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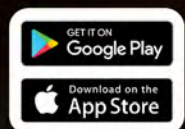
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The Return of Wolves • Branched Oak Through the Seasons
Lake McConaughy Walleyes • Portraits from the Past

Cover: A sailboat crosses Branched Oak Lake near Malcolm at sunset. See the story on page 26.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

This page: The setting sun illuminates a thunderhead beyond a hilltop soapweed near Hyannis.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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Nebraskaland
magazine

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A strawberry moon over the Pine Ridge of Sioux County in June. The strawberry moon is the first full moon of the summer and is named after the wild strawberries that ripen this month.

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For questions, please call (402) 640-0814 or email L.Schwarting@pheasantsforever.org



MAY 10 BIRDS AT THE BREWHAUS
6 PM - 9 PM CST | Big Hair Brewhaus, Hartington
Grassland bird populations are on the decline. Learn how you, your local brews, and ag friendly habitat can make a difference. (21+ event; ID required)

JUN 6 "WHAT'S THAT WEED!?"
9 AM - 1 PM MST | South Platte NRD, Scottsbluff
Are you curious if those "new" arrivals are in fact an issue or if they can be beneficial on the landscape? Join this plant identification tour to find out.

JUN 6 CHAPTER HABITAT TOUR: BUSTING THE BACKROADS
5:30 PM - 8:30 PM CST | Curtis Community Hall, Curtis
Learn how local fundraising events impact pheasant and quail habitat throughout the state. See the projects as we take a bus tour along the backroads and identify quality habitat management.

JUN 12 WHAT CAN CRP AND PLAYAS DO FOR YOUR OPERATION AND POCKETBOOK?
9 AM - 1 PM MST | Community Hall, Lodgepole
Learn about conservation programs for pheasant and grouse habitat, and habitat management strategies.

JUN 20 WHERE THE HECK ARE THE PHEASANTS?
9 AM - 1 PM MST | Alliance
Learn about the top factors that influence pheasant numbers and what you can do to help make local populations more resilient.

JUN 22 QUESTIONS ABOUT QUAIL?
9:30 AM - 12 PM CST | Osage WMA, Tecumseh
Tour project sites and discuss land management techniques to improve quail habitat.

JUN 27 THE CRP MANAGEMENT DILEMMA: WHICH PRACTICES SUITE YOUR CONTRACT?
9:30 AM - 12 PM CST | TBD, Red Willow County
Join us for a CRP field tour to discuss management practices and their potential outcomes.

JUL 13 QUAIL MANAGEMENT AND CRP PROGRAMS FOR QUAIL
6 PM - 8 PM CST | Laux Farms, Franklin
See how habitat techniques, such as edge feathering

JUL 16 A TASTE OF CONSERVATION
6 PM - 9 PM CST | Arnold Community Center, Arnold
Join us for a tour and wild game sampler as we explore opportunities for public access, quality habitat, and outdoor activities.

JUL 19 MANAGING EASTERN SANDHILLS FOR PROFITABLE RANCHING & QUALITY WILDLIFE HABITAT
11 AM - 3 PM CST | Uncle Buck's Lodge, Brewster
Best management practices for wildlife and ranching. Highlighting challenges of eastern red cedar encroachment and program options for working lands.

JUL 27 AN EVENING WITH YOUR BIOLOGISTS
5:30 PM - 8 PM CST | Co Rd J and Co Rd 600, Friend
Showcasing programs for landowners to create a variety of cover types and the wildlife who use them. Pheasant research and precision conservation.

AUG 9 COVER CROP & SOIL HEALTH FIELD DAY
9 AM - 2 PM CST | 4-H Building, York County Fairgrounds
Are you looking for opportunities to improve soil health? See what cover crops can do for you.

SEP 10 MONARCH BUTTERFLY TAGGING
1 PM - 3 PM CST | Ron Larsen Day Use Area, Wahoo
Help catch, tag and release Monarch Butterflies as they migrate south for the winter. Weather permitting.

SEP 30 WOODLAND WILDLIFE WORKSHOP
ALL DAY | Ohiya Casino and surrounding lands, Niobrara
Wildlife trends and management techniques that produce results for deer, turkey, and upland birds, featuring Dr. Marcus Lashley and Dr. Will Gulsby from the "Wild Turkey Science" Podcast.



 Instagram Photos

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upcoming issue.

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Melting Icicle



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



JUNE BLOOMS

Soapweed (*Yucca glauca*) blooms below the steep sandstone ridge on the north side of Cedar Canyon Wildlife Management Area near Gering.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Bumble bee on showy milkweed at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area and Nature Center in Scotts Bluff County.
JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

CELEBRATING POLLINATOR WEEK

By Alie Mayes, Community Science Specialist

Most of us know what a pollinator is — an animal that moves pollen within a flower, or between flowers, in a way that aids in plant reproduction. We also understand pollinators are vital for the health of ecosystems and humans.

It seems fitting that once a year we dedicate a week to learn about and celebrate these important creatures. Here in Nebraska, we make a special effort to promote and share our love and excitement for pollinators during Pollinator Week, which is June 19 to 25 this year.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission hosts this celebration with the help of partners that support pollinator-themed events across the state. Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov and the webpage “Pollinator Week” to find an event near you.

Game and Parks will host the Nebraska Pollinator Quest, formerly

the Pollinator Week Challenge, at that time. Everyone is encouraged to take pictures of pollinators and upload them to the free iNaturalist app.

The Quest is a great place to start celebrating these animals, but for those who want to do more, here are a few suggestions for ways you can support pollinators year-round.

Increase Pollinator Knowledge Through Community Science

Two pollinator projects are looking for volunteers in Nebraska. Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov to learn more about the Nebraska Bumble Bee Atlas and the monarch and regal fritillary butterfly surveys and find out how you can make a difference.

Cultivate Overlapping Blooms

When gardening for pollinators, overlapping bloom times is essential.

Making sure something is always blooming spring through fall will ensure you are providing vital food resources for pollinators. Find resources at OutdoorNebraska.gov.

Leave the Leaves

Looking for a way to help pollinators and do less yard work? Leaving the leaves in your yard provides important overwintering habitat for many insect species, including pollinators. Dead stems are also an important overwintering shelter for native bees.

This month, join Nebraska Game and Parks to celebrate Pollinator Week. Attend an event or go on a Quest. And keep supporting pollinators all year with small actions that lead to big impacts. With your help, Nebraska will continue to have an amazing array of pollinators to celebrate.

NEBRASKA LAND IS IN DEMAND



**DAKOTA CO, NE - 52.79 ± AC.
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A great business opportunity awaits along the banks of the beautiful Missouri River. River Landing Campground is a turn-key, fully booked seasonal campground situated on the banks of the Missouri River. The campground and farmland provide a solid ROI from the day you close. The opportunity exists to add to the campground in many ways to capitalize on your investment. A bathhouse and storm shelter are in place, along with a picnic pavilion. My favorite infrastructure is the concrete boat ramp and seasonal dock to get you out onto the beautiful waters to do boating or fishing! Not many places along Missouri have as many amenities as River Landing!

The surrounding area offers many different activities including, including Ponca State Park, Highland Oaks Golf Course, the Danish Alps State Rec area, and the Landmand Golf Club, to name a few!

JOHNSON CO, NE - 205 ± AC. | SOLD

PRICE REDUCED! Properties with this size and caliber of a lake are rare in any market, and the proximity to Lincoln and Omaha is just the icing on the cake! The acres adjacent to the lake are properly dense with mature hardwoods and cedars. The habitat created on this property has ample cover, and water with the surrounding acres provides destination food sources for the resident deer herd. Several openings in the timber are just begging to be planted in food plots so they can hold up mature bucks during the last minutes of daylight. An internal trail system is in place and will take you to all corners of this farm. A boat house sits at the far side of the property and is complete with a deck and storage loft. The house and shop are both conveniently located near 626 Avenue. If you’ve been looking for a property that contains ample water and offers deer, turkey, and waterfowl opportunities, you will want to take a look at this one! Property is shown by appointment only.



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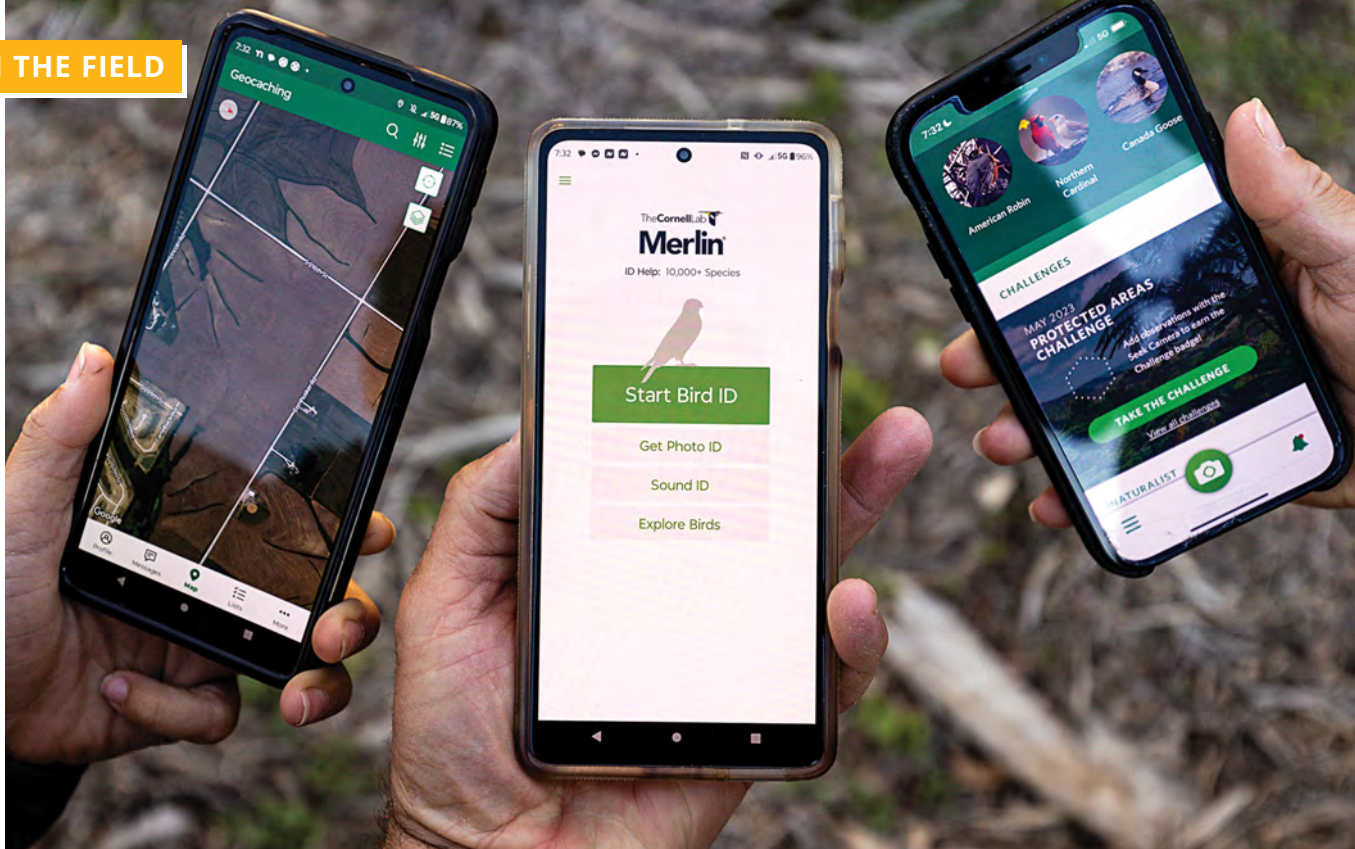
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These are three must-have apps for the outdoor enthusiast. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

THREE OUTDOOR APPS

By Renae Blum

Wish your kids spent more time outdoors and less time in front of a screen? It's a common concern. Rather than cutting out electronics completely, a phone can be a great tool in helping spark a child's curiosity and interest in the outdoors.

