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Cover: The white-breasted
nuthatch is just one of many
species to start your birding list
this month. For other March
activities, see page 28.

LUKE KATHOL

This page: Sandhill cranes
roost on the Platte River on a
foggy morning in Hall County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland
magazine

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



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Ringneck snakes can be found under rocks and logs as early as mid-March.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

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Pheasants Forever and
Quail Forever in Nebraska

2026 Spring Chapter Banquets

Table with 3 columns: DATE, CITY, CHAPTER. Rows include: 3-7-26 York Corn Country PF, 3-7-26 Holdrege Great Plains PF, 3-7-26 Sidney High Plains PF, 3-7-26 West Point Lower Elkhorn Valley PF, 3-7-26 Fairbury Rock Creek PF, 3-13-26 Eustis Wachtel Fur Immer QF, 3-14-26 Ponca Dixon County PF, 3-20-26 Wayne Logan Creek PF, 3-21-26 Arlington Washington County PF, 3-21-26 Weeping Water Cass County PF, 3-21-26 Neligh Golden Prairie PF, 3-21-26 Kimball Mile High PF, 3-28-26 Cambridge Republican Valley PF, 4-4-26 Stockville Medicine Creek PF, 4-24-26 Ashland Lower Platte PF, 5-2-26 Louisville Covey Crossroads QF



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



Colette Rathke, Wahoo
Baiting My Hook

FROSTY PINES

A mountain lion kitten
sounds off while in
its den at Ponderosa
Wildlife Management
Area.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

A SNOW GOOSE PRIMER

By Julie Geiser

This is the year you start snow goose hunting during Nebraska’s Light Goose Conservation Order. Here’s all you need to begin.

Scouting

Once you spot large flocks of snow geese, drive back roads, watch their patterns and get permission from landowners.

The work of finding a good field and setting out decoys can result in two or three successful hunts. After that, the birds may be gone, and it’s back to scouting.

Look for cornfields and winter wheat, as these are favored foods. Avoid any water or flooded areas with high vegetation, treelines or ditches running up to them. Keep away from roads. If an open water area has quality feed around it, you’ve found a honey hole.

Decoys

Use every decoy you have — from flyers, to windsocks, to full bodies. Hunting with friends that have a few hundred decoys will help with cost and effectiveness of a spread.

Many hunters use the “V” tactic in front of their blinds by placing decoys on the upwind side with smaller groups of decoys off to each side. Some hunters use the donut shape, as it’s easy for hunters to move around the shape’s landing hole according to wind direction and where the geese prefer to land.

If geese are landing short of the spread, try moving some of your decoys into that area, forcing the birds to land elsewhere. If the geese aren’t coming all the way to your decoys, move downwind from the decoys where flocks will pass within shotgun range as they swing around the spread.

Pick Your Shot

Focus on one bird at a time; it’s easy to get distracted when hundreds of birds are swarming you. As birds flair from a spread, they’ll go up, so start with a target at the top and work your way down to bag more birds.

Stay within your 45-degree shooting zone for safety and to avoid doubling-up on birds.

Camouflage

Don’t skimp when it comes to concealment. Layout blinds are popular, but portable waterfowl blinds are nice for their easy setup and comfort. Camouflage yourself or blind to match your surroundings and keep movements to a minimum.



Snow goose shot over a farm pond.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Calls and Guns

During the light goose conservation order, e-callers are a must. Add bluetooth speakers in different areas of a decoy spread for realistic sounds. When flocks are far away or the wind is blowing, start loud then turn the volume down as geese get close and add mouth calls as the birds near.

Once the shot is called, use the shotgun gauge that fits you best. Many hunt with 12- and 20-gauge guns, using 2-shot and BBs. If birds are in the 15- to 25-yard range, you’ll have no problem bringing them down with these gauges or even something as small as a .410.

Put these tips to use during your first snow goose spring, and visit OutdoorNebraska.gov for regulations, including zone locations and conservation order dates.

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This 153 ± acre property presents a well-rounded opportunity for buyers seeking rural land with multiple functional uses in Southeast Nebraska. Situated roughly 19 miles from Lincoln and only a short drive from Highway 103, the farm benefits from convenient access while remaining far enough out to retain a true rural setting.

Excellent road frontage on two sides enhances accessibility, future planning options, and overall usability of the tract. Multiple catch ponds are distributed across the property, providing reliable water sources for wildlife, enhancing habitat quality. This farm offers a practical blend of income-producing CRP, agricultural ground and recreational features. It is well-suited for buyers looking to diversify their land portfolio, establish a recreational property close to Lincoln, or position themselves for future land-use flexibility in a strong regional market.



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Tucked away in the Loess Hills of south central Nebraska, this 592.02 ± property offers the kind of privacy and peacefulness that’s getting harder to find. With rolling pastureland, scattered hardwoods, and pockets of dense cover, this is an ideal retreat for those seeking solitude—and a haven for

both livestock and wildlife. Currently used as a cattle pasture, the land is well-suited for grazing. Hunters will appreciate the abundant signs of deer, turkey, and other native game throughout the property. With no nearby neighbors and minimal road traffic, the land feels like your own private wilderness. Whether you’re looking to expand your cattle operation, establish a hunting camp, or simply escape the noise of modern life, this property is a rare and peaceful canvas waiting for the right vision.

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The northern pike is a sport fish that knows how to make a splash. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

A FEROCIOUS FISH

By Justin Haag

With its big alligator-like mouth, torpedo-shaped body and a striking olive-green-and-white-scale pattern, the northern pike has a way of standing out on Nebraska’s fishing scene.

Suited to colder climates, most of Nebraska’s northern pike live in the north-central and northwestern parts of the state. They do especially well in the Sandhills lakes.

These predators aren’t picky about what they eat, and consequently will bite on a variety of lures, baits and presentations. The pike’s diet consists of about anything that moves, and even the dead things that once did.

Fish, including other pike, amphibians, aquatic crustaceans and sometimes even birds fall victim to the pike’s jaws and its hundreds of sharp teeth. The pike is considered to be one of the fastest freshwater fish, as it can sprint toward prey at 10 mph. With large sensory pores on its head, its lateral line excels at detecting movement of prey.

Such a gluttonous appetite often produces a big fish. The pike grows most rapidly in the first few years of its life, when it puts on about 7 inches per year. At just 3 years old, a pike measures about 18 inches long — the “hammer handle,” as it’s often called. Nebraska’s record for northern pike dates back to fall 1997 in the Panhandle; the fish measured 47 inches and weighed 30 pounds and 1 ounce. Steven Morris of Scottsbluff caught it at Terry’s Pit on a twister tail.

Pike thrive in areas of heavy vegetation, both for spawning and hunting, and can be caught from the bank. Not long after ice-out, when the water temperature is 34-50 F, each female

pike lays as many as half a million eggs in the shallows. The eggs, which survive by attaching to sedges, grasses and bulrushes, are fertilized by males and hatch in about two weeks. The new recruits start by eating zooplankton and insect larvae and work their way up to bigger fare.

Pike are subject to some ire from anglers because of their tendency to eat popular panfish species and the perception that they are hard to prepare for the table.

They have a set of y-bones branching from their spine, not present in an easily-filleted walleye or bluegill. Many anglers find their big fillets of white, flaky meat to be just as tasty as those species, though, and cutting around the bones isn’t difficult with practice.

Pike anglers often use medium-action spinning or baitcasting rods with strong 10- to 20-pound line and big lures that produce vibration. They’re also a popular target beneath the ice, with either live bait on tip-ups or jigging lures.

The statewide bag limit for pike is three, only one of which can exceed 34 inches. Because management goals vary where pike are present, many of Nebraska’s waters have special regulations for the species. Check the Nebraska Fishing Guide at OutdoorNebraska.gov for those rules and the list of waters with pike in them.

Regardless whether or not a pike is targeted, even the haters don’t seem to mind reeling one in. In fact, deep down, they surely enjoy it.



Chasing rainbows is the easy part.



