



On a warm, mid-winter afternoon along the Platte River in Colfax County, a fox squirrel takes a siesta with only its tail sticking out of a hole in a cottonwood tree. Photo by Bill Hager.

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NEBRASKAland

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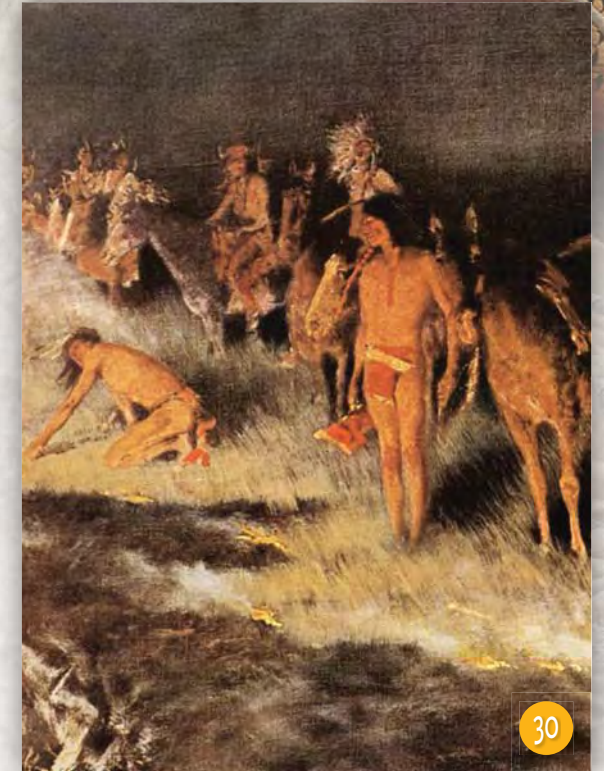
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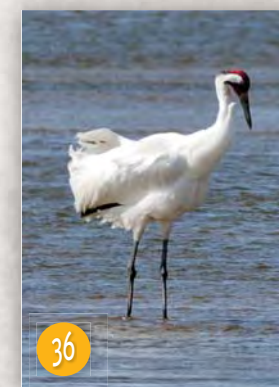
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Cover: This photo composite of a full moon and sandhill cranes was shot south of Grand Island near the Platte River by Rick Rasmussen.
Opposite: A dead cottonwood stands alone after years of wet conditions and standing water in this Thomas County meadow. Photo by Bill Hager.

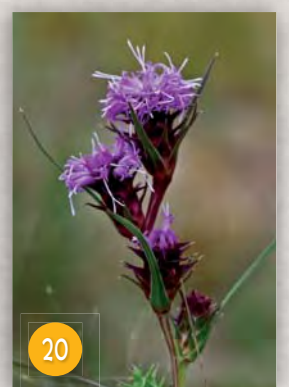
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20



12



Road Pups

I found these little guys last spring while I was doing some culvert inspections north of Tecumseh. I enjoy reading *NEBRASKAland* and always had the intentions of sending in some of the pictures I've taken of wildlife found along the state right of way. Here is an image of the pups.

I believe the fox pups are from two different litters – the mother ran off as I was looking at a culvert, which is what drew me to the den. There were about five pups but two of them were very curious and looked to be of different ages due to size and the way one's ears were folded and the other's were straight.

I was able to get within four feet with my camera.

Jason Moore
Highway Maintenance Supervisor,
Nebraska Dept. of Roads
Tecumseh, Nebraska



Trout for New Year's Dinner

I thought I would share this photo of a rainbow trout I caught in the East Verdigre Creek at Grove Lake WMA.

It was a special day – January 1, 2012. The wind was howling, and I wanted to ice fish, but there wasn't any ice, so I grabbed my fly rod and headed to Royal to go trout fishing.

I caught this 13.5-inch rainbow on a black wooly bugger with a gold beadhead. Nice way to start a new year!

Paul Kolterman
Norfolk, Nebraska

Snowy Owl Rescue

Timing is everything sometimes, for this weary traveler and those knowing (now) how to help. Thanks for the awareness of a great nonprofit organization, **Raptor Recovery Nebraska** in the Jan-Feb 2012 *NEBRASKAland*.

While closing out the duck season with my father, Doug Page, and my son Justin, we were trying to eat up some midday time with some coyote hunting. Between sets and out in the middle of nowhere, we noticed this guy along a corn field, too tired and worn down to hunt.

Knowing immediately he would have little chance of surviving any nighttime elements, with due diligence my dad was on the phone back and forth between available officers and we were soon put in contact with one of these fine teams of raptor volunteers canvassing your wonderful state.

Three hours and 80 miles later, on their third recovery of the day, two "been there, done that's" show up just before dusk and with ease rescue this tired, hungry traveler. The bird was emasculated with hunger, and we were told this has been a common occurrence the last couple of falls as these normally far north birds travel south seeking food down under.

As the bird and volunteers drove away heading into a beautiful sunset, the three of us found ourselves with grins not easily wiped away and the peace-of-mind knowing this regal creature would live to fly again under the skies of yet another 1,000 miles or so. Can anyone else say they've lovingly patted a snowy owl 'farewell

my friend'?

Your fine magazine and state's hospitality are unmatched by any other. Thanks again from the X6 boys.

Steven Page
Eagan, Minnesota



NEBRASKAland Visitor Letters

We want to thank all 48 readers that sent e-mails and letters for last issue's visitor, a nymph katydid that was on page 43 (see page 11 for the winner, rules and this issue's hint). Here are some of the responses we received:

Many years ago I won a boat motor at a federal surplus auction. Turned out that it was located at Cresent Lake Refuge, so off I went to pick it up. The drive north from Oshkosh was the first time I had encountered cattle crossings, cattle in the middle of the road, and single track roads. I didn't even know places like that existed in Nebraska! I have been "out of the big city" many times since then and look forward to a Cresent Lake duck hunt or ice fishing trip soon! Oh, the visitor is on page 43 and looks to be some sort of grasshopper. Thanks!

Ralph Martin
Ceresco, Nebraska

Here's a rule of thumb for amateur bugologists attempting to identify a member of the "grassevious hoppervye" family: If it is GREEN, it most likely is a katydid.

While it is POSSIBLE that some

exist today in the "meadows" of Crescent Lake WMA (see page 43, above Crane Lake), I only remember catching one in the grass near the tube where the NPPD canal comes back up near Paxton "last century"!

Shortly after her capture, she met her demise from an encounter with a 22-inch rainbow trout!
Ken Fankhauser
Kearney, Nebraska

Katydids are members of the Orthoptera family, which also includes grasshoppers and crickets. This particular specimen is a nymph, which is the immature stage, and will molt several times before reaching adulthood. Katydids are generally a leafy-green color, though some species may have brown marking on wings. They are notable for their very long antennae – as long or longer than their bodies. Female katydids have a prominent, sword-shaped ovipositor, extending back behind their abdomen, which is used for depositing eggs. Male katydids lack an ovipositor, and instead have a pair of "spurs" called cerci. The male katydid calls, or sings, to females as part of their mating ritual. They make these noises by rubbing one wing against the other, creating a chirping or buzzing sound. These sounds are unique to species, making it possible to identify the type of katydid heard by their calls.



Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture. Visitor image by Chris Helzer.
www.bugguide.net is a good site for identification

Send your comments to:
Doug Carroll, Editor
NEBRASKAland Magazine
P.O. Box 30370
Lincoln, NE 68503
or e-mail Doug.Carroll@Nebraska.gov
Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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Land for Outdoor People

Jon Farrar

Wildlife Management Areas had their beginning under the name of “state recreation areas” back in 1926 when the Nebraska Bureau of Game and Fish (then under the state Department of Agriculture) acquired Goose Lake in Holt County, Walgren Lake in Sheridan County, land adjoining Rat and Beaver Lakes in Cherry County, and Fremont sandpits in Dodge County “to provide fishing and hunting for the thousands of Nebraska citizens who desire such outdoor recreation.” By the end of 1933, the Game, Forestation and Parks Commission, then an independent state agency, had established 26 state recreation areas.

By the mid-1930s, the names of public-access recreational areas were sorted by the type of recreational opportunities they provided, and those primarily for hunting and fishing were designated State Special-Use Areas. With passage of the Wildlife Habitat Program by the State Legislature in 1976, the \$1 Upland Bird Stamp all hunters had been required to buy was replaced with a \$7.50 Habitat Stamp to both increase the rate of acquisition and protection of vanishing wildlife habit, and to provide more public outdoor recreation lands. With that program came a change in names – State Special-Use Areas were renamed Wildlife Management Areas.

Today there are 271 Wildlife Management Areas in Nebraska totaling 160,295 acres – land owned by the public and managed by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as wildlife habitat and for outdoor recreation such as hunting and fishing. They are open to everyone – hunters, anglers, birdwatchers, mushroom hunters, wildflower enthusiasts or anyone else wanting a bit of quiet time out in nature. You do not need to find a landowner and hope to get permission to trespass because you own the land. Just park your car and roam. Most have names related to the area – a topographical feature, its fauna or flora or its place in history.

For a glimpse of one of Nebraska’s Wildlife Management Areas, see the article on the Plum Creek Valley area in Brown County on page 20.



PHOTO BY DEWAYNE MAGNUSON

With more autos and better roads in the 1920s, the Commission began acquiring public lands for hunting and fishing.

Upcoming Events

Here is a list of upcoming outdoor events across Nebraska. For more information about these and other events, visit the calendar page at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

March 3

BOW Bird Watching
Becoming an Outdoors Woman will be hosting a bird watching event at the AK-SAR-BEN Aquarium. Contact Julia Plugge 402-471-6009 julia.plugge@nebraska.gov

March 9

Board of Commissioners Meeting
8:00 am - 11:00 am
3rd Floor Conference Room
2200 N. 33rd St.
Lincoln NE 68503
Contact Katrinka Dicke 402-471-5539 katrinka.dicke@nebraska.gov

March 9-11, 16-18 and 23-25

Marsh Madness at Ponca State Park
Celebrating Ponca State Park’s richly abundant and inherently beautiful natural areas, the centerpiece of which will be the spring migration of waterfowl through the area. Interpretive programs, educational materials, guided tours and reservable observation blind uses are just a few of the weekend highlights. Special lodging packages are available for these three weekends. A park entry permit is required. Contact Ponca State Park 402-755-2284 ngpc.ponca@nebraska.gov

March 25

Spring Turkey Archery Season
March 25 through May 31. For more information on turkey hunting in Nebraska, check out the 2012 Turkey Guide or visit www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

April 1

Archery Paddlefish Application
The application period for archery paddlefish permits runs April 1-30.

Outdoor Message Plates

Dan Bryant of Lincoln will hunt anything, but prefers upland game (especially quail) behind a good pointer – a fact he has advertised on his message plates since the early 1990s.

If you have a unique outdoor message plate you would like to share or know someone who does, e-mail a photo (high-resolution, JPEG format only, please) of it to Eric.Fowler@Nebraska.gov, along with your name, hometown and a brief description of the interests expressed on your license plate.



NEBRASKA Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever WILDLIFE HABITAT MIXES

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Do you have plans to improve wildlife habitat?

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Bauer on In-Fisherman TV

Daryl Bauer, fisheries biologist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, was recently featured on *In-Fisherman TV* on the Sportsman's Channel in Lincoln with host Doug Stange while they fished for trout at Lake Ogallala. There will be repeats of this broadcast on the Sportsman's Channel on March 5 and 19.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DARYL BAUER

A Look Back - March 1961

Jeff Kurrus

After reading Gerry Steinauer's fire history, I stumbled upon the March 1961 edition of *Outdoor Nebraska*, the predecessor to *NEBRASKALAND Magazine*. Doing so, I immediately saw an article by then-Nebraska Game Commission Director M.O. Steen entitled "A Better Road." In this piece, Steen argues for the conservation of soil, stating that "...man can not reduce soil fertility without all life suffering the consequences." His arguments, while at times misguided to what we now know about techniques such as prairie burnings, are still beneficial today in how we choose to work with the land.

Other features focused on Nebraska's furbearers, a "Boone and Crockett" buck, and sure-fire flies for bluegill. To read these articles, visit NebraskalandMagazine.com and click on "A Look Back."