Give the three apps below a try. All are free, available on both Google Play and the Apple App Store — and can enrich your family's experience of the outdoors.

Merlin Bird ID

Kids can explore their curiosity about birds with this easy-to-use app, which helps with bird identification. Wondering what birds you're hearing? You can make a live sound recording, and the app will suggest species in real-time. The app can identify bird photos, too.

Don't have a photo or sound recording? There's also a Bird ID Wizard which offers possibilities based on your answers to simple questions. Check out the "Explore" section, too, where you can browse a library of birds in your area, complete with photos, sounds and maps.

Seek

Seek is another app that's great for identifying what you see outside. Simply open the camera tool, snap a photo of the plant or animal you see, and the app will make an

identification. You then have the option to read more about the species and its range, similar species and the time of year it appears. The more observations you make, the more badges you'll earn. You also can participate in monthly challenges.

Seek was designed for kids ages 9 to 11 and does not require registration or collect any user data by default. It's a simpler version of the iNaturalist app and great for families who want to explore the outdoors together.

Geocaching

This app is your gateway into a great outdoor family activity — geocaching! Geocaching is a treasure hunt aided by technology. The goal is to find caches, hidden containers with a logbook and sometimes, small trinkets for trade, which the app will help you discover. There are more than 3 million caches hidden worldwide, making opportunities for geocaching fun nearly everywhere you go.

Geocaching can be a fun way to explore places in your neighborhood you didn't know about, or to have some added fun on a vacation. Geocaches come in a variety of sizes and difficulty levels; for the best family experience, focus on caches with a low difficulty level (this is easy to do with the free version of the app, which limits you to easier caches). Kids of all ages can have fun helping locate caches.



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WILD TURKEY BBQ SANDWICHES WITH SPICY SLAW

By Ryan Sparks

Everyone knows how delicious and versatile wild turkey breasts are, but some struggle to prepare meals from the lower half of the bird: the legs and thighs. This recipe is straightforward, requires minimal prep and is a perfect weeknight or summer barbecue meal. With a saucy, tangy filling piled onto a toasted bun, it is an ideal use for the dark meat from any turkey. To save time, both the barbecue sauce and slaw can be made ahead. One additional tip: If you choose to cook the thighs in water, throw in a diced onion, carrot, celery, bay leaf, parsley, black peppercorns or whatever else you have in your pantry for the last few hours of cooking. When your thighs are done cooking, strain the water, and you now have a rich turkey stock to use in the future.

Wild Turkey

- 2 wild turkey thighs (or legs)
- Enough water or stock to cover

Spicy Slaw

- ¼ cup apple cider vinegar
- 2 teaspoons granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 cups sliced green cabbage (about half a small head)
- 1 large shallot or very small red

onion, thinly sliced

- 1 large carrot, coarsely grated
- 1 jalapeno, seeded and thinly sliced

Barbecue Sauce

- ¾ cup ketchup
- ½ cup apple cider vinegar
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- ½ teaspoon cumin
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

Fixings

- Mayonnaise
- Hot sauce (optional)
- Sandwich or hamburger buns
- Pickles

1. Place the turkey thighs in a slow cooker set on high. Add enough water or stock to cover the meat and cook until tender, around 5 hours (longer for legs). The meat should easily flake apart when shredded with two forks, which is a good time to look for any stray shot. While the meat is cooking, make the slaw and barbecue sauce.

2. For the slaw, combine ¼ cup vinegar, sugar and salt in a small pot. Cover the pot and heat until the sugar

dissolves.

Toss together cabbage, shallot, carrot and jalapeno in a medium bowl. Pour the hot vinegar mixture over the slaw and toss to combine. Cover and put in the fridge, tossing again before serving.

3. Make the barbecue sauce by combining all the ingredients in a small saucepan over low heat and whisk until the brown sugar and salt have dissolved and the mixture comes together. Taste it. If it is too sweet, add more vinegar. Add hot sauce if you want it spicier.

4. Next, place the shredded turkey meat into a nonstick pan over medium-low heat and pour in enough barbecue sauce to the consistency you like. Make it saucy.

5. To assemble the sandwiches, cut each bun in half, spread a thin layer of mayonnaise on each cut side, and place them in a nonstick pan over medium-high heat. Cook until the buns are toasted and warmed through. Spread more mayonnaise on the bottom of the bun along with extra hot sauce, and then fill the buns with slaw, pickles and turkey. Serve with additional hot sauce, barbecue sauce and potato salad. Stick a turkey feather in the bun, and celebrate the wild turkey.



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Nebraska

A NEBRASKA TOURISM COMMISSION PROGRAM

The Crankbait Canvas

Painting baits is rewarding, economical and fun.

Story and photos by Justin Haag

Many a fly angler knows the satisfaction of catching fish on a hand-tied masterpiece. For those more inclined to cast and retrieve for pike, bass and walleye, here is a way to emulate that remarkable experience: painting crankbaits.

Quality crankbaits are some of the most expensive products to tie to the end of a line. At \$5-20 each, losing one to a deep snag can put a damper on a day of fishing. Alas, unpainted plastic crankbait blanks resembling many beloved models are available online at \$1 or less each. Simply put, you can just add paint and hooks and get them to the water.

If you are like me, you may be reluctant to trust your limited artistic abilities to something as important as catching a fish. Thankfully, with crankbaits, an exquisite appearance is not imperative.

The Art Critic

Even though I do not hold a degree in aquatic psychology, I can safely surmise fish are not art critics. Just as I do not place a lot of critical judgement on the appearance of a cheeseburger at a fast-food restaurant when I'm hungry, most fish seemingly do not closely scrutinize the details of a moving crankbait. If something buzzes by that looks like suitable prey and the fish is hungry, there's probably not a lot of internal debate, i.e. "I'd bite, but that orange on the pectoral fin is a little too dark, and the design isn't quite symmetrical."



Right: Assorted paints, tools, finished and unfinished lures.

Kiera Haag uses an airbrush to paint a crankbait lure. Notice the homemade cardboard spray booth she's using.

The quality of the paint job is more for self-satisfaction, and for impressing others in the boat.

The Essential Airbrush

With those factors in mind, I invested about \$40 in the favored tool of crankbait painters: the airbrush. It's certainly not a high-end model, but works well for the task. Thankfully, I already had an air compressor in the garage to power it. Another \$20 for a set of assorted airbrush paints, and I was on my way.

I'm partial to crankbaits that look like common prey in nearby lakes — young-of-the-year bluegill, yellow perch, pike and bass darting in and out of shallow vegetation, or schools of shad rising to the water's surface.

The college science professor who got me going on this hobby noted that almost all vertebrates have a pale underbelly. With that in mind, white makes a logical base coat.

Adding colors above the belly is where the artistry begins. With just a little practice, an airbrush can create the subtle

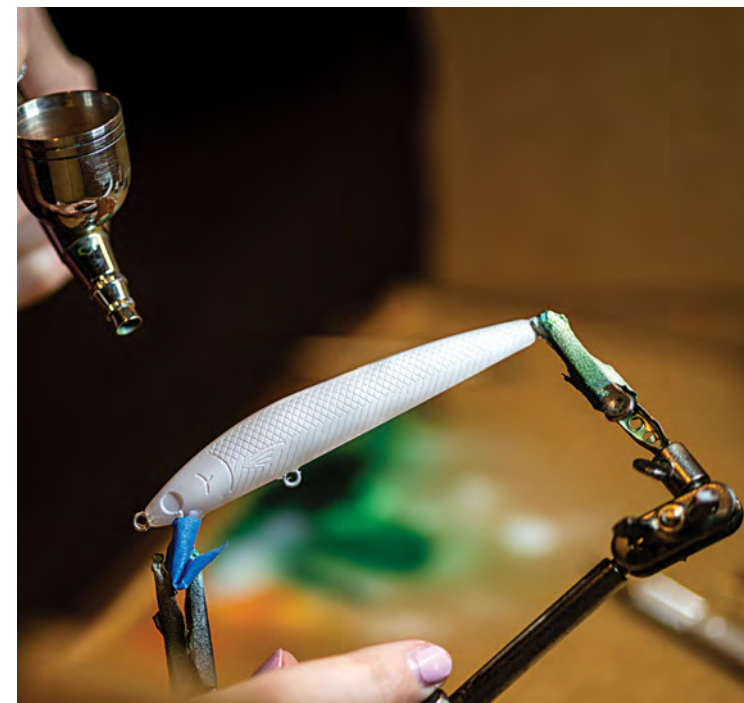


Painting over mesh material to creates a scale pattern.

KIERA HAAG

other items. My go-to is the material from a synthetic loofah — you know, the sponge-like product found in many a bath and shower.

Create stencils to paint in details such as fins and scale patterns. Serious crankbait painters use stencils created by a 3D printer, but one low-budget approach also works well. By placing the actual crankbait blank on a copy machine, the start of a true-to-size 2D stencil is created. Fins and such can be cut from the paper image with an X-Acto knife, and irregular black lines and spots such as those on a largemouth bass or crappie, can be created with a wood burner (don't set the house on fire). Once the holes are made in the paper, just hold the stencil over the crankbait while painting.

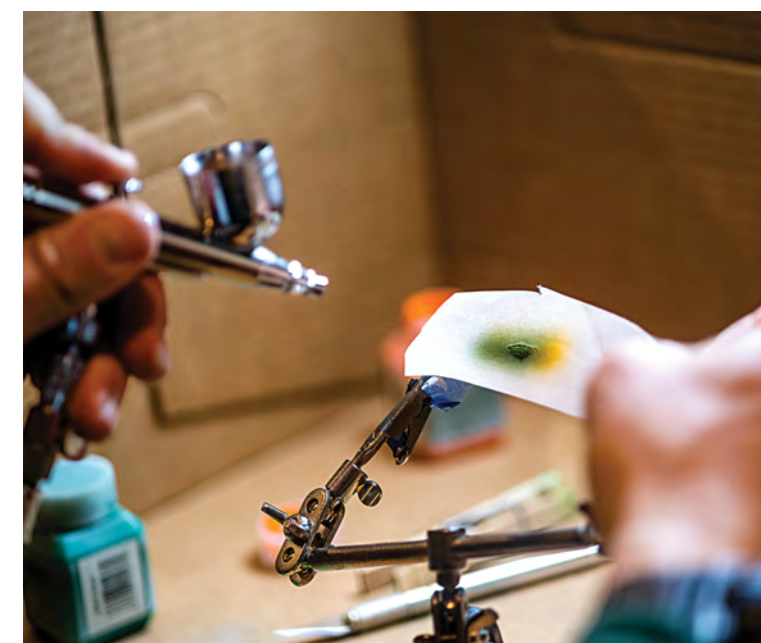


Starting with a white base coat and taped bill, the process begins.

transitions between colors, as do the scales of fish.

A few common tricks can help make that clear piece of plastic evolve into something resembling an aquatic creature.

