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Cover: For the past 20 years, the Missouri River Outdoor Expo at Ponca State Park has been giving school children the chance to experience outdoor activities and learn about nature, including getting an up-close look at a fox snake.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

This page: A storm cloud forms over the Middle Loup River at Harold W. Andersen Wildlife Management Area near Dannebrog. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraskaland
magazine

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False boneset is blooming.
JON FARRAR, NEBRASKALAND

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upcoming issue.

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Bee on Aster



Roger Richters, Utica
Green-eyed Moth



Mat Custer, Omaha
White-tailed Deer Buck



Roy Liesegang, Bellevue
House Sparrows



Chuck Hackenmiller, Lincoln
Autumn Rainbow for Dad

*Correction: Eric Fowler was the
photographer for the Lake
McConaughy photo published
on pages 26-27 of the July issue.*

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

ASH HOLLOW

Ruts created by covered wagons traveling the Oregon and California trails in the mid-1800s are still visible on Windlass Hill at Ash Hollow State Historical Park near Lewellen.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Refining rifle steadiness and accuracy is just one reason to hunt squirrels this fall. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

A CASE FOR SQUIRRELS

By Jeff Kurrus

It's understandable why you don't squirrel hunt. The weather might be hot, often muggy, and despite all of your readings, you're still not quite sure you can distinguish between Virginia creeper and poison ivy.

But you're missing out. Start, or re-kindle, your love for squirrel hunting for these reasons.

Shoot Better

The margin for error when shooting squirrels with a rimfire rifle is small. But for young or inexperienced shooters, practicing with an inexpensive 3-9x40 scope atop a Ruger 10/22 provides the perfect pre-season classroom for big game firearm season. Squirrel hunting forces the shooter to slow down, allowing them to look for the head or heart shot necessary to bring down this quick-moving quarry.

Hunt Better

Tree identification can become a huge advantage for hunters of various species. While deer will spend the majority of their feeding time in crop fields, knowing when walnuts, acorns and other tree nuts drop helps hunters determine travel routes for these big game animals — and determine where squirrels can be found throughout the season that

begins Aug. 1 and doesn't close until Jan. 31.

Fish Better

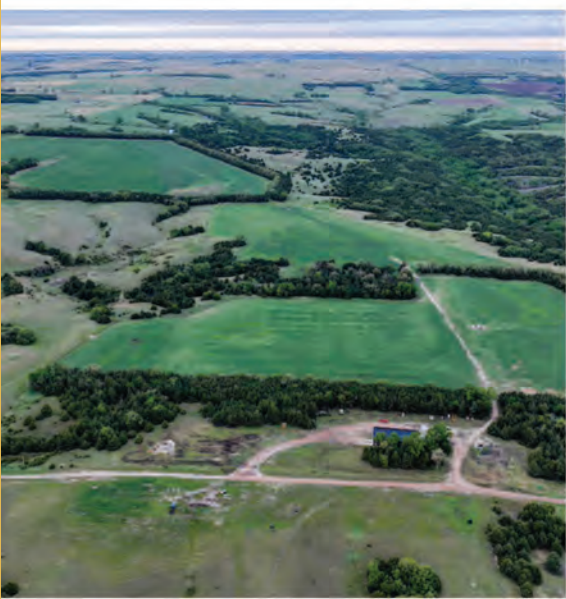
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Cook Better

After a successful hunt, enjoy squirrels at the dinner table. Tasting similar to rabbit — perhaps a bit darker — squirrel meat is nothing to scoff at. Quarter the squirrel(s) into smaller pieces and remove as much silver skin as you can to prevent toughness. Then batter and fry the pieces for a simple meal of fried squirrel. Another option is to simmer them in a stew or gravy, leaving the silver skin on, until tender. Squirrel pot pie or squirrel and dumplings come to mind.

Regardless of how you cook and serve squirrel, the first step is to go to the woods and hunt. Although there are many more reasons to hunt this small game, enjoying them at the dinner table is good motivation alone.

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At the heart of the property is a 50x100 insulated, climate-controlled steel building featuring functional living quarters, ideal for year-round use or as a hunting lodge retreat. The farm includes 128 acres of productive tillable ground, currently planted in alfalfa and triticale, along with additional acres in established food plots, maximizing both agricultural yield and wildlife attraction. Mature shelter belts surround the crop fields, offering exceptional winter protection and space for calving or backgrounding your herd.

For the serious hunter, this ranch has been trophy buck managed for years and is outfitted with six strategically placed Dillon blinds that provide excellent access and outstanding deer hunting opportunities. Tree-filled draws, teeming with wildlife, are fed by live water springs that wind through the landscape and feed into two serene, stocked ponds, offering prime fishing and a tranquil atmosphere.

The pastureland is cross-fenced and meticulously maintained, with no signs of overgrazing, providing excellent grazing rotation. Water is piped to each pasture from a shared well with the adjoining landowner, ensuring reliable and efficient livestock support.



NEMAHA COUNTY, NE | 40 ACRES±

This exceptional recreational tract offers everything the avid outdoorsman could ask for. Featuring rolling topography with a prominent central ridgeline, the land provides ideal vantage points and natural travel corridors for wildlife. A diverse mix of timber creates premium habitat for deer, turkey, and other game, while the timber ties into a larger block of timber stretching for miles along the bluff, enhancing both seclusion and opportunity. The property offers excellent county road frontage for easy access, and elevated views overlooking the Missouri River Valley add to its appeal as both a hunting destination and a place to unwind. As a major bonus, the seller is including a 10-year hunting lease on additional adjacent acreage they own, greatly expanding your hunting opportunities. Whether you're looking for a turnkey hunting retreat or a recreational escape with long-term upside, this property checks all the boxes.

JASON SCHENDT

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HOPPERS

By Monica Macoubrie, Wildlife Education Specialist

True bugs, classified under the order Hemiptera, include a variety of families, such as cicadas, leaf hoppers, plant hoppers and shield bugs. One of the defining features of true bugs is their specialized mouthparts, known as stylets, which are adapted for piercing and sucking fluids from plants or other organisms. These mouthparts are often enclosed within a beak-like structure.

With a name like “hopper,” it’s no surprise that these insects can leap great distances. Young plant hoppers can leap around 3 feet in a single bound. While this might not sound impressive to humans, it’s astonishing when you consider their entire body is only up to a half-inch long.

While **leaf hoppers** and **plant hoppers** share some similarities, they exhibit distinct differences in their morphology and behavior. Leaf hoppers, members of the family Cicadellidae, are typically characterized by their small size, often ranging from 2 mm to 8 mm, and their flattened, wedge-shaped bodies. They exhibit a unique appearance with prominent, sometimes colorful patterns or markings that provide camouflage.

Leaf hoppers’ feeding habits involve using their specialized

mouthparts to pierce plant tissues and extract sap, which can lead to characteristic damage, such as stippling (when leaves have a spotted appearance) and the yellowing of leaves.

In contrast, plant hoppers belong to the family Delphacidae, and they tend to be slightly larger and have more varied body shapes, often with a more pronounced, angled or triangular profile. Their feeding behavior also involves piercing plant tissues to feed on sap, but they are known for their ability to produce a notable frothy substance, which can be seen on the plants they infest.

Treehoppers, part of the family Membracidae, are renowned for their often elaborate physical features. These small- to medium-sized insects, typically ranging from 4 mm to 15 mm in length, are easily recognizable due to their pronounced, horn-like structures or exaggerated body projections, which can resemble various shapes such as spikes, plates or ridges. These unique adaptations serve as camouflage or deterrents against predators. Treehoppers possess specialized mouthparts adapted for piercing and sucking plant sap, and their feeding can sometimes cause deformities or stunted growth in plants.



Plant hoppers, like this one from the genus Stobaera, have an angled or triangular profile and are known to pierce plant tissues to feed on sap. BRIANNA NUGENT

A promotional poster for the Nebraska Upland Slam. The top half features four birds: a quail on the left, a pheasant in the center, a grouse on the right, and a smaller bird on the far right. Below the birds, the word "NEBRASKA" is written in large, white, serif capital letters. Underneath that, "UPLAND SLAM" is written in very large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters, followed by "FOUR BIRDS. ONE BIG STATE." in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters. Below this, the dates "September 1, 2025 — January 31, 2026" are written in orange, sans-serif font. The bottom half of the poster has a dark background with white text. It says "Nebraska is the mixed bag capital of the Great Plains – with diverse hunting opportunities, long seasons, more than 1 million acres of publicly accessible lands and high rates of hunter satisfaction. Experience all of this – and make some great memories – as you work to harvest all four upland bird species this season. Learn more about the slam, the Top Dog award and the prizes offered at OutdoorNebraska.gov (search “Upland Slam”)". At the bottom, there are four logos: "NEBRASKA - GAME PARKS -" with a small bird icon, "PHEASANTS forever" with a pheasant icon, "QUAIL forever" with a quail icon, and "MIXED BAG CAPITAL OF THE GREAT PLAINS" with a mixed bag icon.



High-quality bluegills, like this one, can be targeted in August and September on weed lines. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

FROM WORST TO FIRST

By Jeff Kurrus

August in Nebraska is hot. There’s no way around it. Because of the weather, and the belief that fish don’t “bite” this time of year, many rods and reels gather dust until cooler temperatures return. But Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Fisheries Biologist Daryl Bauer suggests otherwise.

“Fish are eating the entire time in August,” he said. Nebraska’s fish are cold-blooded, meaning their body temperature is proportional to the water temperature, and they’re constantly feeding and burning calories. But they can also find something to eat pretty easily during warm weather.

By late August, however, a couple of factors increase angler chances of catching a nice fish. One, fish begin to put on weight as water temperature and metabolism lower. Second, the baitfish population in our water bodies thins, making fishing easier for those willing to sweat through a few casts for them.

Channel catfishing is one of Nebraska’s most productive species during this transition from August to September.

“When channel catfish finish spawning in July,” Bauer said, “they go hard until the first part of October. If you’re catfishing in September, it’s on.”

Another warmwater species that starts feeding more is bluegill. They can be found on weed lines and deeper water. “It’s different than the shallow spawn bite in the early spring,” Bauer said. “But some really big fish can be caught.”

A third species to target during this transition is wiper. “Bites begin to last longer,” Bauer said. Instead of a 20-minute feeding at the beginning or end of the day, he said, a topwater bite might last for an hour or two.

If coldwater stream fishing is what you’re after, the main change is fly choice. “August and early September is hopper time,” Bauer said.

The changes this time of year will be subtle, but anglers willing to go from short-sleeves to jackets will see the skinny fish they’re catching in August start to transition to fatter ones in September — fish looking to eat and anglers dealing with less competition for their lures in the water.



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Hasenpfeffer served with buttery mashed potatoes. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

GERMAN RABBIT STEW

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Also called hasenpfeffer, this German rabbit stew was brought to my attention by Nebraskaland writer Gerry Steinauer, whose father loved the dish. Although marinating the rabbit for two days in vinegar might raise some eyebrows, the method works. The acidity provided the right balance when serving the stew with heavily buttered mashed potatoes.

This is my version of hasenpfeffer. But first, a word of caution: Do not use plain white vinegar in this dish. The smell will stink up your house, and you won't want to eat it. Trust me. Aside from apple cider vinegar, red or white wine vinegar would also work.

Servings: 4

Prep Time: 48 hours

Cooking Time: 2-3 hours

Ingredients:

- 2 cottontails or 1 jackrabbit or 1 domestic rabbit
- 2 tbsp. of oil, separated
- ½ cup of all-purpose flour
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 tbsp. of sugar
- 2 sprigs of fresh thyme
- 2 sprigs of fresh rosemary
- 1 bay leaf

Marinade

- 1 cup of water
- 1 cup of dry red wine
- 1 cup of apple cider vinegar
- 2 bay leaves
- 4 whole cloves
- 4 cloves of garlic, thinly sliced
- 2 large shallots, thinly sliced
- 2 sprigs of fresh rosemary
- 2 sprigs of fresh thyme
- 1 tsp. of juniper berries, crushed
- ¼ tsp. of ground allspice
- 1 tbsp. of kosher salt

1. In a saucepan, combine marinade ingredients and bring to a boil. Set aside and allow to cool completely. Quarter rabbit(s) into smaller pieces and place them inside a zip-top bag. When marinade is cool, pour it over the rabbit and seal. Refrigerate for 48 hours, flipping the bag occasionally.

2. Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Remove rabbit from the marinade. Strain the marinade, discarding solids only, and then set the liquid aside.

3. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in an enameled Dutch oven (raw cast iron will react to the acid in the vinegar and wine) over medium-high heat.

Coat rabbit with the flour, shaking off excess, and brown on both sides. Do not crowd the pan and add more oil as needed. Remove browned rabbit and set aside.

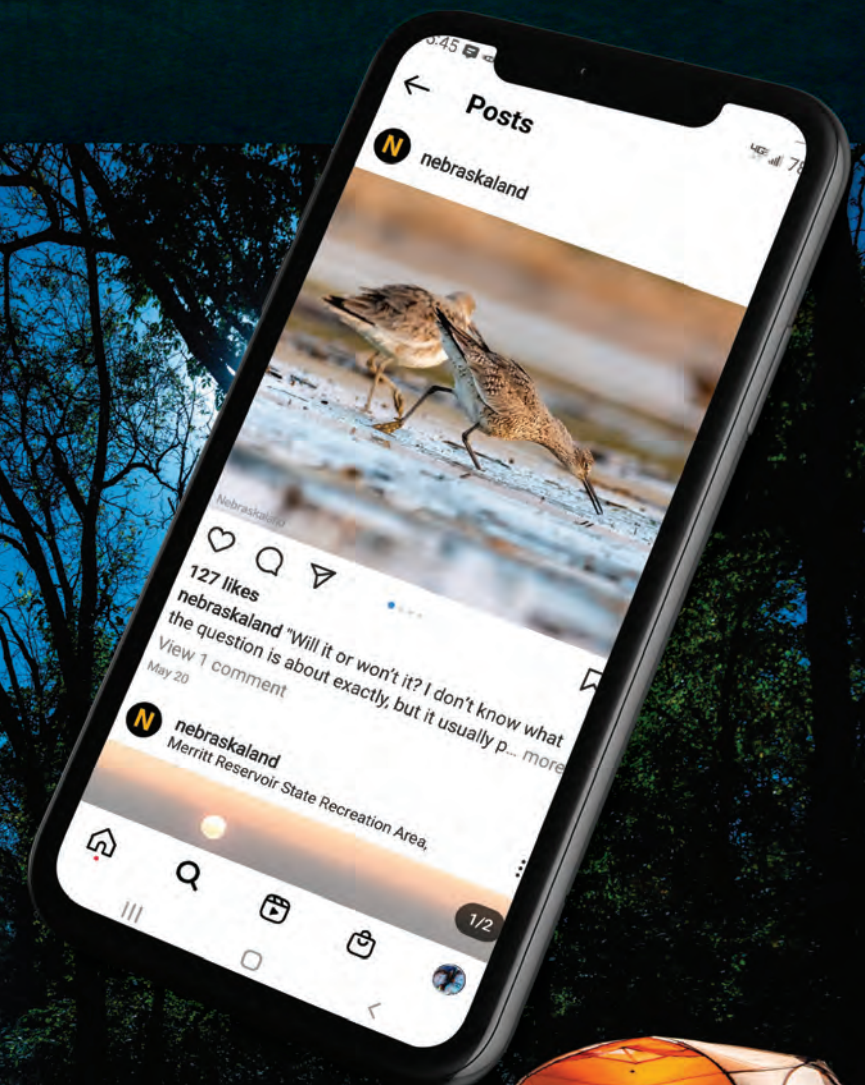
4. Lower heat to medium. Add the remaining oil to the pot and sweat chopped onion until translucent. Then add the reserved liquid from the marinade and 1 tablespoon of sugar, scraping the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon to loosen up the browned bits.

5. Return browned rabbit to the pot and add 2 sprigs each of rosemary and thyme and 1 bay leaf. Bring to a simmer and then take off heat. Cover the pot with aluminum foil, then set the lid on top of the foil — this creates a tighter seal.

6. Bake in a 350-degree oven for 1-2 hours, or until the rabbit meat can be easily pulled from the bone. I suggest checking after an hour — younger or raised rabbits will become tender sooner than older or wild ones. Jackrabbits might take longer to cook as well.

Serve hasenpfeffer over buttery mashed potatoes, boiled potatoes or spaetzle.

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N

Crow Butte

Story and photos by Justin Haag

***Legends
vary, but
scenic
value
certain***

Crow Butte stands on private property as one of the most prominent landmarks in the Pine Ridge. The south side is rarely seen by the public.

Three and a half miles southeast of Crawford stands Crow Butte. The towering sentinel rises conspicuously above the White River Valley on private property that borders Ponderosa Wildlife Management Area. Perhaps no other landform in the Pine Ridge can be seen from so many different vantage points — a fact that has made it a frequent subject for me and other nature photographers.

The landform, about 400 feet tall, is captivating, as are the legends of its naming. Accounts vary, but all center around a territorial feud between two Native American tribes — the Sioux and, of course, the Crow.

One account, which is said to have happened in the 1860s, has a band of Crows from the north entering the butte's vicinity, recognized as Sioux territory. After a few days of fighting, the Crow retreated to the top of the great landform to use its high vantage for fortification. The Sioux knew there was only a narrow path up the butte on its south side, so they guarded the exit while tending to their sick and wounded.

Facing starvation and inevitable defeat, a few of the oldest men in the group of Crows made a sacrificial, last-ditch effort. The men stationed themselves on the guarded side of the butte and began chanting to distract the Sioux. Meanwhile, the others created ropes from whatever fabric they had to lower themselves from the steep north side and escape. The Sioux, however, caught on before their descent and surrounded the butte.

This is where the story gets fantastical. As a lighted mist came upon the butte, three beautiful Indian maidens appeared in the sky, and the old men were lifted into the heavens on the wings of white birds. After some discussion, the Sioux elders determined the maidens had been sent from the Great Father as messengers of peace. The perceived message resulted in a friendly compact between the Sioux and Crow.

The sun sets behind Crow Butte, at right, and Little Crow Butte, ending a winter day.



A different account in a 1901 Omaha World-Herald — said to be firsthand from an unidentified person who witnessed the events in the winter of 1869-70 — said it was exactly 27 Crows who dismounted horses and climbed the butte with only their blankets, rifles and ammunition.

One difference in the story is that just one elder Crow was assigned to distract the Sioux, and did so by zigzagging around the south side firing a rifle at night — an attempt to give the appearance of multiple people trying to escape.

Instead of the harmonious ending of the other legend, the old man was said to have been forced at dawn back up the butte, where he jumped to his death. The 26 others had already descended to the prairie on their makeshift ropes, but they were on foot and soon caught and killed by the Sioux.

Like the peaceful ending of the first story better? As with most legends, it's impossible to know how much, if any, of the stories are true. One thing is for sure: We'll continue to be captivated by the sight of this picturesque landform standing resolute over the White Valley. [N](#)



TOP LEFT: Cattle graze on the lush grass as fog hangs among the butte's crags in spring.

TOP RIGHT: With the ice of Fort Robinson State Park's Grabel Ponds in the foreground, Crow Butte and Little Crow Butte are silhouetted by the pre-dawn sun.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fog rises from a private pond with Crow Butte in the distance.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The crepuscular rays of morning grace the sky above Crow Butte and the Pine Ridge.



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

The first hints of fall usher in the flap of wings, as birds begin to migrate. New hunting seasons arrive, with some relief from July's heat. And, as always, there is something new to discover.



Catch brook trout in Pine Ridge streams

Year-round | Nebraska's far northwestern corner

For fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer, it's not difficult to explain the appeal of brook trout fishing in the Pine Ridge. It's "some of the prettiest fish in the state in some of the prettiest country." These trout may not be huge, but feature gorgeous coloring, particularly during spawning season in late fall. They're not hard to catch either, if you don't spook them. Pretend you're hunting deer on foot: Sneak, be quiet, tread lightly and wear camouflage.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Watch biologists banding wild birds

Typically late August to early October, around sunrise, from Tuesday to Saturday | Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area and Chadron State Park

Want to see beautiful, and perhaps uncommon, wild birds up close? The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies operates bird banding stations each fall at Chadron State Park and Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area. If conditions allow, biologists use fine mist nets to capture their subjects. After recording measurements, they fit each bird's leg with a tiny metal band. You're welcome to watch! If a banding is canceled due to weather, you can still enjoy great birding on the trails. Contact each park for more information. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

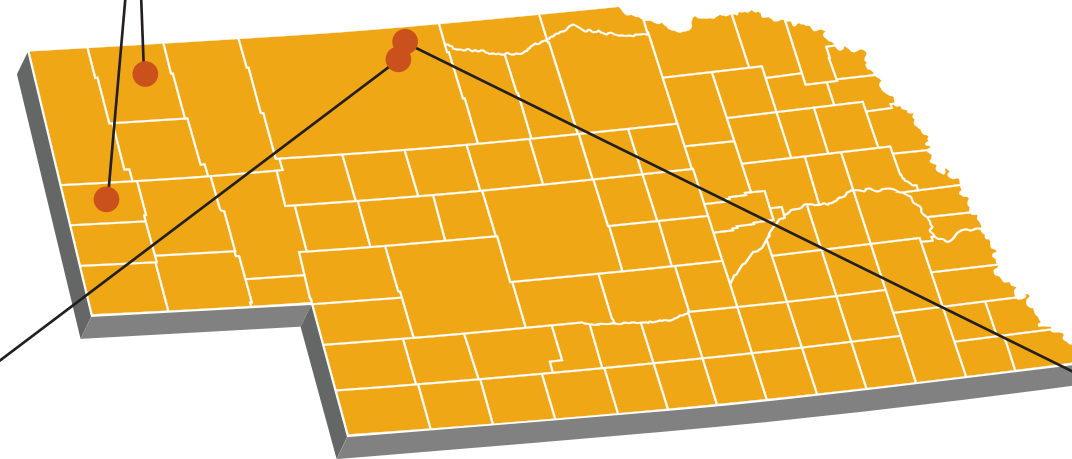


Experience the first waterfowl season of the fall

Early teal season is Sept. 6-14 | Statewide

If you enjoy watching wetlands and waterways come alive in the morning, teal season is for you, whether you harvest a bird or not, said Hunter Education Coordinator Kyle Gaston. Nebraska is a popular flyway and sees large flocks of teal land on public hunting areas, he said. Gaston recommends dressing in thin layers, practicing with your shotgun, and scouting the area before the season starts, as water levels can change quickly.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Explore a unique wildlife refuge via a guided hike

Aug. 2, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. | Meet at the parking area on the west end of Hackberry Lake

With its unplowed prairies, diverse habitats and interesting relics, the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge is well worth exploring. Join a local nonprofit, the Sandhills Prairie Refuge Association, for a free, 2/3-mile, easy hike through this landscape, led by two biologists. You'll learn about native prairie plant identification, birding and 1930s Nebraska history — and perhaps experience incredible views from an observation deck at an old fire tower. Registration is required. Learn more at sandhillspra.org.

Celebrate the Cowboy Trail atop an iconic landmark

Sept. 5, 7-8:30 p.m. | Meet at the Cowboy Trail parking lot, just east of Valentine on Highway 20

Enjoy panoramic views of the Niobrara River, while helping celebrate 30 years of the Cowboy Trail. Earlier that day, you can join other outdoor enthusiasts for a fundraising bike ride and dinner, capped with a free Bridge Social in the evening. Cowboy Trail fans will gather atop an iconic former railroad bridge, enjoying spectacular views while sipping drinks, chatting and watching the sun set. Learn more at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov.

