



On a snowy January day in Omaha, a fox squirrel forages for food on the campus of Grace University.
Photo by Pasquale R. Mingarelli.



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NEBRASKAland

January-February
2009



Eagle at the Window

an encounter by the
Missouri River

Fontenelle Forest

Wildlife at Omaha's Doorstep

Craniacs

These volunteers invade
Rowe Sanctuary every Spring

PLUS

- the LONGHORNS of Fort Rob
- Nebraska GOOSE HUNTING - the recent years
- QUAIL and ICE don't mix
- cross-country SKIING at state areas
- hunting at CRESCENT Lake National Wildlife Refuge



NEBRASKAland

Volume 87, Number 1, January-February 2009

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Opposite: In the early morning, a train rides the rails along the Platte River and Eugene T. Mahoney State Park in Sarpy County. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.

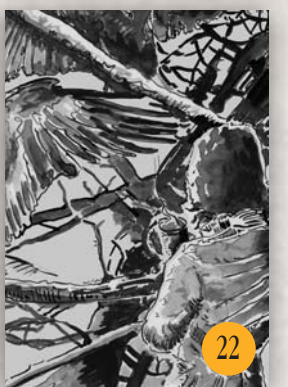
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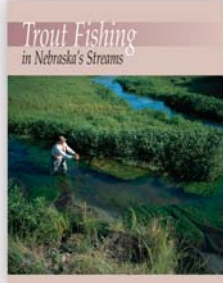
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Trout Fishing Help

I am looking for a publication that shows all trout waters in Nebraska. Specifically, streams. I fly-fish, live in western Nebraska and am interested in finding a few options.

Tim Lecher
Sidney, Nebraska

"Trout Fishing in Nebraska's Streams" offers lots of great information about fishing for trout here and can be found at most Commission offices across the state, or can be sent to you directly if you send a request to let.hain@nebraska.gov.



Out-of-state Hunters

I was not very happy about the pheasant hunting article in a recent issue.

It is getting harder every year for locals to find a place to hunt. As good as it is to have them nearby, Cabela's is a detriment as they are leasing much of the ground that we used to be able to hunt.

Then to add insult to injury, *Nebraskaland Magazine* writes a nice article on out-of-state hunters hunting the west end of Lake McConaughy. Can't "our" magazine find some Nebraskans to write about?

I know we gain income from out of state hunters, but do we charge the high rates that other states charge us if we wish to hunt there?

Well, I feel better now that I have vented. I just hate to see our kids and grandkids get shut out of the sport of hunting that I so enjoyed as youngster in Nebraska.

Ron Mettscher, via e-mail

The story was about a Nebraskan who wishes he still lived here. But as is often the case, he and his wife, an Oshkosh native, followed careers to other states. So whenever he gets the chance to come "home," Vasa makes the most of the lifetime hunting permit he's carried since high school and heads to the field with old friends who still live here, (including one from Oshkosh featured in this story) and occasionally with new ones that he's lured to the Cornhusker state by taking every opportunity he gets to extoll its virtues. One of those is the ease of finding places to hunt.

Yes, leasing has closed some land to resident hunters, including yourself. That trend concerns the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, but the Commission is not sitting idly by. Its CRP-MAP program has opened more than 180,000 acres of private land to all hunters, and the Commission is set to launch another access program. In doing so, it hopes to boost the number of hunters in the state, a number that has been on a steady decline among both residents and nonresidents, in order to maintain the revenue needed to support the agency's mission.

Approximately 19 percent of the 99,000 Nebraska small game licenses sold in 2007 went to nonresidents. While the fees that Nebraska charges nonresident bird hunters are slightly lower than elsewhere, those permits still account for about 42 percent of the \$3.4 million generated for Commission programs, and nonresidents spent another \$300,000 on habitat stamps. Additional money is brought in by big game and waterfowl hunters that are nonresidents.

An informal survey by this magazine in 2000 found that two-thirds of nonresident hunters had ties to the state. Like Vasa, many grew up just down the road. Your kids and grandkids could fit the same mold someday. Will you want them to bring their shotguns when they come back to visit?

-Editor

Lake Maloney

The August/September article about Lake Maloney near North Platte, brought back a lot of memories.

I was born in 1936 and my parents, Louis and Alice Drost, together with their good friends Frank and Ethel McKain, completed the first lake cabin on lot 99. This was in 1937-38, I believe, and my uncle and aunt, Joe and Anna Mae Prohosky, completed the second cabin on lot 101 a short time later.

Many friends were entertained over the following years at these two cabin sites. Boat rides, surfboarding behind the boat and cookouts were the tone of the weekends.

Later, just after WWII, that original cabin was sold and my parents built their second cabin on lot 97. It was named the Pla-Mor and I believe it is still there, with several modifications over the past 60-plus years.

I spent many summers fishing from our dock and catching numerous varieties of fish – crappies, perch, catfish, walleyes and one 18 ½ pound northern pike.

The lake has changed over the nearly 70 years, but it is still a welcome place for fishing, boating and relaxing.

Thanks to Rocky Hoffmann for writing that article.

Ken Drost
Omaha, Nebraska

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

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Big Blue Dies

For 11½ years, he awed visitors to the Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium near Gretna, and at 95 pounds he was the largest North American catfish in captivity. For the previous month, the fish affectionately known as Big Blue had been “turning up his nose” at trout he once consumed at the rate of seven per week. On November 4, Big Blue pumped his gills for the last time.

Big Blue came to the Aquarium in the bed of Cliff and Donna Ferguson’s pickup truck. He made the trip from the Nishnabotna River in northwest Missouri after being caught by the Fergusons on a setline baited with a 5-inch bullhead. The ride was tough on Big Blue and things were touch-and-go for a couple of days, but thanks to treatment from Aquarium staff, Big Blue made a full recovery. An examination of Big Blue’s pectoral spine and otolith

(ear bone) revealed that he was at least 35 years old at the time of his death, making him among the oldest living blue catfish ever documented.

The Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium would like to replace Big Blue and is seeking a blue catfish weighing at least 50 pounds. A plaque with the name of the person providing the first blue catfish meeting or exceeding that weight that is in good condition will be displayed at the Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium on the tank containing the fish. Contact Tony Korth at (402) 332-3901 for details.

Rex Amack Elected President of AFWA

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies named Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Director Rex Amack as its new president during the Association’s recent Annual Meeting in Saratoga Springs, New York. Amack has 41 years of experience with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and 21 years as the Commission’s director.

“It is an overwhelming privilege and honor to serve as president of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. I look forward to representing every fish and wildlife agency in the country and many in

Canada and Mexico, assuring that the mission of the Association is fulfilled,” Amack said.

Amack currently serves on the Association’s Executive, Audit, and Fish and Wildlife Trust Funds committees. During his one-year tenure as president, he plans to pay particular attention to the work of the Association membership in enhancing public understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife management and conservation, especially as it relates to hunter and angler recruitment and retention as well as connecting young people with nature.

The Washington, DC-based Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies is the collective voice of North America’s fish and wildlife agencies at every level of government. The Association provides its member agencies and their senior staff with coordination services that range from migratory birds, fish habitat, and invasive species, to conservation education, leadership development, and international relations. The Association represents its state agency members on Capitol Hill and before the Administration on key conservation and management policies, and works to ensure that all fish and wildlife entities work collaboratively on the most



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Amack will serve as president through September 2009.

November Deer Season Sets Harvest Record

Hunters harvested a record 57,529 deer during the recent November firearm season, according to preliminary results by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

The November firearm season harvest breaks the previous record, set last year, by 8,100 (16 percent).

The highest firearm harvest was in southeast Nebraska, where 14,096 deer were taken, an increase of 26 percent from last year. Every permit in that district included a bonus tag.

Kit Hams, the Commission's big game program manager, attributes the sharp increase to the issuance this year of 85,000 bonus tags that allow the harvest of antlerless white-tailed deer.

"This is good news," he said. "It's definitely what we were trying to accomplish with the bonus tags we authorized this year."

The goal of the bonus tags is to thin the antlerless whitetail herd, especially in eastern Nebraska, where crop-damage complaints and deer-vehicle collisions are common.

The 2008 November firearm deer harvest totals by district, and percentage of increase from 2007, are:

Southeast, 14,096, 26 percent;
Northeast, 12,900, 11 percent;
Southwest, 6,223, 17 percent;
South-central, 9,142, 8 percent;
North-central, 9,428, 20 percent;
and Panhandle, 5,740, 17 percent.

The Commission's objective to control the expanding deer population continues into January 2009 with the antlerless firearm season that runs January 1-15.

Hams expects the total harvest from all deer seasons this year to be in the 75,000-80,000 range, which would be a record. Last year's total harvest was 68,500.

Mountain Lion Shot Near Chadron by Deer Hunter

A 16-year-old boy hunting during the November firearm season shot and killed a 97-pound female mountain lion south of Chadron when it appeared on a game trail and approached within 15 steps of the hunter without showing any fear. Mountain lions are a protected species in Nebraska, but can be shot in defense of life or livestock if imminent danger is present.

The boy was in a group of hunters that were driving deer on U.S. Forest Service land. The group reported the incident to officials at Chadron State Park. No decision has been made yet as to what will be done with the carcass, which was turned over to officials.

The fact that this mountain lion was female was significant, as most Nebraska lion sightings in the past several years have been of young males.

In a related note, an e-mail hoax circulating in Nebraska contains photos claiming to be of mountain lions in the Fort Calhoun area. Sam Wilson, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's nongame mammal/furbearer program manager, said the trail-camera photos actually are of cats in South Dakota.

The photos show an adult female cat and two nearly grown young. An orange tag is visible on the adult's ear. Wilson said the tags are placed in study animals as part of the ongoing mountain lion research project being carried out in the Black Hills.

For accurate information about mountain lions in Nebraska, go to: <http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/mountainlion.asp>.

Kosman Receives Award

It's likely that hunters, hikers and nature lovers in western Nebraska are a big reason Hod Kosman of Scottsbluff was named the Hero of the Year in *Field and Stream Magazine's* Heroes of Conservation awards gala in New York City in September. Their votes, which put Kosman at the top of a field of seven finalists, were no doubt thanks for the land Kosman, through Platte River Basin Environments (PRBE), has conserved and opened to the public.

Kosman helped form PRBE in 1989 in honor of a long-time friend, Clive Ostberg, who had bequeathed a large sum to the Nature Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited. In doing so, Ostberg challenged Kosman and others to find ways to use the money to

restore and protect land in the area where enjoyed hunting and fishing and open it to the public so they could do the same.

Since it's founding, PRBE has used Ostberg's gift, along with grants and help from partners, to acquire or protect nearly 40,000 acres of land in the Wildcat Hills and Pine Ridge escarpments and along the North Platte River, including the Cedar Canyon, Kiowa, Chet and Jane Fliesbach at Facus Springs and Chadron Creek wildlife management areas, which the group has transferred to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Each finalist received a \$5,000 grant from Toyota to support their project. As Hero of the Year, Kosman also received a new Toyota Tundra.

Kudos

The Plattsmouth Wildlife & Gun Club deserves a pat on the back – for several years the club has been supporting the quarterly Trail Tales magazine that is sent for free to every fourth-grader in the state, and it has also been a strong supporter of the state's Hunter Education programs. Last fall they donated \$4,000 to each program – \$8,000 in all. Many thanks! ■



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PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Late-season Deer Hunting

Jeff Kurrus

Two seasons ago, I hunted the last month of the deer season, from December 15 during muzzleloader season to the end of late firearm on January 15, and never saw the first

deer at a place where deer are frequently seen during the November firearm season. Each day that I hunted and saw nothing, I was more determined to hunt again at the same place, trying to prove that time spent would eventually provide what I was looking for. Not so, said Kit Hams, big game program coordinator for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

"Deer move into wintering locations, usually during December, changing their entire travel patterns. And they do so for multiple reasons. One, food is available in fewer locations. They will eat standing and residual agricultural foods, branch tips from trees and shrubs, as well as acorns and fruits. While the list is long, there is just a smaller amount. Two, they seek out thermal cover, which is also available in fewer locations. Cattail marshes; tall, warm-season grasses;

cedar; and the south-facing slopes of creek bottoms and canyons all provide protection from the wind, cold and snow."

During this same time of the year, deer will also be found in larger numbers, much like turkeys during this time and because of similar reasons. In addition, groups of deer move through snow more efficiently than individuals since they can follow each others' paths.

"Because the primary rut is over, deer are trying to replenish fat reserves before deep winter sets in," said Hams. "You may see some deer in some of the same areas as you did during October and November, but it will be much less frequently."

Translated, this is not the time of the hunting season to get hard-headed. Experiment with your hunting locations to assure that you're not in a spot that deer haven't regularly used in a long time.

Pike Rigs for Kids

Jeff Kurrus

This winter, take Mom's old broomstick and cut it into three, 10-inch sections. Take Dad's drill, and with a 1/8 inch bit, drill a hole in the side of each section. While Brother isn't looking, steal about 10 feet of 12- to 20-pound-test line and tie it into the hole you just drilled, cinching it with an improved clinch knot. On the line's other end, go into Sister's tacklebox and first "borrow" a wire leader and then a size 4 or larger treble hook or 6's rigged in tandem.

Once you've made this rig, wind your line around the broomstick handle and anchor the hook(s) in the end of the handle. Then attach one of the many bobbers that Uncle has given you through the years to the line, and when you use these ice-fishing, the bobber will sit on top of the ice and your new wooden rig will straddle the hole. When your bobber moves across the ice, you have a fish.

The only thing you're going to have to provide is the bait, which could be



A Winter Reading- The Rites of Autumn by Dan O'Brien

Jeff Kurrus

At some point this winter, I'm going to be done with going outside. I'll be tired of it being cold, and I'm sure I'm not alone. This happens every winter at some point, and during those moments I'm always looking for a new book to read.

A few years ago I came across Dan O'Brien's *The Rites of Autumn*, the nonfiction story of falconer Dan O'Brien's attempt to release a young peregrine falcon into the wild after traveling with the falcon along a 2000-mile trip from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico, following the annual migration of waterfowl south.

As the book's back cover states, "O'Brien taught her to hunt as a wild falcon would, in the hopes of releasing her into the natural world. The *Rites of Autumn* is the riveting account of their incredible journey." I agree.

This book speaks of the wide-open places still left on the Great Plains, the similarities and differences between wildlife and man, and his involvement in the natural cycle of life on the planet. The one problem with this book is its length. At only 192 pages, you may have to find something else to fill the winter months. Good thing *Rites* isn't O'Brien's only book. He is the author of several nonfiction books as well as fiction novels.

Later in 2009, Dan O'Brien will publish a collection of nature essays in NEBRASKAland contributing editor Michael Forsberg's book *Great Plains: America's Lingering Wild*. Stay tuned in NEBRASKAland for additional information regarding this book. And in the meantime, enjoy *The Rites of Autumn*. Out-of-print, but available online.