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Turkey kabobs seasoned with a North African chili paste. RYAN SPARKS

HARISSA TURKEY KABOBS

By Ryan Sparks

Harissa is a North African chili paste that, when combined with wild turkey, makes a perfect weeknight meal when you feel like grilling. It is as simple as marinating the turkey pieces, placing them on skewers, and tossing them on the grill. I like to serve it with flatbread, a simple yogurt sauce, and a salad of cucumber, tomato and red onion.

Note: You can find dried chiles in the Hispanic section of grocery stores.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 24 hours (marinade time)

Cooking Time: ~15 minutes

Ingredients:

Harissa

- 3 dried pasilla chiles
- 2 dried guajillo chiles
- 2 dried ancho chiles
- 1 dried chipotle chile
- 4 dried arbol chiles (or more if you want it hotter)
- 1 teaspoon caraway seeds
- ½ teaspoon coriander seeds
- ½ teaspoon cumin seeds

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 6 garlic cloves, smashed and minced
- Lemon juice

Kabobs

- 1 wild turkey breast, trimmed of silver skin and cut into 1½ to 2-inch chunks
- ¼ cup harissa
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- Salt
- Fresh mint (optional)

Instructions:

1. Remove the stems and seeds from the dried chiles. Cut the chiles into large pieces and cover them with nearly boiling water. If the chiles want to float, weigh them down with a metal spatula or something similar. Let them soak for 30 minutes or until they are soft. Don't throw away the chile-soaking water.
2. When the chiles are soft, put them and the remaining ingredients into a blender or food processor and blitz them into a nearly smooth paste. If the paste seems too thick,

splash in some of the chile-soaking water. When you've got it to a nice consistency, it will keep in a jar in the refrigerator for months.

3. Put the turkey chunks in a medium bowl and add ¼ cup of the harissa and the red wine vinegar. Give everything a good mix, cover and let it hang out in the refrigerator until you are ready to grill. Overnight is best, but 12 hours is also enough time.
4. When you are ready to grill (a charcoal grill is best), skewer the turkey pieces onto four metal skewers (or more if needed), sprinkle them with salt, and place them on a hot grill.
5. Once on the grill, I like to spray the kabobs with light olive oil. The little drips of oil that fall onto the hot coals create a nice smoky flavor. Grill for 5 to 10 minutes on each side until little charred bits begin to form.
6. Let the kabobs rest for 5 minutes, sprinkle with the fresh mint (if using), and serve.

Let's do this!

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NEBRASKA
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THE LONG SEASON

Sunlight through a turkey feather
feels like a spring morning.

A Change in the Nebraska Turkey Woods

Photos and story by Ryan Sparks

When I was young, turkey season was all about the chase. There are nearly 15 hours of daylight during spring turkey season, and I wanted to hunt every minute of it. Those early years were filled with restless boots, heart-thumping setups and an endless obsession with all things turkey.

Spring turkey season felt like a secret window into the natural world — those first weeks of spring when the woods come alive again, unfolding in shades of green that seem impossible after winter's gray. In spring, everything smells new and hums with life.

Spring turkey season also taught me that, in Nebraska, permission for turkey hunting comes more easily. Landowners will often welcome you onto their land with a smile when you ask about turkeys. That meant I could explore new country every season. It gave me a feeling of endless exploration. It meant the spring woods never felt small.

Over time, my passion has evolved. Those early days of filling my own tags gradually shifted into something else.

Now the most meaningful moments are about who is with me — first-time turkey hunters, friends, family and kids.

There's nothing like watching a kid shake uncontrollably as a tom runs toward the decoys. Or seeing a new hunter freeze as a fan tip appears over a terrace. When I bring someone along, I'm reminded of why I fell in love with turkey hunting in the first place: the music of the spring woods, the unpredictability, the chess match, the chance to witness an ancient ritual at arm's length.

The Nebraska turkey woods changed me from an eager kid who wanted nothing more than to fill tags to a man who finds more joy in calling for someone else. These photos show the splendor of a spring morning and the way a kid's eyes light up when they feel the magic of wild turkeys for the first time.

Turkey hunting in Nebraska has given me more than just a love of wild turkeys — it's given me a passion for the land and a wonderful tradition to pass on. And in these images, you can see that legacy starting to take root. [N](#)



OPPOSITE: Ryan Sparks' nephew, Luke Lovewell, had an exciting turkey hunt last spring, shooting this Nebraska tom with a .410 at 20 yards.

BELOW: Calling turkeys is a conversation. Those who are good at it learn to speak the same language as a wild turkey.

RIGHT: A turkey fan has a mesmerizing iridescence. If you are fortunate enough to shoot a spring turkey, take the time to admire its beauty.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Tom Carpenter traveled from Minnesota to hunt Nebraska turkeys and was rewarded with a beautiful bird.





TOP: A Nebraska tom shows off for the ladies in an ancient spring ritual.

RIGHT: Jillian Sparks quickly sets up a hen decoy as a gobbling tom approaches quickly from the woods behind her.



TOP: Ryan Sparks' nephew, Abe Lovewell, was all smiles after his first turkey in 2021.

LEFT: A red dot sight can help turn chaos into clarity. A single glowing dot gives you a precise point of aim.





LEFT: A tom's spurs — the pointed spike above the feet — are an indication of the turkey's age. The longer the spur, the more mature the bird.

RIGHT: Jillian Sparks practices her aim and identifies her shooting angles before a hunt.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Pulled barbecue turkey sandwiches are a spring staple in the Sparks' house after a successful hunt.



Outdoor Nebraska

By Jeff Kurrus

March is transition month in Nebraska. From open water to the first gobbles of spring turkeys, the world is changing right in front of our eyes. Make sure you’re outside to see it. [N](#)



Archery Spring Turkey

All Month Long | Statewide

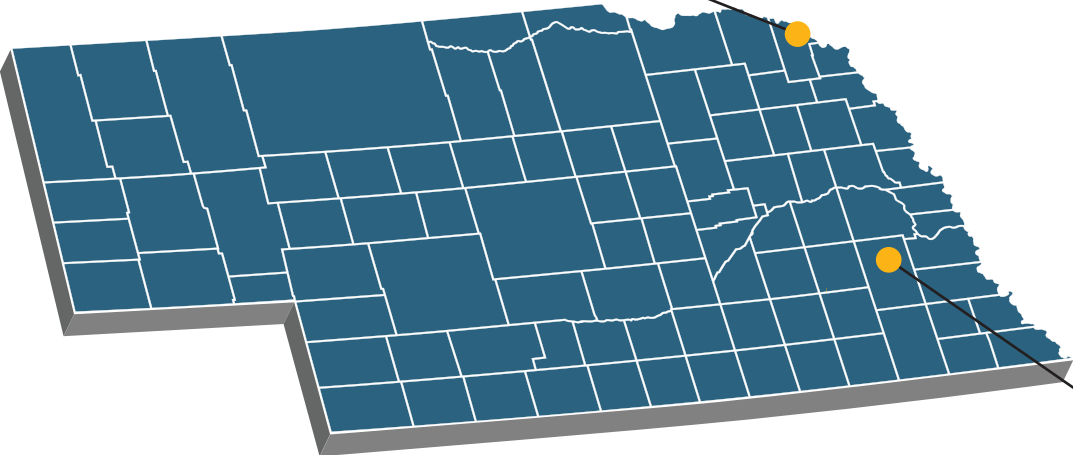
For hunters willing to scout, pick their setup carefully, and patiently wait for a flock to arrive, archery turkey season offers a fun challenge and a chance to enjoy spring’s first signs of life. Because early-season birds are often bunched in winter flocks, scouting fields, roost sites and travel corridors are especially important. Archery hunters are most effective from ground blinds, where movement is concealed and shot opportunities are controlled. Effective bow setups focus on close encounters; place several decoys within 10-15 yards of the blind to draw curious birds within range. Calling should be subtle to spark interest. TEXT BY RYAN SPARKS. PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Open-Water Fishing

Watch the Weather | Statewide

By March, the itchiest of anglers can’t wait to get back on the open water. Fish activity — including bluegills, crappies and even larger fish — tends to increase as the water temperature approaches 50 degrees, so diligently watch the weather. “Start on north shorelines,” said fisheries biologist Aaron Blank, “preferably lined with rocks, as these areas warm quickest.” Fish these areas for increased activity beneath the water’s surface. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



