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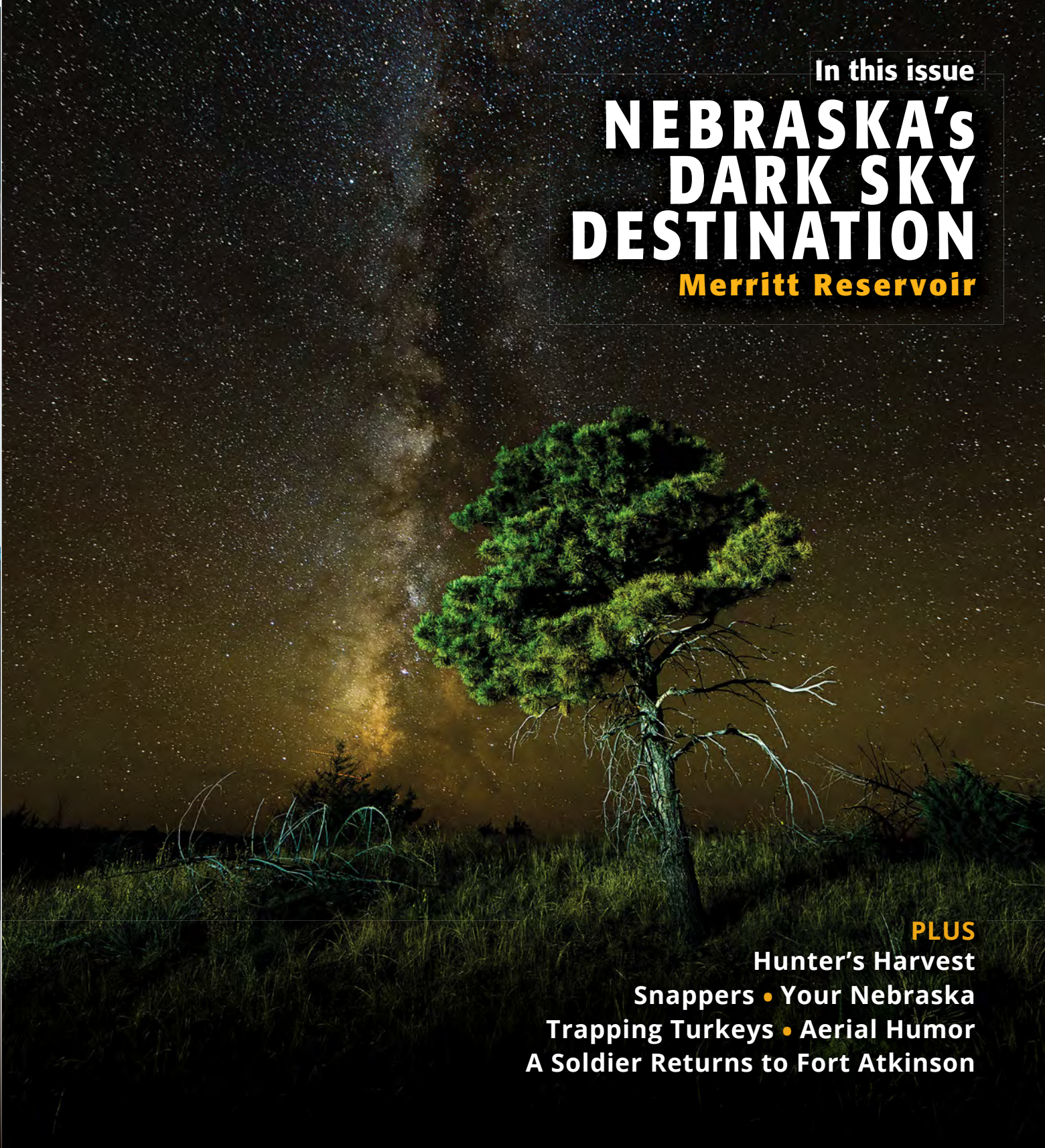
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APRIL 2023

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NEBRASKA'S DARK SKY DESTINATION

Merritt Reservoir



PLUS

Hunter's Harvest
Snappers • Your Nebraska
Trapping Turkeys • Aerial Humor
A Soldier Returns to Fort Atkinson

Cover: Light painting with a spotlight illuminated a ponderosa pine tree in a grassland on the east side of Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area in Cherry County. See the story on page 18.
ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

This page: A Canada goose swims through steam fog rising from a farm pond in Lancaster County on a chilly April morning. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

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magazine

Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926. The Commission is dedicated to the conservation and protection of all the state's natural resources and the people who use them.



