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NEBRASKAland

April 2009



This cloud formation, created above Sioux County on a cool mid-April afternoon, grew as the winds aloft carried it from west to east. Photo by Bill Hager.



A Wild Turkey Year

PLUS

- saving the living DINOSAUR
- couple CAMPING
- KITE flying
- Shoemaker Marsh
- Harlan County HOGS
- KILL a tree
- Heron Haven

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NEBRASKAland

Volume 87, Number 3, April 2009

FEATURES

12 Shoemaker Marsh

For 75 years, these saline wetlands on the northern edge of Lincoln were the hunting grounds for the Little Salt Gun Club. In 2003, the 160 acres were purchased by Lincoln to preserve a piece of Nebraska's most rare ecosystem.

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Early spring in Nebraska is a perfect time to sneak away with your loved one on a private camping trip.

By MATTHEW MARX

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Using a helicopter and an aerial gunner, state and federal wildlife officials attacked the feral pig problem at Harlan County Reservoir this past February.

By DOUG CARROLL

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The year in a turkey's life is both a long and beautiful trek through Nebraska's four seasons. PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

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Aided by dozens of volunteers, biologists spent 12 long days last April catching endangered pallid sturgeon on trotlines in an effort to help save the species. By KIRK STEFFENSEN



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Cover: Ready to do battle, a mature tom turkey can be quite intimidating to younger or less hardy males. To a hen, however, he is a perfect mate. For a behind the scenes story regarding this image, see page 6 in the Mixed Bag section of this issue. Photo by Rocky Hoffmann.

Opposite: The red patches on the head of this rooster pheasant contrasted brightly with the green grass of a Clay County fence line last spring. Photo by Bill Hager.

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History of Pheasants

Jon Farrar's piece on the introductory history of pheasants into Nebraska (March 2009 *NEBRASKAland*) was superb work. What must have been exhaustive work in gathering the data, researching countless official and unofficial documents clearly paid off.

His work expertly illustrates the foresight and determination the early Nebraskan sportsmen, bird fanciers and state game officials had in their decision to actively introduce what few knew or understood would become the premiere game bird in the Midwest. I very much enjoyed Jon's creativity in weaving dry statistical data with personal testaments of those involved in this great venture into an informative and interesting piece. Well done, Jon! In eight short pages your article not only entertained but provided a thorough account of how the Nebraska pheasant got to where it is today. Many thanks.

Joe Sereno
Tampa, Florida

Winter Camping

Having just read the January 2008 *NEBRASKAland*, I found the article about winter camping very interesting and enjoyable. As a scoutmaster of Troop 223 in Beatrice back in the 70s, we had many winter campouts, and loads of fun. There is a book Matthew Marx would find very interesting if he hasn't already read it. It is "Of Men and Mountains" by William Douglas. The hardback copy has the maps in the front and rear covers, so is preferred if the library has it. Enjoy.

Kenneth Laughlin
Rockport, Texas

Kudos for Goose Story

Thanks to Jon Farrar for his accurate, comprehensive and very interesting

two-part December/January article on the history of Nebraska goose hunting.

In 1970, Nick Lyman and I brought the first loads of Canada geese to the Sandhills for release. The birds had some giant Canada goose bloodlines and were reared by Forest Lee at the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Jamestown, North Dakota.

Little did we know then how successful the establishment of a nesting goose population would be.

Dan Timm
North Platte, Nebraska

An Eye for Photos

Bill Hager's owl photo in the March issue was one of the most captivating outdoor life photos I have ever seen. He seems to have the eye and judgment of an artist as well as the ability and patience to capture the world of nature. I would encourage *NEBRASKAland* to continue using his work in future issues. Perhaps his military service as a helicopter pilot has sharpened his sense and appreciation for the beauty we enjoy from our outdoor experiences.

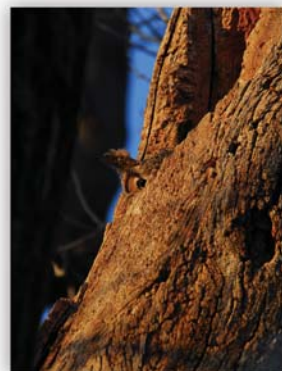
Cliff Dale
Lincoln, Nebraska

Where's the Tag?

As a Hunter Education instructor and member of law enforcement, I couldn't help but notice the photograph of Keith and Seth Colburn hanging Seth's mule deer ("Hunting the Home Place" November 2009 *NEBRASKAland*). I'm sure there's more than meets the eye, but I cannot find a carcass tag or "check-in" ring on the deer's antlers.

I've also looked over the antlers hanging on the wall and can only find two with rings on them. Again, I'm sure there's more to the story, but to a young reader this does not look to set a very good example. Thanks for listening.

Jeff Shelton
Minden, Nebraska



It's hard to see, but there actually is a metal seal barely visible in the right ear of the deer in question. Also, according to Conservation Officer Murray Johnson, under Nebraska game law there is no requirement to leave a deer seal on an animal indefinitely. Many mounted heads are minus the seal (it's often attached to the backing and out of sight or simply discarded). The burden of proof of an illegal animal rests with law enforcement, not with the person who possesses the mount.

Since an animal does not immediately have to go to a check station, it is not uncommon to see an animal hanging without a seal. Seals may also be attached anywhere on the deer, not just on the antlers or a rear hock.

Once a person delivers an animal to a check station, the seal may legally be removed whenever the animal is ready to be processed if a person so chooses.

A Cody Christmas

Thanks so much for your wonderful magazine. Amazing photographs and very useful articles.

Our trip to North Platte, planned after your article about Christmas at Buffalo Bill's Ranch, was really interesting.

The enclosed photo was taken on the weekend of January 24th at our home southeast of Lexington. We have three pairs of cardinals that visit our feeders. Thanks again.

Larry Williams
Lexington, Nebraska

Send your comments to:
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Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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



Behind the Cover

Rocky Hoffmann

For this month's cover photo, I was able to capture the angry expression on the tom turkey's face by placing a mount of another male turkey in full display out front of my blind. When this dominant tom came along, it really upset him to see another tom displaying. His first attack was a kick to the head of the mount, tearing the head completely off and sending it flying about 15 yards. I had borrowed the mount from law enforcement and I don't believe they were too pleased when I brought it back.

Turkey Permits Now Available

Permits for the 2009 spring turkey hunting seasons may now be purchased. Hunters will have more opportunity to use them, too, as the seasons have been extended by a combined 10 days.

The 2009 hunting seasons are: archery and youth archery, March 25-May 31; youth shotgun, April 11-May 31; and shotgun, April 18-May 31.

Spring turkey hunting permits, which are valid statewide, may be purchased through May 31. Each hunter may purchase up to three permits for the spring seasons, and that limit may be any combination of shotgun and archery tags.

Resident permits are \$24 and nonresident permits are \$91. Permits may be purchased online at OutdoorNebraska.org. The bag limit is one male or bearded female turkey per permit.

There is no minimum age requirement

to hunt turkeys, but all archery turkey hunters must use a bow with a draw weight of at least 40 pounds at or before 28 inches of draw. All hunters under the age of 12 must be accompanied by a person 19 years of age or older who has a valid Nebraska hunting permit when hunting turkeys.

Spring Woodland Wildflowers

Jon Farrar

Gardeners with limited space but a taste for variety often resort to "double cropping" – seeding early maturing plants such as radishes between future rows of larger plants like potatoes and green beans. Long before the larger plants tower over the radishes and steal the sunlight, the radishes have been used. Something similar happens quite naturally in woodlands. Before sunlight is shut off from the forest floor by a canopy of leaves, many forest wildflowers have sent up stalks, spread leaves, flowered and set seed. Among these early bloomers in Missouri River Valley woodlands are Virginia spring beauty, bloodroot, Dutchman's breeches, Jack-in-the-pulpit, downy blue violet, May-apple, dog's-tooth-violet and blue phlox. To a degree, these prevernal wildflowers have counterparts on grasslands, racing to complete their lifecycle before the light is stolen away by chest-high bluestem and Indiangrass.

Before the forest's leafy canopy closes is one of the best times for the wildflower photographer in woodlands, but even then finding the best light can be difficult, and it is even more difficult once leaves are on. While digital photography and photo-manipulation software has made making corrections easier after the photo is taken, photographers should not rely solely on them. The better the original image, the better the "worked-up" final image and the less time required to get to it.



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Saturday, May 23
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Other activities planned for the weekend include:
Parade • Quilt Show • Kids games • 5K & 1-Mile Fun Run/Walk
3 on 3 Basketball Tournament • Antique Car & Tractor Show
Big Springs Alumni Banquet • Community Church Service
Veteran's Memorial Dedication • Birthday Celebration & special entertainment
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See a complete listing of events for the Big Springs, Nebraska Quasquicentennial Celebration at www.ci.big-springs.ne.us or call 308-289-5534 for more information.

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There will be occasions when a photographer wants dramatic light – a beam of light falling on a columbine flower with a near-black background – but more often soft, delicate, dispersed light is sought. Unfortunately, woodlands typically offer a patchwork of dark dark shadows interspersed with harsh light where sunlight penetrates.

There are a number of ways to balance the intensity of woodland light. One of the best is to photograph on bright-overcast days. If the day is overcast, but you can see a faint shadow under the car ahead of you, you have bright-overcast light. Photographing before or after sunlight begins falling on the forest floor will offer the same even light, but requires longer exposures and higher ISO settings. One way to fill heavy shadows with light is to use a strobe set to provide light one to two stops less than your exposure reading for the ambient light. Small collapsible reflectors to bounce sunlight into shadow areas are even easier to use. While not as convenient, a piece of white matboard or other reflective surface can be used to accomplish the same thing. Close-to-the-ground tripods or other devices to hold cameras at low levels not only provide stability and prevent unwanted camera movement, but will also free a hand for a reflector or off-camera strobe.

4-H Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Program

Doug Carroll

The Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Program is a fun and challenging outdoor adventure where youngsters age 8-18 can learn about wildlife, conservation and management. Guided by wildlife handbooks especially designed for young people, volunteer leaders help youth learn about the needs of wildlife. The junior (age 12-13) and senior (age 14-18) division youth then compete at a state contest as teams or individually in June. The novice group (ages 8-11) does not compete at the state contest, but learns about wildlife through fun educational activities and games.

Sponsors provide T-shirts and awards, including a trip for the top



PHOTO BY TOM SCHEIMO

A view from the Rim of the World Trail at Ponderosa WMA.

senior team to the National Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Invitational.

To get help forming a team, finding a coach and learning more about WHEP, contact your local extension office or Kirk Gunnerson, Nebraska WHEP State Coordinator, (402) 470-0440, nebraskaWHEP@Hotmail.com.

On the Rim of the World in Nebraska

Tom Scheimo, Chadron

It was an absolute delight. Savoring the soft scent of ponderosa pines warmed by the sun, my wife and I were amazed at the unspoiled beauty around us. We were hiking on the Rim of the World Trail through Nebraska's 4,000-acre Ponderosa WMA (Wildlife Management

Area), treated to stunning views of Barrel Butte and the West Ash Creek canyon to the east.