Scales can be emulated by painting over mesh material wrapped around the crankbait's body and secured with a clothespin or paper clip. Sure, you can buy mesh material, but it also exists on a wide variety of surplus clothing and



Stencils are used to paint hard-edged details.

KIERA HAAG

What the Fish Sees

One age-old crankbait question: Is it better to mimic common prey or go for a non-life-like design. A visit to the crankbait section at the sporting goods store makes it obvious: “It depends.” Or, as the store would like you to believe: “The more the better.”

Fish vision is said to be 80 percent less powerful than terrestrial species just from the eyes being in contact with water instead of air. Add other factors such as turbidity and depth, and color becomes even less important.

However, with so many of Nebraska’s lakes being relatively shallow, color may be a determining factor in coaxing a bite, especially in waters that are clear.

All colors become less discernible the deeper the water is — some more than others. Reds and oranges are the first to become dull as light diminishes, followed by yellows and greens. Blues and blacks are regarded to be best at maintaining visibility in deep waters.

It may pay to have a bait that draws attention rather than mimics other fish species. Sharp contrasts between colors can make a bait stand out, such as the dark circle you see painted on the side of many manufacturers’ brightly colored baits. Wherever light reaches a bait, reflective finishes of silver and gold may shimmer enough to catch a fish’s attention.

With surface lures, such as poppers and frogs, experts agree that color does not matter much. All that is seen from below is a dark silhouette against a bright sky. Dang, it is fun to paint frog patterns, though.

The Final Touches

Once the paint has been applied and dried, protect the work with clear coat. Of course, commercial products are available for this step — KBS Clear Diamond Finish seems to be popular among serious bait painters. At the advice of other crankbait artists who are in it more for utility, a suitable alternative resides in the beauty section of Walmart. The Sally Hansen Xtreme Wear clear nail polish gives the baits a glossy finish and protects them at a reasonable price. And, I like that it has Xtreme in the name.

Finally, add treble hooks. Choose hooks small enough that do not catch on one another, or the line, during a cast. Also, use hook sizes that allow the bait to move as intended. A set of split-ring pliers will save your fingernails, coated with Sally Hansen or not, while installing the rings.

With hooks installed, it’s time for the most important step — presenting those masterpieces to the fish.

Be sure to pack the cooler with snacks and beverages suitable for the opening of your prestigious art show. A beret is optional. 🎩



Black crappie with hand-painted lure caught at Box Butte State Recreation Area.



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Take advantage of the long summer days and try the activities below. Get ready for some good fishing and photography opportunities, as well as fun park events. 



Father's Day weekend at a state park

June 17-18 | Statewide

Nebraska's state parks are a great place to celebrate Father's Day. Try grilling by the lake, swimming at a park pool, going boating or taking Dad on a camping or fishing trip. The gift of time together outdoors makes for great memories. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Enders Outdoor Extravaganza

June 10, 7 a.m. – 10 p.m.
Enders State Recreation Area

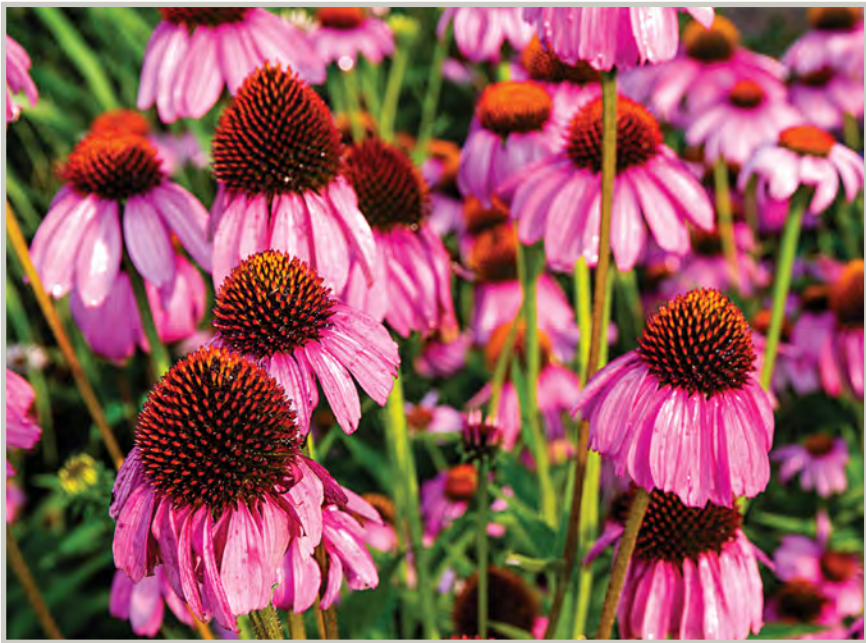
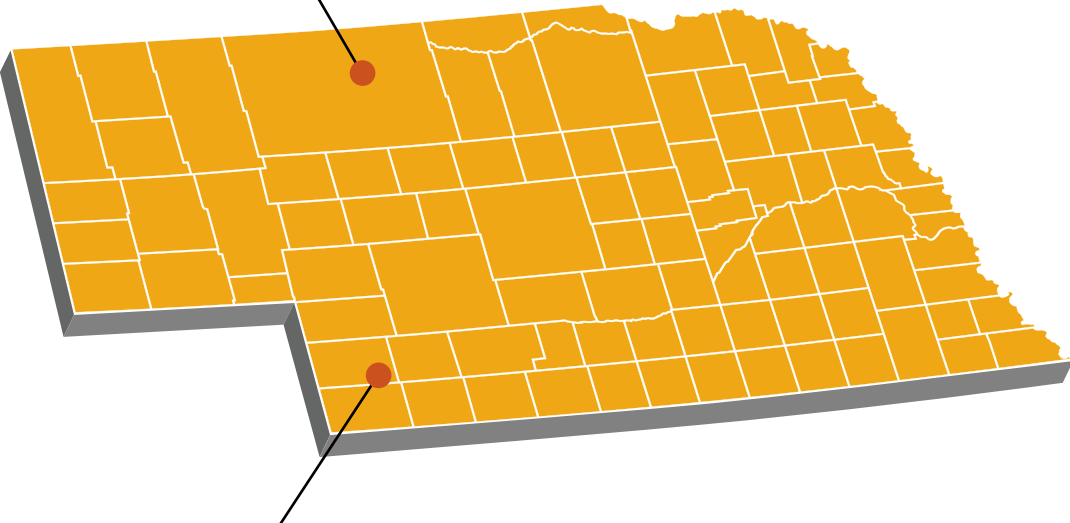
Get ready for a day filled with outdoor fun. Stretch your legs with a 5K run, browse the craft show and tractor show, and sample some food with Dutch-oven-cooking demonstrations and a barbecue smoke-off. Other activities include kayaking, a petting zoo, outdoor games, live music and more. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



Magnificent Moths, Spectacular Skies

June 24, 9 p.m. – 12 a.m.
Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area

Discover the fantastic world of weird and wonderful nighttime creatures, while celebrating Merritt Reservoir's designation as an International Dark Sky Park. Using night lighting equipment, participants will investigate the relationship between dark skies and wildlife. JAMIE BACHMANN



Photograph coneflowers

All summer long | Prairie coneflower found statewide

Coneflowers are a common sight in the summer, growing just about everywhere in Nebraska. They are especially common in roadside ditches and prairies. These flowers are resistant to heat and drought and bloom all summer long. They're also a top menu item for hungry butterflies, such as painted ladies. Get out and shoot a photo of these blooms early and late in the day when there's warm light. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

Catfish fishing

All month | Statewide

May and June are two great months for fishing any species anywhere in the state, and that includes catfish, a warmwater species. In June, these fish are active and feeding. Sutherland Reservoir is one catfish hotspot; others include Calamus, Merritt and Box Butte reservoirs, as well as Branched Oak and Lewis and Clark lakes. If you have access, rivers are great choices, too. Use your favorite bait; cut bait works especially well. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Branched Oak

Through the Seasons

Photos and story by Eric Fowler

There is not a time of the year when Branched Oak State Recreation Area northwest of Lincoln isn't busy. But there's also not a time of year when a person can't find their own little slice of nature so close to the city.



Branch Oak State Recreation Area is a busy place. Especially in the summer. Which makes sense considering the 1,800-acre reservoir is the largest body of water within an hour's drive of more than half of Nebraska's population.

On weekends from late-spring into fall, the lake is abuzz with boats pulling skiers, wakeboarders and tubers, and with personal watercraft. When the wind chases those folks off the water, the sailboats moored in the Branched Oak Lake Marina or parked at the Lincoln Sailing Club find a little more room to maneuver.

The park's three modern campgrounds can be just as busy: show up with your RV Friday evening, or even Thursday, and you're likely to find all 345 spots are already taken. Demand isn't as high for the 195 tent sites spread throughout those three campgrounds and five others. When summer heat sets in, the two swim beaches are the place to be for many. Picnic shelters in the day-use areas seldom go unused on summer evenings.

Anglers fish the lake year-round, in open water or through the ice. Many hope to hook one of the big walleyes, wipers and flathead catfish the lake holds. In the fall, waterfowl hunters set decoys out on the lake and the creeks that feed it, and pheasant, quail and deer hunters search for game in the grasslands and woodlands that comprise the 2,865-acre wildlife management area and 1,000 acres of parkland surrounding it. Birdwatchers flock to the area when bald eagles arrive in numbers in late winter, to watch the colony of bank swallows on the south shore in the summer, and the rest of the year to view many species of grassland, woodland and water birds that spend all or part of the year there.

The park boasts nearly 17 miles of trails. Some are groomed by local mountain bikers, who zoom through the woods and grasslands in Area 7. Horseback riders take care of a maze of trails on the lake's south shore, many of them setting off for their ride from the equestrian camp in Area 2. During the winter, cross-country skiers never miss a chance to cut fresh powder.

Skiers who prefer snow will find Branched Oak to be a quieter place than those who prefer water. But chances are they won't have the area to themselves, which can be the case at many of the state's parks. Not a day goes by that you won't find someone doing something at Branched Oak. 



TOP LEFT: Mike Suding of Santa Barbara, California, and Steve Botts of Ashville, North Carolina, relax at the South Shore campsite during a cross-country bicycle trip.

BOTTOM LEFT: Brooke Talbott and her dog, Zena, of Lincoln, cross-country ski on a trail on the lake's south shore.

TOP RIGHT: Windsurfers like John Curry of Lincoln are happy when the summer crowds are gone and the wind howls, riding the waves until the lake freezes.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Rider Schulzkump of Lincoln tries to buck his brother, Chaison, Jett Lofgren of West Point and Kade Kottman of Waverly from a hammock in their families' campsite in the South Shore campground.





TOP LEFT: Chris Woerth of Lincoln rides an eFoil, an electric-powered board that rides above the water on a mast and hydrofoil wing.

BOTTOM LEFT: Keith Kyle and Betty Vehring of Howels, Dale and Kathy Matter of Cedar Bluffs and Mike Anderson of Blair ride their horses along a trail above the lake in Area 14.

TOP RIGHT: Joel Tabor of Lincoln leads a group of mountain bikers down a trail in Area 7.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Halloween decorations fill many of the campsites in the Middle Oak Creek Campground during the annual Branched Oak Spooktacular each October.





TOP LEFT: Nick Fricke and Zach Schnell of Lincoln hunt ducks from a brush blind they built on the bank of Oak Creek at Branched Oak Wildlife Management Area.