CHRISTY FIRESTONE





Where People and Nature Meet

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

The Missouri River Outdoor Expo at Ponca State Park has served over half a million visitors and provided countless memories and outdoor recreation “firsts.” In 2025, visitors can expect more than 90 vendors, activities and demonstrations Sept. 20-21. And on the school day preceding the public event, upwards of 700 children from approximately 35 schools will fill the

canyons with laughter. From fishing and shooting, kayaking and river boat rides, to lumberjack demonstrations, dog shows and the smells of funnel cake, barbecue and kettle corn — the atmosphere is like that of a fair for outdoor lovers.

This annual outdoor event, in this quiet corner of Nebraska, is the largest of its kind in the Midwest. Nebraska Game and Parks staff and volunteers,



Busloads of children attend the Missouri River Outdoor Expo school day on the Friday preceding the public event. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Aerial view of Ponca State Park's visitor center during the Missouri River Outdoor Expo. NICK SAUVAGEAU, NEBRASKALAND

and the town of 1,000 that pulls it off each year, have much to look back on this vicennial anniversary — and they have a lot to be proud of.

Challenging Start

The expo is the brainchild of a small team of staff and local citizens, including Parks Division Administrator Jeff Fields, who was then the superintendent at Ponca State Park,

and Deputy Director Jim Swenson, who was then eastern regional park manager. This team envisioned a long-term event that would exemplify the Ponca State Park tagline: “Where people and nature meet.”

“We wanted an event that had the same kind of feeling as a county fair but was focused around the outdoors and what our agency represents,” Fields said. Visitors would gain hands-

on experiences, such as shooting a gun or bow.

They wanted it to be free to attend because Fields saw the expo as a long-term investment — introducing people to the outdoors in ways they would not have a chance to experience otherwise. The expo would help “plant the seed” to growing the next generation of hunters, anglers and outdoors people.

Fields knew the event would need

strong regional support and ownership. A team of staff and volunteers worked to secure community buy-in, which led to the creation of the Missouri River Outdoor Expo Board, an advisory committee made up of representatives from Ponca and surrounding communities, such as Sioux City and Newcastle, as well as groups, including local chapters of Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited and the National Rifle



Children get close and personal with Nebraska's reptiles, including this fox snake. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

Association. Board members became spokespeople for the expo and vital to fundraising and recruiting volunteers, which they needed by the hundreds.

The educational aspect of the expo made fundraising easy; generous sponsors contributed and continue to today. These dollars go toward paying for the demonstrations, entertainment and activities offered, such as the dock dog show, Axe Women Loggers of Maine, delivery and set up of the rock wall and ropes course, and many more. Logistical costs include renting

shuttle trailers, port-a-potties and golf carts.

Don Andersen, a longtime resident and former mayor of Ponca, became one of the expo board's first members. He remembers the day Fields called him.

"Jeff had a vision of what we were going to do," Andersen said. Andersen believed in the vision, too, and spent the next 10 years on the board helping grow community support.

Fields knew staff buy-in also would be critical to the event's success, and

Game and Parks' northeast district were more than willing to roll up their sleeves. No matter which division staff worked in, they participated in the expo handling different aspects of the event.

With these pieces in place, execution was the next step, and the first expo in September 2004 became the true test.

That weekend, Ponca set a record for the most rain in a two-day period; 8 inches of rain flooded the riverfront where activities were stationed, forcing everyone to move up to the visitor center. Still, 1,500 to 2,000

people showed up.

"I think that tested our wherewithal a little bit with the group that helped organize it," Fields said, but "we thought, 'If that many people show up under those cruddy conditions, what could we do if we had a nice weekend?'"

It motivated them to keep moving forward.

Evolution

One of the venues established early on was the riverfront. Being the expo's namesake, the team was adamant



Volunteer Don Andersen cleans shotguns at the shooter's village. JOSHUA CARLSON

visitors would be able to "touch, see and smell the Missouri River." Attractions in this area have included a heritage encampment with living history volunteers, boat tours (when conditions

allow), logging demonstrations, and cooking and eating contests.

The visitor center, built in 2003, provides visitors a break from the elements. It houses additional vendors

Volunteer Don Andersen

Ponca resident Don Andersen was a charter member of the Missouri River Outdoor Expo Board. He helped raise considerable funds to get the first expo rolling, and his boots were on the ground when volunteers were called to help complete the Eric Wiebe Shooting Complex in 2013, the site of the expo's shooter's village.

Although the former mayor of Ponca and member of the Better Ponca Foundation has retired from many of his official roles, the 84-year-old has yet to miss an expo as a volunteer. Andersen leads the shotgun shooting range and recruits his own volunteers — about 30 — and he maintains the 20-some shotguns and dozen muzzleloaders that need regular cleaning during the course of the weekend. Last year, they went through 8,700 rounds of shotgun shells during the expo.

Andersen returns every year simply because of his passion for introducing people to shooting. As an avid hunter, it's important to him to introduce guns to people in a safe, informative way.

"My [volunteers], they take it real seriously to get that beginner to do it the right way. And I think when you see them hit the target, it's a lot of self-satisfaction," Andersen said. "I see guys smiling. I see those kids when they walk away — how they've got a smile on their face." It also tickles him that it's often the women who are better shots than their boyfriends or husbands.

Andersen's wife, Jane, also volunteers, helping to register school children during the Friday school day. On Saturday and Sunday, you'll likely find her answering questions at the information booth.



Former Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Biologist Tom Welstead teaches a boy how to shoot a muzzleloader.
JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

and the Better Ponca Foundation silent auction, which helps fund the expo. The area surrounding the visitor center is where activities such as kayaking, fishing, the rock wall, ropes course and dog shows are located.

The shooter’s village is the third venue of the expo. Although the shooting area has been there since the park was established in 1934, a formal shooting range was built in 2013 thanks to memorial dollars from the family of Eric Wiebe, a former Game and Parks conservation officer and one of the

expo’s earliest proponents, who died of cancer in 2009, in conjunction with corporate and nonprofit donations, including from Scheels.

During the expo, visitors can shoot archery, shotgun, muzzleloader, .22 long rifle, pellet guns, slingshot, atlatl and tomahawk — all equipment provided — at the complex.

In the early years, the expo offered 20 to 40 activities. Now, the event has grown twice as large. The expo’s blueprint covers nearly 57 acres of beautiful, hilly terrain.

Gap Year

There was no expo in 2020 as COVID-19 forced restrictions around the globe. At the time, Ponca staff felt they could not do the event justice while maintaining social distancing. But skipping a year had its risks. As organizers saw across the country, many events and activities did not return after the pandemic.

In 2004, the Missouri River Outdoor Expo was one of maybe seven or eight in the Midwestern area. Over time, it has outlasted most in the country, Fields

said. The gap year in 2020 broke 15 years of momentum, but the expo team forged ahead in 2021 under the park’s new superintendent Scott Oligmueller, and they were glad they did. Crowds have returned, but at more manageable sizes than the peak years when 20,000 people attended, lines were long and patience was short.

“People are enjoying it again,” Fields said. “That’s critical to keeping these events going — making sure it’s a quality experience for the staff and the volunteers, along with the public.”

Behind the Scenes

In November 2024, Katie Leware was named Ponca State Park’s superintendent, and the 2025 event will be her fifth expo. At the helm, she and new expo coordinator, Jessica Rich, are in the thick of meeting with expo board members and sponsors, working on contracts and making bids with vendors. Leware feels the weight of the

20th anniversary on her shoulders.

“I guess what’s daunting going into 20 years is the expectation of this event and what’s going to be new and different,” Leware said. “To be honest with you, we’ve had almost full turnover of permanent staff here at the park in the last year and a half and so, we’ve got a fairly new team, which is really great because there are tons of



Kayaking on Ponca State Park’s pond is one of the Missouri River Outdoor Expo’s most popular activities. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



A family walks down the path that leads through the Eric Wiebe Shooting Complex. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



The bike trail is a recently added activity at the Missouri River Outdoor Expo. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

new ideas ... but we're also running this massive event as a new team, which has its own challenges."

The Missouri River Outdoor Expo is not an event park staff plan mere months or weeks ahead. The expo is part of their day-to-day operations, Leware explained. They think about the expo year-round, about the small details that allow the event to run safely and smoothly. For instance: Who is providing portable toilets? Do food vendors have their health inspections and legalities in order? How many extra golf carts do they need?

Safety is also a priority. Leware ensures first responders and an ambulance are on site, and she facilitates the relationship between local paramedics and the expo's emergency management team. Also throw in local law enforcement and conservation officers, whom she meets to discuss evacuation and emergency plans and lost-kid protocols. Even helicopter landing zones have to be identified in the event someone needs to be airlifted to the hospital.

Then leading up the event, it's all hands-on deck with staff and volunteers setting up.

"It's probably a five-page to-do list just to get the shooting range ready," Leware said.

"This is a massive park, and we have a massive event," she said. "This event doesn't happen with one person. The team that we have and the support from the agency, all of our volunteers — I mean, this event didn't make it 20 years without everybody who's involved."

Team

Ask Fields, Swenson and Leware to name what they're most proud of in running the expo, and they will give you similar answers: being part of a great team, community involvement, the camaraderie, the passion and being part of a grassroots effort that has outlasted most of its kind.

"Those relationships that were established are longtime friends, longtime supporters of our agency. Those can't be replaced. So that is, to me, probably the most important of everything the event stands for," Fields said. The Ponca expo depends on 300 to 700 volunteers annually who fill a wide range of vital roles, such as setting up and tearing down, directing traffic and parking, collecting trash, teaching outdoor skills, demonstrating hands-on activities and more.

Perhaps volunteer birding expert Mark Brogie described it best: "It's kind-of like Old Home Week because we see a lot of the other presenters that come up ... a lot of people that we know have been doing presentations there for years and years and years," he said. "It is a fun event."

Brogie and his brother Ed, retired high school science teachers, now scratch the itch to teach through their bird banding demonstrations at Ponca State Park and elsewhere. Mark and Ed have been involved since the first Missouri River Outdoor Expo in 2004.

Husband-and-wife team Leon and Merrie Hansen also are familiar faces. They joined the expo in 2007. Although the couple have relocated to Wichita, Kansas, to be closer to their

Volunteers Ed and Mark Brogie

Brothers Ed and Mark Brogie have been involved with the expo since day one. Known for their expertise on birding, they run the expo's bird banding station, where visitors can watch the brothers catch a variety of live birds with nets before banding them. They often catch species such as white-breasted nuthatches, chickadees, woodpeckers, warblers, catbirds and many species of sparrows.

"The kids, once they see a white-breasted nuthatch up close, hopefully they'll gain ownership of that bird a little bit. [We] let them touch it, and hopefully they'll never want to ever go shoot one with a BB gun again, because they've seen it up close and personal," Mark said.

It's older brother, Ed, who still carries a federal bird banding permit; Mark gave up his permit some time ago. The process for obtaining a permit is rigorous, and when issued, keeping it active is just as in-depth. Only a handful of people in Nebraska have one.

Another notable feature of the Brogies' station is the study skins borrowed from Wayne State College — their alma mater — affectionately referred to as "birds on a stick." Painstakingly preserved by biologist Wayne Molhoff of Ashland over 40 years ago, these study skins allow visitors to observe specimens up close. The collection of 200 birds is representative of birds found in Nebraska.

Local birder Bill Huser is a regular presenter, along with Ed's wife, Lee. The team loves interacting with return students, teachers and parents, who come back with new questions and growing interest in birds.

Outside of the expo, Ed and Mark regularly volunteer at other Ponca and Niobrara state park educational events. Ed also teaches archery at National Archery in the Schools Program events and offers mentorship at local Pheasants Forever youth hunts. Mark is an active community member in Creighton, having served on several boards; he is currently the treasurer of the Ashfall Chapter of the Friends of the University of Nebraska State Museum.