Considering the rugged beauty in the array of steep buttes, deep canyons, small streams, and thick forests, it's surprising that the area does not see more hikers.

Because this WMA's streams are not stocked with fish, few anglers even try. The area's largest number of visitors includes fall deer hunters and spring turkey hunters. The rest of the time things are pretty quiet.

This WMA tucked away in western Dawes County has been in existence since 1965, and has survived the McIntosh Fire in 1985 and the Sawlog Fire in 2000. Fortunately, area fire crews were able to save much of the forest, protecting the habitat for large numbers of deer, wild turkeys, bighorn sheep and other wildlife.

No doubt the Black Hills to the north and the Rockies to the west divert much attention from this area and the rest of Nebraska's Pine Ridge, but as I consider the pristine beauty of the area, I have to wonder if that is such a bad thing.

April Events

April can be a busy time of year as the weather starts to warm up and people start looking for more to do outside. Here are a couple of events that you might want to check out.

If you like getting your hands dirty, you should try to attend this year's 20th Annual Fort Robinson Tree Plant held the weekend of April 4th.

Jim Schmitt, chairman of the event, said more than 1,100 Boy Scouts, volunteers and Nebraska National Guard members are expected to attend this year's event and will plant 20,000 trees to help bring Fort Robinson and the surrounding hills back to the way they were before a big wildfire raged through the area in 1988. More than 350,000 trees have been planted since 1989.

For more information, e-mail Schmitt at foxes4@daltonet.net, call him at (308) 377-2240 in the evenings, (308) 254-5365 during the day, or call Fort Robinson at (308) 665-2900.

Another fun event that weekend, and one a lot closer to the eastern part of the state, is the Spring Art Show that will be held at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park near Ashland. The show is being put on by Loren Goedeken of Prairie Images, a well-known artist whose work has been used for Nebraska Habitat Stamps in the past. A rib cookout will be held in conjunction with the art show, and the park's restaurant will be having an Easter Buffet on Palm Sunday, April 12. For

North Platte River - 258 acres with 1 full mile of river frontage & accretion along with cropland. Great waterfowl and whitetail deer potential, 1 mile south of Mitchell.

Pine Ridge Recreation - Rugged, heavily treed, six miles south of Crawford off NE#2 - 840 acres of deep canyons, Ponderosa pine, small creek. Good access to the property yet secluded, minimal trespass potential. Deer, elk, turkey - close to Fort Robinson - beautiful!

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Officer's Notebook

A Family Affair

One late night in Nemaha County, fellow conservation officer Bill Krause and I were looking for hunters illegally spotlighting. As Bill drove our truck down a broken trail, I asked him what kind of self-respecting poacher would be on a road like this. Just then lights appeared in front of us, bouncing up and down on the same rocky trail. Bill stopped and backed up to a high hill.

After seeing a large spotlight shining out the window, Bill turned on his lights and approached the rusty, extended cab truck. Inside it was a drunk man holding a gun, his mother, who was holding a powerful spotlight, the man's daughter and three of her children. I have heard that hunting can be a family affair, but I thought this was over the top. When we asked the man why he had so many people with him, he said he needed all the help he could get.

I looked at Bill and wondered how many tickets we were going to write. Bill said he wanted the drunken man and that I could deal with the others. Great – I was going to have to give a ticket to a 77-year-old great grandma or a mother with three kids who just wanted to go for a ride. Just then the great grandmother, who was driving, barked out, "I hope I get my damn light back, I need it for the rest of the season!"

After that comment I realized sometimes attitudes make it easier for officers to do their jobs.

– Stacey Lewton, Conservation Officer, Lincoln



more information about either event, call the park at (402) 944-2523.

For Arbor Day on April 24th, Arbor Lodge State Historical Park in Nebraska City will be holding two children's programs, one at 9 a.m. and the other beginning at 1 p.m., that are open to the public. The event features entertainment by Darrel Draper as J. Sterling Morton, founder of Arbor Day, and tree seedlings will be given to each child and participant in attendance for them to plant at home. There will also be a commemorative tree planting ceremony the following day. For more information, call Arbor Lodge at (402) 873-7222.

\$80,000 Toward Nebraska Bighorn Sheep Program

The Nebraska bighorn sheep management program got a big boost when a Kansas man placed the winning \$80,000 bid for a permit to hunt

bighorn sheep in Nebraska's Pine Ridge next year.

John Marsh of Topeka, Kansas, was the winning bidder at this year's Wild Sheep Foundation convention in Salt Lake City. He will receive four days of guide service, horse usage, lodging and meals at Fort Robinson State Park during the 2009 bighorn sheep season this December.

Each year the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission conducts a lottery for one resident sheep hunting permit, and the Commission occasionally offers one permit for auction. While the lottery permit is restricted to Nebraska residents, each auction permit can be purchased by anyone. To date, each lottery winner and auction permit holder has harvested a full-curl ram from Nebraska's Pine Ridge.

Applications for the 2009 bighorn lottery permit cost \$25 and will only be accepted through 5 p.m., August 12 at the

Commission's headquarters in Lincoln. Applications may also be made online at OutdoorNebraska.org. Online registrations will be accepted until midnight, August 12.

Ninety percent of the proceeds from the bighorn permit auction go directly toward the state's reintroduction and management program for bighorn sheep. The program is credited with returning bighorn to the state after they were extirpated in the late-1800s. The most recent milestone reached by the program was the purchase of 51 sheep from Montana that were released into the Wildcat Hills in 2007. Forty-nine sheep were relocated to the Pine Ridge in 2005.

Nebraska has four bighorn herds: Fort Robinson and Barrel Butte in the Pine Ridge, and Cedar Canyon and Hubbard's Gap in the Wildcat Hills. The estimated bighorn population in the state is 280.

Hunting Facts

Because hunting takes planning, start thinking now about what you and your young ones need to legally hunt this year. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission holds Hunter and Bowhunter Education classes throughout the year and the class listings can be found on the Wildlife portion of the Commission's web site at OutdoorNebraska.org. If you are unsure what you or a youth needs to start hunting, here are a few facts:

The minimum age requirement for hunting deer in Nebraska is 10 years of age and the minimum age requirement for all other big game (pronghorn, elk and bighorn sheep) is 12 years of age. The age at which a child can start hunting anything else, including turkeys, is a parental decision.

In addition, all hunters



Message Plates

Eric Fowler

Outdoor enthusiasts tend to be passionate about their pursuits, some so much that anyone who looks at their license plate can tell exactly what they do in their free time.

Take Larry Kroeker of Ogallala, for example, whose plate reads "ILK2FISH." Or Jeff Rawlinson of Lincoln, the head of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's hunter outreach programs, whose plate reads "GO HUNT."

You can get your own message plate, often called vanity plates, through the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles for an additional fee of \$30 when you license your vehicle.

If you have an idea for one, good luck getting it. Most of the good ones, like "I HUNT" and "WTRFWLR," are taken. I know this because I checked the online search at <https://www.nebraska.gov/dmv/splate/>.

If you have a unique message plate you would like to share, or know someone who does, e-mail a photo of it (.jpg format only, please) to Eric.Fowler@Nebraska.gov, along with your name and the town you live in.

in Nebraska between the ages of 12 and 29 who:

- are hunting with either a firearm or crossbow must carry proof of successful completion of Firearm Hunter Education
- are hunting big game (deer, pronghorn, elk or bighorn sheep) with bow and arrow must carry proof of successful completion of Bowhunter Education
- have not completed a Firearm Hunter and/or Bowhunter Education

course may obtain an Apprentice Hunter Education Exemption Certificate from the Commission.

These exemption certificates provide novice hunters the opportunity to try hunting and receive training from experienced hunters before completing a hunter education course.

Hunters using this certificate must be accompanied at all times by a licensed hunter age 19 or older who is in unaided visual and verbal contact with them while hunting. This certificate may be obtained once in each person's lifetime, expires on December 31 of the year in which it was purchased and may be renewed only once. The fee is \$5.

Finally, with the exception of turkeys, big game hunters under the age of 16 must be accompanied by a licensed hunter age 19 or older who is in unaided visual and verbal contact with the younger hunter at all times.



Certificates of Recognition

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has started a new program for individuals wishing to commemorate their trophy or first-ever game animal or fish with a web-generated Certificate of Recognition. These certificates are designed especially with young outdoorsman and woman, but older individuals are welcome to participate as well.

Look for the appropriate certificates under the Hunting and Fishing portions of the Commission's web site at OutdoorNebraska.org. ■

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SHOEMAKER MARSH

By Jon Farrar

For 75 years, these saline wetlands on the north edge of Lincoln were the hunting grounds for the Little Salt Gun Club. In 2003, the 160 acres were purchased by Lincoln to preserve a piece of Nebraska’s most rare ecosystem.



Shoemaker Marsh is nestled in gently rolling farmland on Lincoln’s northern edge along Little Salt Creek.

“I had awakened at 5 a.m. and put on my dad’s old hunting coat and drove the long miles in the darkness to reach the location on North 27th Street that people now know as Shoemaker’s Marsh,” Charles “Fritz” Craft wrote in the “Local View” column of the January 29, 2005 edition of the *Lincoln Journal Star*. “But to me and a few men in the Lincoln area, it will always be known as Little Salt Duck Club.”

That morning Craft, who was briefly home from Cambodia, where he was the chief dental officer for the U.S. Embassy, spread his father’s ashes on the wetlands they both loved. Charles “Fred” Craft, Fritz’s father, had been a member of the Little Salt Gun Club for nearly five decades and the principal caretaker of the club’s dikes, pumps and blinds.

In the first half of the 20th century, duck hunting clubs could be found on most of the shallow, saline wetlands on

Lincoln’s western and northern edges. When rains were timely those wetlands attracted waterbirds, and the ducks among them attracted hunters from the city’s earliest days.

The location for the city of Lincoln was selected because of those basins and the promise of a rich commerce evaporating salts from their saline waters. That hope was dashed by the discovery of easily mined salt deposits in Kansas. From that time until recently, the salt marshes were viewed as mosquito-breeding swamps to be filled with rubbish so something useful could be built on the sites. From the 1930s until the mid-1950s, low ground and wetlands near Oak Lake on Lincoln’s western edge were used as the city dump. Into the 1980s, other wetlands west of Lincoln were filled with construction rubble. Wetlands on Lincoln’s northern edge were used as the city landfill from the mid-1950s until 1988. Saline wetlands that survived were farther from the city,

mostly along Little Salt Creek to the north and Rock Creek south of Ceresco. Wetlands near Lincoln survived for as long as they did because until recently the city had not spread to them, they could only be farmed when dry (and even then produced poor crops) and they were owned or leased by waterfowl hunters. And that is the story of Shoemaker Marsh on Lincoln’s northern edge.

LITTLE SALT GUN CLUB

Dana F. Cole – certified public accountant, charter member, and secretary-treasurer for most of the Little Salt Gun Club’s history – recalled the club’s founding in a 1977 talk to Lincoln sportsmen. In 1927, an acquaintance asked Cole for a loan so he could lease “a place out north of town where commercial hunters used to hunt. It was a great hunting spot.”



Common yellow-throats – small, secretive warblers of marshy and brushy shorelines – are again common on the wetlands.