TOP RIGHT: Girls take part in the Spooktacular dragon races during the fall.

BOTTOM: A wakeboarder takes off on a summer evening.



Branched Oak State Recreation Area features two beaches for swimming, both modern and primitive campsites, and trails for hikers or equestrians. The park also offers a shotgun and archery range and hunting. The marina — located in the northeastern part of the lake — offers boat rentals, fuel, concessions, bait and a restaurant: The Boat House Bar and Grill.



Crossing the Platte, 'the meanest of rivers'

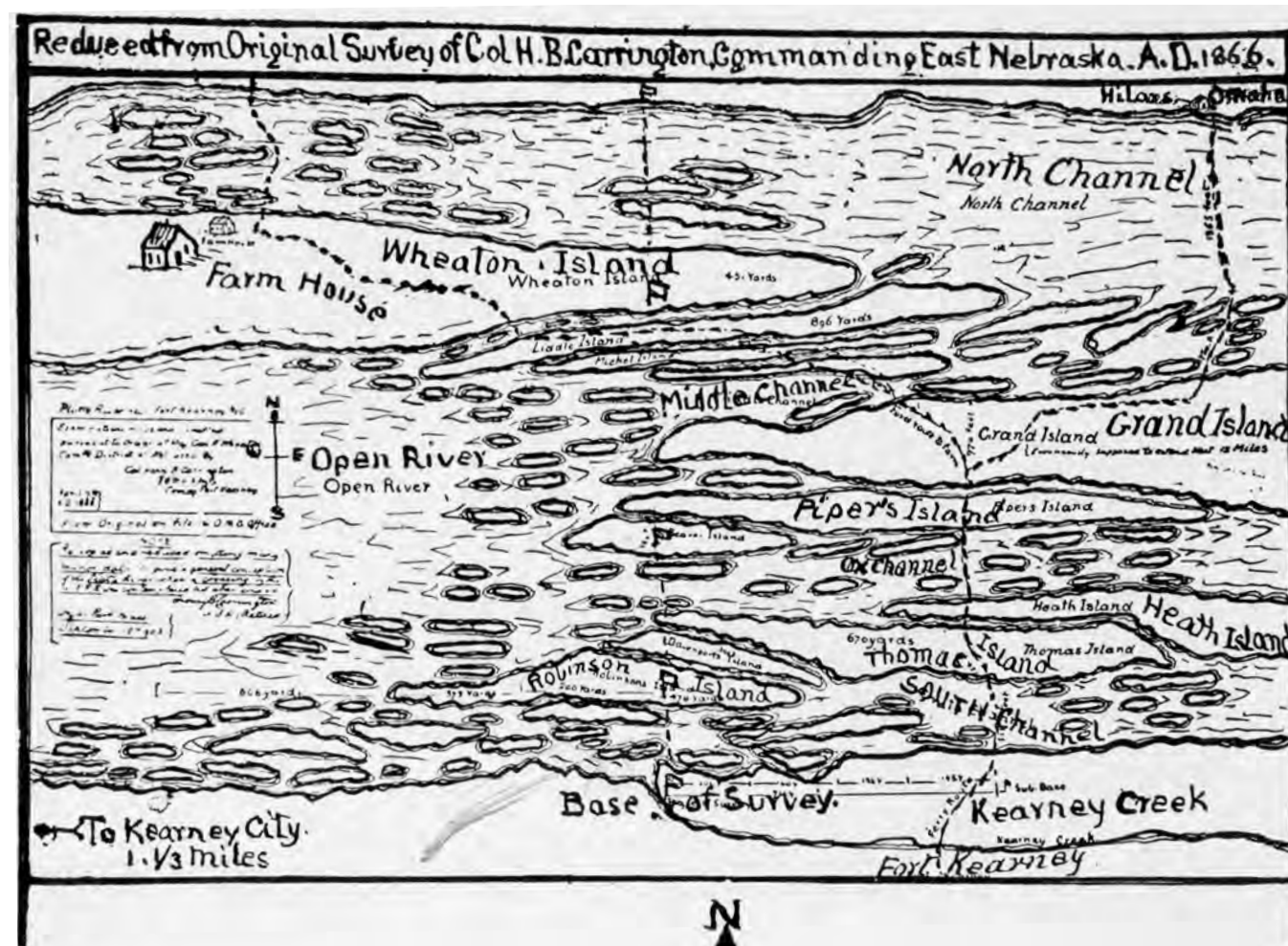
By David L. Bristow, History Nebraska

This is our experience crossing Platte River; the meanest of rivers — broad, shallow, fishless, snakeful, quicksand bars and muddy waters — the stage rumbles over the bottom like on a bed of rock; yet haste must be made to effect a crossing, else you disappear beneath its turbid waters, and your doom is certain,” so reads an 1862 emigrant diary quoted by historian Merrill Mattes in his landmark

book, *The Great Platte River Road*.

Mattes writes that some travelers referred to the “Coast of the Platte” because the broad river on its sandy bed looked almost like an ocean shoreline in the distance. He quotes a traveler named James Evans who saw the river swollen with spring rains and snowmelt:

“From the sandhills, it had the appearance of a great inland



1886 map showing where to ford the Platte. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2102-1-5



CROSSING THE PLATTE RIVER

Rafts were a late development of the highway; the earliest emigrants used the fords, in the quicksands of which more than one wagon with its train disappeared.

An artist's rendition from *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah* (1852). HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3351-0-26



Mormon emigrants ford the South Platte River near present-day Hershey, 1866. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3351-32

sea. It looked wider than the Mississippi ... Judge my surprise when I learned that it was only three or four feet deep ... The water is exceedingly muddy, or I should say sandy, and what adds greatly to the singular appearance of this river, the water is so completely filled with glittering particles of micah or isinglass that its shining waves look to be rich with floating gold.”

No bridges spanned the Platte during most of the overland trail era. In 1876, the Camp Clarke Bridge (below) opened near present-day Bridgeport. Spanning the North Platte River, the 2,000-foot wooden truss toll bridge served travelers during the Black Hills gold rush.

How difficult was it to cross the Platte without a bridge? The 1866 map on page 34 gives you some idea. The river was notorious for its braided channel and patches of quicksand. The map shows the best places to ford.

But some of the map’s labels are confusing to modern eyes. What is Kearney City (lower left) doing south of the river and west of the fort? And what’s this about Grand Island

being north of the fort? Kearney City, informally known as Dobytown for its adobe buildings, was described by an 1860 visitor as a “gambling hell” populated by “as bad a crowd of men and women as ever got together on the plains.” The present city of Kearney was founded in 1872 north of the river.

Grand Island, meanwhile, was a long island between channels of the Platte. It was named “La Grande Isle” by 18th century French traders. The city originally known as Grand Island Station was founded the same year this map was drawn, but well to the east.

Now, consider a 4-foot-high, 100-pound steamboat anchor (right) from History Nebraska’s collection. In 1985, Gloria Liljestrand-Barber found it mostly buried on her parents’ farm near Brady. In the 1890s, a similar anchor was discovered three miles away. Both anchors were not far from the shifting channels of the Platte River.

Does this mean steamboats were navigating the Platte? Legend has it that the steamboat *El Paso* traveled up the

river in 1852, but the story never seemed plausible to most historians. Even shallow-draft steamboats of that era usually drew at least 4 feet of water, but the Platte’s braided channels were frustrating even in fur trade-era canoes or bullboats.

Apparently, the anchors arrived by train, not by steamboat. In 1866, the army built a pontoon bridge near Fort McPherson, and Civil War-era bridges used steamboat anchors to hold the pontoons in place.

The Brady anchor, in other words, tells a story not of steamboat travel, but of the transcontinental railroad and of stagecoaches, freight wagons and other traffic along the Great Platte River Road. And because Fort McPherson was involved in military campaigns during the Indian Wars, the anchor speaks to the conquest of the Plains and the dispossession of Native tribes.

Like the anchor, the Platte River has many stories to tell. Just getting from one side to the other was an adventure. 

Visit History Nebraska’s website at history.nebraska.gov.



This 4-foot-tall anchor weighs at least 100 pounds. It was found in a hayfield near Brady. HISTORY NEBRASKA



Camp Clarke Bridge near present-day Bridgeport, looking south toward the Wildcat Hills. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3289-0-24-A2

Foraging for Wild Plums, Cherries and Berries

Story and photos by Gerry Steinauer, Botanist



Wild plums ripen on the Peterson Wildlife Management Area in Sioux County.

I began foraging as a youngster in small-town Millard in the 1960s. On July mornings, my sister Teri and I would hoof it down to Grandma's house to pick luscious raspberries from fence line bushes, and when playing along the local creek, my friends and I often snacked on plump, ripe mulberries.

Now much older, I still pluck wild fruits whenever the opportunity arises and strategically stock our shelves with enough jars of wild plum syrup and jam to feed an army. Regarding



Wild plum pie drizzled with cream.

the latter, my wife says I get carried away. I respond that foraging is in my blood, and I can't help myself. Modern humans are descendants of hunter-gatherers, and the urge to forage is ingrained deep in our genome. By luck of the draw, I was born with more foraging genes than most folks and unabashedly express them.

I will also argue that it's high time others unleash their suppressed urge to forage. Foraging is a great family activity, an opportunity to introduce children to Mother Nature. And in times of high food prices, why not stock your shelves with free, wild food? Also appealing is the fact that unlike many hobbies, foraging requires little financial investment: All that is needed is a bucket, sunscreen and for the soft-handed, gloves for picking berries growing on prickly bushes. The web provides ample information on how to clean and preserve your harvest, as well as a plethora of recipes to transform the fruit to wonderful desserts and preserves.

Although Nebraska offers many wild fruits to forage, I will focus this short article on a few tasty species that are easily identified, still relatively common on the landscape, and in many years, can be harvested in abundance: wild plums, chokecherries,

sand cherries, raspberries, blackberries and mulberries.

Wild Plums and Cherries

For jelly-makers, wild plums, chokecherries and sand cherries are heaven. They belong to the rose family and more specifically the genus *Prunus*, all having white flowers and fleshy fruits surrounding a central pit.

Wild plum (*P. americana*) is a tall, thicket-forming shrub found growing along roadsides and in fencerows, pastures and woodland edges. Its dense clusters of flowers bloom in mid-April before the leaves emerge, turning the thickets into snowballs of white. The oblong plums, up to an inch long, ripen to a glossy deep red or purple color in late summer. Inside the rather thick skin lies a delicious orange pulp.

Native American children so loved the plums that they picked the bushes near their villages clean before the fruits ripened. The tribes gathered the ripe plums and sun-dried them, either whole or pitted, for later use. Euroamerican settlers reportedly harvested plums by the bushel and wagon-load for sauces, pies, puddings, jelly and preserves.

I start making the rounds of the plum thickets around my hometown



Scott Wessel's tasty dried chokecherry patties.

of Aurora in mid-August. If the plums are ripe, I return with a bucket. Unfortunately, the early-blooming flowers are sometimes nipped by frost and produce no fruit. So in a good plum year, I stock away as many preserves as possible, stopping only when my wife begins to question my sanity.