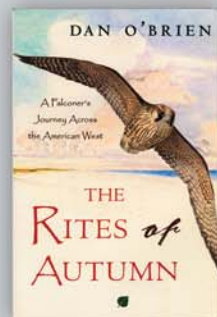


PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

large minnows, and some way to dig a hole. Do you have any relatives left that can provide those things for you?

Lewis and Clark Cabins

It is never too early to rent a summer cabin at Lewis and Clark SRA. It is also never too late to reserve a last-minute winter cabin. There are 10 cabins at this SRA, each one sleeping seven and having the following amenities: Two bedrooms, one with a queen bed and the other with a queen bed, a bunk above it, and another set of bunk beds; bathroom with shower; living room; dining area; and a kitchen with refrigerator, stove and microwave oven. The cabins are also equipped with linens and towels.

No smoking is allowed in any of the cabins and no campers or tents

are allowed in the cabin area.

Reservations are accepted up to one year in advance for a minimum of two nights and are \$128.00 per night. One night stays are on a first-come, first-served basis if a cabin is available and cabins must be paid in full at the time of reservation. Because cabins fill up quickly from the Memorial Day through Labor Day holidays, reserve your room now. Or visit this beautiful area in Nebraska a bit earlier in the year and, chances are there will be a cabin to rent while snow is still on the ground. Plus, cabins at Lewis and Clark SRA are often discounted 30 percent from October through April on reservations made for Sunday through Thursday. Reservations may be made at the park, by calling (402) 471-1414, or online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

For you folks who wear rubber boots ... whether it's chest waders, hip boots or these little cut-off knee boots ... there is kind of a canvas liner in most of those ... especially the insulated ones ... and of course your sock when you try to put that on ... you get a lot of friction. Well here is a good way to solve that problem. Take a plastic trash bag ... put that over your foot ... and slip into that boot and that will go on so much better. That plastic just slicks that up and you can slide right in them. The other good thing about this is ... these are scented and they smell so good. I know that is going to help my smelly feet because they get a little rank in those rubber boots. The only thing is I wish they had something besides pink. ■



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

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PIKE RIG ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT

Conservation Forest

Outdoor education is the core of the
Fontenelle Nature Association

By Jeff Kurrus

On the front page of the Fontenelle Nature Association's web site at fontenelleforest.org is the following statement:

The mission of Fontenelle Nature Association is to enhance human stewardship of the natural world by providing citizens of the greater Omaha metropolitan area with:

- Quality Environmental and Natural Science Education
- Ecologically Sound Management of the Association's Natural Resources
- Preservation and Interpretation of the Association's Historic and Cultural Resources
- Increased opportunities for personal reflection and enjoyment of the outdoors

It is always encouraging when an organization involved with outdoor education and conservation follows through with what they plan to do.

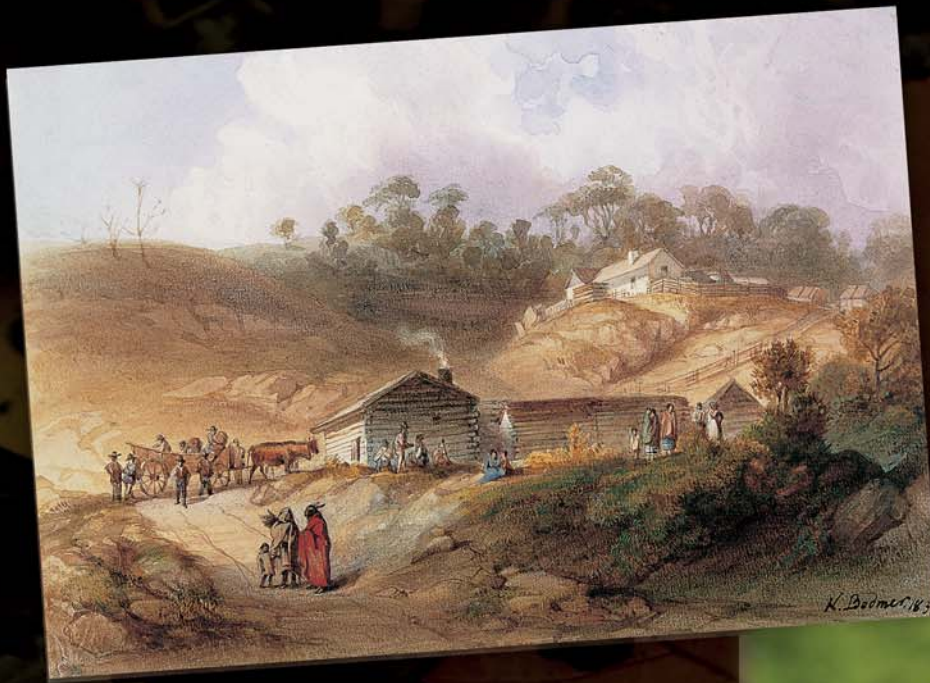
Education

OUTDOOR EDUCATION IS THE CORE of what the Fontenelle Nature Association (FNA) does at both of its properties – 1,500-acre Fontenelle Forest in Bellevue and 567-acre Neale Woods in north Omaha. When asked what exactly it is that FNA does on these two properties, FNA director of education Marty Pagel took a deep breath and smiled. It was obvious she didn't know where to start. Thirty minutes later, it wasn't clear if she was ever going to stop.

"You just need to see it for yourself," she said at the end, knowing there was no way she had failed to leave something out. So I took her advice. And see I did.

Children

At Neale Woods, a young summer camper stared into the eyes of a fox snake; another child held a butterfly net in her hand, eyes peeled on the grass below her; and a group of toddlers painted beneath a tree near the Carl Jonas Interpretive Center. Later that morning, a group of boys crowded around each other, staring at a recently caught Woodhouse's toad near Fontenelle's Wetland Learning Center, where wetland conservation classes are held; boys and girls gobbled at a flock of turkeys near Fontenelle's Camp Logan; another group of children on their hands and knees held magnifying glasses at Fontenelle's Camp Brewster as they observed the massive amount of nature at their fingertips; and even more children pushed and poked at





The Leaflet, FNA's newsletter, features a schedule of activities for visitors, including program information, location, cost (if any) and appropriate age group. It is mailed to members and can also be found at fontenelleforest.org.

the Fontenelle nature center's interactive displays, learning about a variety of topics related to native Nebraska plant and animal species.

A few weeks later, after the opening of FNA's new one-acre outdoor interactive display named Acorn Acres, kids and adults built lodges like a beaver, hid like small Nebraska mammals, viewed butterflies and participated in various other outdoor activities. This area allows children the chance for unstructured play and outdoor learning, and is a place where problem-solving skills related to the natural world can be developed. Yet all of these interactive activities are just the beginning of what FNA offers.

Other programs are organized depending on the ages of the participants and the subjects they are interested in. Classes are held in astronomy, birding and geology. Kids can become amateur rock hounds, sculptors, raptor experts, microbiologists and nature detectives. For older students, FNA's summer programs include classes on canoeing and creating nature art. There is also a program called "Adventure Camp," where participants fish, complete a ropes course and hike in the Forest's wetland region.

During the school year, this outdoor education continues with many students throughout eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. The Bellevue public school system requires each student, kindergarten through 6th grade, to visit Fontenelle each year.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL CAMERON

Brothers Tristan (left) and Logan Cameron begin a walk at Fontenelle. Parents are encouraged to visit with their children.

In addition, other public, private and home-schooled students from the surrounding area also visit, with all of Fontenelle's programs designed to meet Nebraska's state science standards. "Quite often, Fontenelle even provides inner-city students with their first access to nature," said Pagel.

Concerning high school-aged students, organized activities are provided specific to a teacher's curriculum needs. In addition, photography classes are held and students are also asked to assist with special events and trail maintenance.

"Each year, more than 27,000 children visit Fontenelle properties," said Pagel.

Adults

College-age students from Creighton University, the College of St. Mary's, the University of Nebraska-Omaha, Iowa Western Community College and other institutions visit Fontenelle on a regular basis to do work related to their classes. Specifically, Creighton brings many of its international students to Fontenelle to take part in the Critters program, a class designed to introduce new Nebraskans to this region's natural world.

Other programs for all ages cover subjects such as meditation, yoga, native grass landscaping and archeology. FNA sponsors bird and camera clubs, brings in guest speakers on various subjects, and offers limited deer hunting opportunities in order to manage the area's large deer herd.

Many visitors, however, come solely for the

hiking opportunities. Fontenelle Forest has 17 miles of trails, while Neale Woods has nine miles that pass through a combination of forest and restored prairie.

Hikers often use flora guides (see sidebar) and birding books specific to these areas on their excursions, which usually include glimpses of other wildlife, such as white-tailed deer and turkeys, along the trails. Two hundred and forty-six birds have been recorded on the Fontenelle property alone, and the site has been named in *Birder's World* as one of the Top 10 warbler viewing locations in the United States.

For older adults, the Seniors Understanding Nature (SUN) program, held the first Tuesday of each month, concentrates on birding, nature walks, seasonal changes, constellations and other nature-related subjects. The program also travels to local senior-living facilities to do programs.

"Our strength is our flexibility," said Pagel. "There's not a group we can't do a nature program for, and we pride ourselves in that fact." However, there's one part of Fontenelle's mission that remains inflexible. "Ninety-eight percent of our programs, regardless of the time of the year, go outside sometime during the class," she said. Which is exactly why visitors come to Fontenelle in the first place.

Management

BEFORE EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT, fires and floods helped regulate the native ecosystem of what is now Fontenelle Forest, an ecosystem that was described as late as 1856 by surveyor William N. Byers as having three landforms: the riverbottom or floodplain, the rolling prairie uplands and the bluffs dividing the two. Fires prevented nonnative vegetation from taking root, while spring floods on the Missouri River shaped the floodplain and helped provide a complex ecosystem.

Following settlement, three influential acts drastically changed this ecosystem. One, because settlers plowed present-day Fontenelle prairies in the late-1800s and the Neale Woods prairies as recently as 50 years ago, nonnative flora such as garlic mustard and tree of heaven have been able to take hold and crowd out native plants, decreasing the diversity of FNA properties. Second, inhabitants have thwarted the fires necessary to push back plant succession and have logged many of the oak trees common to this area's oak savanna. As a result, faster-growing shade tree species and nonnative understory plants have taken over. Third, the channelization of the Missouri River completed in the 1950s resulted in less spring flooding and reduced diversity in the floodplain's plant communities. It also cut Fontenelle's Great Marsh and Hidden Lake off from the Missouri River.

For a number of years the association took a hands-off approach with its natural resources, hoping nature would preserve itself. This approach did not achieve the desired results, however, so over the last 25 years, significant restoration projects have taken place on FNA properties.

At Neale Woods, upper and lower portions of Knull Prairie were seeded in 1983 and 1985 with material gathered from local native prairies. In 1988, Neale's Jonas and Koley prairies were also seeded. In the late-1990s, Fontenelle staff

The Two Field Guides

Roland E. Barth and Neal S. Ratzlaff's *Field Guide to Trees, Shrubs, Woody Vines, Grasses, Sedges and Rushes* and *Field Guide to Wildflowers* both focus on the species found at Fontenelle Forest and Neale Woods. While the two volumes include a history of the land and its management at both areas, as well as descriptions and photographs of included species, their greatest strengths are their specificity related to FNA properties.

Flora newcomers will find these guides especially navigable due to the locations included by the authors. For example, in the *Field Guide to Wildflowers*, the tall bellflower reference includes the following: "Occurrence: In woodlands and their edges. Fontenelle Forest: Common along Camp Gifford Road near the railroad tracks. Neale Woods: Common along the Missouri River Ecology Trail." These descriptions are included for each species listed, as well as how common each one is. With this information, experienced individuals can quickly find their favorite species, while newcomers can quickly become experienced.



began restoring oak savannas by clearing away shady understory trees to allow more sunlight to reach the forest floor. The result has been the spontaneous regeneration of savanna groundcover such as the grasses bottle brush, slender wild rye and American beakgrass, and forb species such as feverwort and pale Indian plantain.

One of the most effective plant management efforts at



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

A young camper has her first encounter with a fox snake during a Fontenelle Forest summer camp.



PHOTO BY MARK DIETZ

A white-tailed deer fawn in early spring at Fontenelle Forest.

Southern-grown Trees

Garabrandt and his small crew recently collected more than 4,000 bur oak acorns and shagbark hickory nuts to send to native Omahan Scott Schlarbaum, now a biologist at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and head of the university's Tree Improvement Program.

After receiving the nuts, Schlarbaum will plant them at the Georgia Forestry Commission State Nursery, and send them back to Fontenelle as 3- to 4-foot-tall trees in March 2010. It is a relationship first forged by Schlarbaum's volunteer work at the nature center years ago and continued by his offer to help out Fontenelle's oak savannah restoration by growing trees for the FNA.

"I advocate using high-quality seedlings from local seed sources," said Schlarbaum. "After some discussion with Gary [Garabrandt], all he had to do was send the seed and use shelters around the trees because of the deer browse. Over the years, Gary has sent seed of bur oak, northern red oak, hawthorn, Kentucky coffeetree and bladdernut. I have really enjoyed my renewed contact with Fontenelle Forest and am very pleased to give something back to an organization that was important to me in my formative years."

Each year, Gary Garabrandt, Fontenelle's director of science and stewardship, and biologists from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission conduct an aerial survey at Fontenelle. The survey occurs 24 hours after a fresh snowfall and allows biologists to calculate the area's approximate deer herd. Since Fontenelle instituted the deer hunt in 1996, Garabrandt's aerial surveys have shown a gradual trend toward a more manageable population. In 2003, a similar program was instituted at Neale Woods, resulting in the current three-day muzzleloading hunt on the property during Nebraska's firearm deer season.

Also in 1996, both Great Marsh and Hidden Lake at Fontenelle were dredged. As they became shallower since the channelization of the Missouri River, they became less viable and diverse as wetland areas. The dredging made them larger and deeper, sustaining their lives. Hidden Lake was also reconnected to the Missouri River, providing spawning areas for native fish species, including largemouth bass, black and yellow bullhead, black crappie, bluegill and northern pike.

In 1997, FNA adopted its Land and Resources Management Plan, which included protecting, restoring and maintaining its native plant and animal communities through grants and mitigation acts. Since this date, forest staff has continued to re-create oak savannah areas, perform prescribed burns in locations with large amounts of underbrush, remove nonnative plants and re-introduce native plants at both Fontenelle and Neale Woods.

"Some of our biggest problems include areas with the invasives tree of heaven, barberry and garlic mustard," said Garabrandt. "Garlic mustard is so detrimental because it changes the soil chemistry and inhibits root growth of native plant species. Trees grow slower in garlic mustard soil. We'll put 300 hours each year in an effort to control this invasive."