PHOTOS BY JON FARRAR

The man proposed building a dike to enlarge the pond and sell hunting memberships. Cole loaned the man the money, and that autumn Cole and several friends hunted the pond regularly, killing a total of 850 ducks. Cole visited the company holding the mortgage on the land and said he wanted to buy it. "It isn't worth anything, it's worthless" the banker told him. In the spring of 1928, Cole and seven other Lincoln businessmen purchased the 40 acres of land for \$2,000 and formed the Little Salt Gun Club "for recreation and social purposes."

The land was along Little Salt Creek, about two miles above its mouth, today a little more than a mile north of the intersection of Interstate 80 and North 27th Street. Within months the club grew to 10 members, the limit prescribed in the bylaws. The members immediately set about building a shack, pumping water from Little Salt Creek into the pond and refurbishing blinds left by previous hunters. Having a duck pond close to town allowed the businessmen a few hours of shooting in the morning before going to work. Ducks were dropped off at a local poultry house and dressed for 12 cents a bird.

In 1929, the club leased an adjoining 40 acres for hunting, found

the shooting there satisfactory, and purchased it the following spring. For the next three decades, those 80 acres were a close-to-home getaway for members, their sons and their friends. In 1930 the club incorporated, retaining its original name and purpose – "to maintain hunting, fishing and recreation grounds; to maintain a club house thereon and other improvements necessary thereto," with the intent of "continuing 99 years." That same year, the club leased the 40 acres with a wetland that adjoined their land on the east, purchased Triumph Hen Scratch from Crete Mills to feed the English call ducks they kept in a pen by their shack, and purchased custom-made steel tanks from Nebraska Boiler in Lincoln and Dempster Manufacturing in Beatrice to be their shooting boxes.

The drought and depression of the 1930s strained even prosperous businessmen – interest payments on the club's mortgage were often late, and several members dropped out. The remaining members remained optimistic. In October 1933, a

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Saline wetlands were common on Lincoln's western and northern edges, and a frequent destination for duck hunters. Frank Shoemaker, the man for whom the marsh is named, took this photo near Lincoln in the early 1900s.



dozen mallard and a dozen redhead decoys were purchased from Henkle & Joyce Hardware Company at \$8.50 a dozen. Robert M. Joyce, the Joyce in the company's name, was a member of the Little Salt Gun Club. A week later, a dozen duck heads were purchased. Hunting, though, was poor; the ponds often dry and not worth pumping.

Maintenance and improvements were endless – new blinds were sunk partially underground, old blinds repaired or moved, leaking blinds patched for another season; repairs made to an old tractor used to pump water into the pools before the hunting season; breached, low-level dikes repaired and raised a few more inches. During the 1930s the work was done by hired labor. In 1930 the club paid \$75 for "2 men, 3 horses" to do nine days of work "repairing 4 dikes" and the road to the shack. After World War II the work would be done with dozers and dump trucks.

In 1939, James Stuart

Sr. acquired a membership in the club. He would hold that membership for decades and serve as club president for many years after World War II. Stuart was one of few surviving officers of the Battle of the Bulge. He began hunting the club's ponds while still in college. "I would get up in the morning and in 20 minutes I would be at the club [grounds]," he recalled. "I would have my hunting clothes on. My going-to-school clothes were in the backseat of the car. I would shoot for 20 minutes or whatever period of time I could, quickly change my clothes and get to an eight o'clock class."

It was Stuart who brought Fred Craft, a former fraternity brother at the university, into the club in 1955, and they shared the same duck blind many mornings, as Fred's son Fritz said: "Watching Lincoln wake up." Fred was a professional engineer and the on-site manager of the club's land into the 1980s. It was Fred's idea to sink burial vaults to be used for duck hunting blinds in 1955.

"He wanted them delivered out at the gun club," Stuart recalled. "The water was sort of out of the lake, and he drew a picture of the lake and he said: 'Now, this is where I want this put.' One was in the center of the big pond. So the guy said, 'Well, okay.' He went out there and he was going to dig the hole. Those burial vaults must have weighed a thousand tons, you know. Of course he got stuck and he had to bring a tractor out and pull his truck out. He called Craft and said: 'Don't ever call me again.' We hunted out of those for years."

It is the nature of the shallow salt marshes to periodically dry during the summer and often remain dry into the autumn hunting season. The club's solution was to pump water from

PHOTO BY JON FARRAR



To create additional Salt Creek tiger beetle habitat, soil over seeps was intentionally disturbed to leave wet, saline earth.

the creek to fill the pools. As decades passed, though, it became evident pumping fresh or slightly saline water into the ponds was converting them to freshwater ponds, and freshwater aquatic plants like cattails soon invaded the open waters where the hunters hoped to spread their decoys. Aquatic plant herbicides were tried, and Craft mowed the dry wetlands at different times in the summer to “keep the weeds down.”

Throughout the club’s history the members hosted dignitaries, among them, on several occasions, Lieutenant Colonel James “Jimmy” Doolittle who led the first air raid on the Japanese home islands April 18, 1942, knowing they would not have enough fuel to return. One of Doolittle’s pilots on the one-way raid launched from the carrier Hornet was Lt. Richard O. Joyce who after the war was a member of the club. Joyce’s B-25 ran out of fuel over China. He parachuted to safety and spent two more years fighting in the China-Burma-India theater.

In 1960, the club again reorganized, legally becoming the Little Salt Development Company, a name suggesting the members had more in mind for their land than duck hunting. To the members, however, it remained the Little Salt Gun Club. The reorganization was prompted by the purchase of 80 acres of land lying immediately east of the club’s land, including 40 acres it had been leasing. By the 1960s, Dana F. Cole was the only charter member remaining. Other members had passed their memberships to sons or their interests had been sold to other prominent Lincoln businessmen. The club considered purchasing land with wetlands to the north, but did not. In 1967, they had concrete rubble dumped in Little Salt Creek to allow foot traffic from one side of the property to the other.

An irrigation well was installed in the early-1980s and made filling the ponds easier, but the older club members seemed to require less hunting to be satisfied. Fred Craft wrote Stuart he was “weary” of the work with pumps, dikes and blinds and wanted to “bring on the young guys.” By the 1980s, the land was increasingly being used for pheasant

PHOTO BY JON FARRAR



In the summer of 2008, entomologists found 165 Salt Creek tiger beetles, the lowest number since the first survey in 1991.

hunting, and the number of birdwatchers asking permission to use the land was growing.

In 1987, Lincoln purchased 58 acres containing a saline wetland immediately southeast of the club’s land as mitigation for wetlands destroyed by street construction in southwestern Lincoln and named it Arbor Lake. Everyone, including the Little Salt Gun Club, was beginning to see the remnant saline wetlands as more than just swamps to be drained and filled to make way for a housing development, or as a “close to home” place to hunt ducks. During the 1990s, the club talked with the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District about a conservation easement and investigated other wetland preservation programs to perpetually protect the land.

MAKING SHOEMAKER MARSH

In June 2003, Lincoln purchased the Little Salt Gun Club’s 160 acres. The purchase was negotiated by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. The two government entities had worked together protecting wetlands before, such as Arbor Lake, which is owned by the city but managed by the Commission. Because the Little Salt Gun Club land was small and so near the city limits, the Commission believed it was not the right fit to be a wildlife management area. Funds for the purchase came nearly equally from a Nebraska Environmental Trust grant to the city and a State Wildlife Grant award to the Commission by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Saline Wetland Conservation Partnership, formed in 2002 and composed of governmental agencies and conservation organizations, provides additional funding and expertise managing the property. The new park was named Frank Shoemaker Marsh, after an early day amateur naturalist. Also in 2003, Tom Malmstrom was hired by Lincoln as the Saline Wetland Project Coordinator to oversee managing Shoemaker Marsh and other saline wetlands.

Funding to purchase the property was available in part because the Salt Creek tiger beetle, listed as a State Endangered Species, lives there. Two years after the purchase, the species was listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service because it was “one of the rarest insects in the United States.” Surveys conducted by University of Nebraska-Lincoln entomologists in the summer of 2008 on saline wetlands known to have the rare beetle produced a total count of only 165 – all the known Salt Creek tiger beetles in the world – of which 29 were on Shoemaker Marsh.

Just as whooping cranes, piping plovers and least terns have had the legal clout and funding to bring protection and restoration to the central Platte River that has benefitted a host of other plants and animals, the rare tiger beetle has been the headline grabber in protecting the state’s most rare and vanishing habitat. But tiger beetles are only one of the reasons to preserve saline wetlands – the wetlands provide flood protection, improve water quality and are habitat for many plant and animal species. The highest quality saline wetlands that remain are home to salt-tolerant plants rarely found in mid-continent – saltwort (a Nebraska endangered species), sea blite, saltmarsh aster and others. Eastern saline wetlands were never widespread. The most reliable estimate

FRANK SHOEMAKER

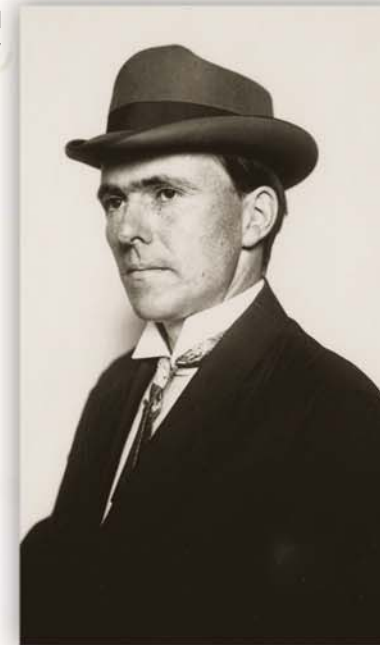
Frank Shoemaker was born in Iowa in 1875, and moved to Omaha in 1897 to work as a stenographer and clerk for Western Union Telegraph Company. His youthful interest in natural history came with him, and he spent as much time as possible exploring nearby Missouri River woodlands in search of birds and insects. He began taking photographs in 1898, using 5-by-7 glass plate negatives. Over 3,000 of his photographs are now housed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Archives.

During the early-1900s he occasionally accompanied University of Nebraska zoologists and botanists on expeditions to the Sandhills and the Panhandle, and in 1911 he was a “special student” at the university. Even before working in Lincoln, Shoemaker had traveled to the saline wetlands in northern

Lancaster County to observe and photograph nature, particularly the many species of tiger beetles found there, which he collected extensively for specimens. He wrote tiger beetles were present in such “great numbers” they sometimes flushed ahead of him and “the ground seemed to rise and walk away.”

Shoemaker never married and held a variety of jobs over his lifetime, leaving him free to travel for nature study. From 1910 through 1913 he worked as a photographer for universities in Lincoln and Omaha, and was a clinical photographer for the University Hospital in Omaha in the late-1920s and early-1930s. During the Depression he was a photographer for the Federal Art Project and held odd jobs in Sioux and Dawes counties. He lived in California from 1928 through 1942, when he returned to Lincoln. Shoemaker lived modestly, working as needed to support himself, pursuing his passion in life until his death in 1948.

– Information from a three-part article series about Frank Shoemaker (March, April and May 1987 *NEBRASKALAND*) by Jim Ducey.



