecdotal accounts as those above imply it was not uncommon.

In 1901, the Nebraska Legislature replaced the Nebraska Fish Commission (established in 1879) with a Game and Fish Commission. With that change it became the responsibility of the state to “manage” wildlife beyond what had been done prior, principally regulating (liberally) hunting seasons. Concern over the declining abundance of native grouse and quail, and a prevailing belief that the most successful response to vanishing game birds was importing exotics, as the Fish Commission had done for years with carp, must have pointed the new game commission in the direction of stocking pheasants. But the small Commission staff was not even adequate to enforce game laws, much less ponder the possibilities of introducing pheasants. Private stockings, though, apparently continued, and probably became even more common and widespread.

The Spring 1941 edition of *Outdoor Nebraska* published an article, “Some Reminiscences of Early Days” by W.A. Anderson of Ord, recalling the stocking of pheasants.

“About forty years ago I was visiting in Ord with my friend Charles Partridge,” Anderson wrote. “At that time he had an idea that the Chinese partridge could be raised in this country, as he said the prairie chicken and quail were disappearing rapidly. He was proprietor and owner of the

Hotel Ord at that time and known to every traveling man in the state. That was about the year 1900, if I recall correctly. I think he had a half dozen birds at that time. He had an old barn and a screened-in yard for his pheasants. He asked me to go in with him hatching the eggs. I agreed and he furnished me two settings of ten eggs each. He had a bantam hen to do his hatching, but I used ordinary Plymouth Rock hens and between us we grew the young birds to about the size of quail.” Anderson selected the northeastern corner of Valley County, where “there were dense thickets of plum and buckbrush,” as the site to release the pheasants. “They were frequently seen that autumn and several survived the winter,” Anderson recalled.

Commission biologist H. Elliott McClure, in the Winter 1942 issue of *Outdoor Nebraska*, wrote of the early introduction of pheasants in Nebraska. He had obtained the pheasant rearing records of Charles Partridge and gives the year when Partridge began rearing birds as 1909.

“In 1909 he received the first three pairs of pheasants on February 11, and had paid for these the sum of \$17,” McClure wrote. “On April 17 one of the hens laid the first [pheasant] egg laid in Valley County.” Apparently Partridge was conversant with bird-rearing, as his records show three of his hens produced 270 eggs in a period of 123 days. “Of course, as the eggs were taken from the hens as quickly as they laid them,” McClure continued, “they did not incubate any, and continued to lay at the rate of about an egg a day.” Perhaps to give his birds greater genetic diversity, Partridge

purchased 12 eggs from an Oregon breeder, and he continued to import new stock and raise pheasants until at least 1919, although his records are incomplete, which brings into question if the 1909 records were really Partridge’s first attempt to rear pheasants, or if Anderson’s memory was correct. Partridge sold pheasant eggs to would-be breeders throughout Nebraska, including those in the towns of Fairbury, Wayne, Grand Island, Hastings, Ord, South Omaha and Columbus.

Similar private attempts to establish pheasants in the state were apparently common. A letter to the *Omaha World-Herald* in October 1913 detailed the release of 24 pairs of pheasants by Charles Hochreiter of Ravenna in 1910. That same year he purchased 48 eggs and raised 34 birds to maturity, some of which he released in the area. The letter noted that “many coveys are known to exist” around the towns of Ravenna, Sweetwater and Rockville. Nebraska farmers, it seems, were better situated to rear pheasants than the state game department as they had barns and coops, brooding hens, experience with poultry and available land. Lacking funds and staff, the Commission could do little more than watch from the sidelines as private breeders attempted to establish pheasants.

“Realizing the helplessness of the ‘Bob White’ quail in severe winters, I started a campaign during the latter part of 1907 to secure money by popular subscription from gun clubs and individuals, for the purpose of experimenting with the Hungarian Partridge,” wrote George L. Carter, Chief Deputy Warden of the Game and Fish Commission in 1908. Sufficient contributions were made for the purchase of 124 pairs at \$4.50 per pair. The birds were shipped from New York and released at 11 sites across the state from Gordon to West Point and south to Fairbury and Minden. Although George L. Carter received correspondence that the stock was proliferating, little more was ever heard of the birds. That attempt to establish Hungarian partridges, though, created an interest at the Commission in introducing exotic game birds, particularly pheasants. The year most often given when the Nebraska Commission initiated pheasant releases is 1915, but it was 1911 when the legislature appropriated a modest sum to pay for the purchase, propagation and distribution of pheasants in the state, and birds were raised that spring.

“Suitable buildings, cages, coops, hatching nests and netting enclosures were erected and purchased,” wrote Henry N. Miller, Chief Deputy Commissioner of the Nebraska Game and Fish Commission in his *Biennial Report of the Game and Fish Commission* for the two years ending December 31, 1912. “Five hundred birds consisting of several varieties of pheasants were purchased from various game preserves at Oak Park, Illinois; Yardley, Pennsylvania; and Jefferson City, Missouri, but we had the same experience as other states have had in the beginning – losing a great many of the birds in transportation and in change of quarters, and also on account of inexperience and knowledge of the habits and requirements of these birds; therefore, the results are not all that we could have hoped for.

“We find from last year’s experience in game propagation that in order to raise the young birds, conditions must be made as nearly as possible as they would have them in the wild state, with plenty of room to roam, otherwise they

cannot be kept in a healthy condition,” Miller continued. “The appropriation made by the 1911 legislature was too small to purchase land, secure experienced help, and properly conduct the propagation of game. If the state expects to continue this work I would recommend a large enough appropriation so that a tract of land can be purchased, not less than 160 acres.”