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Rates: \$18 for one year; \$33 for two years; \$44 for three years. Nebraska recipients must add appropriate sales tax. To subscribe call 1-800-NEBLAND (632-5263), or go online to: NebraskalandMagazine.com.

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In April, newly emerged zebra swallowtail butterflies are flying in the woodlands.
MICHAEL RAMSDELL

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may be condensed and edited.
Photographs are also welcome.

CURIOUS GEORGE

An eastern fox squirrel hangs onto the side of a tree on its way to raid a backyard bird feeder in Lancaster County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





Jenny Feeken, of Gretna, begins to clean a mess of crappies after an April midday fly-fishing trip. Allowing the water to warm up, as well as get a few extra winks, isn't a bad idea this time of year. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

LUNCHTIME IN APRIL

By Jeff Kurrus

The early bird gets the worm, right? Not necessarily in April. While it's nice to watch the sun rise as many days as possible any time of the year, it's unnecessary this month. Plenty awaits you once you decide to enter nature at lunchtime.

Turkey Hunting

Dawn for show, noon for dough the gobbler-chasing cliché goes, but it's never truer than in April. With unpredictable weather during the early spring, seeing flocks in the morning, when toms are still henned up, is the norm. Midday can become a different story, however, as birds begin to separate and toms start to display their first moments of insecurity. Be there when they do.

Fishing

The warmer the water becomes in April, the more active the fish. Another good reason to sleep in is the sheer coldness of the water on your hands on these mornings. The brain tells you it's no longer winter, so you underdress almost naturally, and any sort of gloves are nearly forgotten entirely. Midday sun will warm up those digits and allow you to spend even more time on the water, when the fish are truly starting to become alive.

Hiking

Whether for the start of mushrooming or just to reacquire yourself with the woods, midday hikes in April are spectacular. Every little ounce of color is coming to fruition all around you. There's no better time to be afield. Just make sure you're wearing some hunter orange to keep you and those sharing the woods with you safe.

Biking

Not too hot, not too cold. April is the time to take a stroll through a park. Despite the ideal weather, still bring enough water, especially if riding on one of the state's many trails.

Boating

As excited as you might be, early April in Nebraska is usually not the time to knock the dust off the water-skiing rope. But it is the time to imagine what that will feel like very soon from your spot on the water. If early summer is the first time your boat gets on the water, we have some things to discuss.

Sleep now, for everything you want to see will be there when you finally arise. Unless you're a photographer. If this is the case, get up with the turkeys.

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PILLBUGS

By Julie Geiser

Everyone has seen a roly-poly bug. Their ability to tuck into a little ball, called conglobation, has amazed children and adults alike. But what exactly is a roly-poly bug, and what is its purpose in nature?

The roly-poly bug is sometimes called woodlouse or wood shrimp, but its official name is pillbug or *Armadillidium vulgare*. The pillbug is an isopod; iso- means same or equal and pod means foot. Actually, the pillbug isn't a bug at all. They are terrestrial crustaceans and closely related to shrimp, crabs and crayfish, and they have adapted to live entirely on land.

Pillbugs are most active at night and breathe through gill-like structures that require moisture, which is why we see them in moist environments in soil, under logs, leaves and other decomposing vegetation. Although they need humid environments, they cannot survive underwater.

Roly-polies range in size but average from ¼ to ½ inches long. Their body parts include a head, thorax and abdomen. The head consists of jaw-legs that pass food to the mouthparts and two compound eyes. The leg-bearing thorax consists of seven hardened plates resembling an armadillo.

Their gray to brown color keeps them camouflaged from predators, such as birds, lizards, frogs and spiders, and when rolled into a ball, strong body plates make it difficult for predators to get to their soft underside. Pillbugs also produce unpleasant secretions, which repel potential predators.