Frank Shoemaker (1875-1948), an amateur naturalist, was particularly interested in tiger beetles.

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PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

An aerial view of Shoemaker Marsh, looking southwest, shows Little Salt Creek's meandering course and three wetlands areas.

is about 20,000 acres at the time eastern Nebraska was settled. Today, less than 4,000 acres remain and many of those are highly degraded.

COMPLEX HYDROLOGY

Where does the saline water found in wetlands such as Shoemaker Marsh come from? The answer is deeply buried in ancient shales laid down in Cretaceous times, the Age of Reptiles, some 70 to 160 million years ago when much of central North America was covered by a vast inland ocean of marine waters. Overlying those deeply-buried shale deposits is Dakota sandstone, a soft, permeable rock that outcrops in eastern Nebraska.

For hundreds of thousands of years these salty waters have percolated upward, wicked to the surface during drought and filling the shallow basins of the upper Salt Creek drainage. During the dry months of summer, water in the basins evaporates and the salts precipitate out on the surface. With each cycle of replenishment and evaporation the soil became more saline.

While filling with garbage, construction rubble and soil caused the direct destruction of many saline wetlands in and near Lincoln, many were degraded in a more insidious way – the alteration of the complex hydrology that created and maintained them. The principal instrument was the straightening and confining of Salt Creek with levies to prevent it from flooding, flooding Lincoln in particular.

Once confined and straightened, the velocity of Salt Creek increased, its channel cutting deeper; and channels of smaller streams feeding into it, like Little Salt Creek, also carved deeper beds, creating steep, eroded banks. Periodic floods less frequently spilled into floodplain pools and basins. The water table fell and saline waters were less efficiently wicked to the surface. All of these changes were decades in the making.

Completely restoring the saline wetland's natural hydrology will never be feasible. The best managers can hope for is simulating the incredibly complex system. Before the first yard of earth was moved on Shoemaker Marsh, Malmstrom and the Saline Wetland Conservation Partnership gathered the best experts in many natural resources fields to advise

the work. A technical advisory committee was formed, composed of representatives of all 11 local, state and federal sponsoring agencies and organizations, as well as professionals representing various scientific fields – soil scientists, hydrologists, engineers, botanists, entomologists, ornithologists – including three biologists from the Commission who had worked with wetland restoration for many years. A smaller core team spent days becoming familiar with the site, and met frequently to develop concepts for the restoration. Periodically they presented their ideas to the advisory committee for review and comment. A private engineering firm specializing in wetland restoration was contracted to develop the actual plan, which was reviewed and revised several times by both planning teams. The plan was completed in July 2006, and earthwork on the site was done between September 2006 and April 2007.

Prior to the construction phase, 21 acres of uplands that had been a soybean field were seeded to native grasses and forbs. Over the years, trees had encroached on the site's small remnant patches of native grassland. Many of the invasive trees were removed. "There was only one tree on the place when we bought it," Dana Cole recalled. Malmstrom said the objective is not to restore the entire area to grassland, but to leave some trees as habitat for woodland and woodland-edge species, particularly migratory songbirds. The trees on the margins of the area serve as visual barriers to enhance the experience of visitors in the wetlands. Additionally, Salt Creek tiger beetles are known to be attracted to bright lights and will fly considerable distances to reach them, making the beetles vulnerable to predation and disrupting the mating cycle. Should development encroach closer to Shoemaker, it is hoped the trees will serve as a visual barrier to the beetles as well.

About 50 acres of saline wetlands were present when the land was purchased, but others had become freshwater wetlands and were choked with aquatic vegetation, particularly cattails. Restoring salinity to the wetlands and allowing saline plant communities to recolonize was the primary objective of the restoration plan. Low-level dikes were created or repaired on each of the site's three wetland pools. Each dike has a



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

Saltwort, a Nebraska endangered species, is a compact, low-growing, succulent plant found on wet saline soils.



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

Kevin Poague and other birders find not just wetland species on Shoemaker Marsh, but also grassland and woodland birds, including American bitterns, opposite.

control structure so the water level in the pools can be regulated and surplus water shunted to the creek. The natural cycle of saline wetlands – wet in the spring, dry in the summer and wet again in the autumn – can be simulated, explained Commission wetlands biologist Randy Stutheit, who has been on the core team since Shoemaker was purchased. “It gives us better control over both the freshwater and saline waters entering the wetlands.” Malmstrom usually lowers the pools after the spring migration of waterbirds, and raises the water level again in the autumn to provide migration habitat. Water in the pools is completely dependant on precipitation, saline seeps and runoff. No creek or groundwater is pumped into the pools.

A consultant who worked on the project determined that numerous layers of saline soils existed in the soil column beneath the wetland’s surface. Soil salinity was about 15 times greater 18 inches below the surface. During the earthwork phase of the project, silt was removed from some of the wetlands to uncover the saline soils. Earthwork avoided sites where rare saline plant communities existed. A berm was

built on the north and east side of the wetland near 27th Street to trap sediment from runoff around the wetland.

Almost a mile of Little Salt Creek meanders through Shoemaker, so planners also addressed the problem of its down-cutting bed. The relationship between the creek, the wetlands, and the groundwater connecting them is not fully understood, but planners and managers knew the connection was and is important. Two small, in-stream weirs were installed, one on the north end of the property and one on the south end. Most of the concrete rubble the duck club had put in the creek was removed and a large rock weir was installed at the same location near the middle of the area, creating a four to five feet rise in the stream level. The weirs were built only high enough to stop Little Salt Creek from continuing to cut deeper. Higher weirs might have reversed the down-cutting by allowing sediment to accumulate upstream and re-build the streambed, but there was concern that could increase flooding on upstream private land during high-water periods.

Historically, Salt Creek tiger beetles were found on saline wetlands and wet salt flats. Since the destruction or degradation of most of these wetlands, the beetle’s last retreat has been the mudflats and saline seeps on Little Salt Creek. Commission wetlands specialist Ted LaGrange, a member of the technical advisory committee, proposed additional stream-side tiger beetle habitat could be created by removing the vegetation at some of the saline seeps. At two locations where seeps were evident on Little Salt Creek’s banks, backhoes were used to pull back the soil overburden, leaving wet, saline mudflats, the preferred habitat of Salt Creek tiger beetles. Tiger beetles were found on both sites in 2008.

SHOEMAKER’S FUTURE

No one expects the marsh to ever be what it once was, but every year it should be closer as the renovation work begins to bear fruit and more is learned about saline wetland hydrology. Saline plants should return and flourish fairly quickly in the restored wetlands. The restoration of a diverse prairie plant community will take longer. Simulating the complex hydrology that created and maintained the wetlands could require decades.

“What we did at Shoemaker,” LaGrange said, “was to pull together the best expertise we knew of, come up with a plan we could implement and now we are watching how it plays out. It is an evolving process. Many of the things we are trying will probably work, some will not, or not as well as we’d like, and we will tweak what we are doing.”

Even though Shoemaker is a city park, it will never be a “traditional park setting,” Malmstrom said. “It will remain primitive, a park in the rough, but a great place for hikes or birdwatching close to the city.”

Shoemaker Marsh has only minimal visitor development. There is a parking area off North 27th street, a handicap walkway to an overlook high above Little Salt Creek, another overlook near a wetland, a pedestrian bridge over the creek allowing access to the western half of the property, and dirt trails winding throughout. It is an ecologically significant site, one that will grow in complexity as the clock is slowly turned back. ■



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Wes and Melisa Goeden of Columbus settle into their lakeside campsite at the Miller Creek Area of Lewis and Clark SRA.

Couple Camping

By Matthew Marx

Early spring in Nebraska can be a perfect time to go “couple camping” – a special overnight vacation for just you and your sweetheart. The summer crowds haven’t descended upon the state parks, so it’s possible to find seclusion in the woods. The weather is cool enough to snuggle, but not so cold as to be uncomfortable, especially if you take proper gear. And Nebraska’s state bird, the mosquito, has yet to find its wings. To ensure a great experience, here are a few tips.

Instead of “car camping” with coolers, grills, radios and big tents, pretend like you’re heading to the backwoods – everything goes in the backpack. You can still take some heavier gear, because you aren’t actually climbing any mountains, and you’ll gain a sense of being out in the middle

of nature with barely another soul around. Walking together through the woods is a great way to spend the day. Take pictures, talk, hold hands and just enjoy yourselves.

While trail mix and beef jerky are good for weeklong mountain hikes, make something special for couple camping. Bold flavors put fire in the blood. I like Thai Cuisine Tasty Bites (Satay vegetables are my favorite), which come in foil pouches that can be boiled in water over a camp stove or a campfire if there is a ring and available wood. I use an MSR alcohol-burning, one-pot stove. Side dishes of couscous and salad are easy with small-sized containers or zip-lock baggies. Don’t forget dessert. Hot cocoa, cookies, and dark chocolate are always good.

Make sure you use a quality tent. While big, cheap tents may seem like a great value, nothing ruins a trip more than

water dripping onto your face and the floor flooding with cold water. Conversely, nothing is more romantic than snuggling with your sweetheart under a warm and dry quality tent as the rain comes down.

While a self-inflating, queen-sized air mattress is very comfortable, the weight is restrictive, so unless it’s a short hike to camp, leave it at home. For weight and comfort, sleeping pads are fine, but there is a hitch: Most of them are made for single sleepers, and simply putting two together inevitably leads to an uncomfortable rift between them. Cascade Designs created Thermarest Couplers, a couple of lightweight straps that keep most 20-inch pads snugly together. For one-night use, though, two strips of duct tape would serve the same purpose. If you often go couple camping, consider buying Link Rests – foam pads with edges that lock together like puzzle pieces.

The cheapest and easiest (not to mention the heaviest) option for sleeping bags are rectangular versions that zip together (make sure of this before your trip). I use a couple of Coleman bags rated to 30 degrees that I got on clearance for \$10 each. While I would never recommend these bags for

a backwoods mountain adventure, they are fine for overnight couple camping. If weight is an issue and money is not, I recommend the North Face Cat’s Meow (about \$150 each); just make sure one bag has a zipper on the right and the other has a zipper on the left.

When I’m backwoods camping with my buddies, body cleanliness is not a big issue. When I’m couple camping with my sweetheart, it’s a different story. Be considerate to your significant other. Water, camp soap and bandanas are basic ingredients for a “cat bath.” If water is plentiful and available, a dromedary bag (made by MSR) hung from a tree makes a great shower. Also, wet wipes are invaluable.

Many Nebraska state parks offer campsites in the woods away from the noise and crowds of car campers. Call ahead to make sure this is an available option. If you’re looking for a memorable spring getaway, consider couple camping. It may just be the best time you’ve ever spent in the woods. ■

Matt Marx is a teacher and writer living in Omaha. His story, Out in the Cold, appeared in the January/February 2008 issue of NEBRASKALand.

Wild Hogs at Harlan

Text and photos by Doug Carroll

Using a helicopter and an aerial gunner, state and federal wildlife officials attack the feral pig problem at Harlan County Reservoir.