Information concerning these projects is included in FNA's monthly newsletter and on their web site, with explanations concerning the impact of completed projects. The constant work being conducted on FNA property is best explained in their own words: "Like all restorations, ours are not perfect representations of native prairies. They are

considerably less diverse ... Fully a third of the approximately 85 prairie plant species in the Neale Woods restorations are represented by less than five known individuals."

History

TO START WITH THE FORMATION of the Fontenelle Forest Association in 1913 would drastically shortchange the area's history as well as the



Lewis Bostwick took this photo of Fontenelle Forest's Riverview Trail in 1917.

teachings that Fontenelle naturalists continue to relay to the public.

There is evidence of Indian cultures inhabiting the area from as early as 1100 BP, and there are 60 sites on Fontenelle property where timber and sod-constructed houses once stood. Fish hooks, knives and needles were found in the early 1900s by archeologist Robert Gilder, and Eric Kaldahl discovered projectile points, maws and grindstones in the 1990s.

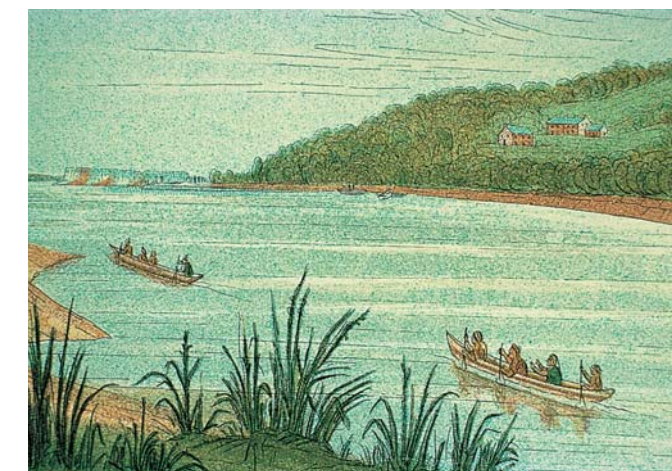
Missouri Fur Company

History provides record of Lewis and Clark crossing the land's path in 1804, but it wasn't until 1822 that the Missouri Fur Company, otherwise known as Pilcher's Post, began the settlement of Bellevue with a trading post on what is now FNA property.

The Bellevue post, located near the present Great Marsh, was a stopover spot for traders making their way toward the Rocky Mountains and contained supplies for the trip west. As Richard E. Jensen recorded in his book *The Fontenelle & Cabanne Trading Posts*, "Many, if not most, of the mountain men of the west were occasional visitors. In the spring, brigades of trappers might spend a week or more at the posts, waiting for the weather to warm or the grass to grow for their pack animals, before continuing their journey up the Missouri River or westward to the Rocky Mountains."

Later archeological digs at the Fontenelle site found mouth harps, gun parts, tobacco pipes and beverage bottles. As stated

in *Trading Posts*, "Evidence from both archeological remains and historical records shows they lived in well-built and comfortable houses. The buildings had wooden floors, glass windows with shutters and doors with finely-crafted hinges and locks. Furniture included cabinets with intricately-made drawer pulls and guards ... Meals were served on ornate plates flanked with high quality knives and forks. Imported coffee was ground at the trading posts, served in delicate china cups and stirred with pewter spoons. Brandy was



George Catlin's 1832 painting "Belle Vue, Indian Agency of Major Dougherty" depicts a view of what is now Fontenelle Forest property from the Iowa side of the Missouri River.



In 1936, archeologist Robert Gilder (middle, with cane) leads a hike in Fontenelle Forest.



Forest of the Past days allow visitors to view free demonstrations at Fontenelle, such as this work being done by Connie Wheeler of the Omaha Weavers and Spinners Guild.

sipped from stemmed glasses. Time was kept with gold pocket watches. Evidently, their goal was to live comfortably, even luxuriously, and to perpetuate the trappings of affluent society in the East.” At Cabanne’s site, and probably at the Fontenelle site as well, most customers bought items on credit. Because Cabanne knew that nearly half of the debts would never be repaid, the trader might have increased their prices by three or four times the cost.

In the area hunting pressure was intense, so much that by the mid-1820s, large animals had essentially disappeared. Riverbottom swarms of mosquitoes also spread disease to those in the area, plus there were Indian raids. Hasps and padlocks were later found on the Fontenelle site through archeological digs, revealing the need for security at the time. Violence was a common occurrence.

However, the close proximity to the Missouri River did provide multiple advantages, including travel as well as drinking water. “Though the water of this river appears so very dirty, yet it is very palatable, and considered very wholesome,” wrote John Dunbar in 1835. “The people who live near the stream, I was informed, use its waters in preference to those of the fountains in its vicinity. I have become very fond of the river water, and think I have never tasted any more pleasant.”

The Fontenelles

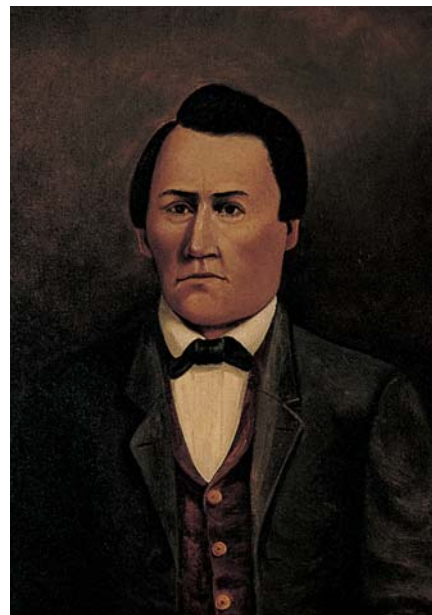
In 1824, Lucien Fontenelle, a French-American fur trader who originally entered the Missouri River fur trade in 1819, married Me-um-bane, daughter of Omaha Indian chief Big Elk. Together they raised five children, the eldest being Logan Fontenelle, who was born in May 1825 and would later become a spokesman for the Omaha tribe.

Lucien purchased the trading fort in Bellevue in 1828, but sold it to the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs four years later. The fort was then used as the Upper Missouri Indian Agency headquarters by the U.S. government. Poor attention and lack of use deteriorated the building until, on July 3, 1839, Joseph V. Hamilton wrote this account of the former post: “... the Public Buildings at Bellevue are in a shocking condition and certainly cannot be intended to be inhabited by anything else than rats & bugs.” The post was finally abandoned that winter. Lucien and his family moved about six hundred yards down the river and built a new house for his wife and family. He died in 1840 and was buried on the bluff overlooking the former trading post.

By the early 1850s, Lucien’s son Logan had been recognized as an Omaha chief by both the tribe and the U.S. government. With his white father and Omaha mother, Logan grew up in the cultures of both and had become an interpreter for the American Indian Agency by the age of 16. When he was 29, Fontenelle met with federal officials in Washington, D.C. on March 16, 1854, to sign a treaty selling Indian land to the U.S. government and restricting themselves to a reservation in northeast Nebraska, thus opening the Nebraska Territory to settlement. During a buffalo hunt the following year with his Omaha party he was killed by Sioux Indians. Logan is buried within the boundaries of the forest that now bears his last name.

Land Acquisition

In 1910, Omaha’s A.A. Tyler and Harold Gifford Sr. wanted to purchase and preserve the land that now makes up the northern portion of Fontenelle Forest. The state of Nebraska rejected their petition to purchase the land, then owned by the estate of Everard Ferguson, for a state forest preserve. So Tyler, Gifford and a group of others purchased the land themselves. By 1913, the group



COURTESY OF JOSLYN ART MUSEUM

Fontenelle Forest is named after Logan Fontenelle, an interpreter for the Omaha tribe killed in battle with Sioux Indians in 1855. This painting by George Simons in the latter half of the 19th century is based on the only known photo of Fontenelle taken between 1853 and 1855.



The view from the Riverview Trail at Fontenelle Forest during the summer.

had formed the Fontenelle Forest Association to raise money, and by 1920 had raised \$60,000 to buy 300 acres of land.

Through the first half of the 20th century, the Forest was used as a nature area by the public for hikes, picnics and the like. In the 1960s, Omaha city forester Jim Malkowski began to lead educational hikes through the Forest, resulting in the desire for even more nature-based education on the property and culminating in the 1966 opening of the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center.

Since that time, there have been a series of additions to Fontenelle. In 1971, the Forest accepted a gift of 120 acres of land from Edith Neale in north Omaha. Neale’s father had homesteaded the land in the mid-1800s and she wished it to stay natural after her death. Neale Woods later expanded when Carl Jonas not only donated land, but also his former home, which has been modified into the Carl Jonas Interpretive Center.

In 1998, property adjacent to the Forest, 82-acre Camp Brewster, was purchased through the aid of the Willer Foundation and the Nebraska Environmental Trust. In addition, the Gilbert and Martha Hitchcock Wetlands Learning Center was opened on the floodplain portion of Fontenelle Forest in 1999 and the Katherine and Fred Buffett Forest Learning Center in October 2000.

FNA teaches its members about the Forest’s history through classes and living-history demonstrations. There is also a self-guided history trail on the southern portion of Fontenelle. In addition, information on Fontenelle’s history is periodically featured in the association’s newsletter, and

the history of the area can always be found at FNA’s web site.

Personal Reflection

EACH VISITOR TO FONTENELLE has their own indelible image of the area etched into their conscience, regardless of the amount of time spent there. Mine came in the last hour of a four-hour hike late last winter. I was tired, winded and ready to go home. When I saw two does scurry past me, I barely paused. When the buck stepped out of the creek a mere 10 steps from me, water dripping from his mouth, I stopped. As did he. Then he turned his head, making sure the does had not wandered too far away. He peered at me one last time, gave a loud, echoing blow, then trotted toward his companions, leaving me still tired and winded, but no longer ready to go home.

By the time I had made my way back to the visitor center, two families had passed by, kids in tow, in search of their own afternoon enjoyment. Much like many others fortunate enough to visit this forested oasis.

The following quotes were spoken by current and past FNA members, explaining why these areas are so important to them.

What Others Say

“... I have raised my children to love the outdoors because of the opportunities they had walking in the Forest and the prairie and participating in the educational programming. I



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Fontenelle Forest's Katherine and Fred Buffett Forest Learning Center.

am now bringing my grandchildren to experience nature in the real world and not on the TV or the computer.”
— Carol Russell

“... Fontenelle Nature Association is a unique example of Nebraskans providing for the future of Nebraskans,

particularly by preserving the natural environment in which our state is literally rooted ... It is not hard for our citizens, our children and our visitors to imagine the land before our ancestors arrived here, and to discover our heritage in the course of a walk through the woods.”

— Michael McCarthy

“...students may not remember the page that they did in math yesterday, but they will never forget the experiences they have had at the Forest.”

— Marjorie Reed-Schmid

“Hiking on the Great Marsh trail on a spring morning at Fontenelle Forest can be a magical trip. With the arrival of spring, hints of green can be seen in the forest canopy and the sounds of migrating songbirds can be heard. One never knows what they might find around each bend and turn in the trail. One morning while photographing waterfowl, I happened to come across an elusive mink fishing. With a bit of patience and a preoccupied mink, I was able to capture this shy creature enjoying its morning breakfast of freshly caught sunfish. What a great memory and a beautiful way to start the day.”

— Mark Dietz

“Last week a member of my office staff told me how excited her four-year-old son was on a recent visit to Fontenelle Forest Nature Center and how interested in nature he had become as a result of his trips to the Forest. Another old friend of mine recently commented on how much he had enjoyed a nighttime visit to the astronomy observatory at



PHOTO BY MARK DIETZ

Mink at Fontenelle Forest.

Neale Woods. These experiences repeat themselves again and again, as thousands of visitors discover or rediscover the Forest for the first or 100th time.”

— Howard Kaslow

“... It's pretty obvious that Fontenelle Forest, Neale Woods and I are old friends – friends that have shared years of discovery together. Seasons of birding in a spot recognized as one of this region's 'go to' sites; seasons of plant observation culminating in the co-production of two field guides with a friend; seasons of watching the flight of butterflies; seasons of just enjoying the songs of birds and insects with friends; seasons of connecting with the Earth that sustains us all; and especially seasons of discovery revealing the rich human history of this place and the remarkable diversity of plants and animals all of us can still experience and enjoy in these two islands tucked away in a metro area of a half million people.”

— Neal Ratzlaff

“I recently moved to Omaha from Florida. When I lived in Florida I had several locations I considered 'hot spots,' places that I would frequently visit to take photographs of the natural world. One of the first things I needed to discover when I moved to Omaha were some local 'hot spots.' Fontenelle Forest was highly recommended, and it took very little time to realize why I needed to spend time there.

While I do not encounter a deer or other animals on every trip to Fontenelle, moments there keep bringing me back to the Forest and nature in general. I always enjoy the opportunity to walk through the canopy of leaves while quietly reflecting on the important things in my life. Having a forest retreat close to home is important to me. Especially on days when I just need to escape from “the real world” and spend time alone with God and the nature He created.”

— Pasquale R. Mingarelli

Fontenelle Camera Club

In 1986, Fontenelle member Ruth Green and Mark Dietz, then an employee of Fontenelle, formed a photography club.

While that first group fit around a small dinner table, the Fontenelle Camera Club now averages 35 members each year. The group has a variety of programs for their monthly meetings, and a host of well-known nature photographers, including Michael Forsberg and Thomas Mangelsen, have done presentations for the club.

The group participates in photography field trips both locally and across Nebraska, but spends most of their time on Fontenelle property. One of their most current projects was to gather photos for this particular article. Outside of the historical photos and those taken by *NEBRASKAland* staff, the rest of the photos for this article were taken by Fontenelle Camera Club members.



PHOTO BY MAUREEN HOSKINSON

“I was raised in Omaha and visited Fontenelle Forest on school trips and nature hikes in the 1960s. I also worked there briefly in the late 1960s, when James Malkowski switched jobs from City Naturalist to Director of Fontenelle Forest. All there was at that time was an old green shed at the main trailhead, an old cabin-type house, a garage and some animal cages. The Forest has really come a long ways since those days.”

— Scott Schlarbaum

Thanks go to the Nebraska State Historical Society, the Fontenelle Nature Association and Richard E. Jensen and his book The Fontenelle & Cabanne Trading Posts for the historical information included.

Photographs on pages 12 and 13 are as follows (clockwise from upper left): Karl Bodmer's “Bellevue Agency, Post of Major Daugherty” on the current site of Fontenelle Forest property, courtesy of Joslyn Art Museum; snapping turtle at the Great Marsh, photo by Maureen Hoskinson; young camper with Woodhouse's toad at Hitchcock Wetlands Learning Center, photo by Jeff Kurrus; inky cap mushrooms at Fontenelle, photo by Maureen Hoskinson; young camper staring at Eastern tiger salamander at Neale Woods, photo by Doug Carroll; and summer camp participants and instructors Kate Murphy (left) and Kit Straley with wild turkeys at Camp Brewster, photo by Jeff Kurrus. ■



PHOTO BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

Water lilies bloom at Fontenelle Forest's Great Marsh.