Unlike other crustaceans, isopods have unstalked compound eyes on their head instead of eyes at the end of a stalk that are attached to the head. They have two antennae with sensory setae, or stiff hairs, attached to them along with a smaller pair of antennules; both are used to find food and detect scented chemicals called pheromones produced by other pillbugs. This is how they locate other pillbugs and suitable habitats to feed.

Males and females can be distinguished by their

undersides. Females have a brood pouch called a marsupium on their underside where fertilized eggs are incubated and hatched after three to seven weeks. Broods can range from seven to 200 eggs, and females may have one to three broods a year, typically during warmer months. The young survive on nutrients received through marsupial fluid from their mother. Newly hatched young may stay in the pouch around 6 to 12 weeks before venturing out on their own. Developing

young that have left the pouch are called mancas. Mancas molt several times to gain the seventh segment of their body, their seventh pair of legs and a hardened exoskeleton. Pillbugs molt throughout their lifetime, which can occur every two to five years.

Pillbugs are scavengers and decomposers. They eat decaying matter from dead plants and animals, along with other decomposing materials, and return essential nutrients back into the

soil. They even eat their own feces. When they poop, pillbugs lose copper, an essential element they need to survive. Therefore, pillbugs help to rid soil of heavy metals by taking in copper, zinc, lead, arsenic and cadmium. Pillbugs can live in contaminated soils where other species can't, and they have a positive impact on the ecosystem as they increase mineral layer nutrients consisting of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. They also eat fungal matter that, if left alone, would increase carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere.

Pillbugs are sensitive to environmental changes and thus serve as biological indicators for the health of the ecosystems where they are found.

Finally, roly-polies don't bite or sting and pose no risk to humans. They rarely eat living plants or crops in agricultural lands. If they do venture into your home, they cannot survive for more than a few days unless they find humid conditions to live. These creatures simply provide their services to the ecosystem and give us all the pleasure of watching them transform into little balls.



The pillbug isn't a bug at all, they are terrestrial crustaceans, meaning they are closely related to shrimp, crabs and crayfish but have adapted to live entirely on land. JULIE GEISER, NEBRASKALAND

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Crispy fried egg rolls filled with ground venison, morel mushrooms and melted cheese. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

MORELS AND VENISON EGG ROLLS

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

This is a versatile recipe. You can use just about any kind of meat. I used ground venison, but shaved or thinly sliced meat would work, too. If you like, substitute the shredded carrot and cabbage with finely chopped green pepper to the sauté for a more Philly cheesesteak-like vibe

Aside from mozzarella, melty cheeses such as provolone, fontina and Gruyere are delicious. American and provolone cheeses are classic choices.

Servings: 4-6 (about 15 eggrolls)

Prep Time: 30 minutes

Cooking Time: 30 minutes

Ingredients:

- 1 pound of ground venison
- 2 tablespoons of olive oil
- 6 green onions, all parts chopped
- 2 tablespoons of Worcestershire sauce
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Handful of morel mushrooms, finely chopped
- Handful of coleslaw salad mix/ mixture of shredded cabbage and carrot

- 4 cups of shredded mozzarella cheese
- 3 cups of ketchup
- 2 tablespoons of powdered mustard
- Half cup of brown sugar
- Tabasco sauce to taste
- 1 package of egg roll wrappers
- Frying oil

1. Heat olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. When oil begins to shimmer, add venison and brown, breaking up the meat with wooden spoon. Then add chopped green onion, chopped mushrooms and coleslaw mix. Sauté until cabbage and carrot have wilted. Mix in Worcestershire sauce, salt and pepper to taste. If there's a lot of moisture from the meat, cook longer to reduce. You want this meat mixture to be fairly dry.

Set aside to cool completely. Once cool, mix in shredded mozzarella cheese.

2. Meanwhile, make the dipping sauce by combining ketchup, powdered mustard, brown sugar and Tabasco

sauce. Set aside until ready to serve.