The helicopter repeatedly cruising back and forth at low altitudes over heavy cover at Harlan County Reservoir in late-February 2009 may have looked like a hot-shot pilot out for a joy ride, but the occasional downward blast from his shotgun-wielding passenger indicated that it was anything but a day of fun in the sun.

The helicopter and its two occupants were the key components of a coordinated effort to rid the area of destructive and potentially dangerous feral pigs that have been living there for years. Believed to be descendents

of domesticated hogs that were released or escaped from area pig operations, this feral pig population had grown significantly and had been negatively affecting wildlife habitat, causing significant crop damage to local farmers, and likely damaging local wildlife populations.

So for the second time in two years, officials from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services division and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers teamed up with a private helicopter pilot to conduct an aerial hunt for the pigs.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Having more hair and longer tusks, feral pigs are usually easily discernible from their domestic brethren after just a few generations of living in the wild.

In January and February of 2008, 86 feral hogs were killed at Harlan, including 69 that were shot from the air. This year's effort was done over two days during the last week of February and resulted in a total of 15 pigs being killed: Five adults and five young pigs were shot the first day, and four adults and one young juvenile were shot the second.

"I believe we killed the vast majority of the existing herd last year and did the same this year. There may be a

few still running around, but not that many, so I see this year's effort as being a big success," said Sam Wilson, nongame mammal and furbearer program manager for the Commission.

Wilson said aerial hunting was used as a control method due to the large amount of land that needed to be covered and because the area's inaccessibility in the winter, rough terrain and heavy habitat made hunting the pigs from the ground virtually

impossible. The helicopter pilot and Wildlife Services gunner made numerous transect passes over the search area, shooting every pig they could and then relaying the animal's location to the recovery team on the ground. The recovery team, including employees from NGPC, Wildlife Services and the Corps of Engineers, then used ATVs and hand-held GPS devices to collect the carcasses for disease testing and disposal.

Much of the search area was public

ground owned by the Corps of Engineers, Wilson said, but adjacent private ground where pigs had been seen was also searched with the owners' permission.

"The helicopter and crew were highly trained aerial hunting professionals with safety concerns for people and livestock their top priority," Wilson said. "We obtained the best level of expertise and safety available in order to conduct this operation."

All of the adult pigs recovered



Dallas Virchow, a wildlife disease biologist with the USDA, and Travis Kenny, a conservation technician with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, take blood samples from one of the feral hogs killed at Harlan County Reservoir in late-February.



The large amount of land to be covered and the area's rough terrain required that a helicopter be used to effectively control the feral pig population in Harlan County.

during the hunt were tested for pseudorabies, swine brucellosis and classical swine fever, but results were not available at time of publication. Wilson said a feral pig killed near Genoa in January of 2007 tested positive for pseudorabies and was one example of the threat feral pigs pose to the economy in Nebraska. In addition to the threat of disease, feral pigs cause \$800 million in damages annually to crops and the ecosystem across the country.

While Harlan County has had the largest concentrations of pigs, it's not the only place in the state where they've been observed in recent years. Wilson said there are a few feral pigs still running loose near Genoa in Nance County as a result of the illegal importation of pigs from Texas a few



Commission biologist Nic Fryda (left) and volunteer Shawn Warner move one of the collected feral pigs from the back of a pickup to a waiting flatbed trailer so blood could be drawn for disease testing.



Because of the disease risk, all feral pigs collected during the eradication effort were hauled away and buried.

years ago, and he is not sure if any of the pigs that have been observed in Valley County are still around. Wilson also said that the group of feral pigs that had been living in Seward County near Garland a few years ago appear to have been eliminated as "we haven't found any pig sign there in two years."

"We're confident we've removed the majority of pigs that were living at Harlan," said Wilson, "but we still would like to find those few individual pigs that may still be running around so we can complete our eradication efforts. If turkey hunters or anyone else that's out and about happens to see feral pigs around Harlan – or anywhere else in the state for that matter – please give us a call at (402) 471-5174. It may seem counterintuitive that it's illegal for members of the general public to shoot feral hogs, but we believe that it removes any incentive for people to bring feral/wild pigs into the state and gives us the best shot at a pig-free Nebraska in the long term." ■

Feral vs Domestic

Although they look very different than the domestic hog most people are used to seeing at county and state fairs, most feral hogs are not that far removed from their domestic brethren.

"Studies have shown that the offspring of an escaped domestic pig can look totally different within only three to five generations of living on their own in the wild," Wilson said. "Although a few of the feral pigs we come across still show signs of domesticity through coloration, etc., many of them, such as most of the ones we've killed at Harlan, look like typical feral pigs found in other states – their tusks are longer, they have more hair and the piglets are brown and striped."

"These feral hogs are also much different in other ways – most people don't think of domestic hogs as being terribly bright, but feral hogs are extremely intelligent, which is why it's so hard to get rid of them. Living in the wild makes them extremely suspicious, so they're hard to trap, and if they get much hunting pressure at all, they'll go nocturnal or move out of the area entirely, which is why we try to eliminate entire groups at one time."

Feral pigs will have up to two litters of young a year and can have 10 young per litter, which explains why their populations can expand so fast. The young are usually born in large nests – 5 to 10 feet across – of grass that the sow has arranged in a circular pattern.

Evidence that feral pigs are using an area include tracks, which are similar in size to those of deer but more roundish and with blunter toes, and signs of rooting, especially in crop fields where the pigs will dig up young plant shoots or seed.

A Wild Turkey Year

Photos and text by Rocky Hoffmann

*Spring is for toms, with
cascading gobbles and struts;
Summer is for watchful
hens with obedient poults
trailing behind;
Fall summons the flocks
into large communal
gatherings, and
Winter's focus is on
survival for Nebraska's
largest game bird.*



Spring often begins on the roost in the dark of night with the clamorous awakening of a single hormonal tom. As the forest warms in predawn glow, individual responses to this solitary outburst dissolve into a cascade of gobbles, one tom igniting another and that another until at last the instigator himself sounds off again, and the cycle begins anew.

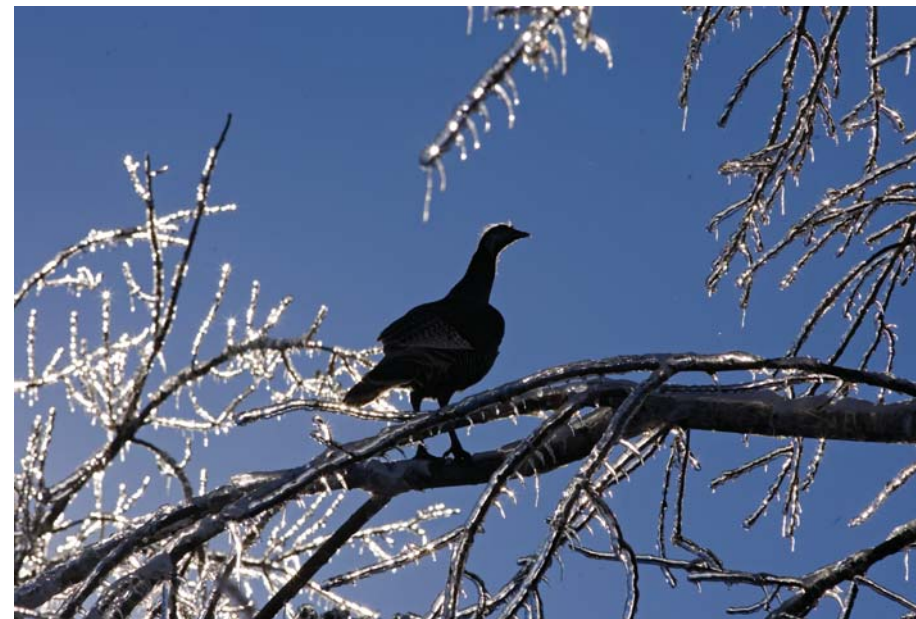
The flock has just outlasted winter, an eerily silent period for such vocal birds. Amidst the snow and ice however there is the occasional and subtle mix of muffled yelps and chirps. On lesser occasion, a distant crow harassing an owl sparks an extemporaneous yet meaningless gobble.



ABOVE: A huddle of hens conserve warmth during severe cold.

LEFT: Spring toms posture for position almost constantly.

RIGHT: In ice and heavy snow turkeys spend some daytime hours in trees.



Winter instead is spent surviving. It's a season of endless preening and fluffing. Feather maintenance is key to frigid existence. It's a season of squatting on icy feet, group contact and stoking the caloric furnace. The longest December night means 15 hours on the roost, clutching a precariously flimsy branch with bare toes, tail bobbing up and down seeking balance.



remain markedly separate and vigilant. The mingling of broods began early in summer. Safety in numbers I suppose. Fostering of young, however, has its limits, and hens harshly repel youngsters that display overzealous familial confusion. As a group, their focus is emerging insects. In the mix of herbaceous cover, young bugs grow strong turkeys.

In summer, last spring's stalwart tom grows sleek, racy and often solitary. Only his long beard gives evidence of his status in the flock. His black coat mercilessly soaks up July's sun. Shade and water become life. The only turkey sounds are the occasional frantic



In the fall, iridescent feathers produce a spectrum of colors that competes with a palette of autumnal grasses and leaves. Phantom figures in tall, golden grass await the inevitable long nights of the coming season. Grasshoppers endure a mild frost or two then give way to grain, wild seeds and withered berries.

Hens with poults have integrated back into the flock's perimeter yet

ABOVE: Hens take in the sun's warmth on a golden fall afternoon.

LEFT: A turkey's iridescent plumage shines during an autumn morning.

RIGHT: Hens and poults are ever alert to danger.





peeping of a lost poult, which instinctively triggers a brooding posture and equally frantic gathering call from the hen – unattended chicks tend to have short lifespans.

Summer's poults hatched in late-May through June result from a long and stressful breeding season that begins with spring's first gobble from that nighttime roost. Toms have sole ownership of early nuptial stress, as they vie for dominance and breeding rights. Strutting displays are not only intended to contract a mating opportunity but to stifle the amorous attempts of other males.

Marauding toms intent on stealing a harem will find willing battle, a battle that begins with ferocious spurring and flogging. Then, like breeding snakes, heads and necks become one. Beaks lock onto beaks, assuring a grip to test strength and endurance. Jakes gather to watch but hens pay little attention. Give-and-take shoving may continue for more than an hour until the victor overruns the loser and sends him on his way.

Breeding rights that no young bird will challenge are won in battle. A single dominant tom will likely produce all the chicks from the entire harem, but in that process, a potential rival will certainly be among the young toms. There will be another challenge. There will be another fight. ■



ABOVE: Always ready for battle, mature toms face off in a battle for breeding rights.

LEFT: More often, supremacy is won by strut and display.

RIGHT: By spring, tail fans have replaced all lost feathers and are essential to attracting a mate.



Go Fly a Kite!

By Elizabeth Mack

Whether it's at a city park, a state park or your backyard, kite flying is fun for children and adults of all ages, as these avid kite-flying hobbyists can attest.

As I turned off the main road and rounded the corner toward the LaVista Soccer Complex, a technicolored horizon danced before my eyes. Floating in the skies over the greening fields were kites, but these weren't the kites of my childhood, back when we glued paper to two sticks and tied on a tail torn from some worn sheet. Among these kites was a 90-foot-long prehistoric fossil, a 12-foot-tall guitar

and even a giant flying fish.