BOW Hunter Safety Weekend

March 13, 6 p.m. – March 15, 1 p.m.
Ponca State Park

This Becoming an Outdoors-Woman weekend is designed to teach women the basics of hunter safety and provide firsthand firearm and archery knowledge through simulated hunting and shooting situations. Equipment will be provided. Participants will receive a Hunter Education certificate at the end of the weekend. Female participants ages 12 years through 18 are required to be accompanied by a participating adult. The \$200 fee includes shared cabin lodging at Ponca State Park and meals. Register at Apps.OutdoorNebraska.gov/BowEvents. DAVID WOLFE



What to Do in March



Begin a Birding List

All Month Long | Statewide

Most serious birders, or birdwatchers, keep lists of how many different species of birds they have identified. March in Nebraska can be a great time to start your list — whether it be a life list, state list, county list, year list, day list, yard list, trip list or just about any type of list you can imagine. Because of so many species returning in the spring, each passing week will offer new opportunities to add species to whatever list you choose to pursue. TEXT BY JOEL JORGENSEN. PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Attend a Fly-Tying Class

March 4 and March 8
Turpin Outdoor Education Center

A woolly bugger, zebra midge or a San Juan worm — these fly-tying patterns are some of the basics that Cornhusker Fly Fishers experts will share with anglers at the Turpin Outdoor Education Center on Mar. 4, 6-9 p.m., and Mar. 8, 2-5 p.m. The workshop welcomes new and experienced fly tiers and will include all materials and tools. Participants will have the opportunity to tie four to six flies. Cost is \$10 per class, and attendees can attend one or both classes. To register, visit Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Crane Tracking

Story and photos by Eric Fowler



A sandhill crane banded and outfitted with a GPS unit in Nebraska ended up nesting south of the Bering Strait on the eastern trip of Russia, wintered in New Mexico and Texas, and is likely back in the Cornhusker State by now. The bird logged at least 11,000 miles.

It was one of five fitted with GPS tracking bands last spring as part of a donor-funded study exploring what the cranes do during their annual stopover in the Platte River Valley. The study is led by the Crane Trust in partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey and the International Crane Foundation.

Abe Kanz, director of science with the Crane Trust, said they want to know how far the cranes are traveling from the Platte River to feed. The long-running answer to that question, based on surveys done in the early 2000s, has been less than 5 miles. Aerial surveys by the Trust and others in recent years, however, have shown cranes going farther: One of the tracked cranes fed 10 miles from the Platte, Kanz said.

Data collected during the study also should show how cranes' foraging patterns shift during the season. Cranes aren't the only birds eating leftover grain — primarily corn — in fields in the valley. Canada geese also feed on corn, as do snow geese, which arrive before the cranes and have become more abundant on the Platte as their migration patterns have shifted to the west. While most cranes only stop in Nebraska in the spring, more have been spending the fall and all or part of the winter on the river in recent years: The Trust counted an estimated 31,000 cranes in mid-December.

"Is that something that's happening — depleting resources near the river? That could also contribute to needing to travel farther," Kanz said.

Prior Crane Trust surveys have also shown the area used by cranes in the spring has shifted east, with more birds roosting on the Platte between U.S. Highway 34 and Chapman, including a record number last year.

While the five birds were banded between Wood River and Grand Island last spring, two roosted and fed east Highway

34 during the last weeks of their stay, and one spent time on both sides of the highway.

Kanz and others will also be looking at fall migration patterns and whether the dates are shifting and, if so, why; if sandhill cranes are staging a second time in the Prairie Pothole region of South Dakota after staging on the Platte; and, of course, where they are breeding and wintering.

LEFT: Dave Brandt, a retired U.S. Geological Survey biologist, sets a radio triggered snare he designed and built in hopes of capturing a sandhill crane to tag last spring as part of a research project led by the Crane Trust.

CENTER: Brandt holds a crane they captured as Abe Kanz of the Crane Trust prepares to attach a GPS leg band and Andy Caven of the International Crane Foundation draws a blood sample.

RIGHT: Brandt releases a banded crane.

The above map shows the paths five sandhill cranes trapped and banded in Nebraska last spring took to their breeding and wintering grounds.



The solar-powered, GPS-tracking leg bands used in the Crane Trust research project weigh just 2.3 ounces.



A crane flies from its roost on the Platte River.



Sandhill cranes take flight from a corn field in Hall County. The Crane Trust's project will help better understand where the birds are feeding during their stopover on the Platte River during the spring.

Dave Brandt, a retired USGS biologist from North Dakota, led the trapping effort in late-February and early-March. In pre-scouted locations in pastures between Wood River and Grand Island, the trapping team set up to four 10-meter snare lines made of heavy monofilament line and spray painted to match the color of the prairie grass. They also set up the “ring of fire,” a spring-powered, radio-triggered snare Brandt designed and built. With traps set before dawn, they watched and waited in nearby blinds.

Brandt has helped band around 3,000 sandhill cranes and put GPS trackers on another 700 sandhills as

well as 170 whooping cranes during his career. One might think that with more than 1 million cranes stopping on the Platte during the migration, trapping enough to deploy 20 transmitters for the study would be easy. But that was not the case.

“They live 30-plus years in the wild, and they have incredible eyesight and incredible hearing,” Brandt said. “So it’s hard to outsmart them, sometimes, even though there’s a lot of them. You’ve got to be in the right place at the right time and not get busted by them.”

Cranes are much easier to trap in their wintering grounds, where

Brandt says food can be a limiting factor, making it possible to get them “addicted to bait.”

“That’s one of the difficulties here is these birds do not really respond to corn or bait, because they have corn ad libitum,” he said. “Everywhere they go is a cornfield, right?”

The team was able to capture three lesser sandhill cranes and two juveniles that are likely greater. Each was fitted with a solar-powered tracker built in a leg band weighing just 2.3 ounces. The trackers are programmed to record a data point every five minutes within the Platte River Valley and every 15 minutes elsewhere. They also contain

an accelerometer, which measures speed and direction, and collect more points when the birds are in flight. This allows them to record behaviors, such as kettling, which leaves a spiral trail of dots as the birds circle to their cruising altitude.

The trackers also record fewer points when battery life is low. During extended cloudy periods, they also quit recording. That was the case with the crane that nested in Siberia: It flew through Alaska when wildfires filled the air with smoke. Through Nov. 12, that crane’s tracker had recorded 201,000 points, compared to 485,000 for a crane that nested in Ontario.



Fog rises from a Platte River full of sandhill cranes on a March morning.

The five banded cranes left the Platte between March 27 and April 6, each stopping in for a time in the Dakotas and south-central Canada before forging ahead to their nesting grounds in early May.

The trackers upload data every four hours whenever they are within range of a cellular tower and only collect and store data when they are not. Each of the birds left areas with cell service before reaching their nesting grounds. “Once they got to some of these more remote areas, we just didn’t hear from them for a while,” Kanz said.

Kanz and others working on the study were relieved when, in August

and September, location data started pouring back in and they knew all five birds were still alive and well.

It was only then they could see that one of the cranes had nested in Russia, something that was known to occur but not expected for this study. “How cool and lucky is it that we managed to snag one of those birds, right?” Kanz said.

Researchers were pleasantly surprised to see that the four other birds each nested in a different part of Canada: Manitoba, Ontario and the Northwest and Nunavut territories. “I couldn’t have planned it better,” Kanz said. “And we didn’t plan it,

right? It’s random cranes. But it does a really good job of showing just how dispersed these populations of sandhill cranes can be.”

The birds migrated south in late-August or early-September. They stopped in locations in southern Saskatchewan or North Dakota for a few weeks before continuing south in mid- to late-October. All five birds flew through Nebraska, but none of them stopped, something that didn’t surprise Kanz as each passed on a day with strong northerly winds.