Miller reported that “in the neighborhood” of 200 pheasants were liberated across the state and that 432 breeding birds were held in temporary quarters at Antelope Park in Lincoln. The stocking program was rather hastily deemed a failure and the legislature declined to appropriate additional funds. In 1914 Miller wrote that the breeding stock was “sent out over the state to the most suitable places, mostly wooded districts and river farms.” He reported pheasants could be seen “in great number along the Niobrara River and also along the Platte.” Pheasants released on an island in the Platte near Columbus were reported to be “doing fine.” Although modest releases of pheasants purchased from commercial game farms would be made, the 1911 attempt to rear pheasants would be the state’s last until 1937. In his 1918 report to the governor, newly appointed Chief Deputy



PHOTO COURTESY OF NANCY LOFHOLM

Jac Lofholm of Loup City posed with his bag of ringnecks in 1943. Pheasants were abundant in Sherman County.

Commissioner Geo. G. Koster recommended “that an appropriation be made for stocking the State with Pheasants.” Apparently, no funds were appropriated per Koster’s request. In 1946, former Commission biologist Levi Mohler wrote that between 1915 and 1925 “the state brought in small shipments of pheasants and released them. None of these early releases were large and it appears, from what the early records show, that not more than 500 pairs of pheasants were brought into Nebraska from the outside.”

“The State Game Commission began a limited stocking program on pheasants in 1915, but if I remember correctly, it wasn’t until after World War I before we received them in Chase County,” wrote Charles and Anoma Hoffmeister in their 1982 self-published book, *Meat in the Pot*. “The people in this part of the state had elected my father to represent them in the legislature and the game commission sent a few pheasants for him to put out. It happened the pheasants came



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

The cock pheasant's colorful plumage, as well as its size and wily nature when pursued by hunters and dogs, immediately endeared it to Nebraska sportsmen.

during the prairie chicken season. Father had a farm at the edge of Imperial so he took them out and shut them in a pen safe from the prairie chicken gunners.

“The pheasants had the use of a hog house and were watered and fed until the prairie chicken season ended, a period of about six weeks. One of the roosters never forgot the hog shed and the comfort and shelter it afforded. Whenever it became cold, he came back to the hog house and roosted with the hogs, and at times when the thermometer dipped below zero, he would sit on the hogs absorbing the warmth from their bodies. He made visits to the hog pen for two or three years after his release.”

By the early-1920s, the ring-necked pheasant was proliferating in some regions of the state, particularly in Howard, Sherman, Greeley and Valley counties. It is probably no coincidence that those were some of the same counties where private breeders made releases in the early-1900s.

Richard McDonald from Rockville in Sherman County wrote the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1924 and complained that pheasants had become a pest to farmers as they followed rows of listed corn and pulled up the sprouts. McDonald suggested that they be thinned out to about 20 pairs to the quarter section “instead of the possible 300 pairs as at the present.” If McDonald exaggerated the pheasant’s abundance, he detailed it with specificity, as he mentioned: “I have sat on my porch and counted as high as 50 males at one time, but that was a very small part of what are here.”

In 1926, the Bureau of Game and Fish contracted with farmers in Sherman and Howard counties to trap pheasants for release in other regions of the state. Seemingly chronically strapped for funds, half of the money for the project came from private individuals and sportsmen organizations. At \$1 per bird in the poor economic times of the 1920s, it was not long before pheasants were “coming into Lincoln by the thousands.” During March of that year, more than 15,000 pheasants were distributed throughout the state. The capture of pheasants from Sherman County averaged 27 birds per section. In the Autumn 1938 issue of *Outdoor Nebraska*, Frank B. O’Connell, Chief of the Bureau of Game and Fish, wrote that: “In 1927 and 1928 the greatest distribution of game birds in the history of the state was made. A total of 28,632 adult pheasants were trapped in four counties

where they had become numerous and replanted in 77 other counties.” Other sources give the number of pheasants trapped and restocked in 1927 alone at 30,000.

In October 1927, Nebraskans finally got their crack at hunting ringnecks during a three-day season in Wheeler and parts of Sherman counties. The daily bag limit and possession limit was five roosters. The following year a 10-day season in nine east-central counties (Hall, Buffalo, Howard, Sherman, Merrick, Valley, Greeley, Garfield and Wheeler) was allowed, and hunters were reported to have shot about 25,000 birds. In 1928 the statewide harvest was estimated to be twice as many, and by 1930 the pheasant

population in Nebraska was estimated at one million. By 1944, hunters were allowed an 80-day season. So abundant were pheasants that one or two hens were allowed in the daily bag from 1930 through 1941. The calculated harvest was about one million in 1941, and two million by 1946.

With large numbers of pheasants being stocked statewide, they quickly proliferated where habitat met their needs. In some areas they became too abundant.

“The introduction of the pheasant into Nebraska by the state game department as a substitute for our disappearing native game birds opens a subject of controversy which is likely to last for many years,” a November 11, 1928, *Omaha World-Herald* editorial stated. “...his versatility in adapting himself to new environments is just enough to bring him under suspicion of being a mischievous bird. The result is that he has to take the blame, not only for such mischief as he actually does do, but for a great deal that he probably doesn’t.