2012 Fishing Forecast Now Available

The 2012 Nebraska Fishing Forecast, with text by fisheries biologist Daryl Bauer and published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, is an angler's best source for fish-surveying information regarding public waters throughout the state. With sampling charts for bluegills, channel catfish, crappies, largemouth bass, walleyes, white bass and wipers, a person looking to put a hook in the water need look no further regarding where that water should be.

Easy to understand and featuring information on more than 100 lakes and reservoirs across the state, this is a must have resource for anyone wanting to know where to fish this year. Copies can be obtained for free from outdoor retailers throughout the state.



See You Out There ... But Where?

Do you know where this Nebraska photograph was taken?
See answer at the bottom of page 11.

PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

True/False Turkeys

Jeff Kurrus

With turkey season beginning statewide for archers on March 25, youth shotgun on April 7 and all shotgunners on April 14, try answering these true or false questions about one of Nebraska's most exciting game animals before you step into the field this season.

- 1) On average, a turkey has 10,000 feathers on its body.
- 2) An estimated 10 to 20 percent of female turkeys have beards.
- 3) Turkeys are herbivorous, only eating plant-related materials.
- 4) Turkeys can run faster than they can fly.
- 5) Incubation of turkey eggs lasts about one month.
- 6) To aid with attracting a mate, a male turkey has more feathers on his head.
- 7) Turkeys have three toes on each foot.
- 8) Turkeys are North America's largest game bird.
- 9) A tom's beard is made up of cartilage, not unlike a person's nose.
- 10) In Nebraska, there is no minimum age to hunt turkeys.

ANSWERS:

- 1) False: On average, a turkey has between 5,000 and 6,000 feathers.
- 2) True
- 3) False: Turkeys are omnivorous, eating acorns, berries, insects and even small reptiles.
- 4) False: Turkeys can run up to 25 mph, but they can fly up to 55 mph.
- 5) True
- 6) False: To aid in camouflage while on the nest, a hen turkey has more feathers on her head.
- 7) False: Turkeys have 4 toes on each foot, 3 pointing forward and 1 pointing backward.
- 8) True
- 9) False: A tom's beard is actually made up of hairlike feathers.
- 10) True

Thanks to the National Wild Turkey Federation for factual assistance with this quiz. Visit nwtf.org for more information.

Great Reading

FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS

Have You Seen Mary?

JEFF KURRUS
Photographs by Michael Forsberg

"Jeff Kurrus's words and Michael Forsberg's photographs are teamed here to bring us a remarkable story from the natural world they both cherish."

—Joel Sartore, author, conservationist, and contributing photographer for National Geographic magazine

... and the sky blackened with dark, gray bodies. In the blurry confusion, John lost Mary." So begins *Have You Seen Mary?*, a fictional account of one sandhill crane's faithful search during spring migration for his lost mate. Set on Nebraska's Platte River, Jeff Kurrus weaves a tender story of love while also teaching us about these majestic birds.

\$16.99 hardcover

Like No Other Place

The Sandhills of Nebraska
DAVID A. OWEN

"David Owen has beautifully captured the rhythms of the Nebraska Sandhills."

—David J. Wishart, editor of The Encyclopedia of the Great Plains

In 2008 and 2009, photographer and storyteller David A. Owen traveled through western Nebraska to capture the unconventional beauty of the geography and singular way of life of the residents there. Connecting the everyday activities of the ranchers and residents he encounters to the vast, isolated landscape, Owen provides a fascinating window into this dazzling area of America.

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The Great Zamboni

Jeff Kurrus

Every hour during the ice skating season at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park in eastern Nebraska, a large machine known as a zamboni moves over the rink like an ice-shaving lawnmower.

Before Frank Zamboni patented his machine in 1949, it would take considerably more time to redo a rink's icy surface, polishing scrape marks from skates and watering the surface to make it smooth again. Zamboni's machine did it all, and in a lot less time. He "modified a tractor adding a blade that shaved the ice smooth; a device that swept up the shavings into a tank; and an apparatus that rinses the ice and left a very thin top layer of water that would freeze within a minute," commented writer Mary Bellis.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

So when you're visiting our most popular state park this late-winter and forced to leave the ice for a few minutes, know your break would be much longer without a zamboni.

Kearney's Crane Watch Festival

From Friday, March 23rd through Sunday, April 1st, the Kearney area will launch the inaugural Crane Watch Festival with 10 days of education, family activities, and entertainment in Kearney, Minden and Gibbon.

This festival, sponsored by community organizations, attractions, businesses, and local professionals, will begin

with its "Lift-Off Luncheon" on Friday, March 23rd with NEBRASKAland contributing editor and speaker Michael Forsberg, and continue throughout the week with events for the entire family.

For more information, contact Jan Rodehorst with the Kearney Area Chamber of Commerce at 308-237-3101 or jrodehorst@kearneycoc.org. Or for a complete list of events, visit www.cranewatchfestival.com.



CRANE WATCH FESTIVAL
KEARNEY, NEBRASKA
SANDHILL CRANE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

MARCH 23 through APRIL 1, 2012

Family Activities ~ Educational Events
FUN FOR EVERYONE

For more information go to: www.cranewatchfestival.com

Seeing Deer in Double

Steve Zechmann

I live on the north edge of Lincoln Nebraska where I find many opportunities for wildlife photography. On this particular day my eye caught movement between two deer that grabbed my attention. Having taken so many pictures, I can get lazy at times and hesitate jumping up and getting my camera. Something about the possibility of this scene, however, enticed me to get off my duff and see what I could make happen. There's a saying in photography – "F8 and be there." F8 is a reliable camera setting for

window to freeze them for a shot but it wasn't quite right. I noticed their eyes lining up so I waited for the deer to take one more step. The pose was perfect. Because deer are always moving their ears back and forth listening to different sounds, I had to rap a couple of more times to get all four ears pointing in my direction. I snapped the picture and yelled "YES" after viewing my camera display. I

knew I had captured something special. I continue shooting pictures knowing that there are many more great shots just waiting to be captured. For those that are interested in learning more about outdoor photography, come join us at Schramm Park. We have a nature photography club that meets there the first Tuesday of each month at 7 p.m. It is called Schramm Park Nature Photography Club. Our club displays pictures at Schramm for the public to see.



good depth of field and being there is a must if you're to even have a chance at a good photo. I have a sunroom that I take many of my pictures out of. As deer move about I will either whistle or rap on the window to get their attention when I notice a unique pose developing. As these two deer were walking I noticed that they were lining up one behind the other. I began shooting and was getting many different poses. I rapped on my

Marsh Madness at Ponca SP

March is the peak month for viewing mass migrations of waterfowl along the Missouri River, and Ponca State Park (SP) is now offering special lodging packages to help bird enthusiasts enjoy the spectacle that is spring migration in Nebraska.

These special getaway packages include 30 percent off lodging rates, free guided sunrise and sunset waterfowl blind tours, unguided bald eagle blind tours and special programming and activities. They are available March 9-11, 16-18 and 23-25. For more information or to make reservations, call (402) 755-2284 or e-mail ngpc.ponca@nebraska.gov.

Situated on the beautiful Missouri River bluffs in northeastern Nebraska, Ponca SP is the eastern gateway to the 59-mile section of the Missouri National Recreational River, one of two unchannelized stretches of the river bordering Nebraska.

NEBRASKAland Visitor Winner and Hint



Last issue's winner of the NEBRASKAland Visitor drawing was Jackie Nunnenkamp of Henderson, Nebraska, who found the **katydid** on page 43. Readers are encouraged to contact NEBRASKAland within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's "Visitor" – a bug found in Nebraska that just happened to find its way onto one of the pages of our publication.

We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a NEBRASKAland Magazine mug. To enter each month, write: **NEBRASKAland Visitor 2200 North 33rd Street, Lincoln, NE 68503.**

Or e-mail: **Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov** with "Visitor" in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on page 4, 5, 7 or 8.

Black and White

The Enduring Beauty in the Digital Age

Photos and text by Bob Grier

Even though millions of full-color photographs are created every day around the world, the popularity of the plain-old black and white image remains strong and growing. Photographers and viewers alike appreciate the luminous beauty of a well-done black and white photograph – wedding photographers offer black and white albums and much of the so-called fine-art photography done today is still made in black and white. Almost entirely gone, however, are the silver-based, wet darkrooms of yester year – they’ve been replaced by computers, monitors and inkjet printers. The digital revolution has made black and white imagery easy, economical and rewarding.

Along with the arrival of small, relatively inexpensive digital cameras has come a wealth of tutorials, tips and how-to information available for free on the Internet. Most of the early masters of photography were quick to understand that “there are no secrets” and freely shared their methods and tools to create their unforgettable imagery. For example, Ansel Adams, known to millions for his epic black and white translations of the American landscape, was committed to sharing his expertise through the publication of his books and his photography workshops.

Today that willingness to share their working procedures in black and white, as well as all other photographic techniques in general, is well represented on the Internet by hundreds of photographers of all skill levels (see a listing of popular photography web sites on page 17).

Nearly all of the new and popular “point-and-shoot” digital cameras offer easy to use defaults to produce black and white in camera, and often include options such as brown-toned sepia, blue tones, and other interesting and dramatic stylistic effects such as giving images the high contrast,

film-like grainy look of photos shot with high-speed Kodak Tri-X and numerous other films that used to be the mainstay of photographers everywhere.

For artists that have worked with black and white film in the past, there are both flat-bed and dedicated 35mm film size and larger scanners that can be used to digitize existing black and white negatives as well as color slides and color negatives. Scanning produces a digital file that can be easily printed using any of the available printers or uploaded to digital labs across the country that produce beautiful black and white prints using their proprietary all-carbon inks and other black and white reproduction options.

For anyone that has a digital camera, from the do-everything “point and shoot” camera with built-in zoom lens, flash and numerous other features to the full-fledged digital single lens reflex cameras with several interchangeable lenses, here is a selection of tips to getting started in black and white photography.

Many digital cameras have the ability to produce in the so-called “RAW” mode as well as in smaller, compressed “JPEG” file formats. The RAW format generally captures everything that the camera’s sensor can record without in-camera



Above: The tremendous range of tones within a storm cloud near Branched Oak Lake near Lincoln are well represented in black and white. Today’s digital photographers have a wide variety of inkjet printers, high quality archival papers and long-lasting inks available to make their own prints. Numerous custom printers across the United States are also available on the Internet. This image was originally captured on b&w film and was then printed digitally using a modest-priced flatbed scanner to produce the digital file. Opposite: A few cottonwood leaves on a burned log along West Ash Creek in the Pine Ridge make an ideal subject for a b&w print.



processing. Photographers interested in getting the most out of their digital file usually work in the RAW format, relying on post-processing to “develop” the file into a photograph that matches their vision.

JPEG is a so-called “lossey” format, using the in-camera processing done automatically according to settings that the photographer selects before taking the photograph. “Lossey” is a technical term for the compression that the in-camera computer applies to the file, “baking in” the selected JPEG settings and compressing the size of the file by removing a substantial amount of the sensor’s digital record.

JPEG settings offered in nearly all digital cameras usually include sharpening, contrast and color balance, as well as different “styles” – including black and white, sepia toning and too often, expansive and confusing file-size options.

It’s possible to shoot a full color JPEG and easily convert the image to black and white using the software that usually is packaged with the digital camera. Adobe’s Photoshop is another RAW development and image management software that can be used, although the entire software package is expensive and full of features that most photographers will never need to learn. Each camera manufacturer usually supplies a software solution for their camera’s file formats and capabilities that’s much easier to use and is a good place to start.

While post-processing software gives you the ability to



Above: Fantasy and imagination – wildly toned in dark selenium and then inverted, this ice detail on Lake Carter P. Johnson on Fort Robinson State Park is a realist’s nightmare.

Left: Backlit cottonwood tree and barn near Verdigre, reportedly Old Jules’ original homestead site in Nebraska.