The crane that nested in Russia followed the most westerly route south and, on the day it made it



Cranes drop into their roost on the Platte River at sunset in Hall County.

from southeastern Montana to New Mexico, flew through the Nebraska Panhandle. It later shifted to wintering grounds in Texas. Kanz is interested to see whether it will return to the central Platte or follow other cranes to spring staging areas along the North Platte River in western Nebraska or elsewhere. “If it doesn’t come back through central Nebraska, there would be a lot of questions around well, why were you here last year and what are you doing now?”

The other four birds wintered in Oklahoma, Texas and southern

Kansas. The one that nested in Ontario flew all the way to the Gulf Coast before flying back north to an area near Wichita Falls, Texas, where it spent the remainder of the winter.

If they haven’t returned to Nebraska by now, the tagged cranes should be here soon. And Kanz, Brandt and others are already working to trap another 15 cranes to fit with the transmitters they didn’t use last year, possibly trying some new techniques to improve efficiency.

“I’m hoping we have some more luck this spring,” Kanz said. 



Cranes dance on their roost on the Platte River.

The Crane Trust

Behind-the-scenes access to the Crane Trust’s sandhill crane tracking project is one of several benefits that come with membership to the organization.

Basic membership also includes access to the guided virtual crane viewing tours during spring migration, year-round access to the Trust’s livestream camera on the Platte River and other exclusive online content, as well as advanced priority booking for riverfront viewing blinds and day tours.

Membership proceeds help support educational programs, research and land management.

For more information, visit cranetrust.org.

Along the Trail

WITH Charles Savage

By David L. Bristow, Nebraska State Historical Society



Fort Kearny, attributed to Charles Savage.
High winds that day blurred the trees.

NSHS RG2102-PH1-3



Mormon Camp, Wyoming, Nebraska.

NSHS RG3351-PH0-31



Roland Reed Ranch, 2 miles west of Beaver Crossing,
Nebraska, 1866.

NSHS RG2469-PH0-5

These pages contain rare photographs of the Nebraska portion of the Oregon, Mormon and California trails in the 1860s. Photography existed during the decades when hundreds of thousands of people were heading west. Why so few photos?

Consider photographer Charles Savage. An English-born Mormon missionary, Savage learned photography in New York before opening a studio in Florence, Nebraska, in 1859. During his 1866 journey to Utah, he made the Nebraska trail images shown here.

Making photos in the field was not easy. Savage brought along a heavy, specially-built photography wagon. This rolling, sheet-iron-sided darkroom was 9 feet long and 6 feet high and filled with drawers for his chemicals and glass-plate negatives.

“Every time he wanted to make a negative,” writes historian John Carter, “he had to concoct his solutions, set up a camera, and pour his emulsion onto a piece of glass, expose and then develop it, all before the plate dried. This process could occupy upwards of half an hour.”

Savage made the trip with a group of Mormon emigrants. Not surprisingly, they did not want to wait while he stopped to make a photo, and by 1866, it was dangerous to lag too

far behind the group. Native Americans had lost patience with the ongoing encroachment on their land. Even so, Savage managed to make a number of photos, some of which still exist.

The town of Florence — now part of Omaha — started out as the 1848 “Winter Quarters” when the first groups of Latter-Day Saints headed to Utah. By 1866 the town of Wyoming — a bit north of Nebraska City — had become the Mormons’ preferred “jumping-off” point. Savage made a photo of the emigrant camp before they departed around July 8.

From there, they followed a cutoff route to Fort Kearny, where Savage made another photo. He wasn’t very happy with it. Because of high winds and the long exposure time, the waving branches are hardly visible and the trees look like stumps.

Continuing west, Savage complained of constant wind that somehow did not disperse the swarms of green flies and mosquitoes. With daily temperatures rising over 100 degrees, it was often too hot for photo chemicals to work properly. That was the case when the group arrived at Scotts Bluff about midday, and Savage regretted that he could make no photo before they had to depart.

Fortunately, he was able to photograph Chimney Rock.

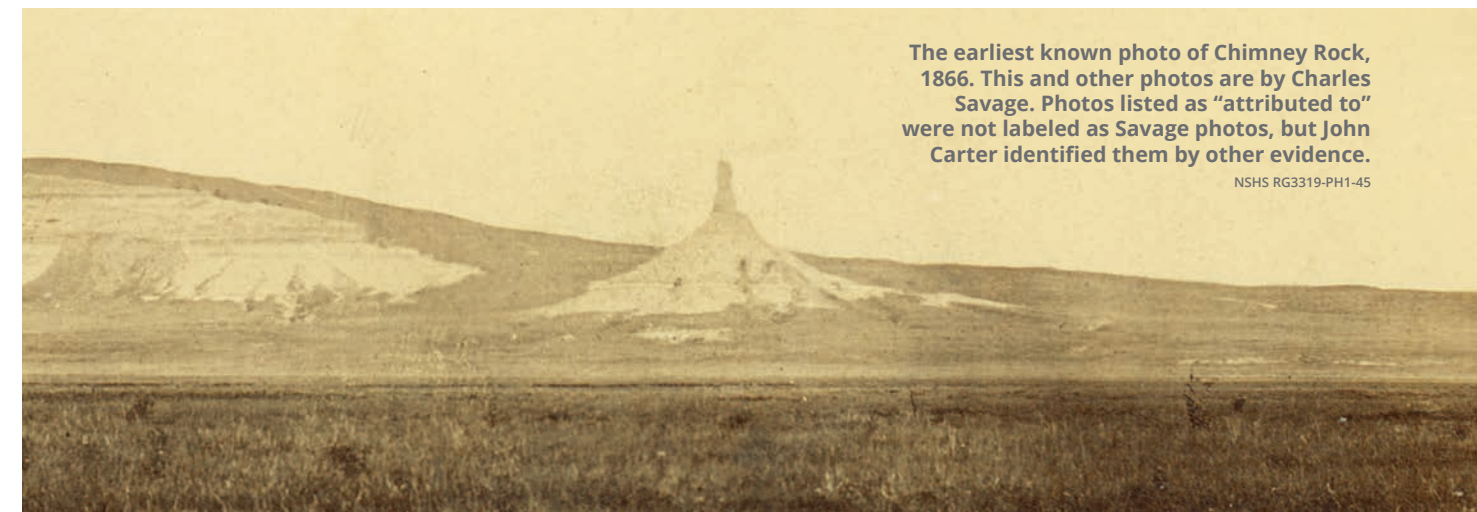
The photo was long considered lost by historians until John Carter found it on eBay in 2008. Purchasing a rare artifact that way was still enough of a novelty that the story made minor headlines nationwide.

“So why did Savage bother?” Carter asked in a Nebraska History magazine article published later that year. “Photographers, especially then, did not photograph for posterity. Rather, they made photographs to sell.” And by then, Salt Lake City was a well-established capital filled with people who shared the experience of that difficult overland journey. “Savage knew his market well and, I suspect, found

eager customers for his wares. His photographs were, in fact, the visual narrative of their experience, their journey to the Promised Land.”

As it turned out, 1866 was the last really big year of the Platte Valley route. Three years later, Savage made his most famous photograph, the iconic “golden spike” image documenting the completion of the transcontinental railroad. [📷](#)

John Carter wrote two articles about Charles Savage, available by searching “Charles Savage” at history.nebraska.gov.



The earliest known photo of Chimney Rock,
1866. This and other photos are by Charles
Savage. Photos listed as “attributed to”
were not labeled as Savage photos, but John
Carter identified them by other evidence.

NSHS RG3319-PH1-45

more than bone

Behaviors Behind Wildlife Antler Recycling

Story and photos by Brian Peterson

Each spring, white-tailed deer bucks shed their antlers and begin growing a new set in preparation for the next season. For many outdoor enthusiasts, searching for these shed antlers can be an enjoyable excuse to get outside and stay active, but findings are often minimal. Many antlers are swallowed up by vegetation, yet many more are picked up by a variety of collectors.

Antlers lost to the woods serve as a valuable resource for a wide range of wildlife species. Squirrels, like other rodents in Nebraska including mice, woodchucks, porcupines, rabbits, chipmunks and beavers, have elodont teeth, which are continuous-growing incisors that are only worn down by constant gnawing. Antlers provide an ideal hardened surface for this purpose.