“From the sportsman’s standpoint his introduction is desirable,” the editorial continued. “He offers good shooting, where nothing else is available to the hunter’s gun. He makes also an excellent table delicacy. It is asserted, however, that he is a bully and tends to the destruction of native game birds, particularly the prairie chicken, by despoiling their nests.” In the pheasant’s defense, though, the editorial continued: “President Brady of the Nebraska Isaak Walton League noted a case on his Holt County ranch, where a hen grouse and a hen pheasant had nests on each side of the same fence post. They raised their flocks undisturbed by each other or by other birds of the same species.

“The greatest complaint against him,” the editorial stated, “...comes from farmers. The question here to be determined is whether his voracious appetite for worms and insects is enough to offset such damage as he may do by pilfering from the farmer’s grain stores, for he is granivorous as well as carnivorous.” The editorial then recounted the story of a South Dakota farmer who saw pheasants feeding along rows of his newly planted corn. “He thought he had caught them in flagrante delicto. A game warden was called in and a number of the birds were killed. Their crops were full, not of young corn, but of cut worms.”

An undocumented newspaper clipping (probably from a local paper in about 1928) from the scrapbook of W.H. Lemburg of rural Boelus in Howard County, who raised many species of game birds, including pheasants, that he released, noted that: “Within twenty years birds became so plentiful in the district of the original planting that farmers were complaining of damage to their crops and a few public meetings were held and a demand made on the department of agriculture to reduce their numbers, the popular idea being that they [farmers] should be allowed to shoot them. The general complaint was that the pheasants were pulling the newly planted corn to get the softened kernel. The department, thru its bureau of game and fish, investigated

and reached the conclusion that the pheasant did not pull the healthy plant but only those which had started to wilt, and that he did not pull it for the kernel, but for the cut worm or wire worm which had caused the plant to die.”

Judging by accounts from the late-1920s, it seems the ring-necked pheasant was a promiscuous consumer of farm produce. Mrs. A.H. Jones wrote in the October 6, 1930 *Nebraska Ornithologists’ Union Letter of Information* that a Mr. Lockwood, “who lives along the Platte River north of Hastings and makes a specialty of growing melons, lost his entire crop of early melons because of depredations by the Ring-necked Pheasant. Lack of water, the Platte River being entirely dry at that time, is considered by Mr. Lockwood to be the cause of these attacks on his melon patch. By actual count the pheasants destroyed 482 of Mr. Lockwood’s melons.

In a 40-acre field he counted 17 coveys of pheasants, which indicates the abundance of these birds in his locality.”

A bill was introduced in the 1929 legislature to allow farmers to kill pheasants when they threatened crops. Not surprisingly, it was introduced by Representative Fred Daddow of Loup City, the heart of the state’s best pheasant range at that time. A similar bill was introduced in 1930 making it legal for “any farmer to kill pheasants on his own lands when they were damaging or destroying the crops.” And a second bill introduced the same year proposed to “vest ownership of all non-migratory game birds with the individual land owner or tenant, instead of with the state as now.” None of the bills passed. In

response, the Commission issued 400 “pheasant damage” permits to farmers in 1930, allowing them to shoot, trap or poison problem pheasants. The Commission’s preferred solution was to further liberalize pheasant hunting seasons and increase the harvest. In 1930, 23 counties were open in an attempt to pare back the number of birds. And the Commission initiated research on the pheasant’s food habits in 1932. By 1933, it was estimated hunters were harvesting about 200,000 pheasants. The Summer 1935 issue of *Outdoor Nebraska* reported that “While the birds are not as numerous in the central part of the state as they were several years ago, they have greatly increased in other sections.”

The number of pheasants and their range continued to grow during the early years of drought and depression in the 1930s. During that decade, the federal government became an increasingly significant player in agriculture. The Cropland Adjustment Act of 1934 and the following Agricultural Conservation Program in 1936 were designed to raise prices for crops and livestock by diverting land from grain production and, as a side benefit, reduce soil erosion. The weedy go-back land created under these programs suited ringnecks just fine, and their numbers boomed. Drought did, however, change where pheasants were found. The Autumn 1934 issue of *Outdoor Nebraska* noted that “the best hunting this year will be in the lowlands” as “hill lands and the corn country does not have its customary supply owing to lack of

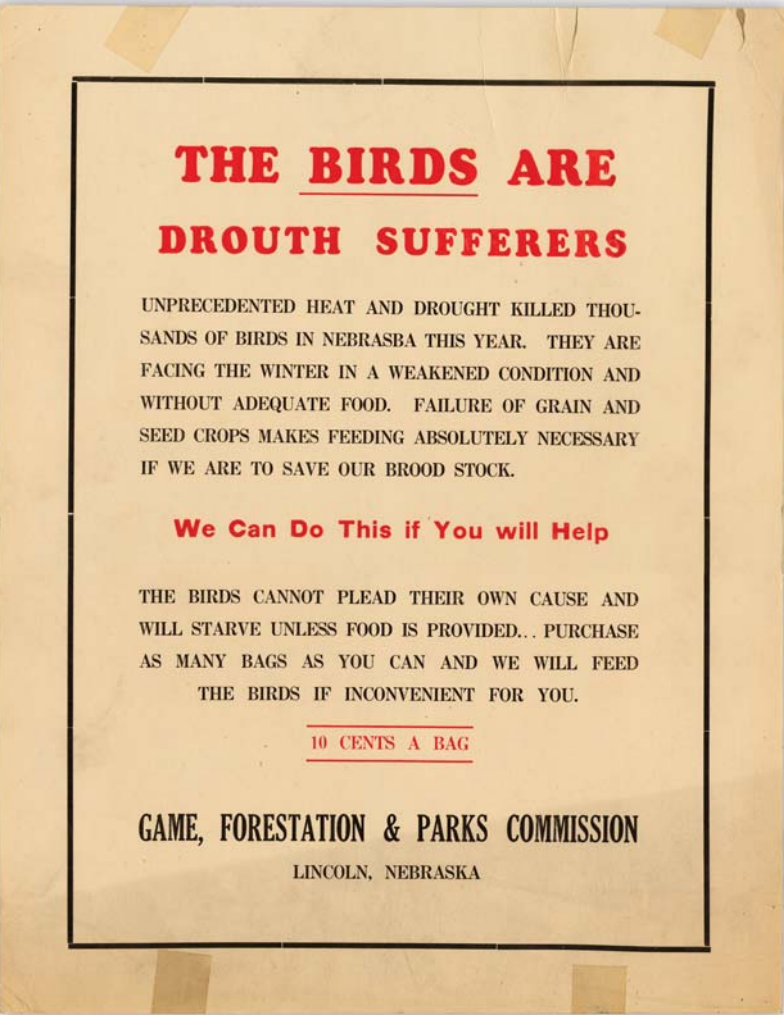
The pheasant is a game bird, full of pep, and it will be fun to hunt them. They are reputed to rival a prairie chicken in eating qualities.