Eagle at the Window

By Margie Lukas

What I saw out the window that cold day in March had me looking for “proof” of my encounter. What was left turned out to be both disappointing and rewarding.

“If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awake – Aye, what then?”

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The United States Department of the Interior has removed the bald eagle from the endangered species list. Their numbers are thriving: From an estimated four hundred nesting pairs in the lower 48 states in 1963, the number of nesting pairs is now believed to be more than 11,000. Which means more and more people across the country are having eagle sightings.

On a cold Saturday morning in late-March last year, I sat with my first cup of coffee in a cabin by the Missouri River, south of Omaha in Otoe County. Suddenly shadows swooped across the walls, momentarily cutting the room into bright and dark wedges of light. Loud and unsettling screeches pierced the quiet. Out the window and only a few feet above where I sat staring, a bald eagle – its wings still outstretched – had just touched down on a branch of my winter-bare cottonwood. The eagle’s drawing in and folding of its massive wings reminded me of my daughters folding up full-length lawn chairs.

From the outside, the large, river-facing window reflected the trees, water and sky. My vantage point matched that of a 1980s cop-show detective standing behind a two-way mirror – the bird couldn’t see me, but I sat near enough to see the smooth, enameled texture of its gold beak. Still, I sat breathless,

afraid to move and shatter the moment.

The eagle perched erect and silent while the screeching continued out of my view. Then a second bird, some breed of hawk I presumed, drew closer to the perching eagle. It definitely wasn’t a younger bald eagle. I knew eaglets didn’t mature into their white hoods for four, or even five, years, but the bird confused me because it was larger than the first one, had white speckles on its brown underside, and was sans the gold beak, gold talons and white tail. It continued to make its harsh, strident screams and its threatening diving maneuvers, swooping in and out at the eagle only to be all but ignored by its potential adversary.

After a few minutes, the second raptor quit diving and lifting, instead trying a new maneuver consisting of moving from branch to branch like a robin, but with none of a robin’s grace. Its likely seven-foot wingspan never fully opened, yet never entirely closed. The word *splashing* came to mind, the dark wingtips splaying in and out, the wings looking ragged and broken, the feathers seeming to crash through the cottonwood limbs.

When the eagle allowed this other bird into close proximity, I knew there would be no combat. I had been wrong – they were family. The adult eagle, its amber eyes unmoving, began dipping its head into something it was clutching and tearing off chunks of meat. No part of the meal extended over the edges of the wide branch, and the eagle had landed before I saw what it carried. I could only see the bird tearing into the flesh, dipping its gold beak into red, lifting its head and gulping the bloody

chunks. Once, when the raptor gave a particularly hard tug, a gray-taloned foot rose off the branch and dropped back lifeless. The kill, or find, I could not know which, was another large bird. There seemed something sinister about one huge bird eating another, and I was surprised to see the clawed foot rather than a catfish tail.

The adult eagle finally dropped a hunk of flesh to the now-patient eaglet. The youngster dropped onto the sand beneath the tree and swallowed the red meat the way my springer spaniel inhales hotdogs. The bird then sprang

back to the same low branch beneath the adult and waited. And waited.

Another 10 minutes of tearing and gulping flesh passed, and the whole of the adult bird’s beak was covered in blood before it dropped the remainder of its meal. I saw only a flash of dark feathers and bloody meat before the eaglet caught the feast in mid-air and vanished outside the scope of the window.

The adult lingered, cleaning and honing its beak on a branch in hard swipe-swipe, left-right, left-right motions like a blade over whetstone. Then in one seamless, muscled gesture,

the wings tipped, the legs pushed off and the bird lifted, its shadow a dark drape floating across my furniture and over my walls.

Though I’d been awake only an hour, and had long before finished that cup of coffee, I thought of lines from a Samuel Coleridge poem. Surely, out under the cottonwood I’d find some proof of the encounter – a large eagle feather I could tuck behind a picture as testament of the gift I’d received. I hurried, walking back and forth over the sand, hunting for my talisman. Nothing. No feathers. No sign. Even the low,

gray branches looked barren and ghosted. The only gift the birds had left was the memory of the encounter. A souvenir both richer and poorer than a feather.

These days I don’t pour that first cup of morning coffee without checking the cottonwood for eagles, hoping that whatever made them choose that tree the first time will call them back. Thanks to the Endangered Species Act and the subsequent thriving eagle population, I now know the possibility exists. ■

Margie Lukas is a writer and teacher living in Omaha.



ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT

Nebraska Goose Hunting

The Recent Decades

By Jon Farrar



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

The plowing of native grasslands and shriveling stream flows as a result of ever-expanding irrigation were not the reasons Canada geese declined precipitously in Nebraska and continentwide during the first half of the 20th century. Rather, it was the decades-long aftermath of unregulated slaughter by market and sport hunters prior to 1900, followed by excessively liberal seasons and bag limits for three decades. Through the 1920s, hunters were still allowed eight to 10 Canada geese daily, even though the chance of shooting one almost anywhere in Nebraska was remote. During the last half of the 20th century, though, changes in the landscape directly and indirectly played a large role in the number of Canada geese and other waterfowl pausing here, where they stopped and how long they stayed.

Even though upstream irrigation had diminished flows in the North and South Platte rivers by the 1920s, especially during the summer months, both remained broad, shallow waterways laced with treeless sandbars; in short, ideal goose roosts. But Jodi McNeel of North Platte said in a 2004 interview, two years before his death at the age of 91, that it was “a rare deal” for anyone to shoot Canada geese in the North Platte area from the 1920s into the 1960s.

Part of the reason was that the populations of Canada geese migrating through central Nebraska remained small relative to their pre-settlement abundance, and there was no sanctuary like the Garden County Refuge to hold migrating birds on the lower North Platte River. During the middle decades of the 1900s it seemed everyone was a duck hunter, McNeel said,

and rivers were lined with occupied blinds every day when migration was underway. For those duck hunters a Canada goose was a trophy bird, and no goose found refuge along the North Platte River during the autumn migration except in Garden County. In the 1930s and 1940s, McNeel said, most hunters didn’t bother with goose decoys because “your chances of seeing a goose was nil. Why go to all the work of packing a bunch of goose decoys around when you’re never going to see a goose?”

“I would say around 1950 you started noticing the [North Platte] river shrinking,” McNeel said. “At Sutherland, just east of the bridge, that used to be a real beautiful piece of river. You come up over this hill on the bluff and look down, a mile wide across there, nothing but six-inch to three-foot water in differ-

ent channels, lots of sandbars, real hard to find a big enough island to build a blind, so what we would do is take chicken wire or hog wire and weave grass and willows in it and set that up on the sandbar. A lot of times you stood in two inches of water all the time to hunt.”

During the 1930s and 1940s, McNeel most often hunted waterfowl on the North Platte River northwest of North Platte as his uncles farmed there. He described the lower North Platte River Valley in those decades as dotted with sloughs and ponds. The river’s floodplain was mostly pastureland, and hayed if dry enough during summers. His favorite hunting spot was east of Lewellen, the first land east of the Garden County Refuge, now the upper end of Lake McConaughy. “It was a beautiful river, wide, not filled with trees,” McNeel recalled. “There were a few willows, but not too many.

“Then they started breaking up the meadows,” McNeel said, “and a lot of them put that land into alfalfa.” A few farmers dug ditches to the river to lower the water table, McNeel said, so the floodplain could be hayed or planted to crops. But what really made farming possible on most of the lower North Platte River Valley was a falling water table because of upstream irrigation. The falling water table not only affected the bottomland, it changed the North Platte River. The changes McNeel witnessed in the 1950s were only harbingers of greater changes to come.

A River Changed

In the 1950s, agriculture began its transformation to bigger, more mechanized, more efficient operations; and became increasingly consumptive of natural resources, particularly water. In the decades that followed, especially after the introduction of center pivot irrigation in the 1970s, diversified farms with small fields planted to several different crops, few of which were irrigated, vanished; replaced by huge irrigated fields planted to only one cash crop, usually corn. As irrigation proliferated and more impoundments were constructed on the Plattes and their tributaries, reduced flows allowed farming of the floodplain and even more irrigation. The elimination of spring floods that once scoured woody vegetation from sandbars and riverbanks allowed trees to encroach on the formerly broad and shallow Platte River. Once Lake McConaughy was completed on the lower North Platte River in 1945, all those changes accelerated downstream. Year to year the changes were almost imperceptible, but they were enormous over the span of several decades.

Since the closing of Kingsley Dam north of Ogallala and the diversion of flows for irrigation, the lower North Platte River, the river McNeel hunted most of his life, evolved into more of a meandering riparian forest than a meandering prairie river, and Canada geese no longer found abundant sandbars without vegetation for roosts between Lake McConaughy and North Platte.

Land-use changes on the North Platte’s floodplain above Lake McConaughy were not as extensive as those downstream, but the river valley in Garden County today is different than what it was in the early-1900s. Tom Olson of Lisco remembers the river valley in Garden County as grassland with patches of corn or potatoes here and there until the late-1940s. That began changing in the 1950s when upstream



PHOTO BY JON FARRAR

The late Earl “Goldie” Haworth of Sidney, above, began hunting geese on North Platte River meadows in the 1940s. Previous page: Cameron Peister, left, and James Vrbsky are shown hunting on the Platte River near Kearney in 1993, the beginning of the good years.

impoundments essentially eliminated spring floods, increased irrigation lowered the water table enough that bottomland could be farmed, and cash crops came to dominate Nebraska agriculture. And with the introduction of center pivot irrigation in the 1970s, corn began replacing traditional dryland wheat and small cornfields on the tableland. The size of the fields and bushels per acre rose almost beyond belief.

“It used to be that about 80 to 100 acres would be about all a person could farm with four head of horses, and that’s just before breakfast now,” Jack Robinson of Oshkosh said in a 2000 interview. Robinson was born in 1921, shot his first two geese in 1928 and still hunts geese in Garden County. The increase in corn undoubtedly attracted more Canada geese and kept them on the North Platte River longer; but modern combines leave less grain in the fields than was left when corn was harvested with two-row pickers. Robinson also believes that the large cornfields make geese less vulnerable to hunting than when fields were small. Available waste grain, though, is only half of the equation – to attract and hold Canada geese the birds require a broad river laced with bare sandbars and shallow water for roosts.

“Those geese have to get out of the water and rest on sandbars, and it’s getting to where there aren’t that many sandbars,” Robinson said. He believes that not only will there be fewer geese using the North Platte River if woody vegetation continues to encroach on it, geese will be more concentrated on the few remaining roosts. Robinson said he knew of 3,000 to 4,000 Canadas on one roost, where in the past it was 200 here and 300 there. “Hunting was good then,” he said “because those little bunches were scattered all along the river

– they would get up to go feed and you could operate on one bunch. Now it’s a pretty tough cookie when you’re dealing with that many birds.”

Where Geese Were

Since the late-1930s, winter counts, taken when geese are more concentrated than through the rest of the year, have been used to estimate the size of populations. Winter surveys in the 1940s and early-1950s seldom revealed more than 2,000 Canada geese in the state. Some years small numbers were reported on the central Platte River, usually near Overton or Lexington, but most geese were on the North Platte River, particularly in Garden County and on the upper end of Lake McConaughy. Winter weather, of course, played a critical role in how many Canada geese, if any, remained in the state. A January 1942 survey showed only 150 Canada geese, all on the North Platte River. That year, U.S. Game Management Agent Clyde L. Licking noted western Nebraska was blanketed with six to 10 inches of snow at the time of the survey and temperatures had been below zero the preceding 10 days. In January 1946, the local game warden and “other interested persons” estimated 3,000 to 4,000 wintering geese along the North Platte River. Licking noted that was “more geese than for many years.” In January 1949, 3,489 Canadas were reported on the North Platte River above Lake McConaughy.

While reduced river flows resulted in the loss of traditional goose roosts on rivers, the construction of reservoirs, such as Lake McConaughy, provided new water habitat for the ever-adaptable birds.

Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission biologist John H. Wampole surveyed western Nebraska waterfowl between mid-December and mid-February in the winter of 1946-1947 and reported his findings in the January-June 1947 issue of *The Nebraska Bird Review*. He surveyed four areas known to have ducks and geese present. An estimated 5,000 to 10,000 ducks were observed on Sutherland Reservoir, but the only geese present were “at least 250” white-fronted geese, probably birds already migrating north. Ducks, but no geese, were found on the South Platte River between Ogallala and Big Springs. More than 3,000 Canada geese were on the upper end of Lake McConaughy. “At locations near Lewellen, Oshkosh and Lisco,” Wampole reported, “the best counts show that at least 2,000 Canada geese spent most of the winter on the refuge area.” He speculated this was probably “only part of the actual total number of birds frequenting the areas.” Both small and large Canadas were observed.

“Lake McConaughy and Sutherland Reservoir are important resting areas for waterfowl” Wampole wrote. “The newly built reservoirs may be expected to provide similar conditions” He noted that the North and South Platte rivers “constitute an important waterfowl wintering area,” and that “the best waterfowl areas along the Platte River are well commercialized for hunting.”

Creation of the North Platte River Refuge on about four miles of the North Platte River north and east of North Platte in 1955 apparently did not significantly increase the number of Canada geese as had the Garden County Refuge 30 years earlier. Perhaps it was not large enough, or perhaps the river there was not as attractive as in Garden County, as trees and shrubs were claiming more of the shorelines and islands. During the 1950s, McNeel said, Canada geese were uncommon on that stretch of the river during migration. Cody Park on the northern edge of North Platte, though, with its resident flock of Canada geese, did attract migrating and wintering Canadas.

In 1960, the Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission established the Clear Creek Wildlife Management Area upstream from the west end of Lake McConaughy under a lease with Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District. Today the area encompasses 6,118 acres. Objectives for the area were to create and enhance migration and wintering habitat for waterfowl, especially Canada geese, and provide public hunting. One year after the creation of the Clear Creek refuge more than 1,400

Canada geese wintered there. By 1966, the number of Canada geese using the area in the fall had grown to an estimated 13,000, of which about 3,500 wintered. From 1995 through 2005, an average of about 5,400 Canada geese wintered at Clear Creek.