A white-tailed deer skull with extensive squirrel chewing damage on main beams and antler tines.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Cottontail rabbits are frequent visitors to shed antlers but cause limited damage.



Small mammals, such as this white-footed mouse, nibble on shed antlers, though damage is typically minimal.



A brown thrasher perches on a shed antler while feeding on ants in the surrounding area.



A young raccoon chews on a shed antler's brow tine.

A squirrel's chisel-shaped incisors leave distinct chew marks on the antlers, often appearing as elongated gouges or divots. Based on years of shed collecting in Nebraska's Central Platte River Valley, however, I've observed minimal rodent damage (<5%), suggesting antlers are not a limiting mineral source, or that squirrel populations are too low to cause a significant impact.

In my experience in central Nebraska, chew marks on antlers are most often associated with coyotes, as I frequently observe evidence of antlers being chewed on or carried/transported by them. These antlers often show rough tooth scoring and distinct bite marks, especially near the tips. Like domestic dogs, coyotes may chew instinctively, but the behavior could also serve practical purposes, such as dental maintenance or mineral intake.

In addition to squirrels and coyotes, Nebraska camera traps have recorded a wide range of other mammals, including rabbits, raccoons, skunks, opossums, bobcats and even deer interacting with shed antlers by licking, nibbling and chewing on them. Because these encounters are brief and infrequent, the extent of wear or damage caused by these species remains unclear. That said, the longer an antler remains on the landscape, the more likely it is to show signs of chewing.

Though often overlooked, shed antlers play a vital role in mineral recycling and ecosystem health, revealing the hidden value in what many may consider to be nothing more than a decaying bone on the forest floor. 🦌

Brian Peterson is a biologist and online academic program advisor for the master's biology program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. His research has focused on white-tailed deer. He would like to thank the Smith family for land access during this study. For more information, please contact peterstonbc@unk.edu.



Coyotes frequently chew and transport shed antlers, often leaving distinct tooth scoring and bite marks.



A young white-tailed buck with new antler growth investigates a shed antler.



Eastern fox squirrels commonly gnaw shed antlers to wear incisors and acquire essential minerals.

American White Pelicans

By Monica Macoubrie

Every spring and fall, Nebraska’s skies put on a show: the migration of American white pelicans. Although these birds are massive, with wingspans close to 9 feet, they somehow glide through the air as though weightless, and when watching a flock circle and touch down onto a sandbar or reservoir, the experience feels almost prehistoric.

Conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote in “A Sand County Almanac”: “Let a

squadron of southbound pelicans but feel a lift of prairie breeze ... and they sense at once that here is a landing in the geological past, a refuge from that most relentless of aggressors, the future. With queer antediluvian grunts they set wing, descending in majestic spirals to the welcoming wastes of a bygone age.”

Leopold’s words capture exactly what pelicans make me feel when I see them. They’re like time travelers.



American white pelicans gather at Whitney Lake Wildlife Management Area in Dawes County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



American white pelicans fly above Spotted Tail, a Platte River Basin Environments property near Mitchell. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

When they land in Nebraska’s quiet wetlands and wide-open prairies, it’s like they’ve found one of the last pieces of the ancient world that hasn’t been modified by humans. It’s a reminder of what’s still wild — and a quiet warning about how easily we could lose it.

Prehistoric Bird

Everything about a pelican seems ancient: Their long, scoop-like beaks; the awkward, yet somehow majestic way they take flight; and the sight of them gathering in massive colonies — just as they have for untold millennia. Fossil records show pelicans have been around for at least 30 million



American white pelican at Bluestem State Recreation Area in Lancaster County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

years, barely changing in form over this vast stretch of time. They are living reminders of a world long gone, sharing traits with creatures that soared when saber-toothed cats and mastodons still roamed the earth. The pelican is a rare and humbling reminder that we share this landscape with survivors of an ancient story still unfolding right above us.

Feeding

Unlike their cousin, the brown pelican, which dive-bombs into the ocean with dramatic splashes, the American white pelican has a calmer and sneakier fishing style. Instead of fishing solo, they team up. Groups of

pelicans, sometimes more than 50, gather in shallow water and paddle in a loose line or half-circle. It looks like they’re choreographing a slow dance, but they’re actually herding fish, working together to push schools into tighter spaces. Once the fish are corralled, the pelicans dip their heads and scoop up their quarry into their giant orange bills, which can hold up to 3 gallons of water. Once they’ve drained out the water, the meal goes straight down the hatch.

A Seasonal Spectacle

Nebraska is a key stop for pelicans during their migration. Every year,



American white pelicans, double-crested cormorants and American coots flock to a shoreline at Sherman Reservoir Wildlife Management Area in Sherman County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



American white pelicans fish at the inlet area of Sutherland Reservoir State Recreation Area in Lincoln County. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

these birds travel thousands of miles between their nesting grounds in the northern U.S. and Canada and their wintering spots along the Gulf Coast and deep into Mexico. It's an epic journey, one that's been happening for countless generations, and Nebraska sits right in the middle of their flyway.

In spring and fall, our state transforms into a pelican rest stop on a scale that's hard to imagine. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of American white pelicans gather on Nebraska's big lakes and reservoirs. Places like Lake McConaughy, Harlan County Reservoir and Sutherland Reservoir can look like someone scattered giant white sails across the water — until one of them suddenly lifts off and the entire flock follows, rising in wide,

graceful spirals. The birds barely flap and instead, they rely on thermals and air currents, making migration look effortless. But don't be fooled — the journey is grueling.

Pelicans burn a lot of energy covering those long distances, and that's where Nebraska comes in. Our wetlands, rivers and reservoirs are the pit stops that keep them going, offering safe places to rest and fish. Without these rich feeding grounds, the miles ahead would be impossible for them to cover. Protecting these stopover sites isn't just good for pelicans — it's what keeps this ancient migration alive.

Raising the Next Generation

Not only is Nebraska an important migratory stop for pelicans, it's also one of the rare places in the interior U.S. where some American white pelicans settle down and raise families. These birds are incredibly selective when it comes to real estate — they won't just nest anywhere. They seek out remote, isolated islands on large lakes and reservoirs, far from people, predators and disturbances. These spots are like safe, floating fortresses

where pelicans can focus on raising chicks without interruption.

Nesting season begins in late spring. Males and females share nest duties, scraping out shallow depressions in the sand or gravel and lining them with sticks, grass or whatever vegetation is nearby. Each pair typically lays one to three chalky white eggs, and both parents take turns incubating them for about a month. When the chicks hatch, both parents step into the demanding role of delivering regurgitated fish meals multiple times a day.

In these dense colonies, the young often form "pelican nurseries," called creches, where dozens of chicks huddle together for warmth and safety while their parents are off fishing. By late summer, these once-fluffy chicks are nearly adult size and testing their giant wings, readying for the first migration of their lives.

When to See Them

Catching sight of American white pelicans in Nebraska is all about timing. From March through May, they move north toward their breeding grounds, often arriving in impressive flocks that seem to appear almost



An American white pelican takes an early morning flight. CHRIS MASADA

overnight. Then, in late August through October, they head south again, gathering on Nebraska's waters to rest and feed before continuing their long journey. These migration windows are your best chances to witness one of Nebraska's most spectacular bird movements up close.

They are not subtle travelers. You'll often see their enormous, white wings cutting across the sky in a graceful V-shaped formation, or see them gathered on the water, bobbing like a loose fleet of ships. Early mornings and late evenings are especially magical, when soft light turns their soaring silhouettes into something almost otherworldly.

Every spring and fall, American white pelicans are reminders that Nebraska is part of something much bigger, a crossroads in their incredible journey across the continent. They are also reminders that the lakes, rivers and wetlands that they rely upon must be protected long into the future, so these ancient birds can continue to make their migration each year. 📍



American white pelicans fly above Spotted Tail, a Platte River Basin Environments property near Mitchell. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Aquatic Habitat

2026

By Eric Fowler



A channel cut around Lake No. 1 at Windmill State Recreation Area will carry floodwaters away from the area.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

A project that began with plans to replace a dilapidated boat ramp at Standing Bear Lake in Omaha grew into a major Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Aquatic Habitat and Angler Access program project that will start paying dividends for anglers this year in the form of keeper-sized bluegill and saugeyes, countless small bass and some decent channel catfish.