3. Pour water into a small bowl. Assemble egg rolls: lay an egg roll wrap in front of you on a dry, clean surface so that it looks like a diamond with one corner pointing toward you. Place a moderate amount of the meat and cheese mixture along the middle of the wrap and then tightly fold the bottom corner over the filling. With your fingers, wet the two corners to the left and right with the water and fold those over. Wet the top corner and roll neatly to seal. Repeat with the rest of the egg rolls. Set aside and cover with a tea towel.

(Keep the rest of the unused wrappers covered with a tea towel or plastic wrap while you work to prevent them from drying out.)

4. Heat frying oil to 325-350 degrees Fahrenheit. Fry egg rolls seam-side down first until golden brown and then turn over to brown the other side. Drain before serving and keep warm. Fry in batches — do not overcrowd the pan. Serve with the dipping sauce. Egg rolls will be hot!

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Magnificently Dark

For those wanting to observe the night sky, Nebraska's remote locations are tops. One such place has earned official confirmation of its brilliance after dark.

By Justin Haag

Stars and wispy clouds hang above the Boardman Creek area of Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area, which has been designated as Nebraska's first International Dark Sky Park.
Nikon D850, 28mm, f/3.2, 20 seconds, ISO 5000.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

For lovers of solitude, it is hard to imagine a better place to be. The occasional howl of a coyote, hoot of an owl, moos from cows. The eerie sound of ice forming over a lake on a cold December night. On occasion, the quiet, but growing, roar of a truck's engine advancing from miles away.

They are about the only things reminding you that you are not completely alone.

Perhaps it is what is seen that is most magnificent about this place, though. Look above to see the seemingly endless array of stars in the sky, each speck more than 20 trillion miles away. Among them is that gorgeous, giant swath known as the Milky Way.

The Nebraska Sandhills is this place, and it is that great view of the stars and other celestial bodies that, in 2022, garnered Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area a new designation as an International Dark Sky Park to add to its long list of attractive attributes. It is the first location in Nebraska to earn the title from the International Dark-Sky Association, the recognized authority on light pollution, putting it in company with some of America's most breathtaking national and state parks.

All one has to do is look at one of the dark sky maps on the Internet to realize why. They show almost the entire United States east of Columbus and Norfolk to the nation's coast lit up with varying degrees of intensely bright colors, which represent the severity of light pollution. Throughout the West, though, about 10 sizable expanses show up dark on the map. The easternmost of them is the Nebraska Sandhills.

Even though the designation is new, the exceptional view of the night sky at Merritt Reservoir has not

The Milky Way rises above a camper in the Beed's Landing campground at Merritt.
Nikon D850, 15mm, f/2.8, 25 seconds, ISO 4000.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





A Photoshop composite of 198 images shows the movement of Earth in relation to the stars between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. on Oct. 26, 2022. Polaris, or the North Star, is at the center of the circles, which are partially reflected on the still water's surface near the boat ramp at Beed's Landing. Nikon D6, 16mm, f/4, 30 seconds, ISO 5000.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Stars seem to shine through the
spinning blades of a windmill on
the Samuel R. McKelvie National
Forest, located adjacent to
Merritt Reservoir.
Nikon D810, 20mm, f/2.8, 25
seconds, ISO 3200.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Light painting with a spotlight illuminated a ponderosa pine tree in a grassland on the east side of Merritt as the Milky Way extends skyward. Nikon D850, 14mm, f/2.8, 25 seconds, ISO 4000.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

been a secret. Each July for the past 29 years, it has hosted the Nebraska Star Party, drawing professional and amateur astronomers from across the country. The throng of attendees revel in the view of the night sky through both high-powered telescopes and the naked eye. During the day, they enjoy the area’s many other features: 9,000 acres of nature and 44 miles of shoreline with white-sand beaches. The park is known for its outstanding fishing, boating and camping opportunities.

No matter where you live, an overnight trip to Merritt Reservoir is worth the drive. Those who stay awake after the sun goes down will be sure to like what they do — and don’t — hear. And, they will especially love what they see. [N](#)



A dark sky map shows the areas of most and least light pollution in the United States. The dot represents Merritt Reservoir.
OPENSTREETMAP

To learn about the International Dark-Sky Association's efforts to combat light pollution, visit [Darksky.org](https://www.darksky.org). Information about the 30th annual Nebraska Star Party may be found at [Nebraskastarparty.org](https://www.nebraskastarparty.org).