– Geo. G. Koster, Chief Warden, 1922.

moisture during the past summer.”

Drought did eventually take its toll on pheasants. In 1936 the Commission cut the season to only eight days and reduced the daily bag from five to four birds, fearing pheasant populations in some regions were not adequate to ensure a large enough breeding population in the event of a severe winter with inadequate waste grain available. Ironically, farmers who in the late-1920s were petitioning to kill pheasants as they were an enemy of agriculture were now asking for reduced hunting and more pheasants to help with grasshopper infestations.

In 1937 the Commission finally got the game farm that



During the late-1930s, the Commission encouraged landowners and sportsmen to purchase grain to feed pheasants and other birds.

Chief Deputy Henry N. Miller asked the legislature to fund in 1912. The farm was established on leased land along U.S. Highway 81 on the southern edge of Norfolk in Madison County as the Commission “deemed [it] inadvisable to purchase a permanent site until more experience had been gained as to the type of soil that was requisite.” Seventy-five breeding pens, seven double brooder houses, 14 brooder runs, 13 show pens, four large range pens, 15 small shelters and 25 shipping crates were constructed. In the first year, 2,700 pheasants, chukar partridges and bobwhite quail were raised. Seven hundred pheasants were held over for brood

stock and 1,266 were stocked in 11 counties, most in east-central Nebraska. In 1939, a second game bird rearing facility was established adjacent to Niobrara State Park in Knox County. And in the summer of 1940, the Commission’s third game farm was under construction at its fish hatchery near Benkelman in Dundy County. More than 110,000 pheasants were reared at state game farms and released from 1937 through 1946. Production at the three hatcheries declined during World War II because of budget cutbacks and the shortage of workers, but again blossomed in the late-1940s and early-1950s.

Paralleling the establishment of state game farms was the creation of 26 “cooperative pheasant-rearing units” by the Commission in 1939, and another 25 added the following year. Under that program, sportsmen and wildlife clubs received a brooder house, sun porch, shelter pen, wire run, small and large feeders and other equipment necessary to rear pheasants, and in June received about 200 young birds reared at the state game farms. When mature, the birds were released into the wild. From 1939 through 1942, the heyday of the cooperatives, sportsmen reared and released more than 40,000 pheasants.

Mohler, who extensively studied upland game birds in the 1940s and early 1950s, wrote in 1946 that pheasant populations peaked in 1942 and 1943. He noted that 1942 field studies “indicated that in good areas the population exceeded 300 pheasants per section of land.” He attributed the decline in pheasant numbers between 1943 and 1946 to “intensive land use in recent years of high prices and good rainfall coupled with fast-moving power machinery for working summer fallow ground” that was “detrimental to pheasant nesting success.”

The Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission was flush with new game biologists following World War II, many educated under the GI bill, and game management made a hard turn, not just in Nebraska, but nationwide. More than any other individual, Mel Steen, appointed Commission director in 1956, ushered in the principles of modern game management. While stocking game birds where they could prosper but did not exist was a logical management tool, he believed Nebraska was two decades beyond that point. Dumping ever more pheasants into counties where they were already established

was increasingly seen as wasted time and money. The emphasis on managing game birds instead turned to managing habitat. Another strike against game farms was the ever rising price of rearing pheasants, nearly doubling from 1943 to 1952, from \$1.13 per bird to \$2.13.

Commission records are incomplete as to when the game farms at Niobrara State Park and in Dundy County were closed. The last to survive was the game farm in Madison County, which had come to be called the Norfolk Game Farm. At a June 12, 1959 Commission meeting, Steen again expressed his desire to close the operation: “I don’t see



J. F. Bookwalter, Louise Broyles and Dick Broyles of North Loup in Valley County with a morning’s bag of ringnecks. Nebraska’s second pheasant season occurred in 1928 and was open in nine counties where the birds were most abundant, including Valley County.

much sense in continuing a big and extensive pheasant stocking program.” Steen’s desire was to create a “small but highly modernized operation” on the Sacramento-Wilcox Wildlife Management area in Phelps County on Commission-owned land, adding that the Madison County game farm was “archaic.” Some of the commissioners were reluctant to close the Madison County game farm. Steen responded: “I don’t see the percentage in it but it has some public relations value.” The issue was again raised at the March 11, 1960 Commission meeting, and a staff member responded that designs for buildings for the new game farm at Sacramento-Wilcox were underway. Steen stated his opinion even more bluntly at the May 20, 1960 Commission meeting, saying: “If you people want to take the heat, I would like to get rid of all the game farms.” The Madison County game farm did go away, quietly, apparently in 1962 when the lease on the land expired. Pheasants were raised at the new game farm in subsequent years but never in the numbers of previous years.