One of the first major flood-control reservoirs built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Omaha, Standing Bear had suffered the same fate as

other mid-sized waters since it was completed in 1975. Sediment washed into the lake from the watershed and shoreline erosion, and the presence of common carp had muddied the waters, creating poor conditions for gamefish.

The lake, owned by the City of Omaha, was drained late in 2022 to allow for construction. A new two-lane boat ramp replaced the old ramp, and a kayak launch was also built. Breakwaters were added to protect both launches and for fishing access, and the parking lot was reconfigured to improve traffic flow.

On the lake's north side, nine fishing points were constructed along a 350-yard stretch of shoreline, one of which includes an accessible fishing pier and sidewalk. Stairs and sidewalks lead to the other points. These improve a shoreline that previously was steep, lined with riprap and trees and difficult for anglers to access. Sediment removed in front of each structure and the boat and kayak launches will help keep aquatic vegetation at bay and give anglers easy access to deep water.

Artificial habitat and fish attractors were placed within casting distance of the structures and in other locations around the lake. This includes 19 rock shoals, more than 100 artificial PVC fish attractors made by Connor Tjepkes and fellow Troop 308 members as part of his Eagle Scout project, and 240 cedar trees placed with the help of volunteers from the Nebraska B.A.S.S. Nation.

Restocking the lake began in the fall of 2023 when a few adult bass and bluegills were moved from other area waters. Heavy rain in May of 2024 filled the reservoir seemingly overnight, and more than 50,000 fingerling bass and bluegills have been stocked since, as well as 8,000 10-inch channel catfish and 33,000 fingerling and advanced fingerling saugeyes. No black crappies were stocked, but there



Several lakes at Windmill State Recreation Area were excavated to provide depth to ensure shallow areas remain connected during low water. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Nine fishing points and an accessible fishing pier and sidewalk built on the north side of Standing Bear Lake in Omaha improved angler access. Rock shoals and other structures, now concealed by water, will improve fish habitat. NICK SAUVAGEAU

was no need, as that species found its way into the lake from upstream ponds, as did a few more adult bass.

Jacob Werner, district fisheries biologist, said fish are thriving in the abundant aquatic vegetation that sprouted in the clear, carp-free water. While their spring trap-net surveys for some reason didn't sample many bluegills, there are plenty in the lake, including good numbers of 5- to 8-inch fish. He was pleasantly surprised with how the saugeyes are doing and said anglers can expect fish to reach the 15-inch minimum length

limit this year. Crappies are present up to 8 inches and need some time to grow, as do the channel catfish, which are topping out at 16 inches. There are a "ridiculous" number of bass in the 7- to 10-inch range from the first year-class that is comprised of stocked and naturally reproduced fish.

"The fishery is progressing really nicely," Werner said. "It'll produce some nice bluegills, and the saugeyes in there actually look incredible."

With the number of fish present, "It will be a phenomenal place to take a kid," Werner said.

Jeff Jackson, aquatic habitat program manager, said while numerous reservoirs have been built in the Omaha Metropolitan Area since the last of the original four Corps reservoirs were completed in the 1980s, rehabilitating Standing Bear Lake and basically creating another new lake within a short drive of more than 5641,000 resident anglers and 1 million people, is well worth the \$2.6 million investment. "There's probably nothing more important," he said. "You can't build enough lakes there."

Other Aquatic Habitat and Angler Access Program Projects Nebraskans can enjoy this year include:

Medicine Creek and Swanson SRAs

In partnership with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 42 rock shoals were built in the lakebed at Medicine Creek Reservoir in 2025 and 43 at Swanson Reservoir in 2023. The 10-by-20 foot wide, 3-foot-high structures were constructed in what will be 8 feet of water when the reservoirs are at full pool, providing habitat for fish where there is little except when the lake is full. Buoys will mark the structures so they don't present a hazard for boaters.

I-80 Lakes

Invasive eastern red cedar and Russian olive trees were removed from 11 borrow pit lakes along Interstate 80 between North Platte and Minden to improve shoreline access for anglers. As part of the project, funded in part by a Nebraska Environmental Trust grant, some of the cedar trees were placed in the lakes for fish habitat.

The lakes include: War Axe SRA, North Kearney Rest Area DOT, Fremont Slough, Pawnee Slough, East Gothenburg, West Maxwell, Daar, Blue Hole, Coot Shallows, Bufflehead and Bassway Strip WMAs.

Windmill SRA

Work will be completed this spring on a project to deepen shallow bottlenecks that cause Lakes 2, 3, 4 and 6 to become disconnected when water levels drop in the summer and to add depth variation in other locations. The project also included the addition of a fishing point on Lake 2, a floating dock on Lake 4, and improved access in several more locations on those and other lakes, including a new parking lot near Lake 4. Floating islands seeded with plants will be installed this spring in Lake 6. The root structure extending below the islands will provide additional fish habitat. A new channel will carry floodwaters around Lake 1 and lessen the likelihood of carp and other rough fish entering the lakes, as was the case in 2019. A renovation is tentatively planned for that lake in 2026.

Fort Robinson State Park

Work is underway to reconnect and restore 51 miles of Soldier Creek. The dam that formed Carter P. Johnson Lake, which was drained in 2023 because it posed a high hazard to the park's campground, will be removed. Downstream, Crazy Horse Pond will be deepened and the stream routed around the pond. A pipe will continue to feed water to the pond. A U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Water Smart grant will fund a majority of the project, which also has support from the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources, Upper Niobrara White Natural Resource District and the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy.

Starting in 2026

Niobrara State Park Pond

Work will begin this spring to reconfigure the pond, which is larger than the watershed can maintain. Leaks will be sealed and a well installed to maintain water levels. A small boat ramp will be built on the south side of the pond that can be used as a kayak launch.

Smith Lake WMA

Work will begin this spring to reconfigure the outlet and improve the road to the south side of the lake, where nine fishing points will be built to improve angler access. An additional point will be built on the northeast corner of the lake, and a breakwater will be added to protect the boat ramp. Some dredging will be done around the points.

Oglala National Grassland Ponds

Work will begin this summer to deepen Agate and Boardgate Reservoirs to prevent summer kill, and to improve angler access. Fencing will be installed to prevent cows from wading in the ponds, and new outlet structures will help maintain water levels. Access improvements include an accessible parking area, kayak launch and fishing point at Agate. The U.S. Forest Service, a partner in the project, recently improved roads to the lakes.

Improved Boat Access

Projects were completed at Bluestem SRA, Lewis and Clark SRA-South Shore, Avocet WMA, Frye WMA, East Midway SRA, Gallagher Cayon SRA, Phillips Canyon SRA, Plum Creek WMA, and Merritt WMA/SRA, including new boat ramps, accessible kayak launches, fishing piers, boat docks and restrooms, and parking lot expansions. More boat ramp improvements are planned this year at Verdel Landing and Frenchman WMAs, Swanson Reservoir SRA and Indian Cave State Park. [N](#)



Game and Parks staff load cedar trees removed to improve angler access at Pawnee Slough Wildlife Management Area onto a boat to place in the lake for fish habitat.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND



Rock shoals created at Red Willow State Recreation Area will provide habitat for fish.

JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

A 100-Year Focus on Recreation *By Jeff Kurrus*

Since its inception, Nebraskaland Magazine — formally Outdoor Nebraska — has strived to provide the most up-to-date information on places its readers could fish, hunt and recreate.

That began with the magazine's first issue in June 1926, when outdoor enthusiasts were briefed on new land access: "Four holdings have already been purchased by the Bureau [the now Game and Parks Commission] and thrown open to the public. The largest of these is Goose Lake, in Holt County." That first publication went on to discuss the other acquisitions: Walgren Lake in Sheridan County and Rat and Beaver lakes in Cherry County.

At the time, Nebraskans, with an increasing amount of spare time and money, were hungry for places to hunt, fish, camp and enjoy nature. And with the advent of the automobile, more of them had the means to get there.