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

As spring unfurls, take some time to soak in the outdoor beauty it offers. Opportunities this month include fishing, hunting, looking for wildflowers and enjoying unique lodging. [N](#)



Listen for boreal chorus frogs calling

Mid-March through summer | Statewide

Boreal chorus frogs, which are brown and green with stripes running through their eyes and down their backs, are one of the first frogs to start calling in the spring. Their call has been described as someone running their fingers over a fine-toothed comb. These frogs are usually in large groups, making the sound deafening, with hundreds calling at once. Look and listen for these frogs near ponds, road ditches, lakes and wetlands.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Look for blooming pasque flowers

Throughout the month | Statewide

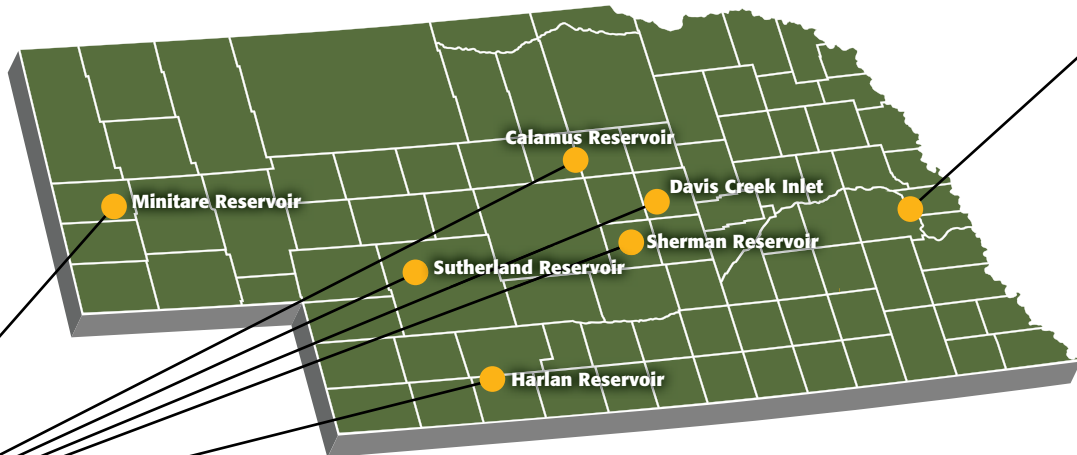
Easily recognized by its purple flower and hairy leaves and stems, pasque flowers are one of the earliest flowers that you can see blooming in the spring. These small purple flowers are usually found in northern Nebraska and along the Niobrara River. Normally found in prairies, they can bloom anywhere with lots of sun and dry, rocky soil. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Stay overnight in a caboose

Available April 15 through September | Two Rivers State Recreation Area

Have an adventure and stay overnight in a remodeled caboose. At Two Rivers State Recreation Area, 10 Union Pacific cabooses have been restored for park lodging. They are air-conditioned and sleep six people. Each is equipped with a modern bathroom and shower, along with a stove, microwave and refrigerator. Learn more at [OutdoorNebraska.org/TwoRivers](#). ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Fish for white bass

Mid- to late April | Statewide

You can find some good fishing for white bass in several larger reservoirs in the state, such as Harlan and Calamus. Other good spots include Davis Creek inlets and Sutherland, Sherman and Minatare reservoirs. In April, white bass are heading for shallow water, with spawning beginning in late April. Feeder streams and creeks are good areas to try, as well as windswept shorelines. Small jigs work well, too. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

Spring turkey shotgun season

April 15 to May 31 | Statewide

There's nothing more exciting in the spring than calling in a turkey and seeing him strut in a full display. Nebraska has lots of opportunities across the state, so be sure to scout and find the best spots near you. Remember to bring a new hunter with you and enter the Take 'em Hunting challenge for a chance at prizes; see details at [OutdoorNebraska.org/TakeEmHunting](#). JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Hunter's Harvest

Story by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley
Photos by Jesse Deuring

The year was 1958. “Volare” dominated the Billboard Hot 100. NASA got its start, and the first Intel microchip was created. In Nebraska, the Blackstone Hotel made its own history. Primarily known for its invention of the famous Reuben sandwich, the Omaha landmark also bears a vibrant, storied past. Black and white photographs hanging in the renamed Kimpton Cottonwood Hotel pique interest, especially among hunters.