Opposite: “Bullfight at the T” has a dark sepia tone, similar to the sepia tones offered as a default on many point-and-shoot digital cameras.



shoot in full color and convert a selected image to black and white later, the camera’s JPEG settings can usually be set (carefully read that camera’s instruction booklet) to produce black and white in-camera images, among other options. The best advice is to set the sharpening, contrast and other settings to a personal preference. Too much sharpening, for example, will make the final image appear “crunchy” or otherwise unnatural. Color defaults range from soft pastels to vibrant, deeper colors. Remember, however, – that JPEG





Crow Butte in a frost-covered landscape is an image that works effectively in both b&w and color. Open shade and overhead cloud cover often produce monochromatic color and soft, enveloping light suitable for b&w.

settings selected for one type of subject may not work under different lighting or subject conditions. By recording a set of JPEG defaults for landscapes, another possibly for sports and maybe one for indoor performances and events, it is possible to generate JPEGs that capture the desired scene without any post-processing tweaks – the camera’s storage media card or memory stick can simply be removed and the files printed at one of the popular one-hour photo processing departments or uploaded on the Internet to a lab for printing.

For a black and white JPEG, select the camera’s black and white settings and the resulting image file will bake-in those defaults, leaving little opportunity to change the photograph later. If you’re not sure whether a full color or black and white image would best express how you envision the scene, set the JPEG default to full color and convert the file later in post processing.

The ability to recognize images or subjects that might appear best in black and white is a learned

talent that takes practice. Study good examples of black and white photography, especially the artist’s original prints in museums and photography galleries where possible, or on a well-crafted web site.

A full color subject rendered in tones of black and white often appears drab and dull. Usually a scene that is a good candidate for black and white includes a range of tones from nearly pure white to deep black, but often a good black and white subject includes a majority of either end of the spectrum – a luminous field of nearly white subject matter accented by only a few pure black accents, for example, or something like the dark interior of a coal bin with a white cat as a subject.

Weather conditions often create excellent opportunities for black and white, such as a foggy landscape, perhaps with a nearby subject rendered dark in the white surround. Light snowfall usually provides black and white potential – the contrast of direct sunlight is softened by the overhead

snow clouds and the shadows are rendered in light grays, no deep black accents are needed. Other black and white subjects could include a darkened, abandoned farmhouse interior with a brighter white door illuminated by shade light through one of the windows. How about a craggy cowboy’s portrait, the face’s weather-worn lines rendered in sharp detail with glistening highlights and luminous shadows without any deep and dark tones?

Free shareware and commercial black and white software that can be used to further refine black and white images is available on some of the web sites listed at the end of this article. Utilizing these sites can help lead you on a personal journey that can take your photography back to the era of the plain-old black and white as well as the leading edge of today’s fine art photography. ■

www.quadtonerip.com -- low-priced b&w printing shareware for Epson printers.

www.dpreview.com -- reviews of a wide range of digital cameras.

www.silverfast.com -- support and tutorials for scanner use, including information on film and flat bed scanners.

www.luminous-landscape.com -- Tutorials and great information.

www.cambridgeincolour.com/tutorials/color-black-white.htm -- great tutorials.

www.epaperpress.com -- shareware actions, including b&w converters, framing and toning actions, free but requires photoshop.

www.masteringdigitalbwbook.com -- “... supporting content for this book and a discussion forum for photographers and printmakers who share a passion for black and white...” ■



One of the oldest film developers, pyro, and b&w film recorded a foggy afternoon landscape at Toadstool Park north of Crawford. Pyro is renowned for its ability of capture very bright highlights – shown by the sun’s disc on the western horizon. Digital print from the scanned negative.

Northern Pintails

Text and photos by Michael Forsberg

There are many no-name spots in the eastern Rainwater Basins of south-central Nebraska where you can view migrating pintail ducks each spring. If you go, try to arrive in the wee hours before dawn when, if you do it just right, you can crest the hill, shut off the lights and coast to a stop along the dirt road that borders a wetland without disturbing the roost.

With the dog quiet and the window cracked open you will hear the mass murmurings of ducks and geese shuffling in the darkness and, if your ear is tuned, you can make out the pintails and their high-pitched, clear notes that sound like a drum major's whistle marking out four-four time marching in a parade.

As the light gathers, you can see the birds begin to stir with their arrow-

like silhouettes as they tip bottoms up, searching for breakfast in the water below. Then as the sun rises, you can watch the spectacle that is their amazing courtship flights – squadrons of drakes flying in tight formations, escorting females in big cursive loops around the wetland as long as the late-winter sun arcs across the sky.

The northern pintail (*Anas acuta*) is a large, beautifully elegant bird that is sometimes called the “greyhound of ducks” with its streamlined profile, slender wings and neck, and long, distinctive, black pin-shaped tail. The males are tuxedo-gray with black accents, a chocolate brown head, long white foreneck, bluish-gray bill and a flash of iridescent green on the wing. The females give up fashion for function, with subtle mottled brown plumage to better blend into their



A nesting female pintail duck incubates eggs in a prairie along the Missouri Coteau in western North Dakota.

grassland nesting grounds.

Northern pintails range over a larger portion of the earth than any other waterfowl species, with a breeding range that circles the northern hemisphere from North America to northern Europe and Asia. A pintail skeleton was even found at 16,400 feet on the Khumbu Glacier during a 1952 expedition to Mount Everest.

On this continent, they breed from Alaska and the Canadian arctic south to the northern Great Plains, and winter along the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific coasts, the playa basins of Texas and Mexico, and as far south as Central America. In Nebraska, they can be found almost statewide during



Migrating northern pintail drakes escort a female during a courtship flight over Hultine Waterfowl Production Area in Clay County.

migration and are considered a regular, but uncommon, resident during the breeding season, nesting primarily in the Sandhills.

Between mid-February and March, roughly one-third of the continent's pintail population arrives at the Rainwater Basin and adjacent Platte River Valley to rest and refuel along with 10 to 15 million other spring-migrating waterfowl. Here they build the critical fat and nutrient reserves they will need to finish migration and begin the nesting cycle. Pintails are omnivorous – their diet consists largely of native wetland and aquatic plant seeds, plant parts and aquatic invertebrates, but they will also feed on

waste grain such as corn and wheat left over from the year's fall harvest.

Once the pintails move north, many head to the Prairie Pothole Region that stretches from the Dakotas into southern Canada. Pintails are true grassland ducks that prefer shallow pothole wetlands that form and warm quickly in the spring. They nest in open country, primarily on native grassland hillsides with a view of the surrounding landscape. They will nest up to a mile away from the nearest water, farther than any other duck.

At the nest, hens lay 7-10 eggs and incubate 22-24 days. Ducklings are led to water within 24 hours after hatching and can feed on their own immediately.

Those that survive will reach flight stage at about 50 days and join the fall flight of roughly 100 million waterfowl down the Central Flyway.

Pintail numbers have declined dramatically over the last few decades due to continued losses of habitat to agricultural conversion. Pintails need large intact grasslands with shallow wetlands to survive. Protecting the integrity of the last strongholds of grass such as the Nebraska Sandhills and the Missouri Coteau in the Prairie Pothole Region, along with migration stopovers such as the Rainwater Basin, is paramount. As goes the grass, so goes the future of the northern pintail here on the plains. ■

Plum Creek Valley

Wildlife Management Area

Text and photos by Jon Farrar

Plum Creek Valley Wildlife Management Area (WMA) southwest of Johnstown in Brown County, acquired in 1999, is a relatively recent addition to the state's outdoor recreation grounds. It was named, obviously, for the creek that flows through it, which is particularly interesting to me because I have spent time where Plum Creek has its beginning. Knowing the creek where it begins and about halfway down its length is something like knowing a person when they were a baby and then middle-aged.

Plum Creek's south fork is relatively short, rising up from groundwater under sand dunes south and southwest of the WMA, and is probably no more than nine miles long if you ignore its meandering course. However, it is the

headwaters of the larger and longer north fork I know. At least twice the length of the south fork, most maps show the north fork beginning at Red Deer Lake, just northeast of Valentine National Wildlife Refuge in eastern Cherry County, but because Red Deer is fed water from Ballards Marsh, which in turn receives water from Trout Lake even farther to the west, and sometimes Big Alkali Lake to the northwest; the true headwaters of the north Fork remain delightfully obscure. I like to think that when I hunt ducks on Ballards Marsh, the water under my boat will eventually course through Plum Creek Valley WMA. It is conceivable I have seen the very same water miles apart but in strikingly different settings. After leaving the WMA, the creek's water races north, turns east just north of Johnstown, and finally northeast in its rush to the Niobrara River near the old town site of Meadville, north of Ainsworth.

Because I came to know Plum Creek Valley WMA when it was brand new, I saw it in a different light than other WMAs. Most have existed for decades, and so it is easy to not think there was a history of the land before it became public. People lived on all these recreation lands, made a living off the land, babies were born and old people died on the land. Floods washed away cornfields on riverbottoms, droughts blew away topsoil, wildfires scorched the earth, milk cows were struck by lightening, and Fourth of July celebrations were built around homegrown chickens and watermelons.

It was the bright orange poppies and dame's rockets in blossom around a small slab of concrete that once was the foundation for a small building that started me thinking of Plum Creek Valley WMA's life before it was owned by the people of the Nebraska. It was early-June at a spot where grassland meets woodland, where there had been a small, wood-frame house, a stucco-covered washhouse, an ample barn with tongue-and-groove siding that once housed horses and cows and prairie hay to feed them, and a chicken coop, no doubt with south-facing windows to keep hens warm and laying in winter. The concrete slab and runaway domestic flowers were the only signs of what had been.

Whenever I was close to that piece of land, I stopped for a few hours and walked the grasslands and the woodlands that bound meandering Plum Creek. I made field notes of the plants and animals I found there through the seasons and, when they allowed it, I made photographs. I seldom was there without trying to imagine who had sat around a big oak table for supper, talking of what they had done that day or would do the next. How many days was a family stranded there during the Blizzard of 1949? That sort of thinking led me to the Brown County Clerk's office and the Ainsworth



Grasslands are being restored by timely cattle grazing and prescribed burns to set back invasive exotic species and kill cedars spreading from the valley. In the spring, grasshopper sparrows sing their territorial songs from the highest perches.





PHOTO COURTESY OF SHIRLEY BOYD MUNDORF

Grant Boyd was described as “a colorful figure of the early west.” His first love seemed to be raising horses, but during his lifetime he wore many hats.

city library. I wanted to know who had the land before we all did.

In 1905, Grant Boyd and his two sisters, Carrie and Maude, moved to Brown County from Richardson County in southeastern Nebraska. The sisters purchased a quarter section of grassland on the east side of Plum Creek; 80 acres adjoining that, which included a half-mile of Plum Creek; another 80 acres with the creek flowing through it and 240 acres to the north that included both creekbottom and upland pasture. Grant did not purchase land when his sisters did, but in 1911 he filed a claim on a quarter section of

tableland pasture adjoining his sisters’ land under the Kinkaid Act, a federal program to move government-owned land into public ownership. In 1912, Grant bought his sisters’ land, bringing his total land holdings to just less than two sections. And that is about all of the history of Boyd’s land told in the thick ledger books of the courthouse.

The more interesting history of the Boyd family is found in *Pioneer Stories of Brown, Keya Paha and Rock Counties in Nebraska*, published in 1980. The probable reason Grant did not buy land when he and his sisters first moved to Brown County was that he was engaged in other ventures. He was, apparently, something of an entrepreneur, preferred raising and selling horses to farming, and perhaps was inflicted with a dose of wanderlust. He was described in the book as “a colorful figure of the early west,” and the photograph of him suggests the description was true. During his early years in Brown County, Grant owned and operated a livery barn and was also a rural mail carrier. In the early-1930s he owned the hotel in Johnstown. In 1911, he married a schoolteacher who lived about three miles north of his ranch. Twin boys were born the next year, Warren and Allan, and three years later a baby girl died at birth. In 1917, Grant’s wife, Ada, died after a long illness. In those years it is likely the births and deaths came on the banks of Plum Creek, not in a city hospital.



Most of the uplands on Plum Creek Wildlife Management area are unplowed native grass. Small tracts were farmed in the early-1900s but later reseeded to grass. Here and there, lone cottonwoods rise up above the horizon.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHIRLEY BOYD MUNDORF

Twin brothers Warren, left, and Allan with a stringer of trout caught in Plum Creek. Perhaps Allan’s best fish was a 21-inch brown trout he caught in 1953.

Grant stayed on his Plum Creek land and raised his two sons.

A satisfying connection between the Boyd family and their land eventually becoming a wildlife management area is that Grant was an outdoorsman, as were his sons. Grant trapped beaver on Plum Creek, and as the *Pioneer Stories* book recounts: “He had a coat made out of the skins for his wife, Ada. Approximately forty years later, Allan trapped beaver on Plum Creek and, like his father, had a coat made for his wife. Allan also presented a beaver coat to daughter, Shirley, for her high school graduation in 1954.”