While there were thousands of miles of rivers and streams and hundreds of natural lakes, mostly in the Sandhills, all but a handful of the more than 400 public reservoirs we now take for granted hadn't yet been envisioned. There were only four state parks, and the agency was just beginning to acquire the first wildlife management areas, of which there are now more than 250.

So any time the Commission acquired land "to provide fishing and hunting for the thousands of Nebraska citizens who desire such outdoor recreation," Outdoor Nebraska editor Frank O'Connell wrote in 1926, it was welcome news.

One example is the Spring 1952 issue that features a cover teaser that read: "Four New Waters Open to Fishing." These lakes were Medicine Creek Reservoir, Atkinson Lake, Hull Lake and Smith Lake.



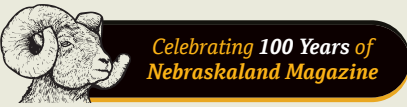
The article revealed the most excitement, and trepidation, over Medicine Creek. "Approximately 175,000 fish — both adult and fingerlings — have been released by the Game Commission. These fish — affording a diversity of fishing — consisted of walleye, white bass, largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill and catfish."

Excitement, however, was tampered in the next line: "Though the reservoir has been amply stocked with most major species of game fish, Nebraskans are cautioned not to become too optimistic about future fishing in the reservoir. ... If Medicine Creek does follow the pattern of most other reservoirs, fishing could be expected to decline in years. Tons and tons of silt being carried into the reservoir could cover and kill vegetation."

The article went on to discuss that this silt would cloud the water, eliminating the insects that use this vegetation and provide

food for fish. Plus, the fluctuating water levels "could play havoc with fishing success."

Land continues to be acquired for Nebraskans to enjoy, and while a reservoirs continue to be built, there are few suitable locations to do so. Nebraskaland continues to highlight those additions. At the same time, it also highlights the work of the Commission's Aquatic Habitat Program, which since 1995 has been helping reverse some of decline that occurs as reservoirs age. More than 70 years after it filled, Medicine Creek is benefitting from that program with the addition of rock shoals last year.



A DE-LISTED SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

North American River Otter

By Ruby Micek, Environmental Specialist



North American river otter on the south channel of the Platte River in Hall County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Slinking out of a tunnel hidden between a tangle of roots and the muddy bank, a North American river otter mother slips out of her burrow and into the icy stream in search of a meal. Deep inside the streambank her two black, velvety pups wait in their grass-lined den for her return. Born in March, they will not venture outside for another two months while they grow bigger and stronger.

With hungry mouths to feed, the mother otter is in search of fish and other prey to fuel herself. She chose her den site well; this section of stream is teeming with life, giving her the resources she needs to raise her young.

Families like this one represent a conservation triumph in Nebraska. Unregulated trapping in the 1800s decimated river otter populations throughout North America. By 1920, they had been extirpated from Nebraska, a fate shared in many Midwestern states. Listed as endangered in 1986, they became the focus of statewide conservation efforts.

Biologists and partners worked together to reintroduce otters to Nebraska. Between 1986 and 1991, 159 otters trapped in other states

were released in seven of the state’s major rivers. As a result of good scientific planning, the otters began to reproduce on their own and expanded their range.

After research showed the population was growing, the species was down-listed to threatened in 2000. By 2020, their numbers had climbed into the thousands and their range included all of the state’s major river systems; most of the descendants were reintroduced in Nebraska and a few were the result of recovery efforts in neighboring states. With their recovery complete, the call for de-listing was made.

Today, otters are managed as a furbearer species, with continuing research on their distribution, genetics and trapper success helping ensure otters continue to thrive in Nebraska.

Nebraska lists 32 species of plants and animals as threatened or endangered. The North American river otter (Lontra canadensis) was de-listed in Nebraska in 2020.

For more information on Nebraska’s threatened and endangered species, visit OutdoorNebraska.gov.

Nebraska’s List

Threatened Species

- Eastern black rail
- Piping plover
- Rufa red knot
- Thick-billed longspur
- Mountain plover
- Southern flying squirrel
- Lake sturgeon
- Northern redbelly dace
- Finescale dace
- American burying beetle
- Timber rattlesnake
- Western massasauga
- Western prairie fringed orchid
- Ute ladies'-tresses
- American ginseng
- Small white lady's slipper

Endangered Species

- Eskimo curlew
- Whooping crane
- Interior least tern
- Black-footed ferret
- Swift fox
- Gray wolf
- Northern long-eared bat
- Pallid sturgeon
- Topeka shiner
- Sturgeon chub
- Blacknose shiner
- Salt Creek tiger beetle
- Scaleshell mussel
- Blowout penstemon
- Colorado butterfly plant
- Saltwort

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LICHEN — NATURE’S QUIET PARTNERSHIP

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist



Lichen on sandstone found at Toadstool Geologic Park. CHRIS MASADA

It’s not a moss. It’s not a plant. And despite its sometimes flaky, crusty appearance, it’s definitely not mold growing on a rock. Lichen is a partnership — a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and either an algae or a cyanobacterium.

It’s an impressive arrangement. The fungus provides structure, holds moisture and protects its partner from harsh environmental extremes, while the algae or cyanobacteria can photosynthesize to create food from sunlight, which they share with the fungus. When they team up, lichens can grow on bare rock, rusty metal, sun-scorched bark, old gravestones ... you name it. That’s why we find lichens in places where most other living things would throw in the towel.

Lichen Diversity

Over 300 lichen species have been documented in Nebraska, and there are likely more waiting to be discovered. They grow slowly — some less than a millimeter per year — but are incredibly tough. From growing on shady cottonwood trunks along the Missouri River to sunbaked limestone outcrops in the Sandhills, some species can withstand freezing temperatures, drought and even radiation.

Some lichens form thin, tight crusts on stone that almost looks like old paint, called crustose lichen. Others are looser and leafier, curling up at the edges like old lettuce, called foliose lichen. And then there are the bearded ones — those shrubby, hair-like forms that dangle, resembling gray-green beards on tree limbs, known as fruticose lichen.

Lichen as Environmental Indicators

Lichens have the ability to “speak” for the environment. Because lichens don’t have roots, they don’t draw nutrients from the soil like plants do. Instead, they absorb everything — water, minerals and pollutants — straight from the atmosphere. That makes them incredibly sensitive to air quality, especially to substances like sulfur dioxide, ammonia and nitrogen compounds from vehicle exhaust, power plants or heavy fertilizer use.

In cities or areas near large-scale agriculture, it’s not uncommon to find only a few tough, pollution-tolerant lichen species — ones that can hang on in conditions where others simply can’t survive. These lichens might be smaller, duller in color or crustose types that hug tightly to stone and bark.



A house wrens sitting on a branch covered in lichen.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

But in rural areas, especially where there’s cleaner air like in the Sandhills, Niobrara Valley or along stretches of the Missouri River, you’re more likely to spot a diverse mix of lichen types in all shapes, colors and textures. It’s like nature’s way of quietly waving a green flag, saying “things are healthy here.”

Scientists may use lichens to monitor air quality in places where they might not have the equipment to record data. By noting what species are present — and which ones are missing — they can get a sense of long-term environmental shifts. Due to their slow growth, lichens are like “biological journals” etched into bark and stone.

Some states even use lichen studies to guide conservation decisions or track the impact of industry and urban development. While Nebraska doesn’t currently have a statewide lichen monitoring program, the potential is there. These tiny organisms are like living sensors that cost nothing to maintain and can survive in the most remote places, just quietly keeping tabs on the air around them.

Part of Nebraska’s Wildlife Web

Beyond their roles as air quality indicators, lichens are also an important — though often overlooked — part of Nebraska’s wildlife web.

Tiny birds, such as hummingbirds, vireos and gnatcatchers, use lichens as camouflage for their nests. They’ll carefully collect pieces of foliose lichens and press them onto the outside of their homes, blending them seamlessly into tree bark. It’s a natural disguise that helps hide vulnerable eggs and chicks from predators.