“The photos kind of remind me of *The*

Shining, when they flash back to the old photo of the people in the hotel,” said Executive Chef Jason Sirois. “We learned early on that they used to do a wild game dinner here back when it was a Schimmel hotel, called the Blackstone. We wanted to recreate that and bring it back to life.”

The Past

Several photos were taken in 1958, evidence of one of the most premier social and culinary gatherings of the season. Beyond a sea of unknown,



A 1958 photo of one of the original wild game dinners that took place at the historical Blackstone Hotel in Omaha. At the time, these dinners were open to men only. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE KIMPTON COTTONWOOD HOTEL



Bison tartare with pickled okra, cured egg yolk, garlic aioli and fry bread.

monochromatic faces, meal identifiers on the buffet line included antelope, venison, raccoon and bear. The party took place in the rooftop Schimmel Ballroom, and guests appeared to be bucks only — an elite group of well-to-do men who were dressed to the nines. The wild game dinner was a highly-anticipated annual event, one that existed during the lifetime of the hotel.

“The Midwest was in its heyday then,” wrote Elizabeth Weil for *Saveur* magazine. Weil’s grandfather, Charles Schimmel, founded the Blackstone

in 1916, along with a string of other prodigious hotels in Omaha and Lincoln that brought people from all over the country to eastern Nebraska. “The railroad was grand. So were my family’s hotels. They had fancy dining rooms with white-gloved waiters rolling silver carts for haute French table service ... [The men] were proud, prominent, going places ...”

The Blackstone gained icon status through the Roaring Twenties, serving as a luxury stopover between San Francisco and Chicago along the Old

Lincoln Highway. President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy spent their fifth wedding anniversary at the Blackstone, and on Dec. 15, 1967, Richard Nixon announced his candidacy for the presidency from the rooftop ballroom. The hotel’s The Orleans Room restaurant won *Holiday* magazine’s “Award for Excellence” 16 consecutive years.

The hotel remained popular throughout its lifetime until 1976, and for unclear reasons, the building was

converted for office use in the 1980s. In 2017, local investors renovated the space with the vision of bringing the Blackstone back to its former grandeur. In 2020, the Kimpton Cottonwood Hotel opened in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The Blackstone name was dropped to avoid confusion with The Blackstone in Chicago.

Today, the historic hotel is an elegant blend of the past and present. It’s new art deco with a touch of nature — a contemporary reimagining of the opulence and glamour of the 1920s



Duck Cassoulet: roulade of duck breast and foie gras, duck jus, white beans and duck skin tuille.

along with motifs of Nebraska’s state tree, the cottonwood, prominently featured. Visitors enter the lobby traversing Blackstone original stone tiling. Vintage details were restored wherever possible and updates were made to stay true to the former hotel’s heart and history. The property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Present

When Chef Jason Sirois joined the Cottonwood’s culinary staff in November 2020, he quickly set his sights on reviving the Blackstone’s wild game dinners. Sirois saw the event as an exciting way to bring back a piece of hotel history and also encourage engagement among the greater Nebraska community. In fall 2022, the Hunter’s Harvest Dinner came to fruition.

On an October night, hungry guests sat elbow-to-elbow at a long community table, decked with picture-perfect autumn squash, flickering wax candles

and glimpses of iridescent pheasant tail feathers and sun-bleached antlers. A stunning seven-course meal of bison, sturgeon, duck, venison and wild boar delighted taste buds, as well as more unusual indigenous ingredients, such as eastern redcedar (juniper), huckleberry, chanterelle mushrooms, sunchoke, yucca and “husker banana,” also known as pawpaw. And across the centerpieces were not just influential men staring back at one another, as it was during the Blackstone days.