In 1935, when Warren and Allan were in their early-20s, Grant was said to have owned more than 100 head of horses. He sold 45, and with the profit

left Nebraska to find Spanish-American War veterans he had served with from 1897 into 1899. That journey took Grant to southern states, and as the climate there seemed more agreeable than Nebraska’s, he purchased a citrus fruit orchard and vegetable farm at McAllen, Texas. Warren moved to Texas to join in the venture. That same year, Allan, who stayed on the Plum Creek land, married Opal Welke of Wood Lake. And it is with Allan and Opal that the connection between the Boyd family and Plum Creek Valley WMA was made.

Allan shared many of his father’s interests, particularly raising horses. He raised cattle, but that could not support a family on less than two sections of rangeland. He tried farming some of

the tableland, as had Grant, but it was not suitable cropland without irrigation and eventually the plowed land was reseeded to grassland.

“....in the early years of their marriage, they had to endure the hard times of Depression,” Shirley Boyd Mundorf, Alan and Opal’s daughter, wrote in *Tales of Brown County, Nebraska – History of Brown County and Its Families*, published by the Brown County Historical Society. “They milked cows and fed calves, selling milk and cream in order to buy groceries. They raised chickens, sold eggs and produced most of their own food.” Allan was an auctioneer and rural mail carrier, cut fence posts to sell, and trapped beaver, muskrats and mink. In later years, Allan became well

known for the quality black Angus cattle he raised, particularly his bulls.

In June 1996, Allan and Opal Boyd began talking with representatives of the Nebraska Game Parks Commission about selling their land. There were public hearings for citizens to comment on the possible acquisition. Merlin “Turk” Beebout of Ainsworth attended one of the hearings and in March 1998 wrote the Commission encouraging the purchase. He had grown up in Johnstown, and Plum Creek was within walking distance when he was a boy. He wrote: “I fully am in favor of this purchase. As a youngster growing up I enjoyed the use of this property, also after I returned from World War II. I hunted that land as did my sons



Dense stands of red cedar may seem like good wildlife habitat, but even the more open stands, above, are virtual biological deserts providing little in the way of food plants or cover.

and now my grandsons. The Boyds are special people. They have controlled their land well, and they know the enjoyment people get out of hunting and fishing. Allan Boyd has been a fisherman as long as I can recall. He's one of a few that used nothing but artificial lures, and he catches fish."

In December of last year, I sat at Beebout's kitchen table and we talked. We talked about how hunting and fishing was in the old days. Beebout is now 87 years old and entitled to

claim some wisdom in assessing the long view. He was a lifelong friend of Allan Boyd. Before World War II, there were no deer or turkey on Plum Creek. The hunting season on grouse had been closed since 1928 and would not open again until 1952. There were a few pheasants. So what was there to hunt?

"When I was a kid I hunted a lot. Jackrabbits especially, and we ate them," Beebout said. "I was born at the time when everybody was a saver, to some degree. If you didn't have a milk cow and a bunch of chickens and a garden in Johnstown, you probably wouldn't have survived."

During the 1920s, gravel was mined on the east side of Plum Creek near the southern end of the Boyd's land to build the road between Johnstown and Wood Lake. In Beebout's youth, the sandpit was a place to jump-shoot mallards in the autumn and fish for bass in the summer. Since the Commission has managed the area, the old sandpit has been periodically stocked with trout. But Beebout said he also walked the creek and jump-shot ducks. There were trout in Plum Creek in the early-1900s as the Commission regularly stocked every stream in the state that might support trout. Plum Creek also had another value in the days before air-conditioning and swimming pools.

"We used to go down, as a family," Beebout recalled. "I was pretty young. We didn't have electricity until I was five years old. We had a Model A then, in the thirties when it was so hot in the summers. We'd go down there in the evening, usually pretty late, and splash around in the crick,



Enough red cedar trees have been mechanically removed that prescribed burns can now be used to economically remove more.



Nesting upland sandpipers are good indicators that Plum Creek Valley's grasslands are being brought back to what they were through careful management.



Hunters such as Brad Brei, left, or Boyd Corliss are not surprised to flush either prairie chickens or sharptails from the grasslands.

and just kill a little time in the water, and get cooled off, but by the time we got back home we were hot again.”

Plum Creek, and the valley it flows through, has changed since the days when Beebout and the young Boyd brothers hunted and fished there. One of the biggest changes has been the invasion of eastern red cedars. Wildfires once kept the cedars confined to protected valleys and canyons along the central Niobrara and the lower reaches of its tributary streams, such as Plum Creek.

“There were trees where it left Boyd’s [land] on the north end,” Beebout said when asked what Plum Creek looked like when he was young. “There was a lot of cedars there, but from there upstream was kind of, well, you might say it was just kind of wide-open, pretty much open. Maybe some willows here and there along the banks.”

Beebout said when he was young the valley sides were grassed, and in some places sandy, probably where cattle and

horses regularly came to water.

Since the end of the drought years of the 1930s, and the virtual elimination of wildfires, cedars have advanced ever farther up the Niobrara’s feeder streams, and spread into once treeless rangeland. The lower half of the Boyd land became a dense cedar forest with nothing growing among them or under them. Cedars had grown so thick they filled openings around native deciduous trees such as bur oak, hackberry and green ash. Young bur oaks and other deciduous trees were not replacing the older trees because there was no place for them to grow.

And Plum Creek itself had changed. Beebout recalled there being rock bottoms in Plum Creek when he was young. Over time they vanished under sand. Vanishing with the rock bottoms were gravel beds, important trout spawning sites. There is little question the creek is carrying a heavier load of silt and sand than it did historically.

Increased erosion in the watershed, particular bordering the creek, is the reason. Satellite images show a cluster

of center-pivot irrigation systems along the south fork of Plum Creek just to the south of the wildlife management area. Overgrazing of pastureland on the valley walls also contributed to the heavier sand load the creek carries. The result has been that stretches of the creek once narrow and deep with cool water were transformed into streambeds 20 to 30 feet wide and only three or four inches of warm water.

Restoration of Plum Creek, its valley and the grasslands bordering it began as soon as the Commission acquired the land, but it will take years to turn back the clock. It is a particularly difficult endeavor because management can only be done on a relatively short stretch of the valley. To a large degree, restoration of the land and water on Plum Creek Valley WMA will continue to be determined by what happens on privately owned land upstream.

In recent years, the WMA’s grasslands have been periodically grazed by cattle and burned to set back invasive and undesirable cool-season

exotic grasses such as bluegrass and brome, at times of the year favoring the recovery of native grasses and forbs. Both sharp-tailed grouse and greater prairie chickens now use the area — evidence the grassland management is working. Male grasshopper sparrows sing their territorial songs from dried goldenrod stalks in the spring, and upland sandpipers hide their nests deep in the grass.

With reduced and controlled grazing, stream banks are again cloaked in vegetation and no longer contributing to the deposition of sand in the creek. Cedar trees have been cut and anchored to shorelines to narrow the stream, resulting in deeper, cooler, trout-friendly waters. The increased velocity of the stream is already scouring sand from the creek bottom and restoring gravel beds where trout can spawn.

The middle and lower reaches of Plum Creek, downstream from the wildlife management area, have long supported trout populations. Beginning in the late-1800s, when there was only a Nebraska Fish Commission, until a few years ago, both brown and rainbow trout were stocked in Plum Creek. Stocking was discontinued when fisheries biologists discovered both species were naturally reproducing. Fisheries biologists do not expect the reach of Plum Creek passing through the wildlife management area to become a high-class trout fishery, not the equal of Long Pine Creek to the east, but it can support trout.

Perhaps the prickliest problem facing wildlife managers is the dense infestation of eastern red cedars. To the untrained eye, the extensive stands of cedar may look like wonderful wildlife habitat, but it is a virtual biological desert. While they may provide cover for deer and turkey during severe weather, 95-percent fewer cedar trees would provide as much. What is lost in the expansive cedar monoculture is wildlife habitat diversity. There are no shrubs for deer to browse, no weedy and grassy spots in woodland openings producing seeds or insects for birds. The National Wild Turkey Federation has aided the Commission’s work by providing grant money for the mechanical removal of cedars trees on Plum Creek Valley WMA. About 130 acres of dense cedar woods have

been cleared in the creekbottom. The openings have provided fire breaks that now allow the use of prescribed burns to economically set back the invasion of cedars, probably beginning as soon as this spring. Additionally, young cedars invading grasslands already have been destroyed using prescribed fires on about 105 acres.

Perhaps in 20 years, or 50, Plum Creek Valley WMA will more resemble what it was when Grant, Carrie and Maude Boyd settled there in 1905. Likely it will be an even better refuge for native fauna and flora, as the land will no longer need to support a family. Allan Boyd would no doubt be pleased to see hunters walking the grasslands and fishermen trying their luck for trout in his creek.

Both Grant and Warren eventually returned to the home place. Warren died while hunting along Plum Creek. Grant lived there until he died in 1951 at the age of 83. Opal was known for her flower gardens. Even though they are not native plants, one hopes the poppies and dame’s rockets she planted continue to flourish around the old homestead — they are a memorial of sorts to Opal. Allan was a sportsman and Plum Creek was his paradise. That the family ranch is now open for hunting and fishing, as he always allowed, is his legacy.

“I fully appreciate the fact that the



Intermingled with the grasses are showy, native wildflowers such as plains gayfeather. Plants that had only been barely surviving are now flourishing.

Game and Parks Commission invests in land and streams so that future generation will have a place to hunt and fish,” Beebout wrote in his 1998 letter in support of the Boyd land becoming a wildlife management area. “In my lifetime, I’ve had my share of hunting and fishing. We need to make it available for future generations. That is what America is all about, and I’m sure the Boyds have the same feelings.” ■



Domestic poppies still flower at the old Boyd homestead, a reminder that the land had a life before it became a wildlife management area owned by the public.

Shed Hunting Dogs

Text and Photos by Eric Fowler



For eons, man has been finding ways to put that cold wet thing on the end of his best friend's face to work. He uses dogs and their amazing noses to hunt and track game, for search and rescue, and to sniff out drugs, bombs – even bedbugs in homes and invasive quagga mussels on boats. Now hunters have found yet another way to utilize Fido's powerful sense of smell: finding shed antlers.

Don Leeding of Doniphan and his two-year-old black Lab Jackie are part of that new segment of a hobby that

was already experiencing significant popularity growth among hunters wanting to see what bucks made it through the season, artists who turn antlers into lamps or other items, and families who treat it like a big Easter egg hunt.

Leeding has only been shed hunting for five years, but has hunted waterfowl and upland game with Labrador retrievers for most of his life. He likes to take his dogs for walks in the woods in the off-season, but he'd never thought about teaching his dogs to find sheds

until he saw a television feature on Roger Sigler, a Smithville, Mo., dog trainer who was doing just that. When he got Jackie, he decided to give Sigler a call and before he knew it the dog was in Missouri enrolled in his Antler Dog training program.

Jackie was a natural and "she just keeps getting better each time she goes out," said Leeding, whose new hobby has gone from hunts in the woods and fields along the Platte River to trips to other states. "We walk the deer trails and stuff like that because that's normally where they're going to be, but if we find one drop on the trail, she might find the match [in thicker cover] when we're out scrounging around."

While sheds are sometimes easy to spot in the winter deer woods, bucks don't always cooperate and drop them there. They may shed in cornfields, where everything looks like an antler, or waist-high CRP or a cedar thicket, where they become the proverbial needle in a haystack. That's where a dog's nose comes in handy.

For scenting dogs, size is everything. Not the size of the dog, but the size of its nose, which is lined with millions of scent receptor cells. Bloodhounds are the champ, with about 300 million cells, but the much smaller beagle also has a big nose, with 225 million scent receptor cells. The human nose, by comparison, has just five million.

Sigler has trained dogs professionally for more than 40 years, teaching sporting dogs to hunt and German shepherds to bite or find drugs or bombs. He has found Labradors to be the best breed for shed hunting, but says others might be trainable, especially retrievers. Not every Lab, however, will be good at shed hunting, Sigler said, just like not every person is good at math. "It's harder to get an antler dog than a drug dog," he said. "[Drug dogs] all work in a controlled environment."