Brothers Mark, left, and Ed Brogie have been running the bird banding station since the expo's first year. JOSHUA CARLSON



Husband-and-wife team Leon, left, and Merrie Hansen of Wichita, Kansas, draw in crowds each year during their outdoor cooking demonstrations.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

grandchildren, they faithfully return to the expo to offer their popular outdoor cooking demonstrations, as well as help set up during the week ahead.

This event is primarily run by volunteers, Leware said. And they're always looking for more, especially on Sunday afternoon when everyone's eager to get home.

"When it's over, we're all so thankful, but it is such a rewarding experience overall," she said.

■ ■ ■
It takes a lot of heart, gumption and sweat to make an event of this magnitude possible. But to execute year after year, for two decades, introducing untold thousands to the outdoors in an accessible way — that's a mission statement realized many times over. The expo's impact has been immeasurable.

"It's one of those places you can go and see parents, grandpa, grandma, the kids, the dog — all in one family



Volunteer Jase Gerdes helping board member Diana Kincaid pick a monarch butterfly for tagging and release. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

unit," said Deputy Director Jim Swenson, who often hears from people who chose careers in conservation because of the expo. "In today's world of distraction and all kinds of options for families to consider, this is an event that brings them where they can truly find themselves and brings them outdoors. It keeps them connected — that connectivity to the landscape is critical to conservation."

The Missouri River Outdoor Expo is where people and nature meet. Come experience it for yourself the third weekend of September. [N](#)



One of Nebraska's most visited state parks, Ponca State Park is popular for its forested hills, scenic vistas, great wildlife watching, Missouri River access, and beautiful and varied lodging options. It is a destination for all types of family gatherings, from family vacations to weddings.

Volunteers Merrie and Leon Hansen

Merrie and Leon Hansen earned their nicknames "Cold Feet" and "Hot Tin," respectively, while backpacking the Appalachian Trail, where it's customary for hikers to call each other by fun monikers — Merrie was always cold, and Leon was always cooking.

Their outdoor cooking demonstrations at the expo are extremely popular. They've cooked a variety of dishes, including roasted turkey in a cardboard box, Dutch-oven pizza, bison stew, cakes, pies, biscuits, eggs in orange peel cups and more. In addition to their demonstrations, the couple also arrives days prior to lend a hand with setting up the tents and putting up banners and signage. They've also helped build some of the new structures on the riverfront.

Merrie and Leon grew up and met in southeastern Nebraska, and subsequently, the U.S. Air Force took their family to Texas, Alaska, Missouri, Kansas, Montana and Colorado. All that traveling came with many outdoor adventures with their two boys, who are now grown. Leon is a lifelong outdoorsman, having been a Boy Scout as a child and serving as scoutmaster for 28 years. The Hansens have backpacked and kayaked all over the country.

"Being outdoors is just part of who we are. And since we have to eat, I think that's how the cooking ends up being a part of it," Leon explained. Despite their nomadic lifestyle, the couple finds the time to return to the Ponca Expo regularly.

"The park people and the local Ponca people — they've always been good to us. So that's a good reason to go back — just to see people," Merrie said.



Children and parents fishing at Ponca State Park's pond. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Bullwhackers and Muleskinners

By David L. Bristow

Nebraska State Historical Society

“There is heard the lumbering of these prairie schooners, the bellowing oxen — braying of mules, creaking [sic] of the long lariats, which for me is a show of itself to see the dexterity with which the drivers use them.”

So wrote a Nebraska City woman to her sister in 1866. She was describing the freight wagons crowding downtown streets. “There is the hollowing [sic], yelling of teamsters mingled with more oaths than I ever heard before in all my life together.”



A woman bullwhacker was a rare enough sight to be sold as a photographic print. The scene is along the Sidney to Deadwood Trail in 1876. Gold seekers were flooding the Black Hills, leading to war with the Lakota. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

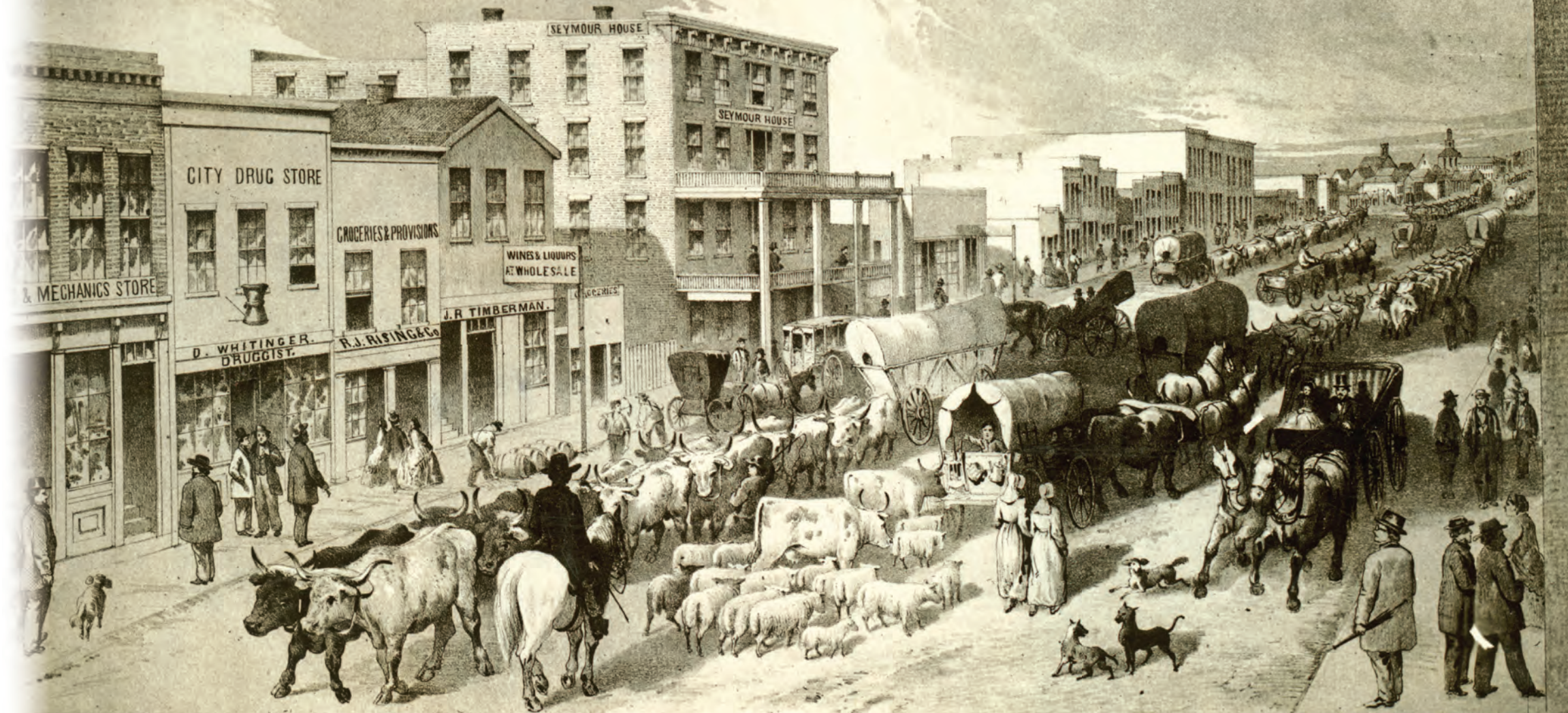


Illustration of freighting in Nebraska City, 1865. NSHS RG2294-0-6

Not all the wagons crossing Nebraska belonged to would-be settlers seeking a new home. Prior to the development of railroads following the Civil War, teamsters drove thousands of heavy freight wagons from Missouri River steamboat landings to points farther inland. Nebraska City was the territory’s leading freight center in the early 1860s, followed by Omaha and Brownville.

While horses pulled freight wagons back East, on the plains a draft animal needed to keep up its strength on forage alone. According to William Lass — whose 1972 book,

“From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake” is still the best account of overland freighting in these parts — the choice was between oxen and mules. Oxen were relatively cheap, durable and less likely to stampede or be stolen, but mules were faster and more manageable. Driving a mule team required more skill, so “muleskinners” were better paid than “bullwhackers.”

But both classes of teamsters were considered dirty and disreputable. They usually wore broad-brimmed felt hats and red- or blue-checked flannel shirts, with trousers tucked

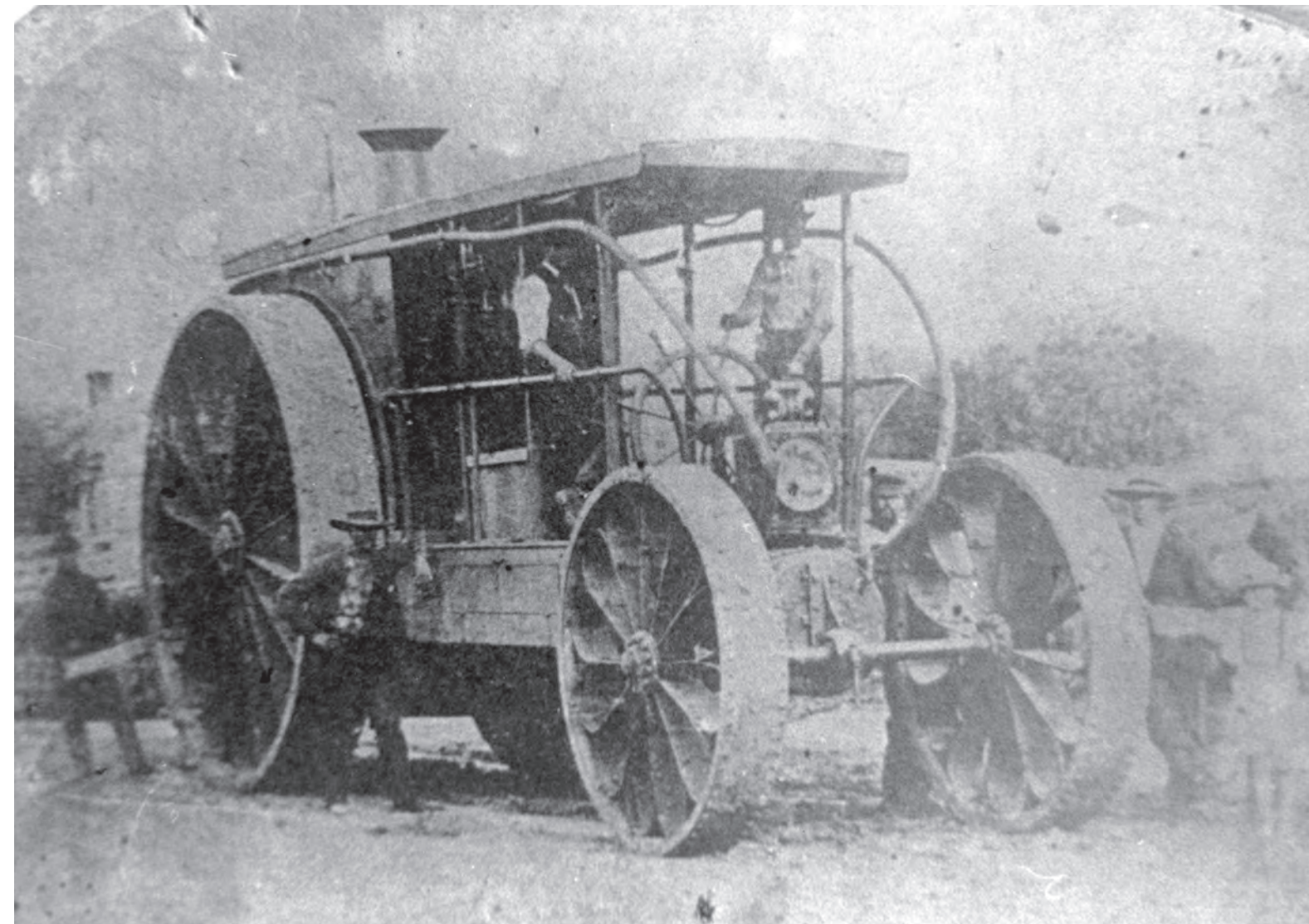
into high boots and held up with a broad belt that also held a bowie knife and revolver. They rode all day in a cloud of dust and slept on the ground with no place to wash up. “No one,” said Lass, “except possibly buffalo skinners, had as much opportunity to become physically repulsive.”