I spread the plums on newspapers in our garage or porch for a few days until all are fully ripe — soft to the touch and juicy. I love eating them fresh, popping one into my mouth and biting through the skin to release the sweet pulp before spitting out the pit and rather tart skin. Unlike me, Native children likely did not waste the nutritious skin. My favorite use for plums is to make jam or syrup, which are great on buttery toast or as

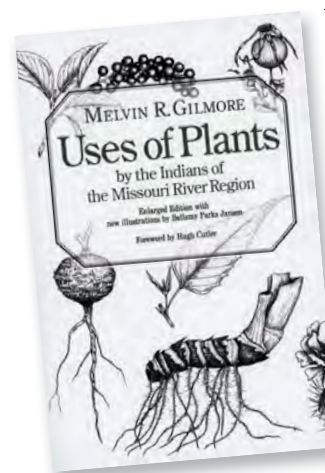
a topping on cottage cheese, yogurt, ice cream or pancakes. You can also cut the plums in half, remove the pit and made a wonderful wild plum pie.

Chokecherry (*P. virginiana*) is also a tall, thicket-forming shrub that is common statewide and grows in the same habitats as the wild plum. The flowers, which hang in distinguishing, drooping clusters, appear in mid-April through May, and the pea-sized cherries ripen from red to blackish-purple in June and July. In many years, the bushes are loaded with fruit that can be picked by the gallon. A warning: Picking the small cherries can be rather tedious work. This is where children can come in handy.

By harvesting the cherries, you will be repeating an ancient tradition of

Great Plains tribes who traveled many miles to stream valleys where they were abundant. There, “they went into camp and worked at preparing the cherries as long as they lasted ... the cherries were pounded to a pulp, pits and all, on stone mortars, and after being shaped into small cakes, were laid out to dry in the sun [and stored for later use],” wrote

ethnobotanist Melvin R. Gilmore in his classic 1914 book *Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region*. The dried cherries, along with dried and pounded bison meat



and boiled fat, were also used to make pemmican, a long-lasting winter food sealed in hide bags.

Recently, my friend Scott Wessel of Bloomfield made chokecherry patties using the method described above, going as far as grinding the cherries, pits and all, between stones, but drying the cakes in a dehydrator rather than in the sun. He said that drying removed much of the cherries’ bitterness, which can cause your mouth to pucker or even worse, as the name implies, to choke when eaten fresh. He described the cakes as “a pleasant combination of sweet and tart with a hint of almond.” The drying also neutralizes the prussic acid naturally found in the pits and responsible for the almond flavor, making the patties safe to eat.

Chokecherries were also a staple fruit of early settlers. One of their recipes was for marmalade, where the cherries were mixed with an equal quantity of wild plums or crabapples to soften their bitterness. They also preserved the cherries as jelly, juice and wine. The latter helped many a

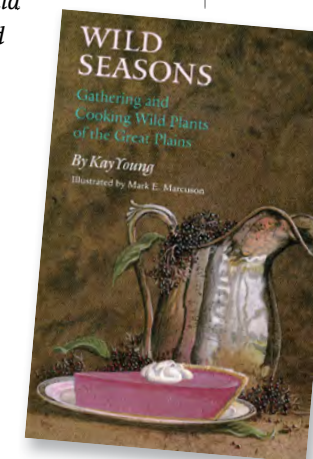


Plump, ripe sand cherries ready for picking. Sand cherries can be substituted in any recipe that calls for sour cherries.

lonely settler pass the long winter nights in a cold sod house.

Sand cherry (*P. pumila*) is a low shrub with willow-like leaves that forms open to dense thickets. In Nebraska, it is most abundant in the Sandhills, but also grows in sand prairie statewide except in southeastern counties. The flowers bloom in clusters of two to four in mid-April through mid-June, and the fingernail-sized, dark-purple fruits ripen in July and August.

In her 1993 book *Wild Seasons: Gathering and Cooking Wild Plants of the Great Plains*, a must read for serious foragers, author Kay Young wrote that sand cherries produce abundant crops about every third year. The cherries are a bit bitter, less so than chokecherries, and are not bad when



eaten fresh, but they come to life when sweetened with sugar and cooked. According to Young, sand cherries can be a substitute in any recipe that calls for sour cherries, and her book includes recipes for sand cherry pie, juice, jubilee, jam, jelly and more.

In summer 2021, for some unknown reason, the sand cherry crop was exceptionally prolific in areas of the eastern Sandhills. Wessel tipped me off to this phenomenon and said the cherries were bigger and sweeter than normal and that the sand cherry pie he baked was delicious. Based on my past experience with both sand cherries and Scott, I thought he might be stretching the truth.

A few days later, while driving through the Sandhills, I caught a glimpse of a cherry thicket in the highway right-of-way flush with purple fruit. I pulled over, emptied my water jug



The aptly-named chokecherries are bitter when eaten fresh, but when sweetened with sugar, make wonderful jam, jelly and sauces.



Unripe red and ripe black raspberries. Native Americans ate the berries fresh and dried them in the sun for later use.

and filled it with cherries in a mere half hour. The next day, I pitted the cherries and froze some in quart jars for later use. I baked the remaining cherries into a pie using a pioneer family recipe that Wessel had found online.

Following the recipe, I combined 1 cup of sugar and 2 tablespoons of flour, then added 1 cup of heavy whipping cream. I poured this mixture over 1 quart of pitted sand cherries, which I had placed in an unbaked bottom pie crust inside a baking dish. Next, I put the top crust in place and baked the pie at 375 degrees for about 40 minutes.

Dang, the pie was good: I kicked myself for not picking a 5-gallon bucket of the cherries.

Raspberries and Blackberries

Blackraspberry (*Rubus occidentalis*) and two species of **highbush**

blackberry (*R. pensilvanicus* and *R. allegheniensis*) are other members of the rose family found in Nebraska that produce tasty fruits. The thicket-forming shrubs are easily identified by their arching, purplish, semi-woody stems that bear curved thorns and grow in similar sunny to partially-shaded habitats.

Black raspberry is common over the eastern half of the state. Its flowers appear in late May and the berries ripen in late June and early July. The late-blooming flowers are not susceptible to late frosts, and the plants bear fruit in most years.

In my humble opinion, raspberries are the most divine-tasting of our wild fruits. Unfortunately, you will be hard-pressed to pick a pail full. From a few nice thickets, however, you can enjoy them fresh by the handful or harvest enough for a few pints of jam or batch of delicious muffins or scones.

Fortunately, the wild shrubs are easily transplanted. We moved several plants into our backyard that, when properly pruned in winter, produces a good crop the following summer. Cultivated raspberries, usually a hybrid of Nebraska natives and other species, are available, and although the berries are good, they lack the intense flavor of wild berries.

The two species of highbush blackberry, which are very similar in appearance, grow in southeastern Nebraska, mainly in counties bordering the Missouri River. The shrubs flower May through June, and the berries ripen in slow procession to shiny black in color late July through August.

Although generally larger in size, blackberries trail behind raspberries with regard to flavor. But don't get me wrong, they are still a treat to eat fresh from the bush on a hot summer day. For cooking, they can be used in the same manner as raspberries: baked into pies, muffins, scones and pancakes or preserved as jams, jellies and sauces. And who has not been tempted by blackberry brandy or wine?

Blackberries are less abundant in our state than raspberries, and finding sites where they can be harvested in abundance is a challenge. I have picked sufficient berries for jam-making from rocky pastures in Jefferson County and the oak woodlands at Indian Cave State Park in Nemaha and Richardson counties.

Native Americans surely picked both raspberries and blackberries from these same areas, enjoying them fresh and dried for winter use. Active managers of the land, they often set fire to eastern Nebraska woodlands to limit tree densities and promote these and other sun-loving, fruit-bearing plants. In recent years, the Game and Parks Commission has conducted prescribed burns at Indian Cave to enhance native plants and improve wildlife habitat. A result of the burning, blackberries and raspberries have flourished in the park.

Mulberries

For foragers, a berry-laden **white mulberry** (*Morus alba*) tree is easy pickings. This species was introduced to the eastern United States from its native China in the early 1600s and rapidly spread from there. A member of the fig family, the tree is now common in vacant lots, road ditches, pastures and woodlands throughout eastern and central Nebraska.

The mulberry's tiny, green flowers arranged in drooping catkins appear in late April and May. The oblong berries ripen in slow procession from green to purplish-black in color throughout June and July, providing a long harvest season. The tree's low, spreading branches place the berries within easy reach of foragers.

If harvesting a few juicy fruits to eat fresh, or enough for a single pie, hand picking will suffice. If you desire sufficient berries for several pies or freezing and later use, place an old sheet or tarp under the tree and give a branch a good shake. The ripe berries will rain down on the sheet, along with a few leaves, twigs and unripe berries that you will need to remove.

Mulberries are often described as



Highbush blackberries growing in oak woodlands at Indian Cave State Park in Nemaha County. Blackberries have increased in the park due to recent prescribed fires.

blackberry-like in flavor with a hint of vanilla. My unrefined taste buds cannot discern these hints of flavor, and for me, the berries taste uniquely

“mulberry-like.” The juiciness, sweetness and flavor of the berries can vary from tree-to-tree, and you may have to sample fruit from several trees to find the best berries. Mulberries can be used alone or mixed with other wild fruits in desserts, including pies, cakes and cookies, and preserves including jam, jelly and syrup. Young wrote that tartness can bring out the mulberry flavor, and she often added gooseberries or rhubarb to her mulberry desserts.

Whether seeking mulberries or other wild fruits, Nebraska provides ample opportunity to forage. The benefits are many: you can relive your hunter-gatherer past, explore a new hobby, try new recipes and best of all, treat yourself to nature's sweetness. 🍷

Maisie Shupe of Omaha, held by her father, Sawyer, delights in her first taste of mulberries.



A Return to the Plains

Wolves in Nebraska

By Sam Wilson, Furbearer and Carnivore Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

The howls of wild wolf packs have been gone from Nebraska for more than 100 years, but recently a few dispersers walked hundreds of miles into the state to return to plains where the species was once common.

Few wild animals hold a larger place in cultures around the world than wolves. They are a symbol of the wild that has inspired legends, lore, fear, reverence, myths, fairy tales and books. They have been viewed as villains, heroes and partners throughout the ages. Societies have put forth great efforts to destroy or to restore this species.

When the first people arrived in North America, wolves were living in fierce competition with a large suite of predators including mountain lions, jaguars, brown and black bears, coyotes, and now-extinct animals like sabertoothed cats, giant short-faced bears, American lions and cheetahs, and their distant relative the dire wolf. By the time Europeans made their way to Nebraska, wolves were one of the few survivors flourishing on prairies grazed by the world's greatest herds of large animals. Millions of bison roamed the plains before settlement along with vast herds of elk and pronghorn. And with these herds followed tens of thousands of wolves. They hunt in unison as a pack and were one of the most dominant forces on Nebraska's prairies, following herds and defending kills from grizzlies — the other powerful predator of the time. This is the landscape that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark observed in 1804 when the men journeyed through Nebraska and other plains states.

A pack of wild gray wolves cross a frozen lake in Minnesota's Boundary Waters wilderness area.

JOEL SARTORE



Wolves are native to Nebraska and were a familiar sight to people here for thousands of years before William Clark documented the expedition's first encounter with a wolf in Nebraska on July 20, 1804. On that day, he wrote in his journal that he killed an “emence [immense] large yellow Wolf” near the mouth of Weeping Water Creek in present day Otoe County.