Sigler practices the science of participative training, the basics of which are traced to Pavlov and his

dogs. He uses only positive reinforcement: no force fetch training, choke chains or shock collars.

"If you've got the right dog," said Sigler, "then it's simply a matter of using that dog's natural talents to perform the behaviors that you want it to do, whether you're training bomb dogs, drug dogs, search and rescue dogs, or antler dogs. A bomb dog or drug dog doesn't go looking for bombs or drugs until they're taught what it is they're looking for. With antler dogs, you are doing exactly the same thing – you're taking their natural prey drive, their desire for that antler, and you're creating a series of games which allows the dog to go out and hunt all day long for that antler just exactly the same way bomb dogs and drug dogs do."

Those games start when the dog is a puppy, fetching a ball impaled with a small piece of antler. The dogs are soon retrieving antlers, and by the time they are five to nine months old, they are hunting for and retrieving antlers hidden in the grass or woods. From there, they are ready for real shed hunts in the deer woods.

Sigler said some dogs are naturally better at some things than others, so he focuses the training on where it is needed most. A common problem is a dog hunting for the trainer's scent rather than the antler's. "In that case, you have to work on scent discrimination, teaching the dog exactly what he's looking for," he said. "You have to continually use different antlers. If you use one antler and that's what you train on, that dog will look for that one and walk right past another."

Washing the antlers and using rubber gloves when hiding them, or even having someone else hide them, may be required in this process.

Dogs can be cross trained to hunt birds and sheds, Sigler said. "These dogs are really intuitive," he said. "It's the commands you set up, much like when I'm training bite dogs – there's a certain command I can give and that dog's going to bite you."

He prefers completing the shed hunting training before moving on to birds, but even then, if pheasants are around, a dog is likely to choose those over antlers. "They have more value," Sigler said. That's why beagles, while they have great noses, don't make good shed dogs – there are too many rabbit tracks in the deer woods.

The right dog, with the right training, however, will hunt all day for a shed, ignoring everything else. In his sport show seminars, Sigler will send his Lab after an antler he's hidden in the arena, some big enough to hold 80,000 people. "The only thing she can think about is finding that antler," he said. "She goes between people's legs and up over counters and whatever she's got to do to get to it."

When he started training dogs to find sheds, Sigler thought a dog might be able to double a handler's haul. "But they find five to your one," said Sigler, who takes shed hunting to a new level by traveling to Canada almost every spring to hunt sheds in areas where hundreds of deer yard up in the winter. One day last spring, one of his dogs found 27 of the 35 sheds they picked up.

Like most shed hunters, the hunt is what attracts Leeding, especially the hunt for big antlers. "You can really get hooked on that stuff," he said, but Leeding also enjoys the exercise, being outside, and watching his dogs work. His other Labs, six-year-old Kate and four-year-old Billie, have even learned a trick or two from Jackie, and will now find sheds on their own, although Kate refuses to retrieve them.

While some shed hunters are in it for the money that can come with finding a matched set from a trophy buck, Leeding just keeps his sheds, some of which serve as chew toys for the dogs in the house. "I even tell landowners that if I find one and it's quite nice, I'll bring it back to them," he said. "I'm still looking at it as getting more antlers in front of

Jackie."

Shed hunting season is short, starting when bucks drop in January and ending when farmers begin working their fields, spring growth starts concealing the sheds, or nature washes enough of the scent away that even dogs have a hard time finding them. So Leeding plants antlers in the woods year-round for his dogs to find on their walks. "It's still a game," he said. "They still like going out and finding them."

And they can be very good at it. "If you've got a dog, try it," Sigler said. "When they're right, they're extraordinary." ■

For more on training dogs to hunt sheds, visit Roger Sigler's web site at AntlerDogs.com. You might also want to check out ShedDogTrainer.com or ShedAntlers.org.



(Left) Don Leeding's black Lab, Jackie, retrieves a shed antler in a Platte River Valley woodland. (Above) Leeding and Jackie with the sheds and skulls they found in 2011.

A History of Prairie Fire

A natural grassland process that was controlled for many years, the benefits of prairie fire are once again being touted.

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

For eons, lightning strikes have set fire to Great Plains prairies. Such fires occurred mainly in summer and were more frequent in the arid western Plains, where “dry storms” were common. In the humid eastern Plains, rain usually accompanied storms and doused most fledgling fires before they spread. If the grass was dry and the wind brisk, however, prairie fires could race for miles until encountering larger streams or heavily grazed areas with little grass fuel. Fire and climate shaped and maintained Great Plains prairies, promoting grass and limiting trees and shrubs to fire-protected sites.

Plains Indians, who migrated into the region about 13,000 years ago, likely observed the benefits to the landscape of lightning fires and adopted fire for their own use. They often set the prairie ablaze in autumn through early spring when grasses were dry and extremely flammable. These fires burned with intensity over large areas and were likely responsible for expanding Great Plains grasslands, displacing bordering shrublands and woodlands.

Some Native American fires, such as escaped campfires, were accidental, but most were purposely set. While traveling along the Platte River near the mouth of the Loup River in 1823, Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wuertemberg, noted that “the Indians know how to fire the prairie with great skill. They take advantage of a favorable wind. In spite of the fact that all around the village the grass was burned, the corn fields near the village were unharmed.” For tribe members, as with later European settlers, careless or untimely fires could be dangerous and destroy

forage, crops or villages, and those who set such fires were often punished.

Plains Indians used fire to force game from thick cover or drive bison off cliffs and embankments, and smoke was craftily used to herd bison to favorable hunting locations. They also used fire to influence the location of game and improve hunting opportunity: The prairie near villages was often burned in early spring to entice migrating bison herds to stop and graze the nutritious and palatable grass resprouts which they favored. In spring, grass sprouts a few weeks earlier on the blackened and sun-warmed soils of burned prairies compared to thatch-shaded, unburned areas. In late summer or fall, tribe members would burn grass off traditional bison wintering grounds, often far from villages, while leaving prairies near their villages unburned, forcing bison to winter within easy hunting distance of their lodges.

In warfare, Plains Indians set prairie fires to force enemies from thick cover, surround them with flame or burn their villages and encampments. In battle, well-placed fires and smoke could confuse the enemy; hide the movement, number and location of warriors; and hinder pursuers by covering trails after an unsuccessful attack. In the 1878 book *The Hunting Grounds of the Great West*, Colonel Richard Irving Dodge stated: “setting fire to the grass in the vicinity of the camp at night is one of the Indian modes of annoying a party too strong for attack and too vigilant for a successful attempt at theft.”

Native Americans also burned off dense grass to ease travel and to prevent potential wildfires near villages. Fires and smoke were used as signals to warn other bands of the

presence of enemies in the region, to proclaim the safe return of a war party, and other events. Prairies and woodlands were burned to enhance berry and seed crops and their harvest, and to clear land for farming. Fire historian Stephen J. Pyne has gone so far as to write that “fire use among Native peoples was an economic necessity ... and without fire most Indian economies would have collapsed.”

The arrival of Europeans on the Great Plains greatly impacted Native American cultures, economies and use of fire. One major change, beginning about 1700, was the American Indians’ adoption of the horse, brought to the continent by Europeans, as their primary mode of travel. Prior to this, many Plains tribes, such as the Sioux and Cheyenne, lived as hunters, gatherers and farmers on the more fertile and wooded Plains periphery and along major river valleys, traveling by foot into the Great Plains interior only for summer bison hunts. For these tribes, the horse and other factors led to a nomadic, bison hunting-based lifestyle and a permanent move into the Plains interior. “The chase” became their primary method of bison hunting for the mounted hunters and fire was used less in hunting. Tribes, however, began to frequently attack other tribes’ villages to steal horses and fire’s use in warfare likely increased. In general, after 1700 more Indians living and traveling on the Plains led to more frequent prairie fires.

For the Plains Indians, the era of the mounted bison hunter was short-lived. By the late-1800s, bison herds were in precipitous decline from unscrupulous commercial hunting and tribes were



Long before Euroamerican settlement, Plains Indians set prairie fires for many reasons, as illustrated in this 1908 artwork “The Grass Fire,” painted by the renowned American artist, Frederic Remington.

being ravaged by foreign diseases and forced onto reservations. Their culture was in turmoil and decline. Simultaneously, the Euroamerican culture, one unfamiliar with prairie fire, was advancing onto the Plains.

Europeans and Fire

Early Euroamerican plains explorers and travelers were awed by the scope, beauty and terror of prairie fires. “It was truly horrifying but at the same time a magnificent sight ... as it appeared for miles a sea of flame,” wrote Paul Wilhelm of an 1823 Kansas prairie fire. An insightful few readily adopted the traditional Indian methods and motives for firing the prairie. Some set the prairie ablaze as entertainment.

By the mid-19th century, settlement of the Plains was well underway. Westward advancing settlers and railroads – whose trains were spark-spewing machines – brought a magnitude of ignition sources

never before seen on the Plains. Compounding this, between 1870 and 1900 there were far fewer bison and yet relatively few cattle grazing the prairies, leading to excessive grass fuels. More fuel, ignition sources and people led to a period of frequent, severe and occasionally deadly prairie fires. Fire scars in tree rings indicate that during this period fires burned through areas of the densely-fueled eastern tallgrass prairies about every two to five years, and every decade or two in the western short-grass prairies.

Prairie fires threatened settlers’ crops, livestock, homes, families and even towns. A 1904 Oklahoma prairie fire left “more than a thousand people...homeless and penniless and many ... in need of medical assistance.” Settlers expended considerable effort plowing fire breaks and fighting wildfires. By the late-19th century, a fervent anti-fire sentiment was sweeping the plains. Local newspaper editors raged against

fire starters and vigilantes threatened lynching. Faced with such opposition, only a few ranchers, such as those in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas, continued to burn rangelands to improve forage and keep trees and shrubs at bay. Not by coincidence, fire has remained a commonly used grassland management tool in the Flint Hills to this day.

The droughts of the 1930s and 1950s only intensified the anti-fire campaigns as misinformed government and research agencies promoted the belief that fire damaged prairie grasses and exposed soils to erosion. Furthermore, in the 1940s the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies created the highly successful anti-fire, Smoky Bear program. Appealing to the strong religious sentiment of the time, its promotional materials went so far as to quote Bible passages deemed to be anti-fire. In one critic’s view this was “the most intensive – and most ludicrous – educational campaign

“The best thing about fire is that it forces landowners to think differently about grazing. Instead of grazing pastures the same way each year, they must include periods of rest from grazing to build fuel for burning.”
— *Kent Pfeiffer, Northern Prairies Land Trust Ecologist*

that ever insulted the intelligence of American audiences. It was carried on by well-meaning but utterly misinformed persons.”

Condemned by critics, by the mid-20th century prairie fire’s image and use were at all-time lows. In the 2011 book *Prairie Fire*, Julie Courtwright wrote: “In many ways the elimination of prairie fire was more about the cultural baggage that Euroamericans brought with them onto the Plains than it was about the fires themselves. The campaign against prairie fire was part of larger campaign to make the Plains into a ‘civilized’ place ... If a ‘savage’ people created this foreign, hostile environment [the prairie] with fire, then

a more ‘civilized’ could correct the savagery by suppressing fire.”

Fire Returns to Nebraska Prairies

In February of 1966, Carl Wolfe and Gary Schlichtemeier, now-retired Game Commission biologists, led the agency’s first prescribed fire at Ballard’s Marsh Wildlife Management Area in Cherry County. Their intent was to thin dense wetland vegetation. The term “prescribed fire” was coined by foresters in the 1940s for planned fires to achieve specific goals under particular fuel and weather conditions.

Wildfires, conversely, are unplanned burns set by lightning or human mishap/malice.

“Nobody was burning in Nebraska then except a few farmers burning weeds to prepare fields for planting and roadsides to ‘tidy up,’” said Wolfe. “From an ecological perspective, fire was thought to destroy wildlife habitat. Mel Steen’s (Commission director at the time) favorite stump speech was ‘the things that destroy wildlife habitat are the match, the plow and the cow.’ Steen made it clear that if the Ballard’s Marsh fire escaped, I could kiss my job goodbye.”

Wolfe explained that in the 1960s, prescribed fire was being used in only

a few areas of the United States to manage native vegetation and wildlife habitat. For example, in the southeastern U.S., pine plantations were regularly burned to reduce shrubs and promote grasses and forbs (nongrasslike herbaceous plants) to improve quail habitat.