A typical wagon train required about 300 oxen, 26 wagons and 30 men to haul about 60-75 tons of cargo. Doing so required physical courage and considerable skill. An ox-drawn wagon usually had six yoke, carefully arranged.

Out front, the two leaders were the best-trained pair,



Mule-drawn freight wagons in Nebraska city. NSHS RG3368-0-2



The Nebraska City steam wagon, 1862. NSHS RG2592-1-3



Nebraska City, ca. 1870. NSHS RG2294-0-4

usually Texas longhorns. The strongest pair — the “wheelers” — were hitched next to the wagon. The next strongest pair were the “pointers,” hitched just ahead of the wheelers. In between the pointers and the leaders were the least experienced “swing cattle,” which were sometimes completely wild.

“The first pop I ever heard from the bull whip gave me a shock such as one might expect from the unlooked-for explosion of a cannon just a few steps behind you,” recalled Henry Palmer of his 1860 introduction to freighting. He said the whip was usually 12 to 16 feet long, and was used with precision by the bullwhackers, who were “not afraid of anything in this world or in the next.”

The teamsters circled the wagons at night to keep the animals corralled. Yoking them up in the morning was the most dangerous part of the day. Trails tended to follow rivers especially the Platte, so water was usually available — but former teamster Herman Lyon recalled that the trip to Denver

included a waterless 40-mile stretch between Julesburg and Court House Rock. Considering that they made only about 12 miles a day, that was a considerable hardship.

Naturally, entrepreneurs considered how new technology might change the game. What if you built a steam locomotive that didn’t need rails? In 1862, a New York City man named Joseph Renshaw Brown built a 10-ton “steam wagon” with rear wheels more than 10 feet in diameter. This monster departed from Nebraska City bound for Denver but broke down only 5 miles outside of town — a monument marks the spot.

The steam wagon was an idea ahead of its time. While the railroads eventually put the long-haul freight wagons out of business, the steam wagon was an early attempt to solve a problem later addressed by paved highways and semi-trailer trucks. [N](#)

Visit NSHS’s website at history.nebraska.gov.

Confessions from the Sunflower Patch

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

A juvenile dickcissel perches
on a common sunflower stem
on the author's farm.

I have a confession to make to Midwestern farmers. In a region of immaculately clean, weed-free crop fields and road ditches, it might get me blacklisted — or at least earn a good scolding: I admire the common sunflower, a plant most farmers consider a weed.





ABOVE: On a cool late-summer morning, a northern paper wasp warms itself on a sunflower leaf.
OPPOSITE: Prairie meadow katydids, common in eastern Nebraska prairies, use their needle-like ovipositor to lay eggs in plant stems and soil.

You've surely seen this tall, stout-stemmed annual with broad leaves. It grows in road ditches, pastures and other areas that aren't farmed. Its late-summer flush of golden blooms is hard to miss.

As its name implies, the common sunflower is indeed common. But before modern agriculture — with its 50-foot-wide cultivators, Roundup Ready corn, soybeans and other crops, and a “not an odd corner can be spared the plow” mindset — it was even more so.

Back then, farmers, their kids and hired hands spent long, hot, sweaty days earning blisters, hoe in hand, chopping sunflowers and any other plant that wasn't a crop from between the rows. The sunflower competed with crops for moisture and sunlight, and in the fall, its dry, tough stalks jammed harvesters. Justly hated by farmers, it never shook its bad reputation.

But those were different times, when biodiversity

was less appreciated. Overlooked in building its reputation were the insects and wildlife that thrived among sunflowers.

Now another confession. My wife, Grace, and I promote the disrespected sunflower on our southeastern South Dakota farm in a long-abandoned crop field and a degraded prairie pasture. In fall, we spray the smooth brome and Kentucky bluegrass with the herbicide glyphosate. Both are non-native grasses that dominate these sites. We also graze the prairie in spring when the brome and bluegrass are growing most actively. Both practices reduce the non-natives, favor remnant native plants and expose bare soil, which allows the sunflowers to germinate and thrive for a couple of years until the grasses regain control.

We fully accept the social consequences of our behavior. We've heard through the grapevine that our “weeds” are a source of local gossip. A visiting cousin had the courage to say, “The pasture is





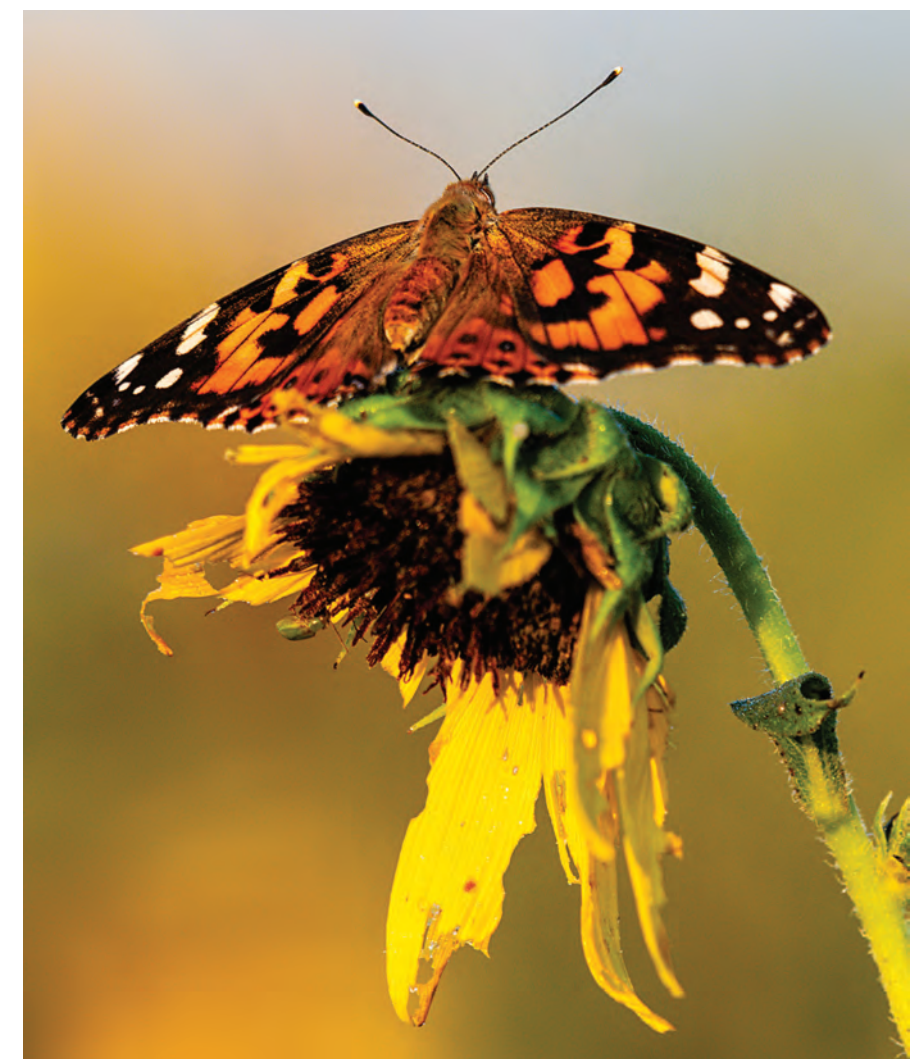
The sun sets behind the blooms of common sunflower, which open in late summer.

starting to look a bit shabby.” Grace promptly explained that his “shabby” was our “habitat.”

For us, enjoying the bugs and birds drawn to the sunflowers outweighs the social risks. In early summer, hen pheasants lead their broods into the sunflower patches. In the openness beneath the shading canopy, vulnerable chicks can wander freely and forage on plentiful grasshoppers and other insects, all while sheltered from the hot sun, wily foxes and hovering hawks. In late summer, bees, butterflies — including migrating monarchs — and other pollinators are

attracted to the flowers’ sweet nectar and abundant pollen. While pheasant hunting the patches in fall and winter, I often see sparrows and goldfinches flitting about, plucking the calorie-rich, oily seeds still clinging to the dried flower heads. And lastly, I can imagine deer mice and meadow voles rustling below the stalks on a cold, calm, moonlit night, searching for fallen seeds.

Although the common sunflower is an eyesore or a weed to some, for those attuned to the summer hum of insects or the brown flash of a winter sparrow, it brings unapologetic pleasure. 🌻



Painted lady butterflies feed on nectar, favoring tall plants like common sunflower. They migrate south in fall to overwinter in Mexico.

NASP

National Archery in the Schools Program

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

Archery does not discriminate. To succeed, you don't have to be the tallest, fastest or strongest. To shoot well, you just have to focus, refine your technique and practice. Or, you can just shoot for fun and not worry about how many bullseyes you hit.

Those aspects are what have made the National Archery in the Schools Program so successful and popular among participants — now 23.5 million and counting — and instructors since it began in 2002.

Our School Sport

Mater Dei Academy, a parochial school in Omaha with approximately 120 students from grades K through 12, has no team sports programs. Except archery. Nearly every student from fourth grade and up participates, and this tradition grows every year.

NASP by the Numbers

- 23.5 million students in more than 9,500 schools across the U.S. have participated since 2002
- 66 percent were first-time archers
- 105,000 educators have been trained
- Half of participants are female, and half male
- \$4 million in scholarships have been awarded to students
- Credited, in part, for an increase in archery participation from 7 million to 19.2 million



Safety official Nick Fischer, assistant superintendent at Indian Cave State Park, helps archers score their targets during the 2024 Nebraska National Archery in the Schools Program State Tournament at the Sandhills Global Event Center in Lincoln.

"It's our school sport," said Sara Cerise, a senior. "Our school has been doing this for a very long time. I like to do my teachers proud. It's a lot of fun, too."

Mater Dei was one of the first schools to sign up for NASP. It doesn't have the budget to travel to weekend tournaments. Instead, the school focuses on one tournament: The State Tournament. This competition, hosted in Lincoln each March, draws an ever-increasing number of participants. In 2025, the event drew more than 700 archers from 33 schools, a big jump from the 100 who participated in the first state tournament in 2006.

This year, Mater Dei brought about 80 students to state, where its high school team won its 10th title to go with

another six runner-up finishes. Their elementary and middle school teams also have two state titles and six runner-up finishes combined. When possible, the high school team travels to the Eastern National Tournament. This year, it placed 84th out of 265 teams.

"A lot of these little low budget schools, they don't get a chance to really go out and make a name for themselves in sports and stuff," said senior Michael Geckle, who shot his personal best of 293 out of 300 to finish 25th among 2,554 high school boys at the national tournament. "Archery, they can kind of resort to and become famous like we did."

"And it gives everyone a good chance to work as a team because in other sports, it's mainly one position as the star of

the show. So as a team here, you can really uplift each other and encourage the entire school to bring their game up."

Bishop Mark Pivarunas, a bowhunter himself, was already teaching archery to Mater Dei students with a hodge-podge of sighted bows when the school joined NASP. The basic NASP equipment, and having the students shoot instinctively, simplified things and made it challenging as well. "For me, I enjoy the children getting better and better and feeling a sense of self-accomplishment," Pivarunas said.

Students practice daily in the church basement. Girls in the boarding program have a target range outside of their dorm. "If you want to be really good, you've got to practice a lot," Pivarunas said. "And if you want to be the best, you've



Members of the Mater Dei Academy practice in the basement of the Mary Immaculate Church in Omaha, where a statue of Jesus watches over their range.

got to practice even more. And they do. They really put their minds and hearts into it.”