The Long Road Back

The liberal limits of the first three decades of the 1900s were cut during the 1930s as prolonged drought settled on the mid-continent and the number of ducks and geese plummeted. Those short hunting seasons and small bag and possession limits remained the rule into the 1960s. Through most of the 1940s the limit on geese was two daily and four in possession, although hunters were allowed to take additional snow geese from 1941 through 1943. In 1946, in response to poor production on the breeding grounds and the swelling number of servicemen returning from World War II and resuming hunting, only two geese of any species were allowed daily. Through the 1950s and 1960s, only two dark geese were allowed daily, and the statewide Canada goose harvest was estimated to range between 5,000 and 10,000 birds. Outside of the North Platte River Valley, the bag limit could have been



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In the early-1900s, prior to the beginning of heavy withdrawals of water for irrigation that allowed trees to encroach on its river bed, the Platte was a river of sandbars and shallow water ideal for roosting Canadas.

10 Canadas daily with little impact on the statewide harvest.

Many factors probably explain why Canada geese were slow to recover even in the decades after restrictive hunting regulations were imposed in the mid-1930s. Because they were relatively uncommon, Canada geese became even more of a trophy bird than they had been in earlier decades, and were subject to unrelenting pressure during autumn migration and on wintering areas. Canada geese are long-lived birds and typically do not successfully breed until three years old, and so they are slower to increase than species such as pheasants or ducks. State and federal refuges were becoming increasingly abundant, but were still relatively few and small in the

Canada Goose Migration Corridors

The identification of four major flyways from east to west across the continent in 1948 was the first step by wildlife managers to better understand the migration of geese and other waterfowl, but they only crudely plotted migration routes and corridors. And large numbers of ducks and geese typically migrated through more than one flyway. With evermore banding projects, and the ability to better survey far-north nesting grounds, the identification of distinct populations led to a greater understanding of geese in North America, their breeding range, wintering range, staging areas and migration corridors. Armed with this knowledge, wildlife managers could more precisely tweak hunting regulations, allowing a liberal harvest of thriving populations while reducing pressure on recovering populations.

The taxonomy (identification of distinct species or races) of Canada geese has long been a realm of lively debate. Over the last 50 years as many as 12 subspecies and four different species have been suggested to classify Canada geese. The most recent classification, adopted by the American Ornithologists Union in 2004 and largely based on mitochondrial DNA studies, recognizes two living species: The cackling goose (*Branta hutchinsii*), comprised of four subspecies of small geese breeding principally in the tundra; and the Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*), with seven subspecies of larger geese nesting inland and more southerly.

Five populations of Canada geese migrate through the Central Flyway, more than any other flyway. Geese from the Tall Grass Prairie Population migrate through the eastern third of Nebraska, nest in the eastern Canadian Arctic and winter in eastern Kansas, Oklahoma and on the Texas coast. They are small Canada geese, lessers and Richardson's. Geese from the Short Grass Prairie Population are also mostly small birds, the same races as in the Tall Grass Prairie population, but nest in the western Canadian Arctic,

migrate through the North Platte River Valley to winter in eastern Colorado, eastern New Mexico and western Texas, and include some larger geese. Geese from the Hi-Line Population are large Canadas, with adult males averaging 10 pounds. These birds nest in southeastern Alberta, southwestern Saskatchewan and through Montana and Wyoming. They winter in Colorado, New Mexico and on the North Platte River in Nebraska. Mixed in the Hi-Line Population are giant Canada geese returned to their native nesting grounds by restoration programs initiated in the 1960s. Geese from the Western Prairie Population are also large birds and include giant Canada geese. These geese nest in eastern Saskatchewan and western Manitoba and winter from South Dakota to Texas, wintering only as far south as required to find open water and grain. Their migration is principally through eastern Nebraska but often as far west as Garden County. The last population important in Nebraska is the Great Plains Restoration Population. These large geese, with adult males weighing 10 to 14 pounds, were reintroduced throughout the central and northern Great Plains. The North Platte River, particularly the Garden County Refuge, are important wintering grounds for these birds. ■

An important factor in the comeback of Canada geese in recent decades has been the identification of specific populations – where they winter, where they nest and their migration corridors – allowing the setting of more precise hunting regulations.



Great Plains Restoration Population



Western Prairie Population



Hi-Line Population



Tall Grass Prairie Population



Short Grass Prairie Population

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT

Central Flyway compared to today. Modern game management, at both state and federal levels, was still in its formative years, and the principal tool in managing waterfowl populations was manipulating hunting regulations on a flyway-wide scale. All of these factors in total probably explain the slow recovery of Canada goose populations. Also, there is a principle in wildlife ecology called “population threshold density” that suggests a wildlife population needs to increase above a certain minimum level, its threshold, before it can expand at its full potential. It is likely that most Canada goose populations in North America were below that threshold until the 1960s and perhaps even the 1970s.

Just as many factors collaborated to keep Canada goose numbers suppressed in the mid-1900s, many contributed to their comeback that started in the 1970s. One obvious factor was the reintroduction of the so-called “giant” Canadas, geese that weigh up to 14 pounds, to their native breeding grounds on the central and northern Great Plains. Once believed to be extirpated, the lineage had survived in captive flocks, many of which originated with call geese used by hunters until the mid-1930s. Beginning in the 1960s, individuals of this large race were gathered at state and federal game farms, and the young they reared released across the race’s former breeding range. A total of 4,100 goslings were released in the Sandhills between 1970 and 1983. Between 1984 and 1993, large Canadas were released in the North Platte River Valley and since 1993, elsewhere in the state. Similar restoration programs were also underway in other Great Plains states and provinces during the same period. Today, giant Canada geese are common across their former range. Many winter on the Platte rivers and are an important component of the goose harvest, but the return of giant Canadas only contributed to the increasingly good goose shooting of the last 30 years. All populations of Canada geese migrating through and wintering in Nebraska have been on the increase since the 1970s. (See sidebar, opposite, for more information on North American Canada goose populations.)

Federal wildlife refuges providing feeding grounds and water roosts probably played an increasingly significant role in protecting migrating Canada geese during hunting seasons, especially in the eastern part of the Central Flyway. And, breeding habitat in prairie Canada and North and South Dakota improved, leading to a 10 percent annual increase in the Western Prairie and Great Plains populations of Canada geese. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission waterfowl specialist Mark Vrtiska said those populations comprise the primary wintering populations using the Platte River. But, to a large degree, the explanation for growing Canada goose numbers over the last four decades has been management of the harvest, allowing struggling populations to increase above that critical population threshold. The Commission, other states in the flyway and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

(USFWS) collaborated to restrict the harvest of populations that needed some protection to grow. This was particularly true for restoration flocks, but waterfowl managers knew all Canada goose populations would benefit.

During the 1970s, large restoration Canadas were being shot in worrisome numbers on the North Platte River. “The kill on the wintering area of western Nebraska has been a major factor in limiting the growth of quite a few of these flocks,” former Commission waterfowl biologist George Schildman wrote in *Report on Goose Populations Occurring in Nebraska*, published in about 1973. “To those in the goose raising business outside our state, western Nebraska is referred to as the ‘goose slaughter area.’” In response, goose hunting regulations became increasingly conservative, including early season-closing dates and daily bag limits of one or two birds. In Keith County, as early as 1971, the daily bag limit changed within the season, allowing two birds early



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

The Clear Creek Wildlife Management Area, established on the west end of Lake McConaughy in 1960, immediately became an important wintering area.

when small, Arctic-nesting geese were migrating through the area, and reducing the limit to one later in the season when restoration geese arrived. The daily bag limit was reduced statewide to one dark goose after December 4 in 1972.

The state was first divided into east and west zones in 1973, allowing specific hunting dates and limits for eastern and western Canada goose populations. The Sandhills region was closed to dark goose hunting from 1970 through 1979 to protect restoration birds; and when dark goose hunting was reinstated there in 1980, only one bird was allowed per year under a special permit system. In subsequent years, the bag limit of dark geese in the Sandhills was gradually liberalized.

In 1976, waterfowl managers first attempted to separate the hunting seasons for light and dark geese, and that was completed in 1980. In 1981, the North Unit was established to control the harvest of large Canadas reared in the Sandhills. A Panhandle Unit was established in 1983 to maximize hunting opportunities while protecting late-migrating, large Canada geese. For goose hunters, the 1970s and 1980s were a time of

short-term sacrifice for better goose hunting down the road. And Canada goose populations responded.

Numbers put the recovery of Canada geese in perspective. The 2006-2008 average winter count of Canada geese in the Central Flyway was 1.5 million birds, compared to about 206,000 in the 1960s. About half of the 1.5 million geese were from the three populations comprised primarily of large Canadas – the Hi-Line, Western Prairie and Great Plains populations. By 2000, all populations of Canada geese in the Central Flyway had exceeded management objectives.

“Between the early 1970s and 1990s, the Flyway and individual states maintained a conservative hold on hunting regulations,” former Commission waterfowl biologist Joe Gabig wrote in a report prepared for the Central Flyway in 2000. “As population objectives were achieved after decades of effort, there was a concern that liberalizing regulations too quickly might cause an unwanted population decline. Ultimately, regulations were slowly liberalized, harvest increased and populations continued to grow.”

During the 1990s, season lengths and bag limits were gradually increased. The dark goose season grew from 72 days to 95 days, and three geese were allowed daily rather than one. The 2008-2009 season is 107 days. In many urban areas, flocks of resident Canada geese had grown to the point they were becoming a problem, and the USFWS began allowing states to set September and January seasons to pare back their numbers. In the period 1995-1998, the average annual harvest of Canada geese in Nebraska was 82,000 birds, 228 percent higher than the average from 1980-1989. From 1999 through 2007, the harvest has averaged 77,900.

As interesting as the dramatic increase in the number of Canada geese passing through and wintering in Nebraska is that the increase happened nearly statewide. Nowhere was the comeback more dramatic than on the 80-mile-long Big Bend region of the central Platte River, the premier goose hunting region of the state before 1900.



North Platte's Cody Park has attracted Canada geese since the 1970s. The lower North Platte River (top of photo), did not because of the encroachment of trees on sandbars.

Vrtiska and now-retired waterfowl biologist Nick Lyman chronicled the changes in Canada goose numbers and distribution in their paper, “Wintering Canada Geese Along the Platte Rivers of Nebraska, 1960-2000,” published in *Great Plains Research*, Spring 2004. In the 1960s, they noted, the North Platte River held an average of 87 percent of all Canada geese wintering in the state. While the North Platte River, including Lake McConaughy, continued to hold most of the Canada geese wintering in Nebraska into the 2000s, the proportion of geese on the central Platte increased dramatically. During the 1960s, the central Platte, from the confluence of the North and South Platte rivers east of North Platte to Central City, held only four percent of the geese observed during the Mid-Winter Survey. The Mid-Winter Survey, conducted by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the USFWS, is the principal tool managers use to assess waterfowl distribution and monitor populations trends. In the 1990s, that survey showed the central Platte held 28 percent of the Canadas in Nebraska. And, a quarter of the state’s total Canada goose harvest came from that region. Significantly more than half of the Canadas shot there were large races.

Canada geese have proven to be adaptable species, quickly taking advantage of any site where food and safe roosts are available. In the 2000s, Canada geese were overwintering in increasing large numbers where they had not been, such as Lake Minatare, Laing Lake and the Sidney area in the Panhandle. From 1996 through 2006, 2,000 to more than 20,000 Canadas wintered at Harlan County Reservoir. And large Canada geese have not been shy about adopting urban waters. During the early 2000s, 5,000 to 38,000 Canadas were estimated using sandpits within Grand Island’s city limits; and as many as 46,000 were counted in a January survey on Grandpa’s Pit on Kearney’s southern edge. “Sandpits provide deepwater habitat that does not freeze as early as shallower wetland habitats, and most sandpits provide refuge for geese from hunting,” Vriska and Lyman wrote. Increasingly, large numbers of Canada geese winter on the North Loup River in Blaine and southeastern Cherry County where cornfields border the river.

De Facto Refuges

Why Canada geese increased in abundance on the central Platte in a relatively short time can probably be attributed to several factors, the most important of which is more Canada geese in the Central Flyway. Land use in the Platte Valley has not changed significantly, other than larger farms, more corn and less hay meadow and pastureland. Waste grain has been available since farming was first introduced to the region.

The establishment of river roosting areas where geese can rest without being hunted has almost certainly been an important factor. In the early-1970s, not a single site along the Big Bend region of the Platte was set aside as a refuge for migratory waterfowl. A 1971 proposal by the USFWS to establish a 15,000-acre wildlife refuge on Mormon Island southwest of Grand Island was withdrawn in the face of strong opposition from landowners fearing their land would be condemned and hunters fearing they would lose shooting grounds. The USFWS then proposed an alternative – small scattered refuges on the central Platte acquired from willing sellers. By



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Canada geese have become year-round residents on urban waters, such as these wintering on Oak Lake in Lincoln.

then the flames of opposition were lapping high and the USFWS abandoned their hoped-for refuge. Ironically, since that time more land has been set aside for wildlife on the central Platte River than the USFWS sought in 1971.

In 1974, the National Audubon Society purchased 782 acres on the middle channel southeast of Gibbon, including 2½ miles of river, principally to provide migration habitat for sandhill and whooping cranes. Today, Audubon’s Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary encompasses about 1,900 acres, including three miles on both side of the river and two miles of side channel. Rowe holds an easement on an additional 420 acres. In 1978, the Platte River Whooping Crane Trust was created as mitigation for construction of the Grayrocks Dam on a tributary of the North Platte River in Wyoming. Funded with a \$7.5 million endowment, the Trust has acquired almost 10,000 acres of Platte River Valley between Grand Island and Overton at eight locations, encompassing about 20 miles of the Platte River. The Nature Conservancy owns 3,450 acres and holds 2,056 acres in easements on the central Platte River, amounting to more than 11 miles of river frontage. The USFWS managed about 450 acres on the Platte southeast of Kearney from 1988 into 2007, land set aside as part of a river-flow settlement with Wyoming. That tract is now managed by the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. Central Nebraska Public Power District leases 4,100 acres and owns 350 acres on the central Platte, encompassing seven miles of river on the north side and five miles on the south side. Central allows limited waterfowl hunting as their federal license to operate Kingsley Dam encourages the “historical use” of their properties, which includes waterfowl hunting. Even more

miles of central Platte River will be restored to the benefit of Canada geese and other species in the future by way of projects currently on the drawing board.

All of these organizations have expended time and money clearing trees from the river to create bare sandbars and shallow waters where geese and other water birds roost. The impact these refuges on the central Platte have on Canada goose numbers pausing during migration and wintering cannot be underestimated. Additionally, many waterfowlers who own or lease land on the Platte have engaged in similar, albeit on a smaller scale, habitat restoration favorable to migratory waterbirds. And there are a number of privately owned, abandoned gravel mining pits and small lakes created during the construction of Interstate 80 where waterfowl find refuge. In total, these protected roosting areas have created sanctuaries on the central Platte that hold Canada geese just as the Garden County Refuge has since 1925.