In the late-60s, Wolfe traveled the state with Herbert L. Stoddard, legendary quail and prescribed-fire researcher in the southeast. “Stoddard saw the need for prescribed fire in Nebraska to improve pheasant and other wildlife habitat,” said Wolfe. Fortunately, Stoddard and Steen were old friends and after talking with Stoddard, Steen’s views on fire softened.

By the mid-70s, the Commission was regularly burning wildlife management areas (WMAs), principally in southeastern Nebraska, to improve wildlife habitat. Wolfe believes the Commission was the only conservation organization in the state using prescribed fire at that time. In the late-1970s, research conducted principally in the Flint Hills expounding the benefits of prescribed fire to prairie vegetation prompted the Commission to begin burning tallgrass prairies on its eastern Nebraska WMAs. By the mid-1980s, a few farmers and ranchers in eastern Nebraska were burning pastures and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fields to promote forage and reduce woody encroachment.

“We now have a few dozen landowners burning upwards of 10,000 acres of grassland each year in just Jefferson, Gage and Pawnee counties,” said Kent Pfeiffer, Northern Prairies Land Trust (NPLT) ecologist in southeastern Nebraska. Since 2003, the NPLT and Commission have provided cost-share to landowners to clear eastern red cedars and other invasive trees from prairies and conduct follow-up prescribed fires. “Many landowners



Native grasses and wildflowers increased in abundance in the southeastern South Dakota tallgrass prairie after cessation of annual haying and one prescribed fire.

now realize that tree encroachment is due to lack of fire and once they start burning to control trees they soon realize the benefits of fire to forage production,” said Pfeiffer. In prairies, fire removes dead vegetation that impedes grazing, reduces low forage value nonnative grasses and promotes high-value native grasses and forbs. In addition cattle, like bison, prefer grazing (and have increased weight gains) on recently burned grasslands.

“The best thing about fire is that it forces landowners to think differently about grazing,” said Pfeiffer. “Instead of grazing pastures the same way each year, they must include periods of rest from grazing to build fuel for burning. Rested and burned pastures generally have increased native plant diversity and more cover for wildlife compared to annually grazed pastures.” As if by magic, Pfeiffer has seen prairie chickens and other grassland wildlife quickly return to pastures cleared of trees and burned.

Although it is an increasingly common and accepted practice in eastern and central Nebraska grasslands, prescribed fire is still little used and fairly controversial in the Sandhills and western Nebraska. Tree

encroachment into the latter regions’ grasslands, however, may soon make prescribed fire a necessity as it is the only economically viable solution to woody invasion and maintenance of the state’s rangelands.

Pfeiffer believes landowners in southeastern Nebraska are burning safely: “One thing that has helped is that neighbors are starting to burn together and are designing larger but safer burn units with good firebreaks, such as roads, streams or crop fields. There is a learning curve with fire and they still make mistakes, but even highly-trained burn crews make mistakes,” said Pfeiffer.

Keys to safe prescribed burning, in addition to establishing good fire breaks, include among other things using the wind to your advantage, setting fire at the right pace and conserving water supplies. Prescribed fire training workshops and landowner cooperatives are available in areas of the state to help landowners burn more safely.

Prescribed fire’s revival on the Great Plains and in Nebraska is little more than relearning an ancient Native American tradition, one that provides benefits to prairie, wildlife and our economy. ■



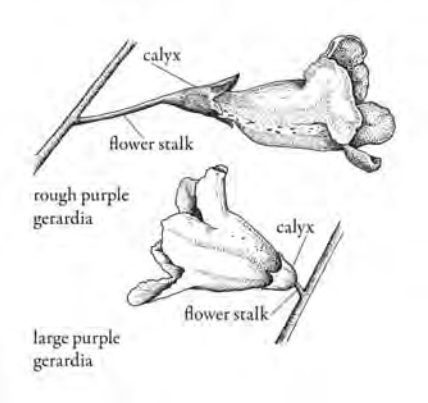
Prairie fires, such as this spring prescribed fire on the Platte River bluffs in Hamilton County, can burn with intensity, limiting shrubs and trees to fire-protected sites.

Wildflower Field Guide

Out of print for 20-plus years, this popular field guide is now back – better than ever.

There is a poem called “The Mouse’s Tale” in Lewis Carroll’s novel, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, in which the mouse says: “Mine is a long and a sad tale!” That line comes to mind when considering the life of the first edition of *Field Guide to Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains*, published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in 1990.

The book was well received, as there was a need for a visual and word guide to some of the showiest and most commonly encountered wildflowers in the region. The 10,000 copies that were printed sold within a year-and-a-half. Before it went to press, the plan was to reprint the book if it proved successful, perhaps even expand it



Line art in this field guide helps illustrate interesting details or identification aids for various flowers.

to include even more species, and so all the negatives from which the press plates had been made were left with the Iowa printing company. This was in the days before digital photograph scans and such things, back in the dark ages of book printing, one or two steps up from rubbing colored rock on cave walls.

Several years passed and the book was not reprinted. More years passed. During all that time requests for the book continued to pour in, so it was finally decided to do a second printing. It was assumed, foolishly, the printer still had the negatives from which new press plates could be made. Alas, the printer had gone out of business and all press-ready materials it had been holding were either recycled or sent to the landfill. To reprint the book would mean starting from scratch – all that existed of the final text was a digital version of

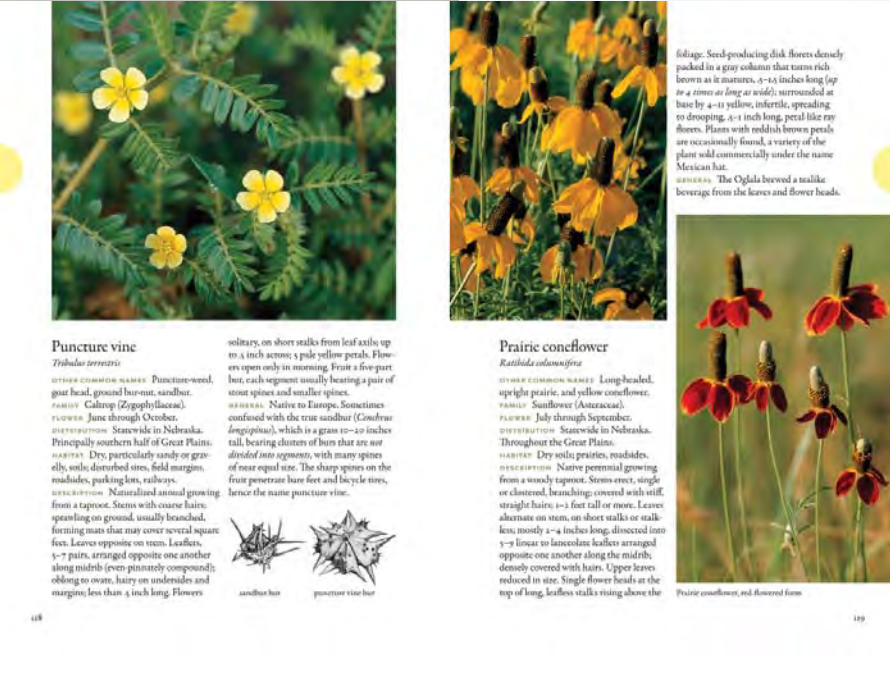
the first draft, so the text would have to be redone, new color separations would have to be made from all the photo transparencies, the book would have to be designed a second time, and all pre-press production costs paid again. Lacking money and time, the project was shelved again.

More years passed, and the demand for copies of the book grew. Letters and phone calls continued to arrive asking for the book to be reprinted. There were several proposals from publishers to reprint it, but none were financially attractive except to the publishers. Botanical and conservation organizations formally requested that the book be reprinted. Dog-eared copies of the book were selling on online auctions for \$40 a copy and up. More years passed. And then one day, 20 years after the first edition was published, an e-mail arrived from Holly Carver, editor of the Bur Oak Guide series for University of Iowa Press, asking about the book: “Is there any possibility of bringing it back into print? If so, we would be very interested in partnering with you to make this happen.” E-mails were exchanged, and eventually a contract drafted and signed by both parties.

In the year that followed, first-draft electronic text was meshed with the final text of the first edition. Commission botanist Gerry Steinauer updated all the changes that had been made in botanical nomenclature over the last 20 years (which were legion), and refined descriptions of some plants as needed. Transparencies used in the first edition were scanned by University of Iowa Press and where possible, newer and better photographs replaced photographs from the first edition. In some cases plants included in the first edition were replaced with plants considered of more interest to

users of the guide. A better map of the vegetation zones of Nebraska, done by botanists Robert Kaul and Steven Rolfsmeier, replaced an older, less detailed map. Introductory text was updated. In January, the second edition was released.

All the features that made the first edition useful and popular are retained in the second. Flowers are organized by color, the quickest way for amateur botanists to match a live plant with its description in the book, and plants within each color category are arranged from earliest of spring to last of fall. Closely related flowers, and flowers similar in appearance, are grouped



for comparison as much as possible. Text describing a plant appears with a photograph of it. The text organization is consistent for the user’s convenience, a uniform order and style for each species so information is easy to find. Common names, family name, time of flowering, distribution, habitat, a detailed description of the plant and, in most cases, addition information such as folklore and medicinal uses are included. For convenience, measurements are not in metric; and technical, botanical language is minimized so the text is understandable for those without botanical training. The book’s photographs were selected to show important identification



as it needs to be to aid in flower identification. Color sections are coded with margin tabs to quickly get the user into the right section. Overall, the design is more contemporary and appealing than the first edition, as would be expected by the University of Iowa Press, one of the top publishers in the country.

Robert B. Kaul, curator of botany for the University of Nebraska State Museum and coauthor of *The Flora of Nebraska*, the botanical bible for Nebraska and neighboring states, wrote: “The clear, natural photographs in Jon Farrar’s *Field Guide to Wildflowers of Nebraska and the Great Plains* show colors and details seldom seen and set a standard for books of this sort. Many of the plants illustrated are rarely photographed with such care, and they grow in a region that’s often neglected by similar manuals. Farrar’s text is accurate and detailed enough to suit a wide variety of users, without overwhelming them with technical terms. Its accuracy is assured because many local experts have reviewed it for both editions.” ■

Selling for \$29.95 – \$10 of cover price – this book can be ordered by going to NebraskalandGifts.com or by calling 1-800-742-9956. It can also be purchased at many Nebraska Game and Parks Commission district offices and state parks or nature centers.

The Luckiest Person on Earth

Text and photos by Abby Jensen

Good timing, good light and great luck led to the photo adventure of a lifetime for a photographer looking for whooping cranes on the central Platte River last spring.

It was dark when I pulled into the campground at Fort Kearny State Recreation Area (SRA) near Kearney. The excitement for my upcoming whooping crane adventure was thick in the air. I had been researching the endangered whooping crane for months and was hoping I would get the chance to see a couple of whoopers during my trip to the Kearney area in early April. The Big Bend portion of the Platte River in central Nebraska is a common stopover location for the cranes during their annual spring migration to their nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo National Park, located in northeastern Alberta and the southern Northwest Territories in Canada.

I had no idea what lay ahead of me.

My first day was spent with Gene Hunt, superintendent of the SRA and adjacent Fort Kearny State Historical Park. Gene is an informed and knowledgeable tour guide, as well as

an expert historian for Kearney County. We toured some of the conservation efforts being done in the area, including numerous wetlands scattered among corn fields and grasslands. It was amazing to see the work being done to bring these lands back to their prairie beginnings.

Because there were still a number of migrating sandhill cranes in the area, I spent some time photographing these intriguing birds. A close relative of whooping cranes, sandhill cranes typically begin their northbound migration much earlier than whoopers, often arriving in Nebraska by late-February, and typically staying here for up to six weeks as they put on the valuable fat reserves they will need when they arrive at their nesting grounds in northern Canada. While driving around, I was fortunate to see a leucistic, or white, sandhill crane. Occasionally the feathers on a sandhill crane don't develop their usual color

pigments and the feathers remain white instead of the typical gray. Leucistic sandhill cranes are frequently mistaken for their much larger cousins, the whoopers.

After an afternoon of driving, bird watching and photographing, it was time to head back to the campground. That evening, listening to sounds of the sandhill cranes as they gathered along the Platte, was magical and something I will never forget.