Pheasant numbers rebounded from their decline in the late-1940s and early-1950s with passage of the Agricultural Act of 1956, which created the Soil Bank Program designed to retire cropland to raise grain prices and place the land under permanent protective cover for five to ten years. The Soil Bank’s patchwork of heavy cover surrounded by a mix of diversified crop fields, agricultural land laced with broad grassy fencerows, brushy and weedy draws and ravines, hedgerows, clumps of plum and chokecherry thickets on roadsides, cattail wetlands and spots of land either too small or too rough to farm led to an immediate boom in pheasants. In the Soil Bank’s heyday, from 1956 to 1958, Nebraska’s

pheasant numbers increased 77 percent and Nebraska became “The Pheasant Capital of the Nation.” But the boom was short-lived. The program was repealed in 1965. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was enacted in 1985 and continues today. It brought a resurgence in pheasants, but never equaling their abundance during the Soil Bank days. The face of the Nebraska landscape had changed dramatically in 30 years. Agriculture had become even more intense, and CRP grasslands were isolated patches of pheasant cover in a landscape of horizon to horizon irrigated corn and soybean fields.

“Wherever they were introduced, it seems to be a pattern that their populations peaked from 20 to 40 years after introduction, and then declined,” the authors of *Restoring America’s Wildlife 1937 -1987*, U.S. Dept of Interior, 1987, wrote of the ring-necked pheasant in the United States. “Their prime habitat requirements are early stages of plant succession created by the farmer. They have done their best in situations where from about half to three-fourths of the land is cultivation.” The authors continued: “That doesn’t describe the modern midwestern farm of today ... We are in an era of intensive farming with sophisticated farm machinery that mandates large fields. Chemical technology and advances in plant breeding have favored monocultures of corn or soybeans on most of our agricultural lands.”

Since pheasants were first introduced in Nebraska, their numbers have cycled with the use of the land. When someone looks back at the 21st century, it will probably be much the same story – the abundance of this gaudy, exotic game bird from China rose and fell with what agriculture provided them in the way of food and cover. ■

Cranes on the North Platte

Photos and text by Bob Grier

“Part of the Western Alaskan-Siberian subpopulation of lesser sandhill cranes stops each spring near Lewellen on the North Platte River on a journey that in some cases exceeds 5,000 miles from their wintering to breeding grounds; and interestingly some of these birds select two of the world’s most inhospitable regions for their final destinations, the Chihuahuan Desert of northern Mexico during the winter and the arctic tundra of northeastern Siberia during the breeding season.”

– Gary L. Krapu, research scientist at the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center

March mornings on the North Platte River near Lewellen begin with the first bands of barely discernable pink and red along the eastern horizon. Above the river’s channel, an exceptionally bright star fights to hold its place in the night sky and a building breeze carries the morning’s first crane calls. Thousands of shadowy sandhill cranes standing in the shallow, willow- and tree-shrouded river channels are beginning to stir on their nightly roosts.

The progression from night to day quickly accelerates and scattered flocks of cranes, Canada geese, pintails and other



Small groups of cranes are constantly on the move between their nightly roosts and the feeding areas along the North Platte River.

waterfowl soon begin to punctuate the now rose and orange-colored sky. Flight after flight of sandhill cranes begin moving to their favored meadows, picked cornfields and pastures to feed.

Most wildlife enthusiasts know of the annual spring rendezvous of 90 percent of North America’s migrating populations of lesser sandhill cranes that gather each March on a relatively short section of the central Platte Valley – considered by many to be the most spectacular concentration of migrating birds anywhere on the planet. Few know, however, of the smaller numbers of cranes that gather along the North Platte above Lake McConaughy from early-March until late-April. It is rare to see birders and other wildlife enthusiasts stop there to view the concentrations of these wary, gray birds with their vibrant red crowns and long legs standing in the flat and fertile riverbottom’s farm and pasturelands.

Out here it’s often a rancher tending calving heifers or a rural mail carrier traveling a lonely gravel road that pauses to view and listen as another flight of cranes joins an already feeding flock by dropping nearly vertically out of the sky

with cupped wings, outstretched legs and seemingly no room to land. Without even knowing that the sandhill crane is the oldest living avian species on earth or thinking of the cranes’ epic 5,000 mile journey and the perils they encounter along the way, watching them feed and hearing their echoing calls can bring a sense of joy, even exhilaration.

As the day progresses, the cranes begin to slow their purposeful feeding activities – their stay on the North Platte is intended to replenish and add to the fat reserves needed to fuel their long journey. As midday approaches, a lull seems to settle over the flock and the sun’s warmth begins to blur distant birds with waves of heat rising from the moist ground. Here and there, pairs and individual cranes begin dancing excitedly – jumping, stretching and running short distances with flapping wings and equally excited calls. Soon the entire assemblage might take to the air, “kettling” into the sky – a living funnel of birds lifting higher and higher on the rising air currents.

The first lesser sandhills arrive on the North Platte, on average, during the second week of March and leave about a

month later, by April 11. Lesser sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis canadensis*) are the smallest of their species, averaging less than seven pounds and standing nearly four feet in height. Intermediate sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis rowani*), often referred to as Canadian sandhill cranes, weigh about 8½ pounds with proportionately longer bills and the largest of the species, the greater sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis tabida*), can weigh more than 10 pounds.