If the Platte rivers of old flowed through the horizon-to-horizon corn and soybean fields of today, with the refuges now in place, Canada geese would probably be declared noxious birds. Outdoor writer Sandy Griswold, in the *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 6, 1895, wrote that nowhere between the “two oceans” furnished better goose shooting than “... the country traversed by this erratic and legendary [Platte] river.” It seems that is once again true. Even given the rivers’ greatly diminished flows, they provide Nebraska’s premier goose hunting, and some of the best to be found in the Central Flyway. ■

Editor’s note: Part one of the history of Canada goose hunting in Nebraska appeared in the December 2008 issue.

No Country for Old Hunters

Crescent Lake NWR

Text and photos by Bob Grier

Pheasant hunters know habitat – everything from grassed waterways snaking through undulating fields of standing corn in eastern and central Nebraska to the chest-high stands of sunflowers and mature CRP fields and abandoned shelterbelts that are found in the west.

Alliance pheasant hunter Alan Tuck and his English-bred Labrador, Jesse, know about gnarly, nasty and even dangerous pheasant habitat found on Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in the rolling sandhills of western Nebraska.

While it's a distinction that Tuck never mentions, a review of the refuge's hunter harvest cards for many years reveals that he and Jesse consistently harvest more roosters than any of the other pheasant hunters that travel to the refuge, usually for their first and last hunt because of the extremely tough hunting conditions they encounter.

Crescent Lake NWR in Garden County is located approximately 25 miles north of Oshkosh or the same distance south of Lakeside. Like Valentine NWR in Cherry County, Crescent Lake NWR includes lakes and

adjacent wetlands that offer some of the state's thickest pheasant habitat.

"It's really like the recent Cohen brothers' film, 'No Country for Old Men,'" Tuck says earnestly. "When someone asks me if they can go along on a Crescent Lake pheasant hunt, I have to ask 'Can you walk ten miles in very heavy cover wearing hip-boots?' If the answer is no, I try to suggest other places to hunt."

It's not just that the NWR has large areas of knee-high grass, chest-high stands of sunflowers and grassy uplands that offer both pheasant and sharp-tailed grouse hunting opportunities, it's

that the refuge, especially after the timely snows and rains of 2008, also has marshes covered with dense stands of 8-foot-tall cattails and phragmites, thick tangles of sunflowers, ragweed, kochia and smaller thickets of plum and large areas of scattered wild rose. After the first timely moisture conditions in six or seven years, even Tuck and Jesse

were finding it nearly impossible to hunt some of the cattail marshes last fall.

Conventional pheasant hunting wisdom at Crescent Lake NWR normally recommends saving the refuge for late-season hunts after the marshes and lakes are frozen solid to give dogs

and hunters the ability to go after birds in the thick cattails, but Tuck has experienced firsthand the dangers of hidden springs, muskrat holes and other areas with thin ice, even during extremely cold winters.

"I don't know where you will find a more dangerous place to hunt. I've hunted the refuge regularly now for 15 years and I still fall through occasionally and Jesse will as well. Imagine breaking through thin ice in the middle of a square mile or two of seven to eight-foot-tall cattails, sinking a foot or two in decaying vegetation and mud on the bottom of the marsh and trying to climb out of water that is from waist to chest-deep surrounded by unsafe ice. There's no one to call, the only cell



The vierling gun that Alan Tuck hunts with is truly a handcrafted work of art.



Alan Tuck of Alliance and his English-bred Labrador Jesse work the rolling sandhills of Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

phone service is at the top of one or two of the highest hills on the refuge.

"It often takes 30 minutes or more to finally get a foot on top of the ice – I've actually thought I was going to die after falling through and flailing about, trying to get a foothold on the slippery ice. When your dog breaks through it has to find a way out as well – there's no way to reach the dog and attempt to pull it free. Getting a foothold on downed cattails on top of the ice is about the only way possible to get out."

In spite of the extremely thick cover and the danger of breaking through the ice later in the season, you'll often find Tuck and Jesse at the refuge, usually visible only as they traverse between marshes or while climbing the uplands

surrounding the refuge lakes and marshes on warm afternoons when the roosters move into uplands to feed before returning to the thick cover to roost. Tuck's observations over 15 years and his close study of pheasant crop contents, the impact of weather conditionss on hunting success and the importance of hunting with a good dog offer a distinctive perspective that pheasant hunters will find valuable wherever they hunt. He shares his knowledge freely, knowing full well that very few hunters are prepared to tackle the refuge.

"To begin with, it's really impossible to hunt thick cover anywhere without a good gun dog," Tuck said during a lunch break on a late-November pheasant hunt last year. Full sunlight glinted

from the thin ice cloaking the nearby water's surface and the tall cover upwind of a grassy low spot provided shelter out of the wind to conduct an in-the-field interview.

"Even when the dog hasn't flushed a bird, it is crucial to have a dog recovering birds knocked down over the cattails or other thick cover."

Jesse was seven years old during the November 2007 hunt and it was eye-opening to see how well the dog handled heavy cover, at least when it was visible. During most of the day the dog was completely out of sight.

"He's the first dog I'd hunted with that would work parallel or 'offset.' For example, there are times when the dog will move into cover so thick and tall



The head-high cover at Crescent Lake NWR makes hunters like Tuck work for the pheasants they harvest.

that it would be impossible for the hunter to even see a flushing rooster. There are times when it wouldn't even be possible to raise the shotgun and get a shot even if I could see the bird. With Jesse, I can walk along the edge and he'll work into the cattails moving parallel and close enough that I can get a shot at the birds as they flush.

"Jesse is an English-bred Labrador, which are somewhat taller, 'lankier' and lighter field dogs, shaped more like a pointer than most Labs that are bred for size. There are certainly other breeds that can dig into heavy cover and do the job, but without exaggeration or bragging, Jesse takes to tough hunting conditions like no other dog I've had the opportunity to hunt over.

"But even with a hardy dog, Crescent Lake's conditions are tough on dogs. Fortunately, there is usually water available, but I have to literally get him to stop at times to prevent overheating. I carry a leash in the hunting vest, make Jesse stop and pour water on his ears to help him cool down. Never let the dog get down – many gun dogs just won't stop unless you force the issue. With the leash, I can control his movements to slow down, cool down and also walk him into pheasant holding areas and weed patches before releasing him to hunt."

Tuck also fits Jesse's collar with a small receiver, a "beeper" that he can use to signal the unseen dog working in heavy cover by using a small transmitter. "Basically, the beeper tells him to check with me – to come look for me –

very useful when I can't locate the dog or when I need to change directions."

Tuck's examination of pheasant crops of harvested birds is an insightful look at pheasant feeding patterns when different food sources are available.

"I can normally identify the three or four favorite pheasant food items in crops at Crescent Lake refuge, including, in order of preference, ragweed, sunflowers, kochia and grasshoppers. Surprisingly, I've seen pheasant crops in December that were 100 percent grasshoppers. Ragweed is a source of very high protein that the birds will use heavily, and I'll also see birds using more kochia later in the year. Identifying food items seasonally as the hunting season progresses will help hunters 'pattern' birds somewhat, but an important secondary consideration is the daily weather condition and how that impacts bird movements as well."

Describing a previous year's hunt on Crescent Lake helped Tuck detail the importance of understanding the impact of weather conditions encountered during the hunt.

"A hunt several years ago with four friends at Crescent Lake is a perfect example. On the first day's hunt, the sky was clear, sunny conditions prevailed and we were able to limit out during a hunt that lasted less than half of the day. We also saw lots of birds flushing out of range and my hunting partners were really excited about returning for a second day's hunt.

"The next day we arrived at the refuge and I told the other hunters that we won't kill very many birds. They couldn't believe that after all the birds we'd seen on the previous day. The second day ended with a tired, leg-sore group of hunters. We'd covered many of the same areas where we'd seen numerous birds on

the previous day, but at the end of the hunt we had only three or four birds. The difference was the weather. Instead of sunlight, the second day was cloudy and dark. Pheasants can find everything they require in the marsh and don't need to come out to feed, at least for several days. Evidently, the food items in the marsh are not as rich as their normal diet. I've actually seen the birds' conditions deteriorate during longer periods when they don't get out to feed.

"Hunters can use the bird's feeding patterns to locate pheasants and there will always be birds using the rushes as well, but understanding the impact of wind, temperature and moisture conditions is important. Cloudy, snowy days will keep the birds in heavy cover. Drier conditions make it difficult for dogs to scent effectively and high winds keep the birds in the heavy cover or on the downwind side of cover, similar to sharptails in the high hills. We try to always hunt into the wind to help the dog, and at times the winds at Crescent Lake are in the 30- to 40-mile-per-hour class. At least we know the direction flushing birds will use to escape – they'll turn almost



Tuck drops a rooster pheasant that a great hunting dog and good knowledge of this bird's habits helped him find.



Jesse retrieves a rooster earned after lots of legwork by both hunting partners.

immediately and try to move with the wind."

Tuck finds ragweed in areas with better soils, not in the marshes specifically, but in low areas adjacent to the marshes and low areas within the surrounding hills. Sunflowers prefer sandy soils, but thicker stands of sunflowers at Crescent Lake have been missing in recent years due to drought. The 2008 moisture patterns produced bumper crops of sunflowers in the sandy hillsides, trails and roadsides.

During the November 2007 hunt, Tuck carried his "combination gun" – a German, handcrafted work of art called a "vierling" that has four barrels: two side-by-side 16-gauge shotgun barrels, with a .22 Hornet barrel in the top rib and an 8x57 JR rimmed centerfire lower barrel. Combination guns, including the three barrel drilling (from the German *drei* for three), the four-barreled vierling and even a five-barrel combination gun called a "fünfling" (from the German *fünf* for five) are extremely rare and expensive. Where and when legal, the vierling combination gun can be used for varmints, upland game birds and waterfowl, and even deer, elk and North America's largest big game.

In Europe, where combination guns remain popular, hunts are often conducted from stands, with drivers pushing a variety of birds as large as small turkeys, varmints and game mammals to the concealed hunters. Also, stalking hunters may be able to take a wide variety of game birds and mammals under traditional European

hunting practices.

"The vierling shotgun barrels are about cylinder bore and improved modified. The upper barrel fires the standard .22 Hornet that is very popular for smaller game, varmints and even wild turkey where it is legal to use a rifle, and the 8x57 rimmed is a very effective big game cartridge that uses a .318-caliber bullet. The handmade gun has double triggers, with a selector to choose the barrel that fires, and both triggers "set" to enable a lighter trigger pull for long-range shooting," said Tuck.

Tuck's vierling includes a handmade rib mount and quick detachable scope rings that can be removed and remounted without changing the rifle barrel's zero. Tuck has never used the vierling to take a deer, but on his first outing of 2008 he bagged three roosters, a sharp-tailed grouse and a coyote.

"The amazing thing about the gun to me is that the craftsman or artisan builder is able to make everything work. I've known about this combination gun even when I was a teenager starting to buy, sell and trade firearms, but of course I couldn't afford one then."

After the lunch break and hunting a few nearby marshes, Tuck drove to a smaller grouping of lakes with a ridge of hills along their western edge. He and Jesse worked the lowlands along the lake for nearly a mile without flushing a pheasant before moving up into the hills as the sun began to lower in the western sky. The choppy terrain offered a glimpse of several roosters and hens that flushed out of range as

the dog and hunter topped the first ridge. With the sun setting in the west the pair began the long trek back to the vehicle parked in the valley below.

"Crescent Lake totals over 45,000-acres. Not all of it is huntable, and pheasants might be found only on several thousand acres of the refuge at any one time," Tuck said. "Hunters must 'pay their dues' to successfully hunt the refuge. Look for the specific areas that hold birds during the different periods of the day, talk to refuge biologists and supervisors to gain their insights and start a conditioning program for yourself and your dog early if you want to tackle these challenging conditions." ■



Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge is located approximately 25 miles north of Oshkosh and 25 miles south of Lakeside. Kiosks located at all refuge entrances offer orientation and interpretive information. To find out about current regulations and to obtain a map of designated hunting and fishing areas, consult the *Crescent Lake NWR Public Use Regulations* brochure usually available at the unmanned kiosks, or contact the Refuge Manager, Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, 10630 Road 181, Ellsworth, NE 69340, (308) 762-4893, crescentlake@fws.gov or <http://crescentlake.fws.gov>. Refuge information is also available from 1-800-344-WILD.

Craniacs

These volunteers invade Rowe Sanctuary every spring

By Jeff Kurrus

Photos by Jeff Kurrus and Michael Forsberg

Morning

Nearly two hours before sunrise, the parking lot at Rowe Sanctuary in central Nebraska was full. Inside the area's visitor center, a crowd of people gathered in a dimly lit room as volunteer Carl Wolfe whispered last-minute instructions. The group was then silently led to one of three viewing blinds overlooking the Platte River as thousands of sandhill cranes conversed with each other on the adjacent water.

While Wolfe quietly answered questions, professional and weekend photographers alike captured images of the increasingly visible gray birds in the morning light. Shortly after sunrise, a loud "whoosh" echoed as thousands of cranes ascended into the air, nearly blackening the sky. A woman next to me breathed a quiet "Wow" – an effective, one word summary of the morning.

"Did you enjoy it?" Wolfe asked when we returned to the center.

"Yes I did," I said.

"Was it your

first time?"

"Yes."

"It was spectacular, wasn't it," he said rhetorically.

As we talked, more visitors filtered through the center, some looking at various items in the gift shop, others perusing the tapestries on the walls. Some wandered aimlessly, taking in the morning and occasionally pausing as a new, thought-provoking question entered their mind. Each time one of these moments occurred, all the visitor had to do was stop one of the green-shirted volunteers patrolling the center and ask for a moment of their time. "Anything I can help you with?" they would hear back, a familiar response from the long line of volunteers who happily invade Rowe Sanctuary each and every spring.

Midday

Volunteer Erv Nichols, originally from Big Bear Lake, California, welcomed patrons to the spotting scope near the north window that overlooks the Platte and a birdfeeder only a few feet away.

Nichols started his volunteering at Bosque del Apache, a national wildlife refuge in New Mexico. "A few years back, Brad Mellema (Rowe's former director) came down and put

his hands on my shoulder. He said, 'You need to come to Nebraska.' I had been watching 7,000 cranes in New Mexico and thought it was great. Then I came to Nebraska. I was blown away."

Coming from Colorado, Maine, California, Wisconsin, Canada and all parts of Nebraska, numerous volunteers land at Rowe every year, each filling a different role. They teach visitors about cranes and their habitat, history and day-to-day activities; conduct morning and evening tours; maintain the blinds; housekeep; garden; work the counter in the visitor's center; restore habitat; maintain trails; answer phones; and assist with the rest of Rowe's various projects.