The next day I was out and about surveying my surroundings when I got the call – eight whoopers were roosting in the south channel of the Platte River right in front of a blind nearby at the Audubon Society's Rowe Sanctuary. Whooping crane spotters were looking for a photographer with a long lens to get some pictures of them and I fit the bill!

Gary Lingle is an ornithologist and conservationist who has been studying

cranes and other birds of the Platte River Valley for more than 30 years. I met up with him on a county road near the blind as soon as I could. Gary is one of numerous people who serve as an aforementioned "whooping crane spotter" during their migration. These spotters help keep track of these endangered birds and help protect them from intentional or unintentional harm. After making our introductions, Gary and I slowly walked out to the blind,

taking care not to disturb the majestic birds. Once inside I was breathless: The most amazing sight was right in front of me – eight whoopers with their heads tucked under a wing and a strong north wind fluttering their feathers, were taking a much needed rest on a sandbar. We were there for some time before even one of them peeked out from under its plumage. The strong north wind continued to blow throughout the next few days



Six endangered whooping cranes fly to a nearby field for breakfast in beautiful morning light near Kearney last spring.



Lifting off into a brisk north wind, five whoopers leave their roost in front of a blind at Audubon Nebraska's Rowe Sanctuary.

which, as I later learned, worked to my advantage.

Gary told me I was the luckiest person he had ever known – in all his years of studying and tracking whooping cranes, this was the first time he had ever seen a group this large on their stopover while migrating north. We stayed for about 90 minutes watching and waiting. It was almost time for Gary to turn his watch over to another spotter when the birds begin to move around. Playing with sticks, tugging on the radio transmitters they'd been fitted with as chicks in order to track their movements, and cleaning their feathers, Gary thought the birds might be getting ready to make a move.

The flock had been there overnight and whooping cranes don't normally like to stay around in one area too long while migrating. We waited patiently for another 10 minutes or so until the flock crouched into their pre-flight stance and whoosh – the group was up fighting against the north wind. All while I was snapping away with my camera. I could not believe I was actually there experiencing the moment.

The cranes lifted off straight into the north wind and with a sharp turn glided back south. We ran out of the blind to watch. Gary kept the flock in sight as best he could. We were excited about the sharp turn back south the

birds made, hoping that we would get a chance to see them again. I couldn't wait to get back to my camper to download the digital images from that breathtaking experience.

The next day, with a strong north wind still blowing, the group was spotted hunkered down in a wetland southwest of Kearney. So I headed over and started waiting and watching again. The wind was so strong that they stayed hunkered down the entire four hours I was parked along the roadside. They seemed quite content to simply mill about the wetland, enjoying the Rainwater Basin.

The following morning, back at that same wetland, I was treated to a



"Dancing" and tossing sticks into the air, two whoopers interact as the trio around them look on.



After spending the night in a wetland southwest of Kearney, a flock of whooping cranes fly to a nearby cornfield for a late-morning snack before continuing their migration north last spring.

beautiful sunrise. The winds had died down considerably, and it wasn't long before a flock of sandhills joined what was now a group of nine whooping cranes. The two crane groups seemed comfortable with one another, although neither took too kindly to the woodducks that wanted to stop for a visit.

After about an hour, the whoopers began dancing, playing and preening their feathers, which I took as a sign that they might be getting ready to fly again. Camera ready, I watched in the beautiful, perfect morning light. Sure enough, just as Gary had taught me, they crouched into preflight postures and took off. To my surprise

and delight they flew right over my head and landed in a cornfield behind me. The flock spent about 30 minutes in the field looking for a late morning snack before returning to the wetland. After a short rest, the nine cranes continued their migration – giant white wings with black tips carrying them skyward in the morning sun to the

warm thermals above that would carry them north. That was the last time I saw this amazing group of whooping cranes. After spending time with the spotters and the locals of the area, I realize that, as Gary said, I might have been the luckiest person on earth for those three days ... it was definitely an experience

that I will treasure and remember forever. ■

Abby Jensen is a native Nebraskan who recently moved to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to expand her wildlife photography business. To see more of her work, visit www.jensen-photography.com.



Keeping Your Toes Warm

Survival in the wild is often a matter of small, but beneficial, details.

By Jon Farrar

Winter months test the mettle of birds not migrating south to warmer climates. Year-round Nebraska residents and species breeding north but wintering here have evolved ways of coping with frigid temperatures and snow-covered feeding grounds.

Bird's feathers are remarkable insulation, and the number of feathers on some species increases with the fall molt. American goldfinches and black-capped chickadees are said to be covered with about 1,000 feathers in the summer months, but more than 2,000 during the winter. Oil from preen glands improves waterproofing. Fluffing feathers creates air pockets, increasing the thickness of the insulating covering. Birds put on white fat, a high-energy fuel that when burned warms the body. Some species, bobwhites, roost in tight clusters overnight to decrease exposure and heat loss. Many birds shiver to warm themselves, producing body heat at five times the normal rate.

But how do birds keep their featherless feet warm? When you see a wintering mallard standing on ice with one leg tucked up into its breast feathers, you can almost be sure it will periodically alternate which leg is being warmed; and when you see an apparently legless sandhill crane flying on a particularly cold March day, it no doubt has both legs tucked up into belly feathers. Birds also have a unique circulatory system in their feet so warm blood passes through a network of small arteries lying close to small veins, warming blood returning to the heart. Rather than heat being lost, it is transferred within the feet, and the featherless appendages are warmed like a radiator.

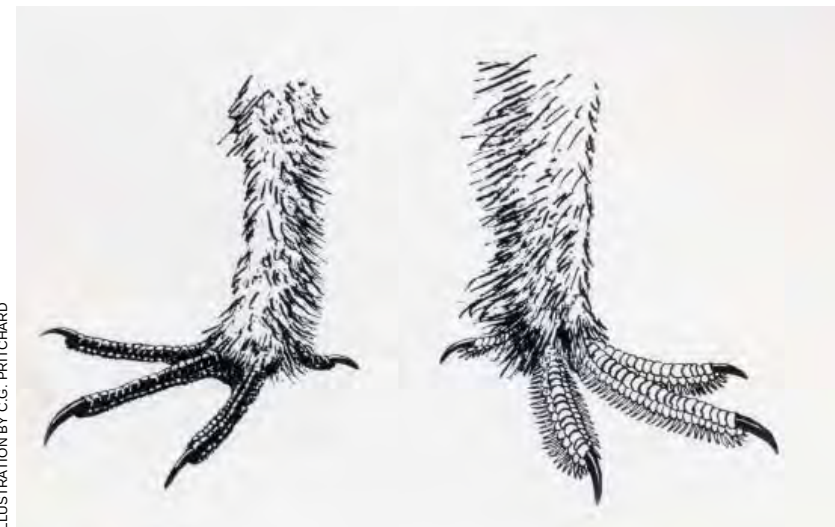
The two species of prairie grouse that are year-round residents in Nebraska provide an interesting comparison of how bird species have adapted to the climate. Nebraska is on



Because the range of sharp-tailed grouse, above, is principally north of Nebraska, it has evolved adaptations benefitting it in a snowy environment, more so than the greater prairie chicken.

the southern edge of the sharp-tailed grouse range, a range that encompasses much of Canada and into Alaska. The greater prairie chicken was a bird of tallgrass prairie, and so its historical range lies to the south and east of Nebraska where winters are shorter and milder. For the same reasons polar bears are white, and northern weasels and snowshoe hares molt into white plumages in winter (to better blend with their environment), sharptails have a more white plumage than do prairie chickens.

Two of the most interesting contrasts between sharptails and prairie chickens are seen on their nostrils and feet. The nostrils of sharptails are feather-covered to keep wind-blown snow from entering, and to ameliorate the effect of cold winds. Even more interesting is that the toes of sharptails are lined with feathery scales and those of prairie chickens are not. The feathering is sparse and probably more useful functioning as snowshoes, allowing the birds to walk on snow without breaking through. Other North American grouse species of higher latitudes have even heavier feathering on their feet. ■



Unlike the naked toes of a prairie chicken, left, the sharptail's toes are lined with feathery scales, probably functioning somewhat like snowshoes.

ILLUSTRATION BY C.G. PRITCHARD

Park Aspens

Smith Falls aspens declining.

By Mike Groenwald

Smith Falls State Park near Valentine not only has the highest waterfall in the state, it also contains a number of aspen trees – a species not found in a lot of Nebraska locales, and one which helps make Smith Falls SP one of the prettiest places in the state.

Unfortunately, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission staff and others are concerned because these small, remnant stands of aspens are declining. A biologist could write a book on the theory of their decline, but a host of factors seem to be at work: Climate change, disease and insects, as well as land use changes since settlement are some possible causes. Most agree this landscape looked far different now than prior to settlement 130 years ago – the pine-covered uplands were much more open and were interspersed with bur oak and red cedar. The aspens probably flourished in moist spring seep canyons. Occasional wildfires started by lightning or Native Americans, as well as grazing by wildlife such as bison, once maintained the open woodlands. As the region was settled, however, homesteaders began protecting their property by suppressing wildfires and the landscape changed dramatically. An open forest became a densely crowded forest.

Fortunately, a management program is now in place to hopefully restore and maintain the park's aspens by thinning

red cedar and excess ponderosa pine from the park forest.

Officials hope to introduce prescribed fire to further restore and maintain the native grasslands and woodlands.

This project is partially funded through a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust, which is funded by proceeds from the Nebraska Lottery and has awarded more than \$157 million to conservation projects in Nebraska since 1994.

At this time there are four aspen groves containing four to six mature trees, and two aspen groves composed of one to two mature trees, remaining in the park's forest. Most competing red cedar trees have been thinned beneath the mature and declining aspens, and numerous sprouts are developing from the roots of mature trees – definitely a good sign for the restoration efforts.

Aspens will reproduce from seed, but new trees develop more readily from root sprouts.

Work on the project continues – a host of organisms, including insects, fungi and viruses, attack aspen, and deer browse the young sprouts and have become the next obstacle to encouraging the development of sprouts into trees that can perpetuate the groves. As a result, workers recently protected a number of sprouts in the four largest aspen groves by using wooden stakes and plastic netting to discourage browsing by deer. Hopefully the young sprouts will survive and begin replacing the mature trees. ■

Mike Groenwald is a park horticulturist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.



Jon Morgenson, park horticulturist, helps erect fencing to protect young aspens at Smith Falls.

PHOTO BY MIKE GROENWALD

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Meet the Spadefoot

One of Nebraska's more unusual amphibians, spadefoots need torrential rains to reproduce.

By Dan Fogell, Herpetologist, Southeast Community College

It's spring, it's night time, and it's raining. Not a quiet drizzle either, but a cloudburst complete with thunder and lightning. It is one of those nights where you're glad you're not traveling anywhere. Not me, though – I'm trying to find any excuse to get out and go on a search for what I consider Nebraska's cutest amphibian – the plains spadefoot. I say cute because if any frog has "Bambi eyes" it's the spadefoot. Often called spadefoot toads, the two- to three-inch long plains spadefoots are not really true toads. They have smooth moist skin, whereas toads have warty, dry skin. They also lack those giant glands on their head (called parotoid glands) that toads use to secrete poison.

Spadefoots have several features that make them unique among Nebraska's amphibian fauna. For instance, they have spades on their back feet. Well, not real spades but **dark, shovel-like**



projections made of keratin – the same protein that makes up human hair

and fingernails. They use them to bury themselves deep (often several feet) underground where they spend weeks or even months waiting for rain. Another feature is a **vertically elliptical pupil**. All frogs and toads have elliptical pupils, but most are horizontal. Spadefoots are the only Nebraska frogs with vertically elliptical pupils and at night, with a light shining on them, they look like big, wide "Bambi eyes."