The sun was bright and winds chilly as 15 to 20 avid hobbyists from the Midwest Winds Kitefliers club welcomed young and old alike to LaVista last April to help celebrate National Kite Month. As the day unfolded and novice enthusiasts flew their kites alongside the hobbyists, the spring skies soon filled with well over 75 kites. More than 300 spectators came to admire the impressive scene, and many of them were soon joining the fun.

Don Murphy, president of Midwest Winds Kitefliers and regional director of the 5,000-member-strong American Kitefliers Association, declined to say just how much his 90-foot trilobite fossil kite – the third largest kite in the United States – cost, but he did say “It’s a hobby, and people spend lots of money on all sorts of hobbies. Mine just happens to be kites.”

Murphy has been flying kites since he was eight years old. “My dad was in the Navy and went away on tour to South America. In every port, the Navy would give the sailors a kite and string. When he got back, Dad had a whole case of kites and string, so I made my own kites. I’d fly them over the ocean until they fell apart.” Murphy lost interest in the sport as he grew older, but it was renewed when he had a son of his own. Although his son is now grown, Murphy remains an avid flier.

Several of the kites flying at the LaVista festival were stunt kites. Jeff Kuhns, an enthusiast who owns more than 50 kites, flew a double-lined Delta, named for the Greek



No-fly “ground bouncer” kites are tethered to the ground where they roll with the breeze, spiking anyone in their path.

letter whose shape the kite mimics. “These stunt kites can do acrobatic maneuvers and tricks by pulling in and letting out two or four lines,” he said. Kuhns lamented it was too windy for many of the stunt kites, which only need three to five mile per hour winds to perform. “Kiting is a great hobby because you can get into it relatively inexpensively. For \$25, you can get a good quality kite that will last forever. But if you wanted, you could also spend a few thousand.” Kuhns estimated that there was more than \$25,000 worth of kites in the air at the spring festival.

Many of those kites were designed and sewn by the fliers themselves. Midwest Winds Kitefliers holds several kite-making workshops throughout the year, and multiple members have received national prizes for their efforts. Murphy’s wife, Betty, a kitemaker herself, often teaches the workshops. “The possibilities are endless. You can come in with a blank canvas and create about anything you can think of. With the new materials available, more intricate designs are possible. The colors hold and don’t fade in the sun like they used to,” she said.

Today’s kites are sturdier than those of my childhood and are made from new materials, such as ripstop nylon, fiberglass and carbon graphite, all of which make kites stronger and lighter. Anchoring them to the ground is another art – some of today’s bigger kites are capable of pulling a person into the air if they’re not careful, as Murphy, no small man himself, can attest. “I’ve seen guys get carried 20, 30 feet up.”

Surprisingly, it doesn’t take much wind to get the kites off the ground. “The ideal wind speed is about 10 to 15 mph for the largest kites,” Murphy said. “Any more than that can damage your kite or knock it down.”

Betty Murphy has spent many hours repairing their trilobite kite (trilobites were hard-shelled, segmented creatures that existed over 300 million years ago), but most tears and rips are easy to fix. Gusty winds were a problem at the conclusion of last year’s LaVista festival, as the Murphys attached several pounds of candy to the

giant fish and tried hoisting it into the air, only to have it fall a few times before it successfully took flight. Once it was well into the air, Betty pulled a cord and candy dropped from the sky to the screaming crowd of children below.

Glancing at two large blackbirds soaring overhead, I soon realized they too were kites, but the most popular kite at the festival, the “ground bouncer,” wasn’t in the sky at all. Wind inflates ground bouncers and once inflated, kids young and old run under the giant spiked balls as the breeze gently rolls them back and forth, softly “spiking” anyone underneath. “The kids love them,” Murphy said as he watched from a distance. “That’s what it’s all about.”

On evenings and weekends throughout the year you will find the Midwest Winds Kitefliers at Omaha’s Immanuel Field, located at 72nd Street and Sorenson Parkway. The public is always invited to take part in any of their flying events. For more information, contact Don Murphy at (402) 391-8503 or region7@aka.kite.org.

Elizabeth Mack is a freelance writer living in Omaha.



High-flying kites hovered over the LaVista Soccer Complex in Omaha last April.



The candy drop is the kite festival finale. Children rush for the goodies as Betty Murphy pulls the drop cord attached to the kite.

Saving a Living Dinosaur

By Kirk Steffensen

Aided by dozens of volunteers, biologists spent 12 long hour days last April catching endangered pallid sturgeon on trotlines in an effort to help save the species.

Many people never have the opportunity to see an endangered species in their lifetime. However, many of the 53 volunteers that participated in last April's first ever intensive broodstock collection effort for pallid sturgeon not only got to see one of the rarest fish in North America, they got

to touch one.

Organized by the fisheries division of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, the project was the first targeted effort toward sampling reproductively mature pallid sturgeon in the channelized portion of the Missouri River from the mouth of the Platte River down to Brownville, but smaller scale efforts also concentrated on the South Sioux City and Decatur portions of the river. Overall, sampling crews composed of Commission biologists and volunteers representing seven state and federal agencies, as well as four state universities and colleges, were able to sample more than 80 river miles.

Pallid sturgeon are often referred to as "living dinosaurs" due in part to their unique appearance. Their cartilaginous skeleton has a flattened, shovel-shaped snout and a long, slender armor-plated body. Their protrusible mouth is located underneath the snout and looks better-suited for feeding on algae at the bottom of the river, but pallids are actually quite efficient predators and feed on a variety of small fish.

Pallids are native to the Missouri and Mississippi river systems, but population declines led to the species being listed as federally endangered in 1990. Human alterations to the Missouri River, such

as the mainstem dams which destroyed or altered spawning areas, reduced food sources, altered water temperature and turbidity and changed the natural hydrograph of the river, have likely been the driving forces behind these declines. In order to protect this ancient species, several recovery projects are ongoing to monitor the current population status of pallids and other native river species, evaluate changes in habitat alterations/improvements, and to identify and understand various life history

characteristics of pallid sturgeon, particularly those involving reproductive behaviors. A stocking augmentation program has also been developed to insure the species survives until the time when pallids begin naturally reproducing at the level where they can once again become a self-sustaining population. Until last year, the lower Missouri River relied on the availability of upper Missouri River progeny to stock below Gavins Point Dam, because since the recovery projects began in 2003, very

few adult pallid sturgeon in reproductive condition had been captured below the dam. Last year's broodstock collection efforts hoped to change that.

Hitting the Water

During the sampling efforts, volunteers either reported every morning at 7 a.m. to the Missouri River fisheries office in Lincoln and left shortly afterward or met their crew at the Missouri River boat ramp they were departing from.



Sampling crews fished areas below the confluence of the Platte River to Brownville, but smaller scale efforts were also concentrated in the South Sioux City and Decatur areas of the river. Overall, crews were able to sample more than 80 river miles.



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

Gerald Mestl, manager of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Missouri River Program, transports one of the adult pallid sturgeon caught last year to a waiting truck so it could be taken to a hatchery as potential brood stock.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

UN-L grad student Brenda Pracheil baits one of the hooks used in the pallid sturgeon study.

Pallid sturgeon are often referred to as “living dinosaurs” due in part to their unique appearance. Their cartilaginous skeleton has a flattened, shovel-shaped snout and a long, slender, armor-plated body. Their protrusible mouth is located underneath the snout with four barbels set slightly forward.

Once the boats were loaded with gear and hit the water, the real work began – pulling the first of eight trotlines, each containing 40 hooks, which had been set in various locations the previous day. Every fish caught was measured, weighed and then released back into the river except for the adult pallids, which were kept in a tank on the boat and later transported to a hatchery via a on-call, oxygenated tank truck. After all

eight trotlines were pulled and checked, each of the 320 hooks was rebaited with nightcrawlers and the trotlines were reset for the next day’s crews.

The number of crews varied each day depending on the number of volunteers available, but three to five boats fished daily from Sunday, April 14 through Thursday, April 24, 2008. Work days averaged nine to ten hours under a variety of weather conditions – on

April 15, the high temperature was 79 degrees with south winds blowing 40-45 mph. Two days later the temperature only reached the upper 30s and crews were working in rain with a 25 mph sustained wind. The volunteer hours combined with those of the 18 NGPC Missouri River Program employees that worked on the project totaled 221 days of work in a twelve calendar day span.

Trotlines were used because they could be targeted for the benthic (bottom dwelling) fish community and wouldn’t negatively affect other fish species. Each trotline was 200 feet long and had 40 hooks. The lines were anchored on the upstream end with commercial boat anchors and forced to the bottom of the river with cinder blocks on the downstream end. Each leader was attached to the main line with a quick

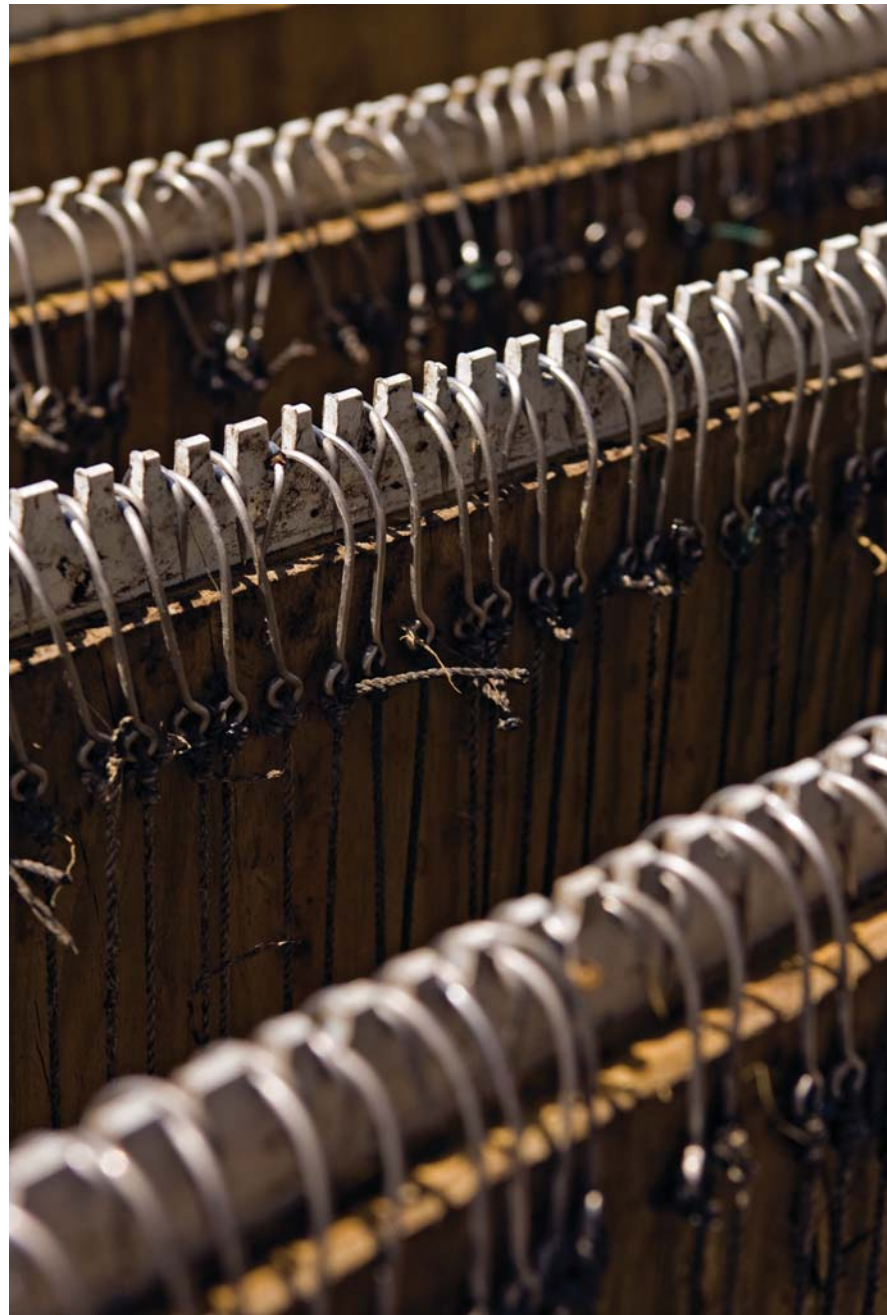


PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

Setting trotlines to catch pallid sturgeon doesn’t seem like that much work until you realize that each crew had to bait 320 hooks every day.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Once the day was done and each crew was back at the dock, their work wasn’t yet done – they still had to transport any adult pallid sturgeon they had caught to a waiting hatchery truck and unload the boat before they could head for home.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