“I think it’s fun to see a table like that, with people like Betsie [Freeman of the Omaha World-Herald], who hadn’t tasted many of those items, or people like yourself or the hunters you were sitting across from enjoying foods they’ve hunted and cooked for themselves, and maybe comparing that to the dishes that they’ve created,” Sirois said.

The menu also paid homage to



Venison Wellington with carrot, sorghum, huckleberry, golden chanterelle mushrooms and truffle demi glace.



Wild boar chops to be served with yucca, husker banana, crispy sunchoke and sofrito, a Latin sauce of peppers and aromatics.

Nebraska’s Native American origins: a delectable bite of bison tartare served atop Indian fry bread; bison short rib and striploin paired with the three sisters of corn, beans and squash; and a Latin-inspired wild boar chop garnished with slivers of fried sunchoke — the starchy, edible root of a common wild species of sunflower (*Helianthus tuberosus*) historically harvested by indigenous peoples of North America for food.

“There’s a lot of Native American influence here in the prairie, and I think it’s important that we include that in what we do,” Sirois said. “There’s also an awesome Latin-America community here and Italian, too. We have our own little Midwestern melting pot, so it’s fun for us to use local ingredients and prepare them in not only different techniques but also

cultures.”

Other dishes at the Hunter’s Harvest Dinner were refreshing takes on Old World classics — a deconstructed duck cassoulet with foie gras and venison Wellington with huckleberry. For dessert, an eye-catching sweet potato cake exposed this humble New World tuber to classic pastry techniques. The fish course offered the most memorable bite: pumpkin seed-crusted lake sturgeon with a clever eastern redcedar-infused aioli.

“There are juniper trees on this property,” Sirois said. “We cut the branches, heated oil to 375 degrees and fried a ton of juniper branches. And that’s the oil we used to make the aioli, and it worked. It really came through. I thought it was one of the best things we put on a plate that night.”

Sirois and his team of seven

managing chefs, plus cooks and dishwashers, made this wild game dinner happen on top of regular service at the hotel. Each chef researched and tackled a different dish, which was paired with wine by a consulting sommelier from Synergy Fine Wines in Omaha. The menu’s focus was to highlight Midwest hunting, fishing, foraging and small-scale farming heritages.

Sirois’s appreciation for wild and local ingredients runs deep. He lived in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, throughout his teens and 20s and dedicated many hours to fly-fishing Alpine lakes and hunting elk in the Buffalo Pass wilderness. As such, the harvest dinner was an amazing opportunity to work with and form relationships with local producers. Sirois’s culinary team sourced



Bison and Three Sisters: short rib, strip loin, corn, beans, squash and berries.



Upper Missouri River sturgeon with pumpkin puree, pickled pear, juniper aioli and pear gastrique.



Sweet potato cake with hay custard, vanilla pecan crumble, cinnamon meringue and clove sorbet.



Guests sat down to dinner at a community table decorated with autumn squash, lit candles and accents of pheasant tail feathers.

ingredients from farmers and ranchers all over the Midwest, as many as possible from Nebraska.

“Everyone thinks Nebraska is just a bunch of corn and soybean and commodity farmers, but that’s not true at all. There are so many fun, small operations around the area that are doing great things,” he said.

One example, Central Nebraska Buffalo, produces great bison meat. Bison was hunted at one time, Sirois said, and as an ecologically and historically significant species of the Great Plains, it deserves a place on American menus. Inspired by

the harvest dinner, the chef plans on incorporating more bison into the regular menu at the Cottonwood’s Committee Chophouse.

Another impetus for these dinners is to bring the Cottonwood back into regional conversations as a premier dining spot, as it was during the Blackstone Hotel’s heyday.

“I want people in like Chicago or Kansas City to hear about some of the stuff that’s going on here and make the trip. I really want to be able to showcase our local ingredients, so that they leave Nebraska with a sense of ‘Oh, wow. It’s not a culinary wasteland out here.

They’re doing some amazing food.’ I want people to leave these dinners feeling satisfied, feeling that they’ve expanded their horizons and broadened their palates,” Sirois said.