Since that encounter, wolf populations were steadily reduced via elimination of their prey, including the great bison, elk and pronghorn herds. Settlers and explorers also killed wolves directly for pelts and to protect livestock at every opportunity. Bounties were paid for dead wolves, and hunting parties numbering in the hundreds pursued wolves, coyotes and other predators. They were trapped, shot and killed by poisoning until the last confirmed wolf in Nebraska was captured near Oconto in Custer County in 1913. This animal was mounted in



A mount of Nebraska’s last known wild wolf from the historical population is on display at the Hastings Museum in Hastings, Nebraska. This animal was killed in Custer County in 1913. COURTESY HASTINGS MUSEUM



Buffalo Hunt. White Wolves attacking a Buffalo Bull – George Catlin 1844.



More than five hundred men participated in a hunt in January 1913 near Elmwood, with 11 coyotes killed. COURTESY HISTORY NEBRASKA

the Hastings Museum in Hastings, Nebraska, and is still on display. Many reports of wild wolves occurred over the years since then, but none were confirmed until a wolf from the Great Lakes area was killed near Spaulding, Nebraska, in 2002.

Present Distribution and Dispersal to Nebraska

Gray wolves are the largest canid and had the widest historic distribution of all mammals other than humans, encompassing most of the northern hemisphere including almost all of North America, Europe and Asia. While they once flourished across most of North America, they are now mostly relegated to dense forests near the Great Lakes, the northern Rocky Mountains, northern California and the Pacific Northwest, Canada and Alaska.

Wolves are capable dispersers and

Biology

Adult gray wolves are larger than most common dog breeds, standing about 30 inches high at the shoulder and weighing 70-130 lbs. Despite the name “gray wolf,” early explorers in Nebraska described their fur color as gray, dusky, white, brown, black and yellow.



Wolves are predators that hunt cooperatively in a pack allowing them to focus on large herbivores like bison, elk, moose and white-tailed and mule deer. They are adaptable and will also feed on smaller animals, insects, plant matter and scavenge when needed. Unfortunately for livestock owners, and wolves themselves, they also sometimes depredate livestock. Wolves in North America are not typically a danger for people.

Wolves are intelligent, cunning and highly social. They hunt in packs averaging around eight wolves that consist of a dominant pair — which produces pups for the pack and may mate for life — and their subordinate offspring of various ages. It is essentially a family group guided by the older parents. The dominant female has one litter of four to eight young each year, often in a den dug into the soil. Older wild wolves may live eight or more years.

may leave the area where they were born when they are 1–2 years old. They can walk hundreds of miles looking for new territories and mates. A recent example of this ability to roam was a wolf collared by Michigan Department of Natural Resources that walked more than 4,000 miles across Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota and then into Canada.

Mountain lions are the other native large predator that dispersed back into Nebraska over the past few decades. But differences in distances to their source populations make a similar comeback story for wolves much more difficult. Despite a similar ability for young animals of both species to disperse, wolves have a much longer path to find their way here. The population of mountain lions in the Black Hills of South Dakota is only about 30 miles from the Pine Ridge in Nebraska — where the first lion population formed. Wolves that disperse toward Nebraska from Wyoming would have to walk about 250 miles to reach our northwest corner, while wolves from the Great Lakes region would need to walk nearly 300 miles to reach the northeast corner.

Either way, wolves have proven that they are very capable of covering this distance, but it is still a rare occurrence.

Modern Confirmations in Nebraska

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has documented wild wolf presence in Nebraska on five occasions in modern times. This is not unique to Nebraska as all our neighboring states have also confirmed the presence of dispersing wolves. The five that made it to Nebraska were not collared or ear-tagged so determining their origin required genetic testing. Results of those tests show the Great Lakes population has been the source for all five.

That Great Lakes population is larger than the population in the northern Rockies and they are similar distances from Nebraska, so this result is not surprising. All five confirmations were made through wolves that had been killed. Nebraska Game and Parks Commission was able to obtain genetic samples from these animals to confirm

their origin and determine that they were wild and not wolf/dog hybrid pets.

The first modern confirmation was a male wolf shot along the Boone County and Greeley County line in 2002. Then four more confirmations were made between 2020 and 2022: 1) a male in Rock County in November 2020, 2) a female in Dodge County in January 2021, 3) a male in Butler County in November 2021, and 4) a female in Custer County in January 2022. Despite these confirmations and possibly additional animals that have been to, or through, Nebraska but were not confirmed, there is no evidence of resident wolves or reproduction in Nebraska.

While the exact paths these animals walked is a mystery, it is remarkable when you imagine the journey they may have taken. Likely beginning in the north woods of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, or Canada (Great Lakes region) where their genetics suggest they were born. At some point they walked away from the pack that raised them. Heading south and west until forests gave way to pastures and corn fields in areas where there were no more wolves to encounter. Eventually

they approached the Missouri River and likely dealt with it as they had most previous smaller rivers and streams, by simply swimming across as wolves are capable swimmers. They would have walked day after day for weeks or months to traverse hundreds of miles in unfamiliar territory, eaten deer, rabbits, mice, beavers, whatever they could find along the way, and eventually crossed into Nebraska from one of our neighboring states.

Present Status and Management for Wolves in Nebraska

Wild wolves that come to Nebraska are listed as federally endangered and are therefore protected under the authority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). Gray wolves were previously taken off the Federal Endangered Species list on January 4, 2021, after the Service determined populations had been recovered. They were not protected for more than a year until federal protections were restored in Nebraska and 43 other states following a court order on February 10, 2022. Wolves may be killed only for the immediate protection of a person.

Management of wolves is fraught with challenges, even in western states with huge tracts of public lands. Nebraska is an agricultural state and the second largest cattle producer in the country. It is also more than 98% privately owned. Because of these factors, the Commission has no plans to reintroduce wolves to Nebraska. Any wolves that may enter from adjacent states or pass through Nebraska are currently federally protected. The Commission will work with the Service to monitor wolves and respond to any wolf-related conflicts that may occur.

If people have evidence of wild wolf presence in Nebraska, they should contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the nearest Nebraska Game and Parks Commission office.

Wolf Bounties in Nebraska



Wolf hunt near Glenville, Nebraska, in 1913.

“The larger number of claims coming into the [Nebraska] State Auditor’s office for bounties on wolves and coyotes has led that official to make an investigation,” said the *New York Times* on January 20, 1902, “and he has arrived at the conclusion that the farmers and ranchers in the western part of the State have gone into the business of breeding these animals for the bounty market. In one instance it was found that one farmer had raised more than 100 wolves last Summer from several animals he had trapped and penned up for that purpose.

“Other cases were unearthed where from fifty to sixty of these animals had been reared. In October and November they were killed and their scalps presented for redemption at the office of the County Clerk of each county. The State law authorized the County Clerk to pay \$3 from the county fund for each coyote or wolf scalp presented, and he certifies the fact of payment to the Auditor, who pays \$1 additional, making \$4 for each wolf or coyote. The State Auditor declares that this pays better than hog raising, and naturally the farmers have turned their attention to this industry.

“The law was passed years ago when the wolf and coyote were great foes of the cattle and sheep men. In the last ten years \$150,000 has been paid by the State alone as bounty. The Legislature of 1899 appropriated \$60,000 for the purpose, and of this amount \$43,000 was immediately demanded by holders of old claims. The remaining \$15,000 was gone within six months, and when the last Legislature appropriated \$15,000 it was at once swallowed up by holders of old claims.

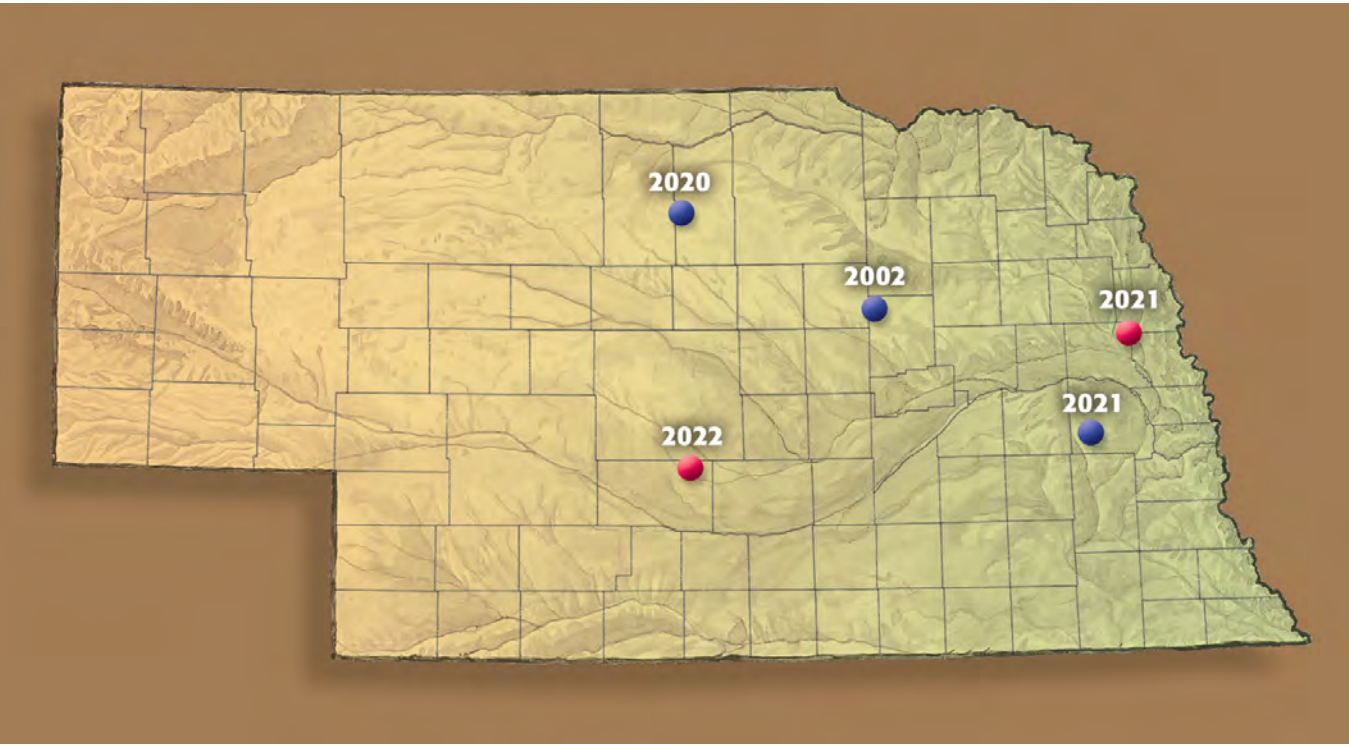
“There are now on file with the Auditor claims aggregating \$25,000, and by the end of next year this figure will be doubled. These figures indicate that instead of being killed off, the wolves are increasing. The explanation is now simple.”

A new wolf bounty law, sponsored by James A. Douglas of Rock County, took effect in 1905. It provided for a bounty of \$5.00 for each wolf, \$1.25 for each coyote, and \$1.00 for each lynx killed.

The *Lincoln Evening News* of November 28, 1905, noted continuing problems with wolf bounty claims under the new law.

The *News* said: “Some of the state officials charged with supervision over the operations of the law are a little fearful that some of the county clerks are not well enough versed in animal lore to know the difference between the scalp of a yellow dog and that of a wolf, so that when John Jones comes in with a few bits of raw fur and ears attached they are apt to take the word of the claimant, as to the character of the creature from which the trophies were taken.”

– Courtesy of History Nebraska



Location and year of wolf confirmations from 2002 – Present. Male wolves are shown in blue, females in red. TIM REIGERT, NEBRASKALAND

Promise of Walleye

Lake Mac Study Fuels Changes to Fisheries Management

Story by Julie Geiser

Lake McConaughy is one of the best fisheries in Nebraska for many fish, including wiper, smallmouth bass, channel catfish and, especially, walleye. For the latter, it is considered one of the best in the Midwest. Maintaining the walleye fishery, however, is complicated.