The more common shovelnose sturgeon made up most of the catch, but a variety of information was recorded for each pallid caught, including barbel measurements.

snap and was approximately 12 to 15 inches long. A total of 303 trotlines were deployed during the project, resulting in 11,953 hook nights. Trotlines were surprisingly specific to sturgeon species, which made up 3,842

of the 4,254 fish sampled. Prior to this effort, trotlines had seen limited use on the Missouri River by Commission biologists. This gear has proven to be effective and will likely continue to play a large role in future sampling

efforts of pallid sturgeon.

Results of the Project

A total of 168 pallid sturgeon were collected during the 2008 broodstock

collection efforts. Thirty-one of these fish were sent to Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery at Yankton, South Dakota and four were sent to Blind Pony State Fish Hatchery at Sweet Springs, Missouri for evaluation of their sex and reproductive condition.

In addition, 133 juvenile pallids were immediately released. Pallid sturgeon (either hatchery reared or of wild origin) were collected each of the days that crews sampled, and adult pallid sturgeon were transported to a hatchery every day but one.

Reproductive assessment indicated that 24 males and five of the females that were caught were in reproductive condition to spawn. All fish not in reproductive condition were released back into the river near their capture sites, and several of these fish were surgically implanted with a telemetry tag so that research crews can monitor their movement patterns. In addition, these fish can be located and recaptured in future years using actively drifted trammel nets in order to do a reproductive assessment. Any of the those recaptured fish that were reproductively ready would then be transported to a hatchery to be used in that year's propagation efforts.

Of the 133 juvenile pallid sturgeon collected last year, 97 were known to be hatchery reared because they still had their original tags. A genetic sample was taken from the remaining juvenile pallids to determine how many of them came from a hatchery. Three of the fish that were collected had passed through Gavins Point Dam and were captured below the confluence of the Platte River.

Overall, the average movement of the hatchery-reared pallid sturgeon was 21.3 miles downstream from their original stocking site. The largest downstream movement was 307.6 miles from Sunshine Bottoms, just west of Verdel, to the Nebraska City area. The largest upstream movement was 401.8 miles from Boonville, Missouri to just below the confluence of the Platte River. Recaptured pallid sturgeon of hatchery origin had been at-large for an average of 4.1 years.

The number of pallid sturgeon collected during last year's 12 day period exceeded the expectations of everyone involved. We learned a great deal from

Know Your Sturgeon

Pallid and shovelnose sturgeon are very similar in appearance. Pallids are typically lighter in color than shovelnose sturgeon, but coloration is not a distinguishing characteristic to differentiate the species.

The presence or absence of belly scales and the arrangement of barbels are more definitive characteristics – pallid sturgeon have no belly scales and their inner barbels are set forward of the outer barbels. Also, the inner barbels of pallid sturgeon usually don't extend into the front of the mouth. Conversely, shovelnose sturgeon have belly scales and their inner barbels are in-line with the outer barbels.

Although the current Nebraska state record shovelnose sturgeon is four pounds, five ounces, biologists working on the river rarely collect a shovelnose larger than three pounds. Any sturgeon longer than 30 inches is probably a pallid. A conclusive identification mark is the presence of an elastomere tag – a colored latex injectable marker used to identify stocking information from hatchery-reared pallid sturgeon – on the underside of the rostrum.

NGPC is participating in a basin-wide shovelnose sturgeon population study. Some shovelnose sturgeon are marked with a white plastic tag at the base of the dorsal fin. Each tag has a unique five digit number, so if you catch a marked shovelnose sturgeon, please record the number and call 1-866-762-3338 to report the collection.

Pallid Sturgeon

Inner barbel bases set forward

Belly without plates

Shovelnose Sturgeon

Barbel bases in-line

Belly covered with small plates (except in young)

ILLUSTRATION BY RANDY BRIGHT



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Hauling in the trotlines was a labor filled process that usually required good gloves and a strong back.

this effort and it could not have been accomplished without the hard work of all of the volunteers. We are continuing this broodstock collection effort and look forward to developing further relationships among other agencies and organizations. A similar effort is being

planned again this year and will happen April 5 - 10 and April 13 - 18. ■

Kirk Steffensen is a fisheries biologist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Missouri River Program who lives in Lincoln.

Kill a Tree for Arbor Day

Planting trees in town has merit, but elsewhere less can be more.

By Eric Fowler

We always like to get letters from our readers here at *NEBRASKAland*. This should help. As you celebrate Arbor Day on April 24, go out and kill a tree.

I know, saying something like that in Nebraska, home of Arbor Day and once officially known as the “Tree Planters State” is blasphemy. But before you send a lynch mob after me, let me explain.

Nebraska is a prairie state. Accounts of early explorers tell us there were trees along rivers and streams, in the Pine Ridge and other escarpments, and in deep, shaded canyons, but elsewhere there was grass as far as the eye could see. Periodic wildfires thinned the forest, keeping it healthy, and keeping trees confined, but as soon as man began suppressing fire, forests started creeping into the grasslands that hadn’t been plowed.

Nebraska’s Forests 2005, a report by the USDA Forest Service, estimated there are 352 million trees covering 1.2 million acres, or 2.5 percent of the state. Forested acres in the state increased by 500,000 acres between 1983 and 2005, including a 300,000-acre jump since 1993.

Eastern red cedar and Rocky Mountain juniper made up a large part of the increase, and more cedars is seldom a good thing. This highly prolific species has invaded the rare tallgrass prairie in eastern Nebraska, the loess hills mixed-grass prairies of southwestern and central Nebraska, the pine forest of the Niobrara River Valley, and the understory of hardwood and cottonwood forests throughout the state.

Cedars are not the only problem: Gray-leaf dogwood and other shrubs choke the understory of many riparian forests; Russian olive, a non-native species, has overtaken many meadows in the North Platte River Valley; and ponderosa pines have spread from the steep draws and slopes to the grassed ridgetops, valleys and meadows in the Pine Ridge.



A contractor uses a tractor to pile cut cedars in 2002 as part of a restoration project at Twin Oaks Wildlife Management Area in Johnson County.

In the case of pines and cedars, the consequences of having more trees can be catastrophic – in 2002, thousands of acres of pastureland, some of it choked with cedars, burned south of Brady. In 2006, four wildfires scorched 65,000 acres of pine forest and grassland in the Pine Ridge, and another fire burned 3,000 acres and destroyed 10 homes on the edge of Valentine.

For ranchers, there are financial implications. Where cedars grow, grass doesn’t. And where there are a few cedars, there will soon be more if steps aren’t taken to control them. Eventually there could be little grass for cattle.

Wildlife is also affected by tree encroachment, especially in grasslands, one of the least conserved ecosystems in the world. Many grassland bird species are in decline, and the bare ground beneath cedars is highly erodible, affecting water quality in streams.

Yes, trees are important. They clean the air, save on heating and cooling bills by shading our homes and blocking the winter wind, and extend the life of our streets. There is most certainly a need for trees in our communities, and programs like those of the Arbor Day Foundation and the Nebraska Forest Service’s ReTree Nebraska are worthy causes. Planting a tree in your yard is a

good thing.

But do your homework before planting a tree in the country. Deer, wild turkeys and even native woodland bird species have plenty of tree cover already. In some places, they probably have more than they need. Planting a plum thicket for pheasants and quail is a good thing. Planting a cedar windbreak might have some benefits, but it might also become a problem in years to come.

If you really want to make a difference for wildlife, cut down trees or conduct a prescribed burn in your grasslands or in the understory of your oak or cottonwood forest. Through numerous programs, the Commission and many of its partners are working diligently to restore these ecosystems both on land they own and by assisting private landowners.

If you don’t own land, you can’t just grab your chainsaw and start removing trees on someone else’s, but you can help by making a donation to the Nebraska Wildlife Conservation Fund or one of the many groups that have made grassland restoration a priority in Nebraska.

The cost of controlling the trees where they aren’t welcome is huge and the work may never be done, but it has begun. Part of that job includes teaching everyone that not every tree is a good tree. ■

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Heron Haven

A wildlife sanctuary in the middle of suburbia.

By Pasquale Mingarelli

It’s a still morning as the sun rises above a wooded slope. The distinctive calls of dueling red-winged blackbirds can be heard in surround sound across an otherwise seemingly peaceful marsh. A pair of wood ducks swims along, occasionally dabbling down for something to eat. This peaceful scene, quiet enough to relax a restless heart, is suddenly broken by the squawk of a great blue heron coming in for a landing. It flutters down into a corner of the marsh, transforming into a typically stoic, hunting heron. The momentarily interrupted tranquility soon returns.

This is not some rustic setting far from the hustle and bustle of city – this marsh known as Heron Haven sits in the heart of west Omaha on 25 acres of land nestled between a major highway, a residential community, a golf course and what used to be a bar. Located just off Old Maple Road, Heron Haven was born when local naturalist Ione Werthman convinced the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District to help purchase a wetland area that was slated to become an apartment complex. With additional funds from private and group donations, the land was purchased in 1993 and slowly developed into a wildlife oasis within a city.

Today Heron Haven is home, or at least a stopover, for 125 different species of birds according to Werthman, a former board member of the National Audubon Society, and other bird experts. These range from common species such as cardinals and blue jays to the not so common yellow-throated warblers. A bald eagle and an osprey have also been sighted here, and as of last year a couple of great egrets have made a spring migration visit. Other commonly seen species on the



Mingarelli

property include turkeys, juncos, goldfinches, kingfishers, the ever-present Canada geese, and a summer resident green heron.