"Everything from cleaning the bathrooms and changing

toilet paper to washing dishes. Whatever I am needed for," said Marianna Wimberley, who has volunteered at Rowe for four years. "Our family had been out before, but I had never been on one of the blind tours. I think a lot of people don't realize what a difference it is being in a blind, seeing the cranes so close and hearing the stupendous noise they make when they leave. Forget about talking when that happens – they have the floor."

Regardless of what jobs the volunteers are assigned to, they ooze interest about cranes, perhaps their largest contribution. "The volunteers are the face, the one-on-one, of what we do at Rowe," said Tony Docherty, Rowe's volunteer coordinator. "With only five full-time employees,



A crane-viewing morning overlooking the Platte River at Rowe Sanctuary.



Rowe Sanctuary staff member Bill Taddicken (left) goes over a list of morning viewing blind participants with volunteer Carolyn Hall.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

we couldn't function without them."

During a volunteer's first year, they are partnered with a more experienced volunteer and evaluated by staff so they can be positioned based on their strengths and availability. Because many of the local volunteers have jobs and are limited by time, out-of-state volunteers are heavily relied on because of their attendance over anywhere from one to five weeks of the season. "They are extremely important because they are essentially trapped here," laughed Docherty.

Out-of-town volunteers are put up in local homes in Kearney or stay at the sanctuary itself. The latter is a big aid because of the 6:30 a.m. trips to the blind. But it's not all work. "We're flexible enough that volunteers can leave, go take a nap or disappear for awhile," said Docherty. "No one is under pressure to do six or eight hours of work per day. We work with what their needs and desires are.

"And people keep coming back because what is happening here isn't happening anywhere else in the world. Anywhere. People want to be part of that. Many people don't have the money to give a big wad of cash to Rowe, but they can donate hours and time. That's a very worthwhile way of looking at life."

Midday Afternoon

"And where are you from?" the woman behind the counter asked.

"Omaha," I replied.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

Volunteer Cindy Weitzel (foreground) and Cindy Powell teach kids the crane dance during the Family Crane Carnival at Rowe Sanctuary.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

Volunteer Rosie Docherty smiles as crane watchers visit the photo booth at the Family Crane Carnival at Rowe Sanctuary.

"We've had people from all over today," she said. "One man was from Germany."

"Is this your first time?" another volunteer behind the counter asked.

"Yes. How long have you been here?"

She pointed to the pin on her chest. It read "Carolyn" and had a "5" beside it, but Carolyn Hall quickly admitted to not having updated her pin and began to tell of her almost 20 years of volunteer service at Rowe.

"Why are you here?" I mused.

"To talk to you," she replied.

She told me about crane blinds, the volunteer quarters and the cranes themselves, all while using a hand-held clicker to record each person that walked through the door. "It will be in the 600s here very soon," she said. "You were clicked as well."

When Kent Skaggs, Rowe's office manager, started working there in 1992 there were only 3,000 to 5,000 visitors during the entire crane season. "We didn't have the number of volunteers that we have today, so staff led nearly all of the morning and evening trips to the viewing blinds, as well as dealing with all of the crane watchers during the course of the day, for the entire season. Today, it's essentially the reverse — our volunteers lead most of the crane viewing trips and are the first to greet the 12,000-plus visitors that walk through our doors each season since the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center opened in 2003."

Carolyn continued to click as visitors walked through the door. Driving from



her home in Bassett, she started volunteering at Rowe in 1989.

"Back then, we spent a lot of time cutting willows on sandbars," she said, her voice booming with excitement. "We'd come up in July and August, the later the better so they wouldn't regrow, and work to clear the Platte with help from the Whooping Crane Trust. So if this area on the river looks farmed, it's because it is."

As Carolyn's voice continued to echo through the center, volunteer Caryl McHarney sat at a table, water colors and canvas before her as she looked out at the Platte River. "Early this morning at dawn," she said, "it was sort of yellow and gray, and the sun was behind one of the

trees. I'm just trying to capture that early effect." She continued to paint as visitors walked by, still and video cameras in their hands.

Caryl has lived in New Mexico since the 1940s, but life totally changed for her nearly 10 years ago after her son went to a Boy Scout camp at Bosque del Apache. When he came home, he told his mom that she wasn't going to believe what he had seen. She decided to investigate. "The next weekend, I went down, made a turn in the road and saw a field of gray corn. It took me a minute to realize that I was looking at five-foot-tall birds, and I've been in love with



PHOTO BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

Volunteer Carl Wolfe (left) watches as Emme Forsberg colors at Rowe Sanctuary's Family Crane Carnival.



In 2007, shortly after volunteer Stevie Staples's death, Rowe Sanctuary's west blind was renamed "Stevie's Blind" in her honor. "There is a lot of love around here," said volunteer Phil Mesner. "But sometimes there's a lot of pain. Rowe is a sanctuary for people who have a love for cranes that carries over to the love people have for each other."

them ever since."

An art teacher, Caryl started doing crane paintings, which were well received at a Bosque del Apache crane festival. Soon she was visiting festivals in other states, and now she spends springs in Nebraska. "I'm a crane groupie," she said. "I just love this place."

She isn't the only traveling volunteer of the group, says fellow volunteer Susan Ahlschwede. "There are a number of people who go from refuge to sanctuary to national park, and this is their life – they meet up with each other at various places."

This particular "place" takes Caryl two days to reach each

spring, where she has volunteered for the past six years. "These trees here," she said, pointing out of the window, "are unique. I call this my left-handed tree because all the branches come out on the left side. There was a terrible ice storm in December that has pretty much demolished the tree, as you see. That's an example of what nature does. But we can decide to either cut that off or let it decay so that insects can live in it and woodpeckers can feed off of it."

Rowe volunteers either arrive with a sense of the environment or leave with one, and they share their ideas with others. Caryl works with youth from the area during crane season, teaching them about art and journaling by viewing nature. "I want them to understand that Earth was given to everyone. We didn't design it, we didn't work to build it, but everything on it works, and the only responsibility they have is to take care of it."

Evening

"In the evening you wait, and wait, and wait," said Carolyn, describing the cranes' daily return to their Platte River roosting sites. "Then they start to come. Two weeks ago it was nearly dark before they arrived. Then they came



Sandhill cranes viewed from a Rowe Sanctuary viewing blind.

in one solid mass."

This day it was different, however. The cranes returned to their river roosts in small pairs, larger groups and huge, dark swarms. People filled the bridges at the Central Platte Natural Resources District's Plautz and Alda viewing sites and the hike/bike trail at Fort Kearny State Recreation Area. Cameras, binoculars and spotting scopes lined every roadside clearing. "There is potential for growth here in our volunteer base," said Skaggs. "Manning all of these local viewing spots with knowledgeable volunteers would be great."

Until then, volunteers will continue their day-to-day activities at Rowe itself, providing the pulse for everything that the Sanctuary does each spring.

Yet there was still one question that I still I wanted answered before I left. Why did so many volunteers return to Rowe year after year? Was it the cranes? The people? What?

"Something about the cranes is different," said Canadian Phil Mesner, a longtime volunteer. "Many people talk about them in a spiritual sense and I can't put it into words. All I know is that it makes me feel very good about what I do here."

"They come for the same reason I stay here," said Docherty. "Once you see the cranes' behavior and know their background and history, you become captivated."

Janet Christiansen, another longtime volunteer, walked through. She spends a month at Rowe every spring and, when asked why, smiled. "Because it's March," she said. "It's the cranes. It's too easy to make the birds human, but they do so many human things. They dance because they're happy. They fight each other. They have families. They are constantly talking back and forth. They are a fascinating and beautiful bird. At the same time, I come here for the people. You never know what sort of person is going to come through that door next. I'll be here every March," she said, turning to walk away.

Then she turned back. "And if you need anything else, I'll be around." ■

"Cranes are the storyline but the story is much bigger. They connect habitats with people who migrate to the Platte River over and over again, each time dropping another root. For a lot of these folks, this is their anchor. The cranes, Rowe Sanctuary, the volunteers – they are all family. These volunteers send birthday cards and create email chains; they go to each others' weddings and funerals. And each year they return to the Platte. For there is something solid about knowing that every day, at an hour before sundown, those birds are going to come back to that river. And these volunteers will once again have new and old friends alike right beside them, listening to the sounds of the birds as if for the first time. It is a very comforting routine."

– Michael Forsberg
Author of *On Ancient Wings - The Sandhill Cranes of North America*



Volunteer Phil Mesner talks to a crane viewer in one of Rowe Sanctuary's blinds.

The Longhorns of Fort Rob

Text and photos by Bob Grier

A key component in western lore and cowboy tales, Fort Robinson State Park's herd of longhorn cattle is the perfect addition to an area already rich in Old West history.

In some ways, the snowy, 170-mile, nine-day trail that led nearly 140 Texas longhorns from Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge near Valentine to Fort Robinson State Park (SP) eight years ago has grown significantly – now longhorn ranchers, breeders and enthusiasts from across North America trek to northwest Nebraska to see the only publically-held herd of genetically documented and registered Texas longhorns in the United States.

Texas longhorns have been part of

the Americas ever since Christopher Columbus made his second voyage to the New World in 1493, bringing Spanish settlers and their Iberian cattle to the major islands of the Antilles – Jamaica, Hispaniola, Cuba and Puerto Rico. Soon after the Spanish conquest of mainland Mexico in 1519, the longhorns arrived on this continent and began weaving their extraordinary, several century-long trail through American history.

Despite their historical significance, Texas longhorns were nearly extinct at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1927, after an extensive and exhausting search through Texas and Mexico, only 30 pure-bred Texas longhorns were selected and taken to the Wichita National Forest near Lawton, Oklahoma in an effort to protect the bloodline. Of those animals, research conducted in the early 1960s indicates, only one of the mature bulls left progeny. In his report in *Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science*, Arthur Halloran writes that "... a review of the record indicates that one bull, 19 cows and one of the 1927 bull calves formed the original herd foundation."

Halloran noted the addition of

eight longhorns from Marathon, Texas, to the Wichita Forest herd in 1953, and his report added "... it seems that 59 animals constituted the foundation stock for the present herd."

In an effort to protect the species' gene pool, four heifers, a bull and a steer were transferred to Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge near Valentine in 1936 – the southern herd was branded WR and the Fort Niobrara herd was branded US. Approximately 4,000 calves were born to the Fort Niobrara herd between

1936 and 2000, at which time the herd was transferred to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

The Oklahoma herd, which now resides on the current-day Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, isn't managed to maintain individual sire-dam records, so the Fort Robinson SP herd is the only remaining publically-held herd managed to maintain the original Texas longhorn gene pool.

If a Texas longhorn is anything, it isn't speed, beauty and grace. They

were described in the October 2001 *NEBRASKALAND Magazine* article about the Fort Niobrara to Fort Robinson trail drive as "...a breed of long-legged, raw-boned, cat-hammed, long-tailed cattle with shoulders sharp enough to split hailstones, fearsome horns and dispositions forged over 500 years of nearly wild existence in rock and thorn country..."

"That's the Texas longhorn we're trying to preserve at Fort Robinson State Park," says Mike Morava,



During their annual Fort Robinson trail ride, Joe Berens of Las Vegas and other members of the American Paint Horse Association drive Fort Robinson longhorns to the Crawford rodeo arena.



Texas longhorn mother and calf.



Fort Robinson State Park is western Nebraska's premier state park. Located west of Crawford, the park offers more than 22,000 acres of exquisite Pine Ridge scenery, compelling old west history, exceptional lodging, loads of fun activities, scenic camping and its own buffalo and longhorn herds.

superintendent and longhorn herd manager at Fort Robinson SP. "The longhorn herd is managed to preserve the original bloodlines, characteristics and traits – not just their diverse colors, conformation or horn, but the longhorn's hardiness, 'ranginess,' vitality and – to some eyes at least – their classic beauty."

Ever since their arrival at Fort Robinson, Morava has maintained individual sire and dam records for each of the herd's longhorns. Every newborn calf is registered with the three existing longhorn registries, including the prestigious Cattleman's Texas Longhorn Registry (CTLR) that requires blood samples from each longhorn to authenticate and ensure the integrity of the herd's bloodlines and genetics.

Key to Morava's ability to manage the park's longhorn herd is the integration of the herd with the annual schedule and activities of a full-fledged Nebraska state park.

"We schedule the longhorn's activities around the park season," he said,

"including beginning longhorn calving in late-February to mid-April each year. Longhorns are extremely hardy, and while they don't require as much assistance or care as other breeds during the calving season, they do produce small calves – the average live-weight on the calves is about 40 pounds. It would be great to schedule calving later in the spring to avoid the wet and cold weather, but our park season really picks up each year as spring approaches."

Morava and the park's wranglers move the calving cows into pastures close to his ranch home on Fort Robinson before the calving season begins. "Again, the calves are light and they are usually born during late-winter's cold and wet weather. We monitor the calving closely to ensure the calf can rise and begin milking, and in extreme conditions we may have to bring a newborn in to warm up."

At birth, the calves are ear-tagged to record lineage, and each receives a herd identification brand at the park's

annual branding operation. The longhorn calves are weaned about the beginning of November, after the annual park season begins to slow, and the park's annual surplus sale is held each year in late-November.

"We try to maintain about 125 breeding cows each year and normally see better than 80 percent reproduction. To maintain the herd, we have the 125 breeding-age cows plus about 20 trophy steers and 10 to 15 bulls. From the annual calf crop, we'll keep three or four bull calves to evaluate for addition to the herd and about 25 heifers to raise to yearlings for evaluation and other uses on the park as well, thus each of the candidates for addition to the herd go through at least two culls as we try to pick the 'top of the top' to maintain the herd. Our annual surplus sale in November isn't a production sale – we are required by State of Nebraska regulations to auction surplus livestock, and we sell some good



Each Fort Robinson longhorn receives an ear tag and identification brand in order to maintain complete sire and dam records.



Surplus longhorns and bison from the Fort Robinson herds are auctioned off each November at the Crawford Livestock Sales Arena.

stock that attracts longhorn breeders and owners from across the United States each November."

To maintain the genetic records of sire and dam, Morava uses as many as eight to 10 separate breeding pastures each year, with a single mature bull moved into each of the pastures in late-May through June. The longhorn's gestation period is approximately nine months.

"The selection of breeding bulls and cows is an active process to help maintain the longhorn's color, conformation and other characteristics, and we constantly try to breed for the longhorn's diversity, including colors and the original longhorn 'look.' Several years ago, we acquired five additional bulls from longhorn breeders in south Texas maintained on the CTLR registry to ensure their genetics add to the herd's diversity.

"Colors can range from spotted or speckled with a wide range of colors – red, black to roan and white and numerous shadings and patterns. We've seen red begin to predominate within

the Fort Robinson herd and our current efforts try to select breeding stock to reduce red and achieve some of the more unique colors, like the blue to roan colors and even the all-black colors that cattlemen use to help reduce calving difficulties within their herds.