What probably makes them most interesting, however, is their reproductive strategy. Warm torrential rains trigger their emergence from underground refugia. Why? To breed, of course. They breed opportunistically and explosively when the conditions



PHOTO BY DAN FOGELL

With its "Bambi eyes," spadefoots may be Nebraska's cutest amphibian.

are right. Heavy rains leave behind many small, temporary pools ... perfect breeding habitat for spadefoots. In fact, I once saw hundreds of spadefoot tadpoles in a rain-filled tire rut on a dirt road! Females lay thousands of eggs that hatch in about a day, and tadpoles metamorphose from egg to froglet in a month – faster than any other Nebraska frog or toad. Frog and toad tadpoles breathe using gills and feed on vegetation and algae. Temporary pools don't stay around long enough for those resources to be abundant, making it difficult to support thousands of rapidly growing tadpoles. Therefore, growing legs and lungs and getting out of the water is a top priority. So consider this: thousands of tadpoles in a rapidly disappearing pool of water means extreme competition for food and oxygen. How, then, do enough tadpoles survive to keep the population thriving? Spadefoots have a contingency plan. They produce two kinds of tadpoles: small ones that eat algae and vegetation, and large ones that eat other tadpoles. That's right ...

cannibalism. If pools remain productive and vegetation and algae can keep the herbivores fed, then great. But if not, at least some of the tadpoles will eat their fellow tadpoles (as well as those of other species), grow faster than the herbivores, and get out of the pool before it dries out. Once they metamorphose there is no way to tell if they were carnivorous or herbivorous as tadpoles.

Just like other Nebraska wildlife, plains spadefoots have evolved a strategy that ensures survival in the harsh plains environment. And while it may seem unpleasant and brutal to eat your siblings and cousins, it is simply a means to an end that has proven successful for this cute, wide-eyed amphibian. ■

Dan Fogell teaches biology and zoology at Southeast Community College in Lincoln. He has appeared in NEBRASKALAND Magazine since 2000.

Special thanks to Adam Meser's image of the foot and Colorado Division of Wildlife's image of the eye.

from NEBRASKALAND's Trail Tales magazine for kids

junior journal!

interesting notes for readers of all ages

by Lindsay Rogers and Donna Schimonitz

Wind Energy In Nebraska

by Shaun Dunn

Every time you turn on a light you're using electricity. Electricity can be generated from many sources - coal, nuclear, water and natural gas. Another source that is becoming popular is wind energy. Wind can be used for power with the help of a turbine. Turbines have large blades that attach to a central hub. As the wind blows, it spins these blades around. This spinning motion powers a generator inside the hub which then produces electricity. This electricity is then used to power your lights and other electric gadgets!

Does Wind Energy Impact the Environment?

Wind energy can impact the environment in several ways. The first, called direct impacts, occur when flying animals, like birds and bats, are killed by flying into a turbine.

Another way wind energy can negatively impact the environment is through Indirect Impacts. These include: habitat fragmentation, habitat destruction, and habitat degradation. For example, some birds will avoid tall structures like wind turbines, making the habitat around the turbines useless for finding food or nesting.

Is Wind Energy Good?

Wind energy is beneficial for several reasons: it's a renewable energy source (which means it will never run out), it's inexpensive to capture and use, and the turbines occupy a small area of land. Wind energy is also considered a clean source of energy because it doesn't release any chemicals or greenhouse gasses.

Is Wind Energy Good for Nebraska?

Yes! It is a clean and renewable source of energy. To reduce the environmental impacts of wind energy, turbines should be constructed in areas already disturbed or developed. When turbines are built in areas where they will have little impact on the wildlife, wind energy is a great source of energy for Nebraska.



photo by Jon Farar

Wind farms are developing in Nebraska.

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- ☐ Read lots of books
- ☐ Replace your furnace filter regularly
- ☐ Eat lots of popcorn



Third, sixth and eighth grades do NOT conserve energy

NATURE CALENDAR

- **Baby opossums** born; climb into their mother's pouch: early March
- **Flowers** blooming: March through April
- **Male red-winged blackbirds** arrive from wintering grounds; begin to establish territories: mid-March
- Look for **Luna Moths** on buildings and trees: beginning in April
- **Meadowlarks** begin nesting: mid-May
- **Fawns** are born: May through June



photo by Doug Carroll

white-tailed deer fawn

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

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◀ This is my great-grandfather, James Hocking, after a rabbit hunt. He settled north of Denton in 1876 and died in 1912. My mother told us he moved from New England out here to the prairie for the sake of my infant grandmother's health. Once she could walk, they tied her to the corner of the barn so she would not get lost in the tall grass. She grew up to be a petite but strong woman, cheery, energetic, and especially quick, which my grandfather attributed to her early diet of rabbit and squirrel.

– Jane Reinkordt, Denton, Nebraska

► Pictured is my father, Lee M. Clark, my brother, Marvin Clark, and my uncle, Frank Clark, in the 1930s. The location was four miles east of Chappell on Uncle Frank's farm. There were five brothers and they all farmed in Nebraska. The Ford truck has a home-made wooden box that the whitetailed jackrabbits were nailed to the side of. They hunted rabbits for a bounty at that time. One of the shotguns, identified by my son, Dwight Montgomery, is a Winchester 1897 round knob.

– Virginia Montgomery, North Platte, Nebraska



◀ This photo was taken on a pheasant hunt north of Alliance in November 1971. From left are: Ron Brumbaugh; Ben Urzendowski; and myself, Pat McWilliams, all of Omaha.

The dog's name was Lady – NEBRASKALand Magazine did an article regarding her hunting skills in a 1970 or 1971 issue.

– Pat McWilliams, Omaha, Nebraska



Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKALand Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to tim.reigert@nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1980. 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.

True Blue

Unmistakable when seen (but ya gotta see it first), chicory blue catches your eye.

By Roger Welsch

Linda has this theory that you can tell where her kinsmen (Bohemians) live by the flashes of that gorgeous blue you catch from the corner of your eye as you pass by their farms and towns. It's chicory. Blue is one of my favorite colors anyway but there's no mistaking the blue of chicory. There is, however, a possibility of missing it altogether.

When I first started my passion for wild edibles back in the 1960s I wanted to find this "chicory" stuff because it is a legendary fresh salad green and, of course, provides the chocolaty, bitterness of chicory coffee. I was talking with my friend Mike Cowan, a biology teacher and fellow faculty member at Nebraska Wesleyan, and he said, "Oh, there are tons of it in the highway ditch up toward Wahoo. Tons of it. You can't miss that blue." You know – Bohemian country. So that afternoon after classes I head up Highway 77 with a shovel and a bucket. And I found ... nothing. I stopped near a railroad trestle Mike had specifically mentioned and walked around in the weeds. Nothing. Not a hint of blue.

I drove back home disappointed and confronted Mike in the faculty lounge the next day. He was flabbergasted that I could have missed it. "Chicory everywhere!" he sputtered. "You can't miss it. That blue is unmistakable!" So I tried again that afternoon. Nothing. Not one blue flower.

The next day I was getting just a touch miffed about being jerked around by a friend. Then he remembered. "Uh, Rog ... chicory only blooms in the morning." That was Friday so the next morning, bright and early, I headed up the same road again and this time I recorded in my eye and my eye's mind that spectacular blue that I have never forgotten since ... the blue of Linda's eyes and Bohemian ditches.

We have often speculated, Linda and I, how something like this phenomenon happens: Did some Czech settler, liking the blue of the flowers, the tang of the greens or the rich taste of the roasted roots, plant some chicory and then wound up spreading it up and down the roads the next time he or the roads department mowed? Luckily, chicory likes being mowed, so it prospers with abuse. Or is it a purposeful signpost in Bohemian-dense areas like Butler County, Nebraska? Is it like this in Czechoslovakia?

My yard when I lived on Mohawk Street in Lincoln was in large part chicory. I once dug a mess of those roots up toward Wahoo and cleaned them on my front stoop so I could roast them for coffee. The next spring it was clear that while chicory coffee was my intent, the chicory had its own notions about what was going on: it was establishing itself in advance in soil that would eventually be a Bohemian home when I married Linda. It knew better than I did.

It doesn't matter, I guess, when all is said and done. That glorious blue is there and Linda and I never fail to appreciate it as a Nebraska glory and one of Linda's true kinsmen. Once you learn to recognize that specific hue, you

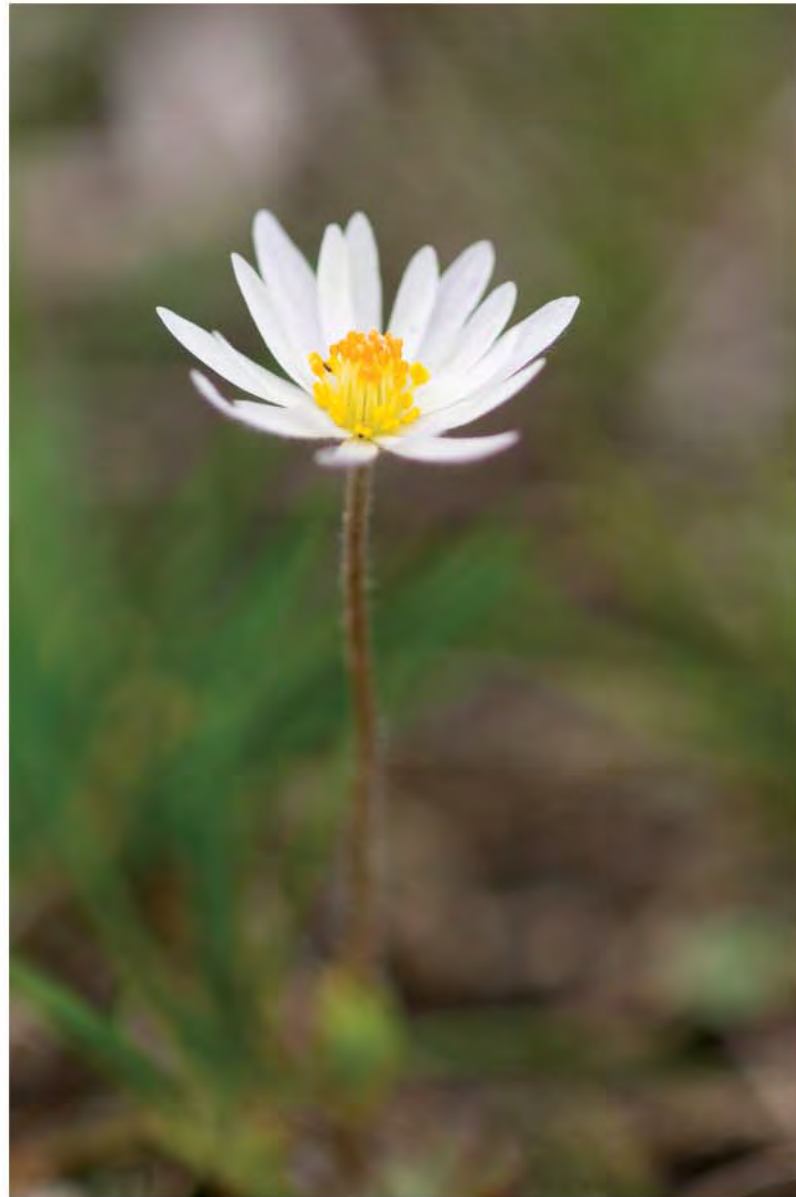


PHOTO BY JON FARPAR

won't need to look for it or think about it. You'll be driving along thinking about something entirely apart from weeds in general or in particular and suddenly, far back in your peripheral vision, you'll see it. Chicory. In fact, the next time you come through Dannebrog ... a Danish town set in a German-Polish geography ... watch the ditches and when you see that glorious blue, you'll know that you are close to our place. At least if you pass through in the morning. ■

Roger Welsch is an author, humorist and folklorist. For years he was a regular guest on CBS's Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt. Welsch resides in Dannebrog, Nebraska, with his wife, Linda. He has appeared in NEBRASKALand Magazine since 1977.





I've only seen a Carolina anemone flower twice in the prairies I manage along the Central Platte River. Each time, it was in the same hill prairie, and each time, I found it in the spring following a summer prescribed burn. Sometimes, breaking out of traditional management patterns, such as spring burning, can bring pleasant surprises. In this case, a small flower found an opportunity to bloom while surrounding grasses were still reeling from the shock of the previous summer's burn (and subsequent grazing). How many years had it waited for that chance? How many other plant and animal species are out there, hunkered down and waiting for an unexpected opportunity – a chance to grab a temporary edge over their competition? How many disappear before their chance comes?

It's a complex world out there, but sometimes we are pretty unimaginative in our stewardship of it. Every land management decision is an opportunity to learn. It's up to us to grab those opportunities when we can. The anemone, and other species like it, are both the reward and reason for taking chances.



Chris Helzer
April 14, 2010

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