That, he said, will carry over later in their lives. “If you put your mind to it and you work at something hard enough, you can be good at whatever you do.”

“Archery, in general, has taught me to be disciplined,” Cerise said, “[to] use your time well, and you got to really work for your goals. It’s not just going to happen. You got to work for it.”

The Yorkshire Homeschool Archers

The Yorkshire Homeschool Archers is one of several teams of homeschooled youths that participate in NASP. Last year, their second in the program, they had 23 students from York and the surrounding communities participate, with more interested in joining next year.

“One of the things we’re trying to do is build this so kids who are looking for something to do and needing something to do can have a positive place to come,” said Charla Stark, one of the parents who serves as a coach on the team. “They can jump right into it. You can come from having never picked up a bow before to shooting with hundreds of archers on the line at state.

“Whatever you want to make of the sport, you can make it. If you want to just have fun and make it recreational, you can do that. There’s no pressure on you. But if you want to succeed and go on to further things, you can do that, too.”

The Yorkshire coaches appreciate the fact that NASP caters to everyone, no matter their abilities or strengths, and that it has both individual and team aspects. “And there’s no running and no weightlifting,” said Caitlynn Howard, another parent and coach on the team.



Archers score their targets during the 2024 Nebraska National Archery in the Schools Program State Tournament.



Members of the Yorkshire Homeschool Archers compete during the school year and also gather to shoot at other times, including taking advantage of the opportunity to use a range set up for an archery camp in York in June.

Yorkshire fifth grader Kemper Marquart hadn’t shot a bow prior to NASP but thought he would be good at it. After just a few weeks of practice, he was and has since won a few medals and trophies at area shoots. What he enjoys about the program is simple: “I like how when I pull back the bow, I can make the arrow go where I want it to,” he said.

A Family of Archers

Milford is one of several schools in Nebraska that is all-in on NASP, regularly placing at state and qualifying for nationals. When she was in eighth grade, Natalie Nutzman found immediate success in her first year of NASP, finishing third among middle school girls in the state tournament. The following year, she won the state girls title as a high school freshman despite having fallen and injuring her elbow. That injury, however, led to nerve damage in her hand that didn’t appear until she went to the national tournament that same year. At full draw, she was in extreme pain.

“I was actually really bummed because I didn’t want to give up this sport that I loved,” Nutzman said.

Worried she wouldn’t be able to find a way to keep shooting, her coach and coaches from other teams helped her find the answer in a mouth tab. Rather than pull the bowstring back with her fingers, she bites a tab attached to the string,

releasing the arrow by relaxing her bite.

She was initially disappointed when she didn’t fare as well at state the following year. “When I got home, I had to just take a second and be like, ‘Wait, I’m the only one that does this in the state. Why am I bummed about 15th?’” she said, adding she did better this year and hopes to improve more as a senior.

Getting to know her teammates and people from other teams is something she always enjoys. “It’s weird because we come from different backgrounds, and you just meet all of these amazing people that you wouldn’t have met otherwise. It just becomes a family,” she said.

From the Line to the Stand

One of the goals of NASP is to increase participation in the shooting sports. That has certainly happened since the program began in 2002: Participation in archery hunting and target shooting has grown from 7 million to 19 million.

While it’s not implicitly stated — hunting doesn’t even garner a mention in the curriculum — another goal of NASP was to increase participation in bowhunting. That is why in most cases the program is coordinated by state wildlife agencies. The connection has still happened, though, as the current count of 3.7 million bowhunters is a 23 percent

NASP History and Curriculum

NASP began in Kentucky in 2002 and quickly grew to include 20 states by the time the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission launched its program in 2005 with 32 schools adding archery to their curriculum. During the past school year, 350 schools and homeschooled groups and 33,000 students participated in Nebraska.

In most schools, NASP is simply 10 hours of the curriculum in physical education or other classes, taught by teachers who have been certified as Basic Archery Instructors. Game and Parks provides equipment at a reduced cost thanks to national grants.

Everyone in the country uses the same Genesis compound bow and aluminum Easton arrows, an aspect that is key for those teaching the class. “I don’t want to have to give Suzie a different bow than Johnny, and have to know how both of those bows work and how to adjust both of those bows,” said Megan Price, hunting and shooting sports outreach coordinator at Game and Parks. “They need something that’s easy and consistent.”

For students, not having to compete against others using pricey bows with sights, stabilizers or other accessories common in both hunting and target bows simplifies the sport as well. “They are all on the same playing field, so it makes it about your technique and not the extras,” Price said.

Perfecting that technique can quickly improve scores, boosting a student’s confidence. That, according to annual surveys of students who participate in the basic program, produces benefits beyond shooting: Students say they work harder and have better focus in school, and feel more connected to their school. Outside of class, they are more confident.

At about 10 percent of the schools, NASP doesn’t end when the PE bell rings. Students who wish to do so can shoot competitively, often in clubs that



JJ Ozuna, PE teacher and NASP Coach at Minatare High School, one of the smaller schools involved in the program, helps Jericho Timmens score his target during practice. If not for NASP, “Not a lot of kids are going to touch a bow,” Ozuna said. “It’s giving them a chance to be a part of that and introduce some skills.”

PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

meet before or after school. In some cases, the same teachers who deliver the program in class lead the competitive program. In others, dedicated volunteer instructors do so.

Archers can compete at local and regional tournaments hosted nearly every weekend starting in January and leading up to the Nebraska state tournament, held in Lincoln each March. Any team or individual from a NASP school can participate in the state tournament.

Each year, several teams and individuals from Nebraska advance to one of two national tournaments, the Western National in Utah and the Eastern Nationals in Louisville, Kentucky. The latter drew 15,000 archers in 2025, making it the largest archery tournament in the world.

increase from 2000.

Silas McDaniel of Lincoln is one of those new bowhunters. The first time he picked up a bow was in sixth-grade physical education class at Pound Middle School in Lincoln. That same year, he visited the NASP booth at the Nebraska Deer and Game Expo and shot 3D targets.

That, and the urging of a classmate and fellow NASP participant, piqued his interest not only in archery, but also bowhunting, something that no one in his family did. His father, Brendan, bought Silas a bow and the teenager kept shooting during the summer, passed his hunter education class and joined Pound’s after-school NASP club in seventh grade. That fall, he signed up for the Nebraska Game and

Parks Commission Youth Mentor Hunt Program. He has since harvested three deer and a turkey with his bow.

“I like the feeling after you get a deer or a turkey,” said Silas, now a freshman. “And I like just sitting in the tree and watching wildlife do its thing.”

Silas credits NASP for his interest in archery. His father credits both programs for his. “Between NASP and the mentor program, it has opened the door for me,” Brendan said. “I own a bow now, and Silas and I will go out and we’ll hunt together. Very quickly it turned into something that was a way for him and I to connect. It’s just such an amazing experience.”

While hunting was left out of the NASP curriculum by design, with the hope that more schools would participate,



Wanting to continue shooting in NASP after a hand injury left Natalie Nutzman of Milford unable to pull back a bow, she adapted by learning to shoot with a mouth tab.

efforts are underway to improve the connection, including the addition of a 3D target competition at tournaments in recent years.

But even if participants only shoot in PE class and never shoot again, the National Archery in the Schools Program has been a tremendous success and continues to grow each year.

Simply getting youths involved in the sport was the goal, said Aaron Hershberger, Outdoor Skills Education supervisor and former coordinator of NASP in Nebraska.

“It’s still kind of surprising to folks that we harnessed the attraction in the flight of the arrow into a school curriculum taught during the school day,” Hershberger said. 

How to Get NASP in Your School

Grants from state and national organizations help defray much of the cost of equipment needed to start a program. The first 12 schools to submit an application are guaranteed to receive a kit, which includes 13 bows, 5 targets, arrows, an arrow curtain and a repair kit. If more than 12 apply to join the program, staff will work to find funding to keep the cost of additional kits down.

Game and Parks staff will also travel to new schools to train teachers and help them secure the required Basic Archery Instructor certification.

For more information, contact Megan Price at Megan.Price@Nebraska.gov or 402-471-6133.



Silas McDaniel of Lincoln began shooting a bow in NASP and graduated to Game and Parks’ Youth Mentor Hunt program, where volunteers have helped him harvest three deer, including this whitetail buck in 2024. JOHN HAY

A Little Owl Goes Big Places

Spike, an animal ambassador at Bellevue's Fontenelle Forest, is winning hearts around the globe.

By Renae Blum

Something squeezes the heart when you look at Spike, a 5-inch-tall eastern screech owl living with a raptor conservation organization in Bellevue. One of his eyes perpetually squints, giving him a bewildered expression. And both eyes — huge, bottomless, round, seemingly seeing everything and nothing at once — appear slightly off-kilter, not perfectly in sync.

In one video, now viewed more than 9 million times on Instagram alone, Spike's handler and one of his main caregivers, Ell Kinsey, gently waves a hand close to the bird's face, as if checking for signs of life.

Spike doesn't appear to react, and she explains, "He's just not all there. He doesn't have that typical wild awareness that a normal screech owl should have."

Despite that, the 3- or 4-year-old owl is alert, calm and seemingly content in his second chance at life — millions of online admirers in tow.

A Chance Encounter

In September 2023, a railroad employee rescued Spike from inside a sweltering train car in Fremont. No one knows how long he'd been trapped inside, but by the time he was rescued, Spike was starving, and the heat had

permanently damaged his brain.

Staff at the Raptor Conservation Alliance near Elmwood got him back to a better weight, but realized he could not be released back into the



Raptor Care Specialist Ell Kinsey is one of Spike's main caretakers and appears with him in many of his most popular videos.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FONTENELLE FOREST

wild. He could still fly, but his ability to hunt, and his natural fear of predators, was gone.

Kinsey believes that before this, Spike — who she named for a railroad spike — was indeed a mighty hunter. Generally, only one in four screech owls survive their first year, and many don't make it through their first winter.

But Spike was at least a year old when he was found.

"The fact that he made it to adulthood says a lot about the kind of hunter he was before the train car," Kinsey said. "Every now and then, we get a glimpse of that hunter."

New Beginnings

When the Raptor Conservation Alliance deems a bird non-releasable, the next stop may be Fontenelle Forest. One of Nebraska's oldest conservation organizations, Fontenelle is home to 27 non-releasable raptors. They receive specialized care, customized enclosures and the opportunity to live new lives as educational ambassadors.

Some live in the Raptor Woodland Refuge, a large exhibit open to public view. Others, like Spike, aren't on public display, because they've shown the aptitude to educate people in other ways.

These birds travel with Kinsey and other staff to local communities, appearing in programs at schools, senior care facilities and day camps.

"[Spike] went on his first program probably about a month after we got him," Kinsey said. "He was a real, real good bird — easy to train."

During the summer, Spike may appear at up to three events a week, though his schedule is quite flexible. Staff keep a careful eye on each bird

An eastern screech owl named Spike, who lives at Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue, has sparked fan art, donations and adoration from fans around the world — much to the staff's surprise.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FONTENELLE FOREST



How to Help Raptors

“There are raptors all around you,” said Eli Kinsey, one of Spike’s main caregivers. A few simple actions, like these, can help prevent future raptor injuries and deaths:

- **Put trash away instead of tossing it along roadsides.**

That attracts rodents, which attracts hungry raptors to busy roadways. It’s not uncommon for rehabbers to see birds hit by cars, Kinsey said.

- **Choose lead-free fishing weights and ammunition.**

As hunters and anglers shift to lead-free alternatives in their gear, it can have a huge, positive impact for raptors and other wildlife. “All it takes is lead the size of a grain of rice to kill a fully-grown eagle,” Kinsey said.