The concentration of cranes along the central Platte Valley each March that draws avid birders from around the globe is composed of about 57 percent lesser sandhills, with a smaller percentage of intermediate sandhills and an even smaller percentage of greater sandhills. Intermediate and greater sandhill cranes occur mostly on the eastern portion of the central Platte, from about the U.S. Highway 34 bridge over the Platte near Grand Island west to Shelton.

“The lesser sandhill cranes staging in the Lewellen area are part of what we’ve designated as the West Alaska-Siberian subpopulation,” crane researcher Gary Krapu of the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Jamestown,



Sunset’s golden light finds a small flight of cranes on the move near Lewellen. Earlier in the day, it is possible to see thousands of cranes noisily “kettling” into the sky on lifting air currents.



"Dancing at the Mirage" – Sunlight heating the moist meadow and pasture feeding areas by midday blurs distant cranes as excited pairs and individual cranes perform their best moves.

North Dakota says. "The majority of this population winters on the Chihuahuan Desert of northern Mexico and the west Texas plains, where the flocks are usually associated with saline lakes and salt flats."

The Chihuahuan Desert covers parts of New Mexico, Arizona, Texas and a large part of northern Mexico. This approximately 140,000 square mile desert is the second largest desert in North America.

Krapu has live-trapped and attached small transmitters to the legs of numerous cranes to study their movements. The transmitters weigh about 30 grams and transmit signals that are received by satellites and then downloaded to computers via the Internet. The telemetry tracking provides a very accurate and detailed look at the subpopulation's movements.

"The cranes leave the southern winter grounds beginning

as early, on average, as February 20, and by March 1 most of the cranes are on their way north. The subpopulation's migratory route and their intermediate stopovers throughout their journey are very precise and have been used for thousands of years."

A nonstop flight from northern Mexico or southern Texas to the North Platte River near Lewellen – approximately 600 miles to the north – would require at least 12 hours of flying at a 50-mph pace. The migrants usually take several days to reach the North Platte, often arriving around sunset before finding roosts in the shallow, braided river channels.

The trip north is fraught with dangers – cranes can encounter freezing rain and late-winter storms at any time on their northward migration, and spring or early summer storms hitting their arctic breeding grounds on the Siberian and Alaskan tundra can kill breeding adults and their chicks. However, while inhospitable at times, the tundra is very productive during the nesting season, and both American and Russian wildlife biologists believe the West Alaska-Siberian subpopulation is expanding their breeding range and their numbers.

The majority of the sandhills near Lewellen normally leave by about April 5, arriving within three days at a second refueling stop in western Saskatchewan after crossing South Dakota, North Dakota and southern Saskatchewan. This second stopover lasts about 2½ to 3 weeks before the cranes resume their migration. From western Saskatchewan the cranes cross northern Alberta and British Columbia before entering the Yukon Territory and turning north to pass near Fairbanks, Alaska.

"After reaching central Alaska, part of the subpopulation leaves the main migration to select nesting sites in western Alaska, including the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, while the majority of the migrants continue their journey across the Bering Sea and some travel as far as 1,500 miles into northeastern Siberia where they breed and nest, usually on major river deltas entering the Arctic Ocean," said Krapu.

Unlike the overcrowding of snow geese on their North American arctic breeding and nesting grounds that threatens and destroys the fragile tundra (see the snow geese story beginning on page 28), sandhill crane pairs select and defend large nesting areas. Nest densities for lesser sandhill cranes



Ground blizzards and late winter storms are a constant threat during the sandhill cranes' migration north.



Cranes return to their nightly roosts on the North Platte's wide and shallow channels well after sundown on warm spring evenings.

on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska, for example, are estimated to be less than one nest per square mile.

Snow and ice on the arctic breeding grounds can delay the cranes' arrival and the birds will often stage in sub-arctic regions until the breeding grounds open.

Lesser sandhills usually arrive on their breeding and nesting grounds in mid-May, and their stay fits tightly within the brief arctic summer. Incubation begins with the laying of the first egg, and both adults take turns incubating the one- to two-egg clutch. Incubation averages about 31 to 33 days.

Possibly as an adaptation to the shortened arctic breeding and nesting season and possibly aided in their feeding activities by the nearly 24 hours of daylight, lesser sandhill chicks fledge at about two months of age, compared to the nearly three months needed for greater sandhill crane chicks.

Less than three months after their arrival, the sandhills are ready to begin the migration back to their wintering grounds. During the fall migration, the cranes follow much the same course as in spring until reaching their fall staging areas in western Saskatchewan, where they stop for about three weeks. Departing from Saskatchewan in mid-October, the cranes migrate to their wintering grounds in less than a week. Most migrate across eastern and central Montana, through eastern Wyoming, Colorado and into New Mexico, where the birds heading to the Texas plains split from the migrants continuing to Mexico.

The sandhill cranes that stop near Lewellen each spring offer excellent viewing opportunities, particularly for people out west who don't want to travel quite as far to see these magnificent birds and those who like a little more solitude as they enjoy nature. Both viewer and crane safety are critical

and *NEBRASKAland Magazine's Wildlife Viewing Guide* (January-February 1997) offers detailed recommendations on approaching and viewing wildlife.