Recruitment is cyclical in most walleye waters, with strong production years often followed by

poor ones, and McConaughy is no exception. In Big Mac, anglers have as good of a chance at catching a trophy walleye as anywhere, but in recent years have found fewer 15- to 20-inch fish.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission is investigating this, and since 2015, fisheries biologists have been working with University of Nebraska at Kearney



Steve Frederick of Scottsbluff holds a trophy walleye he caught while fishing along Kingsley Dam at Lake McConaughy near Ogallala.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Research is showing that walleye stocked as fingerlings might have higher survival rates than fry in Lake McConaughy. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

researchers to find the reason behind low recruitment.

Researchers collected young-of-the-year walleyes between 2015 and 2018 and found that in each of those years, 10 percent or less of the total population was produced naturally. Knowing increasing survival of stocked fish was critical to improving recruitment, the researchers also collected baseline information on predators, zooplankton and water clarity. Combining this information could then be used to develop a map of locations where stocked fish would

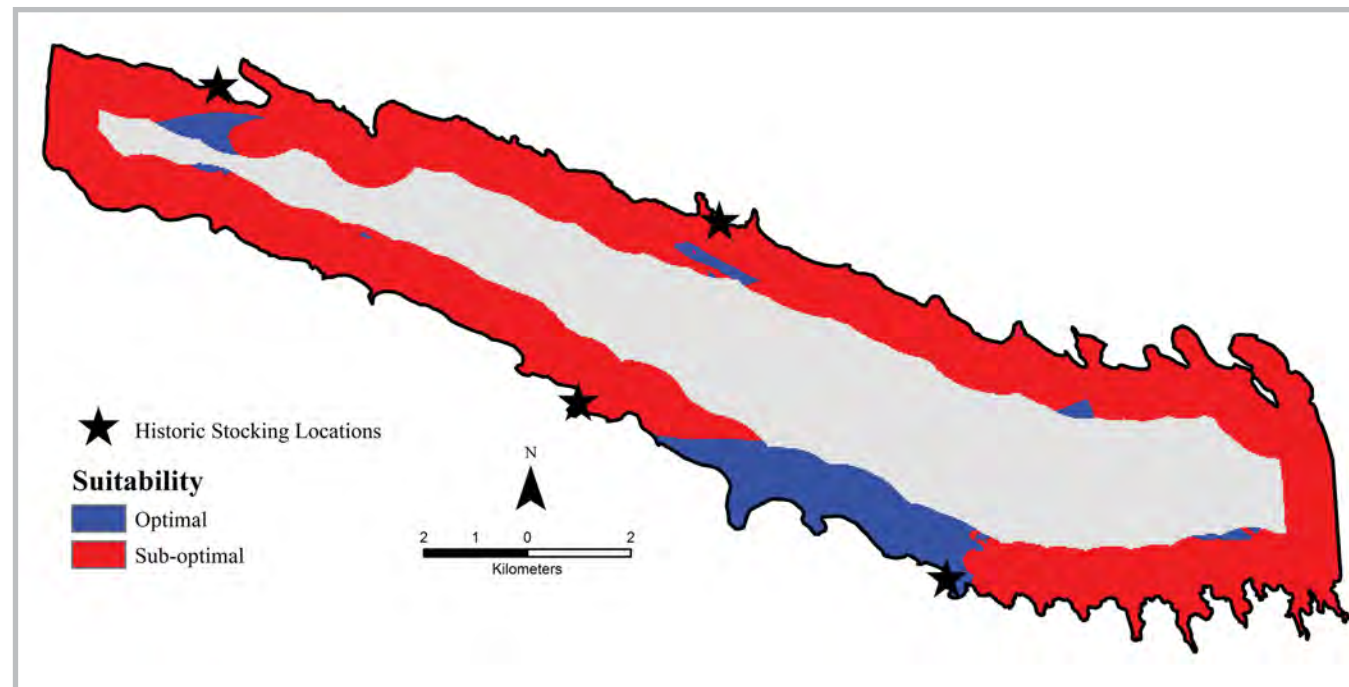
have the best chance of survival.

In 2017 and 2018, immediately after walleye were stocked, UNK researchers and Game and Parks biologists collected predator fish in areas where walleyes were stocked, as well as elsewhere in the lake, to determine what species were present where. The stomachs of those fish were pumped to determine what they had been eating, and then they were released back into the lake. Researchers found every predator in the lake was feeding on young-of-the-year walleyes, and those fish were most abundant in the middle

and lower reaches of the reservoir.

For the second part of the study, researchers focused on what young walleye primarily eat: small, aquatic microorganisms, known as zooplankton. They sampled 48 locations along the north and south shore of McConaughy when walleye were stocked in 2018 and found zooplankton size and availability varied by month and location. This is significant because previous studies have shown fry will select smaller species of zooplankton and fingerlings will select larger ones.

A third piece of the research focused on water clarity, another important factor to walleye fry and fingerling survival based on previous research. Juvenile walleyes prefer depths between 3 and 9 feet where water tends to be more turbid. In these conditions, they can see better than other fish because of their eye structure, and the turbidity can serve as a cover, protecting them from other sight-feeding predators. In 2018, researchers measured water clarity at locations throughout the lake when walleye were stocked. Researchers



University of Nebraska at Kearney researchers produced identified locations on Lake McConaughy where young walleye had the lowest chance of predation, the most zooplankton to eat and the optimal water clarity. Combining factors produced this map, which shows where stocked walleye have the best chances of survival. SEAN FARRIER, UNK



University of Nebraska at Kearney researchers sampled alewife in Lake McConaughy using gill nets.

LOGAN ZEBRO, UNK

found the reservoir was more turbid on the west and south ends and clearer to the north and by the dam.

From these findings, researchers produced maps showing which locations had the lowest chance of predation, the most zooplankton, and the optimal water clarity. They then combined these maps to find locations where stocked fish had the best chances of survival.

Game and Parks biologists began using this information in 2022 and also tweaked their stocking protocol. Along with 26 million fry and 1.3 million 1¼-inch fingerlings, they stocked 280,000 1½-inch fingerlings. The latter were stocked at a lower rate in the hatchery ponds and kept there a week longer, allowing them to grow larger. This extra growing time got them closer to the size when they could feed on larval alewife instead of zooplankton, in hopes of increasing their chances of survival.

Biologists used a chemical to mark fry and the larger fingerlings they stocked in 2022. In the fall, they collected 200 of these age-0 fish and examined the otoliths to determine

which stocking they came from. That examination of marked fish found the survival of fingerlings to be greater than fry. They are still working to determine the origin of unmarked fish by examining the microchemistry in the otoliths to see if they came from a hatchery or natural reproduction.

With lower reservoir levels, biologists aim to stock 20 million walleye fry, 800,000 1¼-inch fish and 200,000 1¾-inch fish in 2023. Those fish will again be marked, sampled in the fall and analyzed to determine contribution to the fishery. Results of these assessments will guide future stocking practices at the lake.

Researchers also are continuing to explore other pieces of the management puzzle. Knowing zooplankton availability could be affecting survival of stocked walleyes, researchers have been looking into the likely cause of declines: alewife. This forage fish was introduced to the lake in 1986 to supplement the gizzard shad population that tended to be boom or bust. Since their introduction, however, zooplankton levels, especially the larger species important in a young



After stocking walleye at Lake McConaughy, predator fish — including wipers — were caught and their stomachs flushed to see if they had eaten the newly stocked fish. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

walleye's diet, have been noticeably lower in the reservoir.

Researchers collected alewife at

locations throughout the lake within 48 hours of stocking walleye to determine where they were and what

they were eating. They found alewife were feeding almost exclusively on larger zooplankton and not walleye fry, as suspected.

Alewife, however, have proven to be a reliable food source for walleyes, allowing them to grow fast and fat. With populations presently at historically high levels, however, it is likely compounding the zooplankton part of the management equation.

High alewife populations isn't making things easy on anglers either: with more food than they can possibly eat, the walleye that are swimming in the state's largest reservoir can be difficult to catch at times.

Biologists hope these research efforts can help identify the stocking regimen that will help increase the number of fish that grow big enough to eat more alewife and tip the scales in favor of fish and anglers alike — keeping Lake Mac at the top of the fisheries list and more fish on the end of an angler's line. [N](#)



A team of researchers shock recently stocked walleye to measure their growth and see what they have eaten. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

MISSISSIPPI KITE COMEBACK

By Julie Geiser

The Mississippi kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) is a small raptor that many people don't know about. After reading this, hopefully you'll keep an eye on the sky as these graceful birds will leave you admiring them.

The Mississippi kite is about the size of a peregrine falcon; their body length is about 13 to 15 inches, with a 3-foot wingspan. They weigh 7 to 14 ounces. Both the male and female are similar in appearance and have gray bodies with dark gray to black tails and outer wings. Their wings, which resemble a giant purple martin, are pointed, making them aerodynamic when in flight and catching food.



A juvenile Mississippi kite watches and waits for its next meal.
JOEL JORGENSEN

Kites will glide, circle and perform acrobatic movements as they swoop in to catch large flying insects such as cicadas, grasshoppers, beetles, wasps, moths and dragonflies in their sharp talons. Kites will also eat smaller birds, bats, frogs, toads and lizards. Sometimes, they will eat while in flight by transferring prey from their talons to their beak.

Mississippi kites inhabit open wooded areas, wooded river corridors and suburban areas. They nest in colonies, making small, shallow, bowl-shaped structures built out of sticks. The female lays one to three eggs, and both parents incubate the eggs for about a month. Parents take turns feeding themselves when not incubating eggs, which is different than other birds of prey. In other raptor species, the female usually relies on the male to provide her with food as she solely incubates the eggs.

Both Mississippi kite parents will also take care of their young, first providing hatchlings with food regurgitated into the nest and working up to solid foods as the young birds grow older. At about four weeks, young birds begin climbing on branches near the nest, and at five weeks, they will test their wings and make their first flights.

During the mid-1900s, Mississippi kite populations declined, but recently, the species expanded its breeding range into new regions, including in many areas of the Great Plains. This species is known to nest in the southern U.S. from Arizona to northern Florida and into Illinois. More recently, they've nested as far north as New Hampshire and Connecticut, and now, Nebraska is on the list. It's not known

for sure why these kites are expanding their range, but tree and hedgerow plantings in the Great Plains have probably contributed to them adapting to urban environments.

Prior to the 1990s, the Mississippi kite was an infrequent summer visitor to Nebraska. In 1991, kites were observed in Ogallala, and the first confirmed nesting activities were documented in August 1994 when 11 birds were counted, and two successful nests were found.

Successful breeding has occurred in North Platte since 2012. Since then, the population has grown, with at least 21 birds

reported in July 2021. Nesting has also occurred recently in Scottsbluff, McCook and Lincoln. Reports from many other cities across the state have also increased in recent years.

Mississippi kites typically gather in large flocks as they prepare to migrate to warmer areas for the winter. These birds travel great lengths during their migration through several states before arriving at winter retreats in South America, in places as far as Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina.

Because they travel through a number of states and countries, the Mississippi kite is susceptible to many threats, including weather, exhaustion, starvation and disease.

Currently, though, this species is thriving, but it is still important to protect them.