- **Avoid harmful pesticides.**

Certain pesticides and insecticides introduce toxins into the ecosystem, and the effect spreads. “If a rabbit is poisoned, it doesn’t leave the food chain when the rabbit dies,” Kinsey explained. She recommends asking your local plant nursery about more natural alternatives.

- **Consider catch-and-release traps for pests.** Some pest traps, like glue traps or fly ribbons, pose a threat to raptors seeking an easy lunch — who may then get stuck themselves and struggle to escape.

and rotate between them, sometimes swapping one bird for another on a given day, to ensure none of them are stressed or exhausted.

“Spike and George back each other up,” Kinsey said, referring to Spike’s roommate, a 12-year-old eastern screech owl with an eye injury. George had rejected multiple previous roommates, either refusing to eat or picking fights.



Omaha-based artist, author and educator Regan Ralston focuses on the magic of the everyday in her artwork. Spike’s curious stares reminded her of “the wonder we share with all living things.”

But on their first night in the same enclosure, staff were amazed to see the older bird bring Spike his leftover mouse from the night before — something only a mate or parent typically does. Kinsey can’t be sure, but she believes George sensed Spike’s limitations.

“He seemed to know, OK, this guy needs a little bit of extra help,” Kinsey said.

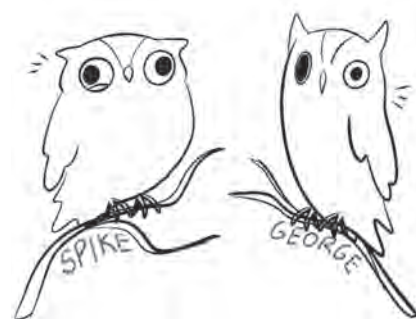
Life at Fontenelle

Dozens of people aided in Spike’s recovery and are now part of his everyday life. But Kinsey is “the mouse bringer,” as she calls herself.

Despite that prestigious title, and despite working with Spike and George for years, she doesn’t believe they recognize her visually.

“But I know when they hear my voice, that usually means ‘mouse’ or ‘glove’ or something to that effect,” she said.

At the end of the day, staff lock the



Rachel Whitner of Birmingham, Alabama, found inspiration in each raptor’s unique face.

gates, and then the raptors get their evening meal. Spike eats one mouse each day. “It’s 20 grams, so I always compare that to, like, 20 paperclips,” Kinsey said.

Kinsey is hesitant to assign a wild animal more human qualities, or to speculate about what his personality might be. In Spike’s case, mentally, “I don’t think there’s a lot going on,” she said. But she and the staff do recognize signs of stress versus contentment, which they monitor for.

If Spike does have a personality, “derpy” is the best word for it,

according to Kinsey. “He’s the hardest one to resist petting,” she said.

A Star is Born

Spike’s first video appearance came from an idea of Kinsey’s: “I saw that stupid trend online of showing someone something they had never seen before. I was like, oh my gosh, we have to do that with one of our birds!”

She encouraged the team to pick Spike for the video, and he was a natural — gazing at a water fountain, break room freezer, wall certificate and more, all with the same wide-eyed, seemingly amazed expression.

“We thought that was viral. It got, like, 100,000 views,” she recalled.

But Spike’s true breakthrough moment came later, when Kinsey appeared alongside him in a video “introducing” him to their audience.

Kinsey still remembers the moment she realized how big the video had gotten. She was hiking and had stopped to sip water and check Instagram. A rising Brooklyn-born singer-songwriter, INIKO, had

commented and clicked the “heart” button on the post.

“I remember freaking out at that,” Kinsey said. “I texted our social media manager ... and it just blew up from there.”

Fans began sending staff their Spike and George fan art. Donations came in from places like Canada, Germany, Italy and Australia. And in one year, Fontenelle Forest’s Instagram following increased by more than 700 percent.

“It’s amazing, the influence and reach that he has,” Kinsey said.

Seizing the moment, Fontenelle staff created a Spike and George T-shirt to sell in the gift shop, and in June, a sold-out crowd attended an in-person meet-and-greet with Spike and George. Virtual and in-person private meetings are also in the works.

With a Little Help from My Friends

Why has Spike become so beloved? Peek through the comment sections and you’ll see mostly good-spirited

humor — “I would die for Spike” or “Spike is my spirit animal” — but also sincere emotion.

One person wrote, “I’m having such a rough day, and seeing Spike, and how he doesn’t let his limitations hold him back, really inspires me. ... Seeing Spike made me smile.”

Kinsey fondly remembers one visitor who flew in from Chicago after requesting a private meeting.

“She was having some medical issues, and she said that Spike was a big part of her healing journey,” Kinsey said. “I think she appreciated the quality of life that we’re able to give the birds here.”

“And that’s something that’s really important to me. The broken birds are not going to get tossed aside,” she said. “We don’t just discard something that doesn’t work right. I think that meant a lot.” 🦉

To see more of Spike’s adventures, follow Fontenelle Forest on Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube or LinkedIn. Learn more at fontenelleforest.org.



In June, visitors from across the country gathered at Fontenelle Forest for its first-ever “Spike Spectacular,” a sold-out meet-and-greet with Spike and his roommate, George (pictured above). PHOTO BY RENAE BLUM

Cottonwood-Steverson

**Two names.
Three lakes.
Countless
opportunities.**

Story and photos by Justin Haag

In a region of more than 1,500 lakes, it can be a challenge to find anything distinct to say about just one — or, in this case, three — of them.

Perhaps what makes these Sandhills lakes stand out is how remote, yet accessible, they are. One need not travel a long stretch of bumpy road to experience Cottonwood-Steverson



An angler in a boat at Cottonwood-Steverson Wildlife Management Area.



The sun rises behind Steverson Lake, which has the most surface area of the property's three lakes.

Wildlife Management Area. The 2,902-acre property with more than 1,000 acres of water is centrally located on the 67-mile stretch between Hyannis and Merriman, just off the asphalt of Nebraska Highway 61.

Because of the name of the WMA, two of the lakes often get lumped together in descriptions, and the third is rarely mentioned. On the south end of the property, along Carver Road, is Steverson Lake, the largest and most-accessible of the three at about 540 surface acres. The 230-acre Cottonwood Lake is just north of Steverson and connected by a narrow channel. Northeast of the two, standing alone, is

the 340-acre Home Valley Lake.

To understand Cottonwood-Steverson, it helps to know a little about geology and history. Droughts of centuries ago formed the dunes of the Sandhills. Wetter times of late stabilized the dunes with grasses, and the massive Ogallala Aquifer feeds the low spots with groundwater to give the region the special trove of lakes present today.

At this locale, the Sandhills' elevation varies more than it does in most parts. Upon driving into the property, visitors are taken up and over a vantage point more than 100 feet above Steverson Lake and its wetlands below — something

of a cliff in the massive expanse known for its rounded hills.

The variance of elevation isn't just above the surface. The lakes in this area are deeper than most in the Sandhills, and Cottonwood, which reaches 20 feet, is considered to be the deepest of natural public water bodies in the region.

At more than 1½ miles from the access road, a visit to Home Valley requires some hiking or time on a horse, and gets traffic in winter when anglers are allowed to ride an ATV over ice to the north end of Cottonwood and follow a trail the last half-mile over land. After ice-out, some take the same approach by paddling and pulling kayaks, float tubes and



The day's last moments of light reflect from the water's surface and silhouette the cattails along the shoreline at Cottonwood-Steverson Wildlife Management Area in the Sandhills.

other small vessels.

Anglers who make the trip to Cottonwood-Steverson are often rewarded, sometimes with a catch not found in many other Nebraska water bodies. Steverson and Cottonwood have an ample population of muskellunge, with surveys reporting some topping 40 inches.

Other species swimming at Cottonwood-Steverson include crappies, wipers, walleyes, saugeyes, bluegills, yellow perch, largemouth bass and common carp. Unlike many shallower Sandhills lakes, those of Cottonwood-Steverson showed no signs of winterkill in early 2023.

Home Valley has a special fishing regulation. It limits the 15-fish daily bag limit of panfish to include no more than five yellow perch 10 inches or greater of which only one can be 12 or more inches. The lake has had a history of producing trophy perch and the regulation was put in place to manage

for its quality potential.

Hunting opportunities include mule deer, white-tailed deer, grouse, pheasant and waterfowl, to name a few. Elk have even been seen on the property. Birdwatchers will find a wide variety of other species, whether it be shorebirds and waders, songbirds of the grasslands, or warblers in the towering riparian habitat at the southwestern corner of Steverson Lake.

The Game and Parks Commission's habitat management efforts have improved the area. It has divided the area into four cattle grazing allotments that rotate annually in conjunction with two adjoining landowners. A high intensity, low duration grazing system in early spring suppresses problematic cool-season grasses and bolsters the native warm-season ones typical to the Sandhills. Prescribed burns have been used to manage the wetland and upland vegetation on the western end.



A yellow-rumped warbler (*Setophaga coronata*) briefly clings to a branch at Cottonwood-Steverson WMA.



A willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) forages along the shoreline at Cottonwood-Steverson WMA.



The western end has a fen, defined as a type of peat-accumulating wetland fed by mineral-rich ground or surface water. The western prairie fringed orchid (*Platanthera praeclara*), one of Nebraska's rarest plants, has been known to grow there.

Cottonwood and Steverson lakes have been among the Game and Parks holdings since 1997 when they were purchased for \$543,761, the most ever paid for a parcel of property by the agency to that point. Home Valley was added

about a year later.

The property has retained its primitive charm. It does feature a concrete boat ramp, compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, but no dock. Boats are restricted to 5 mph. There also are no restrooms or trash service there.

Sure, the Sandhills feature more than 1,500 lakes, and these are just three of them. Each lake is special in its own way, and Cottonwood, Steverson and Home Valley are certainly no exception. [N](#)

ABOVE: Cottonwood-Steverson Wildlife Management Area has three lakes, including the largest, Steverson. Cottonwood Lake and Home Valley Lake can be seen to the left in the distance, as well as Piester Lake, at right, which is on private property. The 2,900-acre WMA is accessible by Carver Road which intersects with Nebraska 61.

MAP RIGHT: Located in Cherry County, Nebraska, Cottonwood-Steverson WMA is about 30 miles north of Hyannis or 35 miles south of Merriman.



OPENING DAY DOG CARE

By Todd Mills

A wise dog trainer told me years ago that a hunting dog really has no off-season. Although true, the reality is life can get in the way. Summer activities, kids’ activities, lack of training ground and weather all play factors in losing focus on getting your dog in early season form. More times than not, your dog can get neglected.

If you want your dog to perform at its best, the work doesn’t start in the blind or the uplands — it starts in August. A few focused weeks can make the difference between a sluggish pup and a strong, steady hunter.

The Earlier, the Better

Coming off a long winter, especially in the Midwest, many dogs have spent months with limited activity. By early August, it’s time to build their stamina. Begin with daily walks, gradually working in short training sessions and longer off-leash runs. If your water dog hasn’t seen water in a while, reintroduce these retrievers. Even just 30 minutes a day of consistent activity helps condition joints, build endurance and sharpen focus. Walking them is not enough here. The more you can replicate hunting situations, the better your dog will adapt in September.

Know Your Dog

Just like us, every dog is different. Some bounce back quickly, others need more ramp-up time. Pay attention to how your dog handles heat, terrain and pressure. Watch for signs of fatigue and any early signs of heat stroke. Training in the early mornings or evenings is preferable. The key is consistency without overdoing it — don’t expect your dog to be in mid-season shape on day one. For example, I have an 11-year-old Lab that spends a lot of time in the water before we go on land in early August. Water



Todd Mills and his 11-year-old Labrador retriever, Hope, hunting teal from a Platte River sandbar in Hall County. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

is better on her joints and builds up her cardiovascular system without compromising her hips.

Feed for Performance

As activity levels rise, your dog’s nutritional needs change, too. Transition from maintenance food to a performance formula with higher fat and protein content. Stay consistent with feeding times and ensure your dog has plenty of clean, cool water — especially after training. Hydration is just as crucial as calories.