Werthman is the president of Friends of Heron Haven, a nonprofit organization given a 10-year lease by the Papio-Missouri River NRD to care for the land. The nonprofit group’s mission is to make Heron Haven a wildlife sanctuary in the middle of suburban Omaha, and there’s more to see there than just birds – as you walk down one of the area’s trails, you might encounter muskrats, rabbits or raccoons. Deer and red foxes have also been known to make an appearance.

One of these trails starts as a short stroll through trees and ends at the boardwalk that reaches out into the middle of Heron Haven’s main pond. While relaxing on a bench, you may catch a glimpse of the mink family that has made their home on a small island near the base of the boardwalk. A second trail winds through the woods out to the far end of the property. There you will discover a large photo/birding blind that looks out across another large pond. The blind’s benches can easily accommodate six guests, but if you come in the morning you will more likely enjoy a time of solitude while watching and observing nature.

For those not wanting to make the trek out to the blind, many birds and an occasional black or fox squirrel can be seen at the bird feeders through two large picture windows in the area’s nature center. The feeders, which are filled with food everyday, are located in a fenced area directly behind the center and attract a variety of birds that frequent Heron Haven.

Another way for visitors to observe life on a smaller scale is the area’s vibrant butterfly garden seeded with native Nebraskan flowers, such as redleaf rose and butterfly milkweed. Monarchs, viceroys, eastern tiger swallowtails and common buckeyes are just a few of the butterflies that can be



PHOTO BY PASQUALE MINGARELLI

A variety of bird species, such as this great egret, use Heron Haven’s waters.

seen gathering sweet nectar from the abundant bouquet.

Friends of Heron Haven has more than 200 members who make an annual donation of \$25 or more, but there is no charge to visit the area. Many people come to experience the birding, nature, environmental and photography seminars that Werthman and others teach inside the area’s spacious nature center. There are also classes designed for Boy Scouts to earn their merit badges. Other visitors include church groups, school field trips and home-schooled children. Each fall Heron Haven has an open house that more than 150 people attend.

Heron Haven is open from dawn to dusk year-round with additional parking located outside the gate for those who arrive early. For more information, call (402) 493-4303. ■

Pasquale Mingarelli is a nature photographer living in Omaha.



Heron Haven is located in west Omaha.

GOOGLE MAPS © 2009

Nebraska Canoeing – it's all downstream

These canoeing basics will have the novice paddling in no time.

By Aaron Hershberger

Canoes have been around since there have been places to float them, and in that time they have been used for transportation, sport and as a wonderful way to get away from the stress of everyday. You can use them for those very same reasons and you'll even find that there is no better place to give it a go than right here in Nebraska and half the fun is learning how to do it. Here's a quick look at what you need to know to get your paddling trails started.

The three most important items you need are a canoe, a paddle for each paddler and a good place to float your boat. To be legal don't forget your personal flotation device (PFD), a bailing mechanism – such as a sponge or pail – and a whistle, just in case you need to call for assistance. It's also a great idea to learn a little of the lingo as well.

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER



John Bradley and Leon Kresl of Omaha canoe the Calamus River as it winds through the Sandhills in Brown County.

Canoes

- Bow – the front of the boat
- Stern – the back of the boat
- Starboard – the right side of the boat
- Port – the left side of the boat
- Gunwales (pronounced 'gunnels') – the top edge of the sides of the boat
- Centerline – an imaginary line that perfectly dissects the canoe from bow to stern

There are canoes that you can use by yourself, but usually canoeing is all about teamwork as two paddlers work in unison to propel and steer the craft. For best results both paddlers must face the same direction – toward the bow – and paddle on opposite sides.

The stern paddler has a better view on the line (direction) of the canoe and has an easier time steering the vessel. The bow of the canoe is the power position where the paddler provides

more propulsion than steering, though when tight turns or abrupt slowdowns are needed this paddler must be able to lend the necessary help.

Paddles

- Grip – the top of the paddle, opposite the blade
- Shaft – the long skinny part that attaches the grip to the blade
- Throat – the narrow area where the shaft and the blade meet
- Blade – the larger part of the paddle, used in the water

For such a simple device, canoe paddles come in a variety of materials, designs and lengths. Length should be the paddler's main consideration as it helps maintain comfort level while canoeing. Though personal preference plays significantly into the equation, a paddle that stands at about the level of your chest to chin area as it sits on your toe is a decent starting point. As you become more serious in canoeing, more in-depth measurements can be made to ensure a proper fit. To properly hold a paddle for use portside, grip the throat of the paddle with your left hand and place your right hand on the grip with your fingers wrapping up and over. For paddling on the starboard side, reverse your hand positions.

Water

Canoes can be used on just about any water found in Nebraska, and the state has a diversity of water types. However, for your first canoe adventure, a calm pond

is ideal as it will allow you the best opportunity to work on your paddling strokes, steering and getting comfortable in the watercraft. As your canoeing skills increase you can enhance the challenge by moving to larger bodies of water and rivers where steering becomes much more important.

Staying Dry

Canoes are actually very stable watercraft, but because the occupants usually outweigh the canoe itself, it's important to remember that balance is maintained by staying low and centered in the vessel. This is especially important as you enter and exit the canoe.

To load safely and dryly, teamwork is needed. Position the canoe on a gently sloping shoreline so that most of the craft is floating, preferably on calm water, while the edge of the stern remains on shore. With the entire centerline supported, the canoe will move around less as you climb in. Lay paddles flat on the canoe bottom before anyone gets in. With the stern paddler straddling the back of the vessel, the bow paddler steps into the center of the canoe, keeping one hand on each gunwale. Staying in this crouched position, the bow paddler slowly walks toward the front of the canoe, keeping their steps along the centerline. Once seated, the bow paddler grabs their paddle and helps brace the canoe in the most stable manner possible as the stern paddler boards. This can be done a variety of ways. If it's warm and the water shallow, it might be best to gently push the rest of the canoe into the water, place your hands on the gunwales and then step into the canoe by placing your foot onto the centerline of the craft. If you want to stay completely dry, gently push the canoe to the very edge of the water, place your hands on the gunwales and with one foot step onto the centerline of the boat while using the other to give one more push from shore.

Steering

Once in the canoe and away from shore, you'll find that just about any use of the paddle influences the direction the craft travels. Paddling on one side of the canoe usually pushes the canoe in

the opposite direction, while reversing the stroke pulls the canoe toward the paddle. Below is a description of paddling basics, but they are best learned by actually being on the water. You'll also develop some of your own techniques to keep your canoe going in the right direction.

The most common strokes used are:

- Forward Stroke – the motion of pulling water towards the stern of the boat parallel to the centerline. Used by both paddlers to move the canoe forward and maintain a straight line on the water.
- Reverse Stroke – the motion of pushing water toward the bow of the boat parallel to the centerline. Used by both paddlers to back the canoe up or to slow the craft down on moving water.
- Sweep – a forward stroke with an arcing line in relation to the keel. Used mostly by stern paddler to aid in steering the canoe in the opposite direction that the paddle is being used.
- Reverse Sweep – a reverse stroke with an arcing line in relation to the centerline. Used mostly by stern paddler to aid in steering the canoe in the same direction that the paddle is being used.
- J-Stroke – a forward stroke with a short hook away from the boat at the end. Used by the stern paddler to aid in steering the canoe and maintaining a straight line.

Some other key things to remember include:

- keep $\frac{2}{3}$ of your paddle blade in the water during the paddle stroke
- to avoid fatigue, push with your grip hand more than you pull with your throat hand
- efficient strokes have the paddle blade perpendicular to the centerline

Lastly, and probably most importantly, braking is accomplished by placing the paddle blade straight up and down in the water while using the hand on the throat to also grip the boat's gunwales.

For more information on canoeing Nebraska's public areas, log on to www.OutdoorNebraska.org and click on State Parks.

Nebraska has lots to offer canoeing enthusiasts, so get out there and enjoy Nebraska's great water resources. ■

Aaron Hershberger is an Outdoor Education Specialist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.



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◀ This photo is of my father, Don Schaepler, and his mother, Mrs. Charlie Schaepler posing with a skunk that Dad had trapped. He used a #1 single long spring, and was trapping along the Little Blue River on the family farm two miles south of Polk. At that time, a skunk skinned and finished sold for two dollars – a lot of money for a 12-year-old in 1939. Dad would run his traps on his way to school, and on one occasion his teacher excused him for the day because he had been sprayed by a skunk that morning.

He continued to trap after marrying Margaret Goztsch in 1948 and in 1951 he trapped 11 mink, selling them for 30 dollars apiece. That money paid for hospital and doctor bill when his oldest daughter (me) was born.

In 1960, Dad went to work for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as a Conservation Officer – a position that he held until 1976 when he and my mother moved to Lincoln and he took the position of Assistant Chief of Law Enforcement. Shortly after he became Chief.

Upon retiring in 1992, he and my mother moved to Holbrook in southwestern Nebraska, right in the heart of some of the best hunting, fishing and trapping in the state. He returned to his love of trapping and in 1995 he trapped, finished and sold 55 raccoons, four coyotes, eight bobcats and a few skunks.

In 2003 he suffered a stroke while trapshooting. Even though he no longer traps, he still hunts turkeys and deer. He continues to enjoy NEBRASKAland Magazine every month – especially Portraits from the Past – and for that reason I am sending you this picture.

– Deborah Schaepler, Arapahoe, Nebraska



▲ Enclosed is a photo taken during the 1940 Armistice Day Blizzard. The storm covered much of the Midwest with up to two feet of snow, 50-plus mph winds and temperatures in the single digits. The storm was blamed for more than 150 deaths, including a larger number of duck hunters on the Mississippi River who were caught off guard by the speed and intensity of the storm. The storm did push large numbers of ducks and prompted Dad and the others in this photo to venture out to a spring hole on Beaver Creek, west of Petersburg.

Included in the photo are (left to right): Dad (Jerome Mack), Del Henn, Joe Leifield and Roman (Pood) Mack, all of Petersburg. Hunting was a large part of my dad's life and outcomes like the one in this photo were common. What made this story unique was the weather conditions these gentlemen endured.

I have been a subscriber for a very long time and truly enjoy each and every edition, especially the old photos/stories.

– Ron Mack, Norfolk, Nebraska



◀ This is a picture of my grandfather, Steve Bahensky (center), his brother Joe (left) and nephew Leonard with a stringer of catfish caught at Spring Creek near Wolback probably about 1915. They felt along the banks for holes containing fish and caught them by hand. Leonard's dad, KD Bahensky, probably took

the picture. Steve was father of LeRoy Bahensky – one-time state senator and I think member of the Nebraska Game Commission.

– Milt Kotre, Kearney, Nebraska



◀ This is my father, Henry Proehl (left), my brother, Richard, and my uncle, Burnell Proehl (right), at our home in rural Boone County east of Albion in 1953. My uncle Burnell would visit us from California each summer and we would fish Beaver Creek east of Albion for catfish. This stringer was from a summer night's fishing on Beaver Creek that made for a great fish fry.

Thanks NEBRASKAland for printing these old photos and stories. They keep memories alive.

– Robert Proehl, Marietta, Georgia

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKAland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1970. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Photos will be returned.



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