A juvenile Mississippi kite sits in its nest located in Lincoln County. This bird is almost fully fledged and ready to fly.
JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

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DEKAY'S BROWNSNAKE

By Marissa Jensen

Nebraska is home to 29 species of native snakes with each species claiming its own unique characteristics, habits, and habitats. And for those who find themselves a little squeamish about even the mere mention of snakes, we have the perfect one to introduce you to.

The Dekay's brownsnake (*Storeria dekayi*) is a non-venomous snake named in honor of the 19th-century naturalist and zoologist, Dr. James Ellsworth De Kay, who collected the first known specimen.

With an average adult size between 9 and 13 inches in length, the Dekay's brownsnake may resemble the No. 2 pencil you hold in your hand. Due to their size, this small snake has a unique appetite. The typical diet for a Dekay's brownsnake consists of earthworms, snails and slugs. In fact, the snake is equipped with a specialized tool: An acrodont tooth structure on the snake's mandible allows them to remove snails from their shells before they're consumed.

Additionally, due to their small size, the Dekay's brownsnake falls victim to a variety of predators, including larger frogs and toads, birds and mammals. They're quite adept at hiding and are secretive in nature, which likely helps avoid predation.

Brown, or reddish-brown in color like their namesake, Dekay's brownsnake often has a dark head and a white or gray underbelly. Many will exhibit a light-colored stripe running down the length of their spine. This stripe may have a paired line of black dots that run along the edge on both sides. Additionally, a dark black spot is typically located underneath each eye of the snake.

This species of snake is known as viviparous (giving birth to live young) and a female may have anywhere between



The Dekay's brownsnake is a non-venomous snake named after 19th-century naturalist and zoologist. MARISSA JENSEN

three and 41 young in the summer months. Newborn snakes can be as small as 4 inches in length.

Reptiles like Dekay's brownsnake are ectothermic, meaning they rely on outside heat sources to maintain body temperature. Because of this, during the months of late fall and winter when temperatures drop and days shorten, the Dekay's brownsnake goes through brumation to survive the cold. Brumation includes a dormant period for cold-blooded animals, such as snakes. During this time, physical activity drops off and metabolic processes slow down. Brumation is not devoid of all activity, however, as the Dekay's brownsnake will occasionally rouse to drink or bask if the temperatures warm.

As temperatures increase and the days lengthen, brumation comes to an end and the cycle will start all over again.

Historically, the Dekay's brownsnake has been found primarily in the eastern region of Nebraska. However,

a recent paper published by the University of Nebraska at Kearney took a closer look at the potential range extension for Dekay's brownsnake in south-central Nebraska. Although this species was previously known to occupy 16 counties across Nebraska, recent findings added seven new counties in south-central Nebraska to the Dekay's brownsnake range. These counties included Clay, Fillmore, Kearney, Nuckolls, Seward, Thayer and York.

The Dekay's brownsnake can be found in woodland and shrubby habitats around streams and have been documented in ecosystems and environments such as upland grasslands and row-crop agriculture. The next time you're out on a hike or standing in your garden, look closely. Maybe you'll be fortunate to spot this little, secretive snake.

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NORTH GRABLE POND RENOVATION

By Justin Haag

It may not have been in the plans, but anglers this summer are enjoying the latest improvement on the Fort Robinson State Park fishing scene — a renovation of the North Grable Pond.

Seven ponds were renovated during the initial phase of the park’s comprehensive aquatic habitat and access improvements, but North Grable was not included because it already supported a healthy fishery. As luck would have it, not long after those seven projects wrapped up in 2020, a wooden dam board broke in North Grable’s aging outlet structure and all the water quickly drained from the pond.

The Game and Parks Commission turned misfortune into opportunity. With the 1.7-acre pond drained, the agency sought funding for a complete renovation. They were successful and the project was completed last fall.

Workers constructed a new outlet structure, with durable aluminum instead of wood, as well as a covered fishing pier with wheelchair access.

They also deepened the pond and created fish habitat of rock piles and more than a half-dozen massive cottonwood stumps harvested on-site. The dam was fortified with packed clay to avoid seepage.

North Grable is positioned at the end of a chain of three ponds that were once used by the now defunct federal fish hatchery in Crawford. The southernmost pond receives cool spring water, and the water naturally becomes warmer as it moves northward through two dams to reach North Grable. Nebraska’s diverse fish species thrive at varying water temperatures, a big consideration when choosing what to stock.

Fisheries biologist Joe Rydell said a surprise source of cool water has created a little uncertainty about North Grable, so temperature will be monitored in coming months.

“We did open up some new springs during the construction, so there’s a chance that it could be trout-supporting,” Rydell said.

Rainbow trout were released in the pond last fall to provide anglers with an immediate harvest opportunity. The pond also was scheduled to receive largemouth bass, bluegills, yellow perch and rock bass this year. When those populations become established, black crappies and channel catfish can be added.

Rydell said the Grable ponds, as well as the park’s streams and other ponds, provide anglers diverse fishing opportunities in a small area. The other two ponds, comprising 4 acres, were stocked with brook trout, tiger trout, rock bass, bluegills, smallmouth bass and rainbows following renovation. They will soon receive cutthroat trout. Other Fort Robinson ponds renovated in recent years are the three Ice House Ponds, the Cherry Creek Pond and Cherry Creek Diversion Pond.

Funding for the North Grable project was provided by the Game and Parks Commission’s Aquatic Habitat and Angler Access Fund and the federal Sport Fish Restoration program.



North Grable Pond at Fort Robinson State Park begins to refill last fall after an aquatic habitat project. JUSTIN HAAG

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BRANCHED OAK HABITAT

By Eric Fowler

An innovative project to create artificial underwater habitat at Branched Oak Lake near Lincoln will benefit both fish and anglers.

Fish like largemouth bass, crappies and bluegills love structure, especially submerged trees. As flood control reservoirs age, this type of habitat declines. This lost habitat can be replaced with cedar trees or artificial structures.

Knowing this, Joe Petrzilka, a Lincoln area angler, approached Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologist Aaron

Blank with an idea. He had found he could get partial spools of PVC pipe that was left over from projects such as running fiberoptic lines, and because these spools didn't have enough tubing for another project and were headed to the landfill, he could get them for free. Petrzilka wanted to build a few structures and place them in area lakes. Blank had a better idea: "If you can get PVC, lets

put together a big event and get a bunch of anglers together and build 150 or 200 of these things. That will make the kind of impact we can study."

So last October, with the PVC Petrzilka acquired, the 5-gallon buckets and concrete mix provided by Game and Parks, and the help of about 25 volunteers and staff, they built and sank 171 artificial "trees," taller ones for deep water and shorter versions for shallow water, in the two bays on the north side of Branched Oak State Recreation Area.

Fisheries staff places cedar trees in the lakebed of reservoirs that are drained for Aquatic Habitat Program projects, tying them together with cable and adding cinder blocks as anchors that will keep them in place when the lake refills. But they also do several brushing projects each winter, dragging cedar trees onto the ice that are tied together and sink when the ice melts. The older reservoirs like those in the

Salt Creek watershed that have suffered from siltation and where there is little woody habitat left are prime candidates for these projects.

"Adding that in there gives a little bit of habitat for the fish and it concentrates fish for fishermen," Blank said. "And hopefully if you get enough of it added, you can start seeing some biological changes for our fish. If you can get aquatic insects and algae start to form on these structures, not only are you providing cover for the fish, you're also providing a food source."

Blank had been wanting to do that type of project at Branched Oak for several years, but ice conditions hadn't been safe.

"Of course, the year we get this artificial stuff in place we had good enough ice and were able to get another 200 cedar trees in there," Blank said.

Blank said he prefers cedar trees because they are natural, provide a more complex structure and are free, with many

growing in grasslands around reservoirs where they aren't wanted. But the artificial structures are easier to place from boats and don't snag anglers' lures. So when they cost as little as the ones placed in Branched Oak — about \$5 each, a fraction of the hundreds commercially produced fish habitat can cost — there is a place for those as well.

Blank said they are stockpiling more PVC that Petrzilka has acquired and will put together another event at an Omaha-area lake this summer. Using electrofishing and sonar, biologists will try to get an idea of the species and number of fish using the structures.

He already knows fish are using them at Branched Oak. "I fished them a week later and I caught crappies off almost every one of those artificial structures," he said.

Put some structure, any structure, in these older reservoirs, and fish will find it. That's good for the fish, and for anglers.



Game and Parks biologist Aaron Blank and volunteer Sam Cowan load artificial fish habitat in a boat before placing it in Branched Oak Lake. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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Duck Hunting near York, 1985

My dad, Tom Cox, taught me to love the great outdoors at a young age. Our time together spent building our duck blinds and watching the sun come up in the mornings over the decoys are priceless to me. He displayed extreme patience after he introduced me to a duck call at a young age, and I struggled to learn it and often overcalled the birds. He passed away a few years ago now, but as I often reflect on so many of the life lessons he taught me, many of them were centered around our time together in the field. I am forever grateful to my dad for getting me outdoors with him and all the memories we shared in Nebraska and South Dakota hunting together and with family and friends.

– Chris Cox, Oro Valley, Arizona



Two Rivers trout lake, circa 1984

My sons, Greg and Bob Hladik, Jr. — nice catch for junior anglers. Today, Greg is an Omaha firefighter/paramedic. Bob is the sales manager for a beer distributorship in Missouri.

– Bob Hladik, Sr., Omaha

Hunting near Agate, early 1900s

My grandfather, John Wesley Warren, center bottom row, with brothers and neighbors near Agate, Nebraska. He, along with seven brothers and sisters, homesteaded on the flats south of Agate. Hunting provided meat for their family and some to sell.

– Jim Warren, Gretna



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



A CATERPILLAR MORNING

By Chris Helzer

I'm very fortunate to be a photographer who rarely works with assignments or deadlines. Instead, I take my camera for a walk whenever the light is beautiful and I'm in the mood to wander and explore. I don't usually have a preconceived idea of what I might find, and I like it that way.

I was on a sandbar along the edge of the Niobrara River. I'd chosen the location because I knew light would hit it quickly after the sun broke above the horizon, but also because I'd seen a lot of frogs, insects and flowers on the same sandbar in previous years. Since I'd had prior experience, I headed straight for a little pool of water in the middle of the large island to see if there were any frogs about. It seemed as good a place as any to start.

Before I got to the pool, however, I was distracted by numerous little fuzzy caterpillars feeding on wetland rushes. "Well," I thought, "It looks like it's going to be a caterpillar morning!"

There were at least a dozen little critters, each between 1½ and 2 inches in length. Sunlight was reflecting wonderfully off bundles of spiny hairs protruding

from bright orange bands around their pale bodies. I knelt down with my tripod and macro lens and tried to photograph them from all angles.

One caterpillar in particular caught my interest because it was actively eating, and its face was fully visible near the chewed-off end of a leaf. I positioned my tripod and camera so I was looking down into its huge, mottled eyes. I'm pretty sure I gasped softly at that point because I was so excited about the lighting. Not only was the sun illuminating the eyes of the caterpillar, it was also highlighting its hairs beautifully. The gorgeous orange and white spines on the body were in soft focus in the background, but the real winners were the long, spready hairs framing its face. Yes, the word "spready" is made up. I can't help that it's the best term to describe those amazing hairs.

I did end up photographing a few other things on that sandbar, including a cute little snail and a couple of insects, but the lion's share of my time was spent admiring those caterpillars. I never did make it to that pool. That's OK — it had turned out to be a caterpillar morning.

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