Unlike the crane-viewing facilities, blinds and highway and county road turnouts available along the central Platte, the Lewellen region's crane viewing infrastructure is primitive and requires constant attention. Viewers should pull their vehicles well off highway and county road surfaces whenever possible while also avoiding wet and soft road shoulders. The best crane-viewing locations are found from the Clear Creek Wildlife Management Area five miles east of Lewellen on Nebraska Highway 92 to the Garden County roads west of Lewellen. At times, feeding flocks of cranes may be found as far west as the Oshkosh area.

An overall view of the North Platte valley is offered at the Ash Hollow State Historical Park's visitor center, located two miles east of Lewellen on U.S. Highway 26. A small parking area at the south end of the county road bridge directly south of Lewellen offers a panoramic view of the North Platte.

At times, large concentrations of cranes are visible on the outskirts of Lewellen and are often observed "kettling" in the sky directly over the small community, as well as transiting at low altitudes between their nightly roosts and day-time feeding areas.

The sandhill crane's pause along the North Platte in March is not nearly as well-known as the central Platte's gathering, but it is important to know that the rewards for birders and others that hope to spend time with this most ancient of living bird species can be found in both places each spring. Wherever you find them, enjoy the spectacle that is crane season in Nebraska. ■

High populations imply area is again supporting diverse wildlife populations.

The Loess Canyons area of southeast Lincoln County, northern Frontier County and southwest Dawson County is a very unique landscape in Nebraska. This large area is part of a former elevated plain that has been eroded over time and is now known for its deep and branching canyons. The area is highly variable in vegetation, with mixed-grass prairie and cedar woodland dominating, but there are also stands of deciduous trees such as green ash, American elm, boxelder, hackberry and cottonwood.



T. J. Walker

effort is to protect and increase the population of an endangered species present in this landscape, the American burying beetle. Due to requirements of the federal funding sources contributing to this project, NGPC and Quail Forever personnel are required to monitor the population of this species. Therefore, annual trapping efforts for the American burying beetle were initiated and continued in 2008.

The American burying beetle is a member of a group of insects known as carrion beetles, named for their feeding requirements of carrion (dead animals). Trapping these insects is not difficult or expensive when compared to trapping other wildlife – all that is required is a bucket buried in the ground, a dead animal (usually a rat purchased from a scientific supply house), some latex gloves and a little personal grit.

While two years of monitoring is not sufficient to assess the total population of the American burying beetle in the Loess Canyons, biologists are finding some interesting results. The trapping efforts in 2007 produced fairly low capture rates for the endangered beetle, primarily due to cool

nighttime temperatures during the time the trapping was going on. American burying beetles are nocturnal and are only active when temperatures surpass 60 degrees. Trapping conditions

in 2008 were perfect, including warm nighttime temperatures with elevated humidity levels – beetles also do not like dry weather and become relatively inactive under such conditions.

Collectively during the two years of trapping, 166 American burying beetles



A study trap similar to the one shown here contained 837 carrion beetles from a single night of trapping.

were captured, with 129 of those being caught in 2008. The top two traps for this species to date, producing half of the total captures in 2008, were located within an area that burned during the August 2002 Gothenburg wildfire. This is a very positive finding for our current management efforts because it suggests that fire is beneficial for this endangered beetle species. While the wildfire may have killed some American burying beetles, it also greatly improved the habitat for a variety of wildlife that eventually became food for the beetle.

It is also evident from the trapping results that more American burying beetles are being captured in areas with low to moderate cedar density than in areas with high cedar density. This is also a very positive result, as it supports the removal of cedar trees, the primary management activity being implemented on this landscape. The combined tools of fire, mechanical cedar removal and improved grazing management have already shown great benefits in improving the range quality on numerous project sites. We are seeing more native, warm-season grasses and higher abundance of annual weeds and native wildflowers. We are also seeing new growth of plum, sumac, currant, snowberry and other shrubs, along with saplings of green ash, American elm and other trees where, as recently as the fall of 2007, cedar trees completely

One of the unique objectives of this effort is to protect and increase the population of an endangered species present in this landscape, the American burying beetle.

These changes on the landscape will improve the area for beef production as well as for game species, including mule deer, wild turkey, northern bobwhite and elk as well as nongame species, including several that are listed as at-risk in the Nebraska Natural Legacy Plan. A more diverse landscape means more diverse and abundant wildlife, which will lead eventually to

Along with the American burying beetle, 12 other species of carrion beetles were captured, identified and counted during these monitoring efforts. More than 30,000 carrion beetles have been identified and counted to date, and while the numbers captured vary widely per trap and trapping period, it has not been uncommon to

have more than 600 carrion beetles in one trap in a 24-hour trapping period. The highest count resulted in 837 carrion beetles in a single trap.

The Loess Canyons obviously have a very high carrion beetle population, which implies that the landscape is again supporting high and diverse populations of wildlife. ■

For more on burying beetles, see the March 2005 issue of *NEBRASKAland*.

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WARRANTY Three year bumper to bumper backed by a fifty-five year old Nebraska Company	Three Year Warranty	Read the warranty. Most parts are limited to one year by some competitors
HEAT 24 oz. copper acting as a heat sync produces more heat than any other 1500 watt infrared heater	More heat	Some have no copper at all. Others only 5.9 to 12 oz. therefore they cannot produce as much heat or hold it as long as the SUNHEAT which makes competitor's models less efficient
FAN Quiet fan with sealed ball bearings with an incredible 80,000 hour life expectancy	Fan twice as quiet as competitor	None twice as quiet - one is 8 decibels quieter, most have a life expectancy of only 20,000 hours
HEAT TUBES 6000 plus hours with heavy duty wiring and a three year guarantee Easily replaceable by owner.	20,000 hours	Wiring is very thin with life expectancy approx. 5000 hours. Some heaters have only been on the market one year or less
QUALITY No electronics close to heat exhaust. All high quality heavy duty components and parts. Designed, engineered and guaranteed by a fifty-five year old Nebraska Company. Built in our own factory under watchful eyes and every heater is inspected in the U.S. by trained quality control inspectors	Good Quality	Electronics located close to heat exhaust with light wiring. Contracted out on a low bid basis to factories that do not specialize in building infrared heaters. For most, this is their first season of building infrared heaters and they are not quality controlled inspected in the U.S.