A word of caution here: The most important factor for keeping your dog in the field longer as they age is keeping their weight down. Over the years I’ve seen dogs and hunters pack on the weight in the off-season, hindering their ability to hunt hard once opening day comes. Also, don’t skimp on the quality of food. A recent change in my older dog’s diet has probably added a year or two to her hunting career.

Do this work now so you have a quality hunting partner all season long.

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DEER RUBS *The science and behavior of deer rubs or signposts*

By Brian Peterson

Deer rubs, scientifically described as signposts, are markings made on trees, fenceposts and a variety of other wooden structures, including — literally — posts on road signs. For deer, rubs serve several purposes, such as communicating with other deer both visually and through scent. For larger bucks, it is their billboard, a way to mark their territory.

Deer typically select aromatic trees with smooth bark along heavily used trails adjacent to bedding areas or food sources. New rubs are easily identified, as freshly removed bark or wood exposes the brightly-colored, non-weathered wood beneath it.

Not all deer rubs are created equal. Some are used only for a short time as bucks are shedding antler velvet or as males thrash and scrape small diameter trees, saplings or bushes in the presence of other bucks to intimidate them prior to sparring.

The more impressive rubs on trees or posts 3 to 5 inches in diameter, and sometimes even larger, are community rubs frequented by multiple deer throughout the season. These signposts might be used year after year depending on location, habitat changes and seasonal

food availability.

Community rub use increases from the time velvet is shed in September, peaking in early November and then decreasing until antlers are cast. They serve two primary purposes: First, it's a visual, attention-getting “street” sign within a high-traffic area, and second, it's a chemical scent holder and dispenser that communicates the individual's presence and breeding status with both rival male and female white-tailed deer in the area. Studies show that the oldest bucks typically make the largest rubs, whereas younger bucks and females may visit and interact with the rub, but rarely maintain it.

Through studies with camera traps, I have observed and recorded consistent behaviors as deer utilize these signposts. Deer will often approach an established rub, scent check it from a distance, and then move closer to smell and sometimes lick the post. Bucks will then aggressively scrape and scar the post or tree with the jagged, sharp burrs and tines on their antlers.

Following the rubbing sequence, bucks rub scent glands located on their forehead on the newly-exposed



Larger diameter community rubs, such as the one on this abandoned deer stand along the Platte River in central Nebraska, can become a hub of communication between all deer and are used year after year.

BRIAN PETERSON

wood to leave their chemical signature. Bucks often vocalize by grunting prior to, during and following rubbing.

Mature females visit these community rubs to gain information relating to herd dynamics in the area and are sometimes observed licking or rubbing their forehead directly on the signpost.

As you investigate and perhaps set game cameras on fresh rubs in the woods this fall, try to determine whether it was a rub that was used only once, or if it was a community signpost. If it is the latter, hanging a stand nearby might put you on the road to a nice buck come deer season.

Brian Peterson is a biologist at the University of Nebraska at Kearney and coordinates the M.S. Biology Online Program. His research has focused on white-tailed deer antler metrics. For more information, contact petersonbc@unk.edu. He would like to thank Larry Bragg for allowing camera trap access to his property for research investigations.



Deer will rub wooden posts or trees, removing enough wood or bark through time and changing their shape. BRIAN PETERSON (LEFT) AND LOGAN DIETRICH (RIGHT)



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REDHEAD ON THIS YEAR'S WATERFOWL STAMP

By Justin Haag

The Nebraska migratory waterfowl stamp features a redhead duck painted by Stephanie Zhang of Scottsbluff, a 14-year-old student of Bluffs Middle School.

A panel chose Zhang's acrylic painting as best of show from 550 entries during judging at Scottsbluff's West Nebraska Arts Center in March. The artwork then advanced to national junior duck stamp competition, where it finished in the top 25.

The annual contest, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is open to students in kindergarten through 12th grades.

The Nebraska contest winner is honored by placement on the Game and Parks Commission's migratory waterfowl stamp, a required purchase for duck and goose hunters in the state.



This redhead duck painting by Stephanie Zhang, a 14-year-old student from Scottsbluff, will be placed on the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's migratory waterfowl stamp.



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CLEAN, DRAIN AND DRY DURING WATERFOWL SEASON

By Jerry Kane

As waterfowl season kicks off, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission reminds hunters to help prevent the spread of damaging aquatic invasive species.

Zebra mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil, curly-leaf pondweed, brittle naiad and other aquatic invasive species can “hitchhike” on hunting gear and be spread by droplets of water or even tiny plant fragments.

Aquatic invasive species cause irreparable harm to aquatic ecosystems and waterfowl habitat, severely impeding hunting, fishing and boating for future generations.

Nebraska is one of the few states in the Midwest left without widespread zebra mussel invasions. The only water bodies in the state that have established zebra mussel populations are the Missouri River, Lewis and Clark Lake/Lake Yankton, Beaver Lake in Plattsmouth and Offutt Air Force Base Lake.

Game and Parks’ AIS staff have noted an increase in invasive aquatic plants across Nebraska. These plants likely are being spread from one water body to the next by some boaters, anglers and hunters not taking sufficient precautions against the spread of these species. Hunters also should avoid using invasive plants, such as phragmites — an invasive, noxious wetland plant often used as camouflage — in their hunting blinds.

“Nebraska is home for us and we urgently need the public’s help to keep our waters invasive-free and stop these critters in their tracks,” said Kristopher Stahr, Game and Parks’ aquatic invasive species program manager. “Take a few moments to Clean, Drain and Dry your gear, and choose camouflaging plants wisely for your blind to help stop the spread of these aquatic invasive species.”

Nebraskans hunting out-of-state should be especially cautious to not spread invasive species into Nebraska waters.

Game and Parks regulations require anglers, hunters and



After waterfowl hunts, check decoys for invasive species just like you would a boat. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

boaters conduct clean, drain and dry procedures before leaving a water body. They are not allowed to arrive at a water body with any water from another water body. Hunters should remove any visible plants or mud from their gear and then clean with high pressure or hot water. They also should ensure all water is drained before leaving and to let gear dry for at least five days or wipe it dry before re-using.



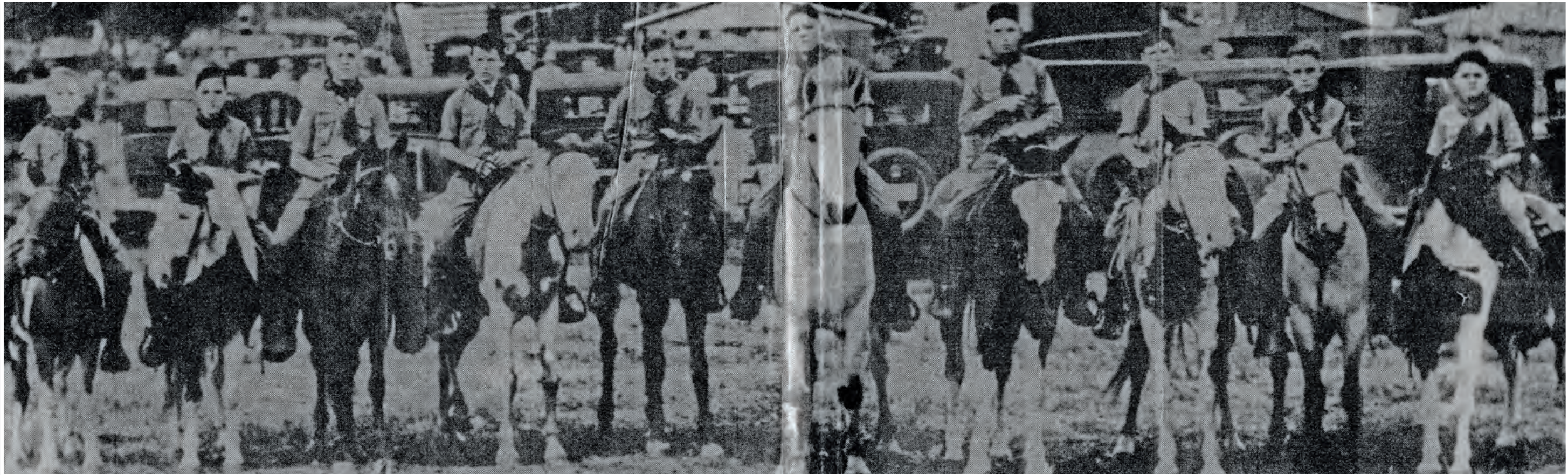
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Mounted Boy Scout troop at the Douglas County Fair, 1930 ▲

A mounted Boy Scout troop handling the crowds at the Douglas County Fair. My father, William Hannan, is to the far right. My three brothers, William, Robert and James Patrick, and I, still own the original farm along Highway 64 just west of Leshara (5 miles west of Valley). Robert owns the farmstead with the original farm house built in 1902. William built his house on 10 acres along Highway 64. James lives in Mead and I live in Greeley, Colorado. The remaining 190 acres of the original 300 are farmed by cousin Matt Hannan who lives north of the farm. We do not know the whereabouts of any of the other nine horsemen of the mounted Boy Scout troop, but if magazine subscribers have any knowledge, they can write to me.

 – Richard Hannan, Greeley, Colorado

Deer hunting at Swanson Reservoir, 1976 ►

From left: Leon Barkdahl; his son, Chip; Ken Drinkwyne; Bob Turpin; Scott Mcdonald; and my dad, Jerry Mittelstadt. Bob was the superintendent at Swanson. Leon, Ken, Scott and my dad all worked for the Department of Corrections, then called the Reformatory. Navy, Air Force and Marines represented. The deer check station was in Trenton on the big hill going north out of town. Legend has it that Scott's Datsun needed some help getting up the hill. That was Dad's first trip there. We have hunted that area ever since. I still have Dad's canceled permit, and that deer is now mounted. – Matt Mittelstadt, Lincoln



Pike fishing at Calamus Reservoir, 1990 ◀

My dad, LaVerne Vrbka, and me. My dad had a love for the outdoors, both hunting and fishing. I caught both of these northern pike on July 15, 1990. The one my dad was holding weighed 7 pounds and the one I was holding was 14 pounds. I was generous enough to let him hold the smaller one. We caught these at Calamus Reservoir, and this photo was taken in front of Homestead Knolls. They were caught off number 5 Mepp spinners. Not pictured is my uncle Bob Vrbka who caught a 13-pound, 10-ounce northern pike the next day. We both received Master Angler awards.

 – Neal Vrbka, Omaha



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



A pair of sandhill cranes walk through wheat stubble in Dawes County on Aug. 9, 2024. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

SUMMER CRANES

By Justin Haag

Sometimes, wildlife prompts a double take. That happened last August when my eyes caught sight of a pair of sandhill cranes in wheat stubble near Crow Butte in northwestern Nebraska — yes, the Crow Butte featured in this month's magazine.

Sandhill cranes are among Nebraska's most photographed birds during their annual stopover in the Platte Valley during spring, but not commonly seen in the Pine Ridge. Here, most of the sandhill crane sightings happen during fall migration when flocks are singing their familiar song thousands of feet above.

The fall crane migration doesn't pick up until October, so an ornithologist friend told me this was probably a pair that failed to nest and was biding time moving around the region prior to migration. Although cranes occasionally nest in Nebraska, no young birds were near these two.

Unlike the cranes of so many Nebraska spring photographs, these two featured remarkable rusty red plumage. Sandhill cranes improve their camouflage during the nesting season by preening with the mud of iron-rich soils in the north. Later in the year, the red fades and the birds return to being mostly gray.

As is often the case with wildlife, I wish I could ask them where they've been.

According to a map I found online, one area not too far away with soils of high iron content is west-central South Dakota. With the ability to fly 400 miles per day, it's hard to tell where they had been spending most of their time that summer, though.

Regardless, I hope the pair had safe travels south, followed by time on the Platte in spring and better luck nesting after that.

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