"Private longhorn breeders can select for specific traits – horn size and length is a good example. When we received the longhorn herd from Fort Niobrara, we also took on the responsibility to maintain the longhorn's original characteristics."

Fort Robinson's park visitors can observe both the longhorns and bison along the park's interior roads and in the larger, drive-through display pasture on the park's southwestern edge. The information booth in front of the park's main lodge and office during the annual park season can provide timely information on the best viewing locations throughout the park. The paved Smiley Canyon road passes through the main display pasture and the one-way access road is open daily from sunrise to sunset. Visitors

should avoid closely approaching bison and longhorns but the park's interior roads and numerous scenic viewpoints offer excellent viewing opportunities.

Some of the longhorn calves that Morava and the park's wranglers hold back each year also appear as roping stock in the evening rodeos held regularly throughout the annual park season from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day weekend, and the fort's popular restaurant menu offers both bison and longhorn from the herd's surplus production.

Fort Robinson SP represents a critical effort to preserve and protect the last remaining publically-held and genetically registered herd of Texas longhorns. The "long-legged, raw-boned, cat-hammed, long-tailed cattle with fearsome horns and formidable dispositions" that reside there offer a unique opportunity to view history on the hoof, living examples of the cattle trailed out of Texas on the Chisholm and Goodnight-Loving trails and into American history. ■

Mark Your Calendars

The NEBRASKAland Calendar continues to brighten walls.

By Rocky Hoffmann

Forty-five years ago, the premiering 1965 *NEBRASKAland Calendar of Color* was inserted in the 1964 December issue of its namesake, *NEBRASKAland Magazine*, and mailed to every subscriber. Calendars that were sold across the counter the following year were priced at just 50 cents. In those years, the magazine was more popularly known as *Outdoor NEBRASKAland*. Color pages in the magazine were relatively new and few, but the calendar first appeared in color and has remained famous for its spectacular color photos each year.

For nearly a decade now, Nebraska Game and Parks graphic artist Donna Schimonitz has had the responsibility of creating the annual *NEBRASKAland* calendars. Donna said that the heart of the calendar's success lies in the photography, but finding those photos and balancing the layout require considerable effort and planning. What makes a photo a *NEBRASKAland Calendar* photo?

"All calendar images are photos taken by agency personnel. This is our in-house presentation to the public," Schimonitz said. "Of course we begin with the technical merits of the photographs submitted for consideration. They have to be quality photos with good resolution and

crispness that provoke a little 'awe.' Then we try to represent the state by featuring a wide range of locations."

When the call for photos goes out, Schimonitz asks staff to include images featuring scenics, nongame flora and fauna, game animals, aerials, close-ups, fishing, boating, park scenics and activities – even agriculture. Photos must also represent all seasons and even more specifically, the months for which they will be used.

"We are truly blessed with the changing seasons in Nebraska, and showcasing images that are time-appropriate to each particular

month keeps the viewer current to what they can actually see in the outdoors at that specific time of the year," said Schimonitz.

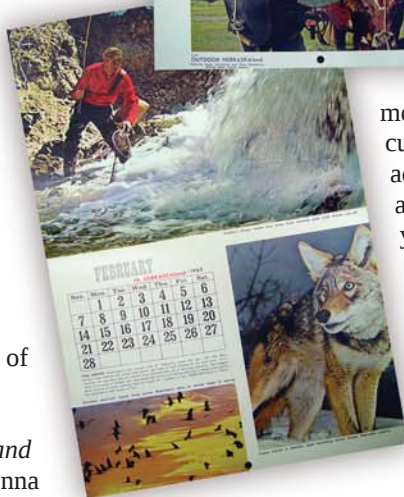
A committee of staff photographers and artists select the 12 images from scores of many qualifying photographs. Schimonitz said some years the submissions are "heavy" with a single subject matter, such as birds, and although many of those images would qualify for selection, some might not get used for several years until there is a scarcity of bird images submitted.

Photos featuring different locations across the state are of great interest to both current residents and out-of-state recipients of the calendar. Schimonitz gets calls such as: "Is that really found in Nebraska?" The past few years, she has included a small Nebraska map on the back cover, roughly identifying where

each month's photo was taken, and the photographers whose photos appear write short captions for their photos on the date pages, as well as more in-depth captions for their photos on a thumbnail page.

"Creating the *NEBRASKAland Calendar* is more intense than many people would suspect. There is a great deal of research and fact finding required for setting up the changing moon phases, sunrise/sunset schedules, holiday dates and historical notations. When the Lewis and Clark Discovery Expedition was being commemorated and followed across the nation, significant travel dates through Nebraska were noted on the calendar," Schimonitz said.

The first calendar cover in 1965 featured the oxen "Neb" and "Raska" leaning against their yoke and hitched to a covered wagon with the bold letters "Where the WEST begins – NEBRASKAland." Not only has the calendar changed, but so too have the times. The 2009 calendar features a hen turkey leading her poults on an insect hunt. When the first calendar appeared, turkey hunting was only three years old in Nebraska. Now the wild turkey is one of the state's most popular and abundant game birds. ■



Quail and Ice Don't Mix

Population reduced in southwestern Nebraska due to winter storms.

By Rocky Hoffmann

The National Weather Service termed the December storms of 2006 as classic strong mid-latitude cyclones. For many wildlife species and especially northern bobwhite quail the double storm combination spelled destruction for the breeding populations along the storms' paths.

On December 19, the first of the two events began with a half-inch coating of ice, followed by an 8-inch snowfall over the next two days. The center of the storm was

widespread, covering most of southwestern Nebraska. On December 29 through 31, a more severe storm struck along the central Platte River corridor and south, coating everything with at least an inch of ice, followed again by snow.

Temperatures on the heels of both storms remained well below freezing during daytime hours and extremely cold at night. These temperatures were quite significant because the daytime highs were not high enough to allow the ice to thaw, and the nighttime temperatures were cold enough to require a high caloric intake by quail for survival. However, ice coated every food source. A single kernel of corn became the size of a golf ball, a wild sunflower head the size of a baseball – even foxtail heads weighed their supporting stems to the ground.

Because of the heavy snow cover, ground temperatures maintained the ice even on sunlit days. Food sources remained encapsulated and unavailable for more than a week. Quail simply ran out of energy and

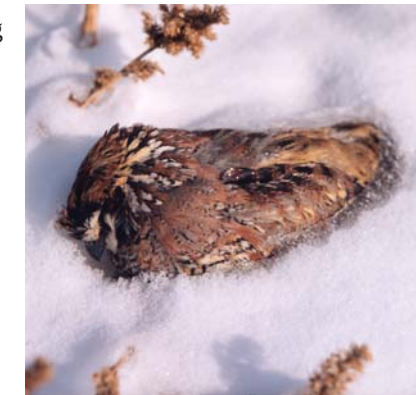
began to perish, leaving a huge void in the spring 2007 breeding population in those areas.

According to Dr. Jeffrey Lusk, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's upland game program manager, "Our June 2007 whistle

counts truly reflected the impact of the December 2006 storms on quail in the West Platte and Republican quail management areas."

Lusk said that the June whistle count, a standard measurement conducted by

Commission biologists to measure annual breeding populations, was down considerably in the two quail management units affected by the storms. The West Platte quail management unit and the Republican quail management units were in the path of both storms and showed a drop of 45 percent and 50 percent from the five year means, respectively.



Lusk said that storms are often responsible for setting back northern bobwhite quail, as Nebraska is located on the northwest fringe of the quail range. Long periods of heavy snow cover with extremely cold temperatures are detrimental where habitat is marginal. Heavy ice coating for any extended time can affect quail numbers even in good habitat areas.

Lusk said that the recovery process is underway, and the June 2008 whistle counts support that. The West Platte counts indicated a 50 percent increase over the five-year mean, and the Republican counts indicated an 84 percent increase over the five-year mean.

"If weather conditions are favorable, quail will tend to fill ideal habitat areas first. Then, as those areas reach carrying capacity, surplus birds will begin to populate less ideal habitat or even find isolated preferred habitat areas," Lusk said.

Quail are beginning to show up in the hunter's bag again throughout these hard hit areas, especially where habitat is ideal and contiguous. It might take several years of good production before quail seek out more isolated pockets of supportive quail habitat. ■



ATTRACTIONS/EVENTS

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Got Snow?

Many state park and recreation areas offer great skiing.

By Bob Grier

GOT SNOW? If the answer is yes and you can dig out or borrow a pair of “skinny skis” hiding for too long in a closet, garage or attic, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s 86 state parks, state recreation areas and other sites across Nebraska offer excellent cross-country skiing opportunities that are close to home and easy to find. The state park’s lineup features eight locations, including Eugene T. Mahoney State Park near Omaha and Fort Robinson State Park in the Pine Ridge; nearly 40 state recreation areas, including Louisville and the Salt Valley lakes in the urban east, Lewis and Clark Lake in the northeast, Box Butte Reservoir in the central Panhandle and the southwest reservoirs near McCook are also prime skiing spots.

Add 10 state historical parks across Nebraska for good measure and all of the state parks system’s hiking trails, unplowed interior roads and trails, and numerous open areas and terrain become available for cross-country ski adventures when winter weather cooperates. Nearly all of the areas offer scenic beauty, quite surroundings and gas saving, close-to-home access.

The easiest way to find the closest state parks in your area is to obtain a copy of the Nebraska State Park brochure or log on to the Game and Parks Commission’s web site at www.OutdoorNebraska.org and follow the state park links from the web site’s main page. From the internet, select the State Parks link at the top of the Commission’s

homepage and the next page that appears includes a menu leading to the State Parks Area Guide. Click on any of the parks numbered on each of the guide map’s regions to read detailed information on that park, including location, daily hours, park facilities and attractions, as well as a



Connie and Brad McKinney take a break from skiing at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area.

list of nearby accommodations and other attractions within the immediate vicinity.

This parks information is also available by brochure at Commission offices and permit vendors across the state. The brochure includes a large map of Nebraska with the locations of parks available within five major regions of the state and detailed information on each of these locations.

The web site pages and information brochure offer helpful phone numbers and additional resources as well. The traditional state park season runs from Memorial Day weekend

through Labor Day weekend, with year-round lodging available at Mahoney, Platte River and Niobrara state parks, as well as Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area. Primitive camping and camping with electrical hookups are available on some areas even during the winter, but most park facilities are reduced or closed during the winter.

Popular cross-country skiing destinations within the parks system include Indian Cave State Park, with 3,052-acres bordering the Missouri River in southeast Nebraska and 20 miles of hiking trails within the park. The Cowboy State Recreation Trail, the longest rail-to-trail development in the United States when finished, will include 321 miles from Norfolk to Chadron, covering 4,121-acres and 600 water crossings, with 221 bridges and three miles of decking already completed. Each year, 13 to 20 miles of developed trail will be added.

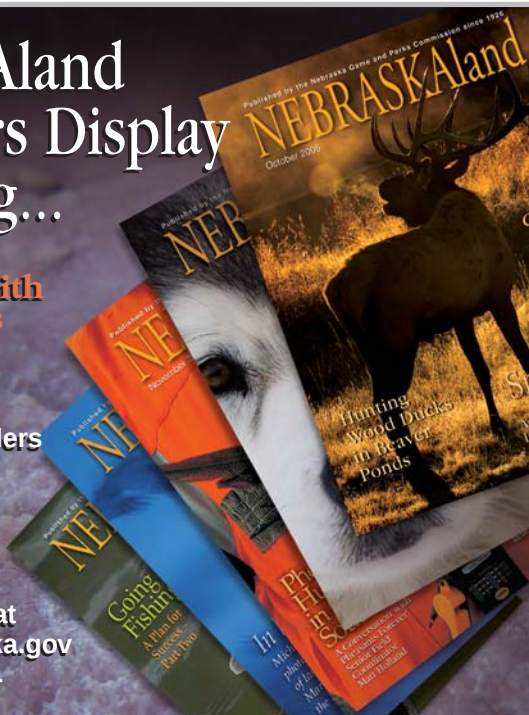
For the latest update on the Cowboy Trail, visit the Commission’s web site and download the latest Cowboy Recreation and Nature Trail brochure. The brochure includes trail tips, safety and access rules as well as highlights and Nebraska communities found along the trail.

A valid Nebraska state park entry permit is required year-round for all motor vehicles entering any state park, state historical park or state recreation area. State park permits are available wherever hunting and fishing are sold, from any Commission office, at manned state park areas and online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org ■

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Portraits from the Past



◀ This is a picture of my dad and brother fishing at Lake Ogallala in August 1963. My father, Joe Welsh Jr., was a State Board Inspector in the Ogallala area from 1952 until 1992 and died in 2004. My brother Doug, seen here at eight years of age, graduated from Ogallala High in 1973 and still enjoys fishing. I remember many good days of fishing with my father at Lake Ogallala. Our favorite spot was on the south end near the spillway. The bait of choice was usually worms, as seen in my dad's hands. The rods and reels are almost as old as Kingsley Dam is today, which can be seen in the background. I enjoy your magazine – keep up the good work.

– J. "Chuck" Welsh III, Ogallala, Nebraska

▶ This picture was taken in the 1920s after a successful prairie chicken hunting trip in Rock and Brown counties. In the picture, from left to right, are: Walter Christensen with his 1897 Winchester, Alfred Johnson, Roy Christensen, Harvey Christensen with his Remington Model 10 pump gun, and Andrew Olson. Most of the men were from the Minden area. The picture was passed on to me by my uncle, Jack Christensen of Lincoln, and my father, Aubrey (Chris) Christensen of Superior, sons of Harvey Christensen.

– Alan Lee Christensen, Waverly, New York



▲ My father, Jac Lofholm, hunted all his life near Loup City, where he grew up. This photo, taken in 1943, shows one of his many successful pheasant and squirrel hunts. He was an avid taxidermist as well as hunter; so we not only ate what he shot, we also had a home filled with wildlife in various poses. It gave all of us kids an appreciation for the beauty, as well as the taste, of wildlife in Nebraska.

– Nancy Lofholm, Grand Junction, Colorado



▲ My great uncle, Oscar Blevens from Oconto, just landed a 6-pound cat on September 7th, 1924. With Oscar (from left to right) is the bait carrier, fish packer, and water boy.

– Vernon Lee Dewey, Lake Havasu, Arizona



◀ This picture of my mother, Darleen Butolph, was taken as she stood outside of her Kearney home in 1940. She and my father, Clarence, hunted together until he was drafted into the Army during World War II. My father was killed in action in 1944 in France while serving with the Corp. of Engineers. My mother continued to hunt until about 1990 and has since found joy in watching the cranes and geese as they migrate through Nebraska each year. She still thinks she can shoot her 12-gauge and I wouldn't bet against it. On February 26, 2008, she will celebrate her 90th birthday. Submitted in celebration of a life well lived.

– Richard Butolph, Ventura, California

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

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