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Hull Lake

This small Boyd County lake is a gem in the Niobrara River breaks.

By Jon Farrar

Dendrites. That was the word that popped into my mind when I Google Earthed Hull Lake southwest of Butte in Boyd County and saw intricate, fringe-edged fingers radiating out from a thicker trunk. I knew it was precisely the right word for the image on my computer screen, a latent memory from an animal behavior or geology course I'd taken more than 40 years ago. Dendrites (from Greek meaning "tree") are the branched projections of a neuron that conduct electrochemical stimulation within the cells of our bodies. In geology, dendrites are the frost-like patterns found in mineral crystals. But the Google Earth image was neither of those, rather it was a wooded drainage feeding into the Niobrara River. On the trunk of that drainage were the impounded waters of Hull Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

The first view of Hull Lake from ground level is nearly as surprising. Visitors jog back and forth on county roads through a gently rolling countryside of cornfields as they drive south from State Highway 12. Big bales of hay line the roadsides in late-summer. Cattle gather under the shade of lines of trees in browning pastures. The county road ends with a view across a broad valley to the south, through which the Niobrara River courses. The last turn is onto a winding, single-lane, graveled road. At the WMA's entrance are ponderosa pines, eastern red cedars and a lone windmill that looks as if its galvanized blades that once captured the wind and put it to use have not turned for many years. The road drops abruptly into a narrow canyon and the clear, blue waters of Hull Lake lie ahead. Broadleaf arrowhead, wild bergamot and Joe-Pye weed line the shoreline along the dam; trees creep down the



ABOVE: Woodlands surround the upper end of the lake while cattails and swamp milkweed blanket the dam face. BELOW LEFT: A house wren leaves its tree hole nest to feed.

hills to the lake where it narrows. It is a tranquil, and unexpected, scene on the hardland of north-central Nebraska farm country. Construction of the earthen dam that created Hull Lake began late in 1949. A 1950 *Outdoor Nebraska* article stated the completed dam was 500 feet long, 38 feet high, 180 feet wide at the bottom, and the lake's water was 32 feet deep off the face of the dam. Hull Lake WMA is something of an anomaly as a state recreation area, as the land is not owned by the Commission. The right to create the lake and manage the WMA's six acres of land and water

was gained as an easement from landowners Raymond and Opal O'Haney. Even though small, the lake was welcomed by fishermen in this lake-poor region of the state. Fed by springs, the water quality is good and the lake deep enough to safeguard against winterkills. Hull Lake is stocked with bluegills, channel catfish, largemouth bass and



Hull Lake is ½ mile west, 2 miles south, 1 mile west and 1¼ miles south of Butte in Boyd County.



◀ This is my favorite photograph of my grandfather, Fred Loeffler, who passed away in 1988 in Fremont. Writing on the photo identifies the animal as a lynx, but could be a bobcat, as lynx are rare in Nebraska. He did not shoot the animal, only posed with it, and others probably did as well. The photo was taken in 1916 at Lindsay in Platte County when my grandfather was 17 years old.

– Gary Ebert, Eagle, Nebraska

► This picture is of two Canada geese shot near Stuart by my dad, Frank A. Greger Jr., around 1928 when he was 12 years old.

Dad said he heard hunters shooting down at the pond and saw the geese take off. The geese acted tired and landed on the east meadow. So he grabbed his shotgun and jumped on his pony Black Beauty and rode bareback out to where the geese were. He got real close, slid off his pony and shot two geese.

I'm sure Dad was pretty proud and I'm sure his mother was proud of him too! Dad said his mom always wanted him to go hunting and bring home some wild game to cook.

Dad will be 93 years old on March 27, 2009, and still hunts geese and deer.

– Dan Greger, Stuart, Nebraska



◀ This picture was taken in July 1969 in North Platte after a good walleye fishing trip to Lake McConaughy.

Pictured (left to right) are: Mike Ponte (myself); my step-dad, Ray Christiansen; my cousin, Ray

Detlefsen; and Dean Jamieson – all from North Platte at that time.

We always enjoyed getting together for fishing trips to the lake and the great meals that followed.

– Mike Ponte, Grand Island, Nebraska



◀ Jim and Ron Beran after a hunt with their grandfather, Tony Guzinski, near Ashton in 1952 when Jim was seven and Ron was five years old.

– Cheron 'Ron' Beran, Omaha, Nebraska



◀ Rabbits were plentiful in the 1930s. Hunting jacks and cottontails was great sport but also a significant source of nutrition. We had many meals of rabbit, squab or squirrel.

In this photo, my father Dan Seibold (left) is shown with his father's 12-gauge, double-barrel shotgun, which his grandson says has Damascus and Henry on the barrel.

On the right is his cousin, George Seibold, holding an unknown single-barrel shotgun.

– Danny B. Seibold, Papillion, Nebraska

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKALAND Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1970. 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. Photos will be returned.

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