Small mammals, such as voles and shrews, may collect lichens as bedding for their underground nests and burrows, adding it to the grasses, leaves and mosses they use for insulation. In some cases, lichens may even serve as a source of antimicrobial protection, keeping nests a bit cleaner.

And during Nebraska’s long, harsh winters, food can be scarce, especially out in the Sandhills or Pine Ridge, where snow can blanket everything for weeks. That’s when lichens become forage for wildlife, such as deer, elk and even pronghorn. Though not particularly high in nutrients, lichens are better than nothing when grasses and forbs are buried underneath snow.

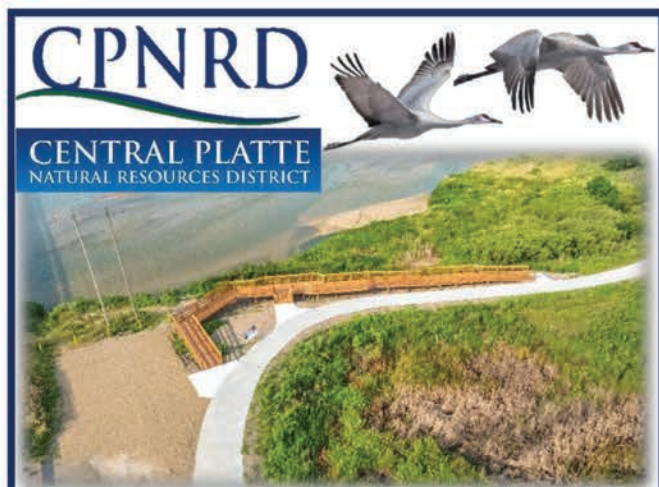
Lichens also play an indirect but vital role in the ecosystem. They help break down rocks into soil, stabilizing thin soils on cliffs and outcrops and contributing organic material as they grow and decompose. Some types even fix nitrogen, enriching the soil in areas where other plants might struggle to gain a foothold. This is especially helpful in recovering prairie or rocky outcrop ecosystems, where building up soil health is a slow, long-term process.

While not flashy, the ecological and habitat benefits of lichens are crucial, providing not only habitat and food but also a measuring stick to how healthy the environment where they’re growing actually is.



Lichen on a tree near West Ash Creek in the Nebraska National Forest. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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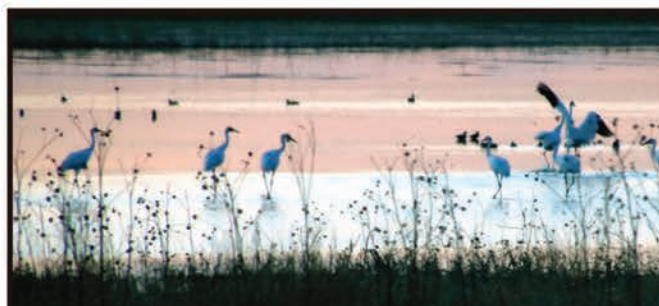
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NEBRASKALAND MAGAZINE DIGITAL ARCHIVE

By Jeff Kurrus



Visitors to the Nebraskaland Magazine Digital Archive can delight in every cover image since 1926. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Want a rabbit hole to climb down? Nebraskaland Magazine has unearthed a century's worth of stories, photos and history, just waiting for you to explore. Celebrate 100 years of the Nebraska outdoors in the newly expanded Nebraskaland Magazine Digital Archive at <https://archives.OutdoorNebraska.gov>.

Inspiration for the project began in 2014, when photo librarian Jaclyn Cruikshank Vogt joined Game and Parks. With a background in transforming print and visual materials into searchable digital content, a skill she learned on-the-job as a graduate research assistant at UNL's Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, digitization of Nebraskaland seemed like a natural fit for the magazine. It would bring together the entire run of the publication into a single, unified space — making every word, every image every story — fully searchable and easily accessible online. Game and Parks partnered with UNL's CDRH to bring the idea to life.

Project staff scanned back issues page-by-page, performed optical character recognition and encoded textual transcriptions. The content was then organized, indexed and made available online in 2020, with the digital archive website then capping off at the December 1977 issue. Bringing the next 50 years of the magazine into the fold, including born-digital issues like those Nebraskaland produces today, necessitated some creative thinking and migration to a new server, hosted directly by Game and Parks.

Now, as we mark the 100-year anniversary of Nebraskaland, it's a thrill to share the entire run of the magazine, from 1926 to today. In addition to nearly 50 more years of content, this refreshed iteration of the digital archive offers several new features, including a redesigned search, additional browse and filter options, and an integrated PDF viewer for born-digital issues.

The archive brings to light much about the history and evolution of the magazine, as well as the history and

evolution of the Nebraska outdoors, its people, places and cultural touchstones through the years.

A jaunt through the 1950s shows the awe-inspiring work of artist Bud Pritchard, while the 1970s features the magazine's first of 31 special issues, "Portrait of the Plains." The January 1931 issue reveals a poignant first mention of the Great Depression, while a visit through the early 2000s reveals a time when the magazine staff boasted more than 200 years of experience working for Nebraskaland.

From the reader's perspective, the Nebraskaland Magazine Digital Archive is a walk down memory lane, an education of the times, and a look into an incredible body of work created by a long list of Nebraskaland contributors.

It's a rabbit hole, for sure.



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Harlan County Lake family camp, Early 1990s ►

The Gunther family has been camping and fishing at Harlan County Lake for over 50 years. We always go in August when the white bass are schooling, and we can chase the gulls. At first we camped in tents three days. Now, we stay a week. Some years the fishing was excellent and some years not so good, but we always had fun.

 – Bob Bauer, Fairbury



Trolling at Lake McConaughy, Late 1990s ▲

In the picture is my daughter, Julie; dad, Bill; and mom, Lucy. Dad and I were trolling near Sandy Beach on the north side of the lake. Dad caught a pretty big fish. He thought it was a catfish because it wasn't fighting much. As he got the fish near the boat, it was this 8½-pound walleye!

 – Ray Carr, Raymond



Opening day bucks, November 1991 ▲

As I was going through some old photos, I came across this photo of my three sons the year they all shot a buck the opening day of deer season. From left to right: Jeff, Brett and Chris Meyer. We have been enjoying your magazine for so many years. The articles and pictures are amazing!

 – Beverly Milligan, Hooper



◀ Sandhills geese, 1989

This picture was from the days of the Sandhills Canada Goose Season. A special free permit was required, and the limit was one goose per season. In the picture, from left: Joe Francis, Scott Schroth, Marv Adamson and me. The dog was Joe's yellow Lab, Rye, who made quick work of retrieving birds from the tough cover of the Adamson's marsh in Cherry County.

 – Douglas Harris, Lincoln

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



A 2006 sunrise at Memphis State Recreation Area in Saunders County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

COME BACK WITH SOMETHING

By Jeff Kurrus

I started at Nebraskaland Magazine in August 2006, and there aren't many photos of mine that survived that first year. During those days, we backed up everything on CDs and DVDs, and there weren't many of my images that survived the transfer from camera to disc. Bad composition, bad light, bad everything.

Then, in 2013, the magazine staff began uploading photos to a cloud-based system named Merlin. Since that day, every photo the magazine staff keeps ends up in this database. Currently, there are 323,114 images searchable by Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff and the general public.

One of these photos is this sunrise from Memphis State Recreation Area from Nov. 1, 2006. Just beginning my fourth month on the job, I had been given Nebraskaland's No. 1 rule for time in the field.

"You better come back with something."

Sometimes the photo you're chasing doesn't work out. Sometimes the angler doesn't catch a fish, and there are no birds being retrieved. But that doesn't

mean you don't continue to shoot. You must find something that an audience will find appealing.

On this particular morning, I was introduced to the notion of reading clouds. They had formed way before sunrise and, as I drove from my hometown of Gretna to the closest public area I could find, Memphis State Recreation Area, I prayed they held up.

When I arrived, the sun was just about to rise as I stood on the northwestern end of the lake, wondering what my first real sunrise photo for Nebraskaland Magazine was going to be.

Was I going to pass my first real test? Was I going to come back with something?

The photo made it to the database and, 20 years later, is still there. That says enough for me.



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