These dinners are also a lot of fun for the staff. They’re opportunities for the culinary team to flex their creativity and collaborate beyond the day-to-day, often monotonous, tasks of hotel dining. They hope to put on these harvest dinners twice a year in the spring and fall. Sirois anxiously looks ahead to the future.

“In the spring, we have all these beautiful, small local farms and people

growing amazing produce. So, to showcase some of those items, we’ll make dinner a little lighter as the weather is warming up. We’re looking at the end of April,” he said. Morels likely will make an appearance and possibly rabbit, lamb and walleye. Eventually, Sirois hopes the success of these dinners will encourage other chefs and wine purveyors to collaborate.

Keep an eye out for the next harvest dinner at the Kimpton Cottonwood Hotel on their website, thecottonwoodhotel.com. The food will beat raccoon off a buffet line in 1958 by a long shot. Suit and tie not required. 🍷

A Soldier Returns to Fort Atkinson

By Eric Fowler

Were it not for happenstance, we might know little about Lt. Gabriel Field. When John “Jack” Rathjen uncovered a portion of his headstone while plowing a crop field in 1954, it led to the exhumation of six graves, including Field’s, north of where Fort Atkinson, the first U.S. military fort in what was to become Nebraska, had once stood.

In the years that followed, historians, both professionals and amateurs, searched through military and genealogical records trying to answer the obvious question: Who was Gabriel Field? They uncovered many details about the life and military career of Field, the soldier who helped build Fort Atkinson and met his untimely death there in 1823 that, were it not for a farmer’s plow, might remain footnotes in history.

On April 16, the 200th anniversary of his death, Field will



Lt. Gabriel Field died at Fort Atkinson in 1823. Nebraska History archeologists identified his remains and commissioned a facial reconstruction based on cranial structure. HISTORY NEBRASKA



The Monument to the Deceased at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park was dedicated in 2013. Funded by the Fort Atkinson Foundation, it includes a boulder with a plaque recognizing the 313 soldiers and civilians who died while serving at Fort Atkinson between 1819 and 1827, a plaque listing their names, and a headstone for Gabriel Field. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

return to Fort Atkinson, where his remains will be reburied in the Monument to the Deceased, an event that will fulfill the wishes of the man who found his headstone.

The Soldier

Gabriel Field was born near Louisville, Kentucky, in 1794 or 1795, according to research by Gayle Carlson, an archeologist

with History Nebraska, formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society, who spent years researching the soldier. His parents, Abner Field and Jane Pope, had moved there from Virginia, where they were well-known and influential. Maj. Abner Field was a commander in the Revolutionary War and senator in Virginia. Pope came from an aristocratic family. Among Field’s distant relatives were two presidents, George

Washington and, through marriage, John Quincy Adams, as well as one of the country’s most famous explorers, William Clark.

Field gained military experience in the War of 1812, serving in the Kentucky Volunteers and Kentucky Militia. After the war, he worked as a field surveyor in northwestern Missouri in 1815 and 1816.



An aerial photo looking to the northwest shows Fort Atkinson State Historical Park on the edge of Fort Calhoun. Archaeologists found the remains of Gabriel Field and four others in the field northwest of the park. Soldiers built Cantonment Missouri, their winter camp, in 1819, on the west bank of the Missouri River, which has since shifted, leaving that location on the Iowa side of the river in the upper right portion of this image. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

In May 1817, he sought and received a commission as a second lieutenant in the Army's Rifle Regiment. In 1818, the regiment was assigned to the Yellowstone Expedition. Under the command of Col. Henry Atkinson, the expedition was to establish a series of forts along the Missouri River between St. Louis and the mouth of the Yellowstone River in Montana to protect the growing fur trade and prevent British encroachment from the north. In all, it included 1,126 members of the Rifle Regiment and Infantry, one fourth of the young nation's army.

Field, having been promoted to first lieutenant, was one of 10 officers to lead 347 enlisted men of the First Battalion of the Rifle Regiment, under the command of Col. Talbot Chambers, up the Missouri River as an advance party of the Yellowstone Expedition. According to the journals of John Gale, the surgeon with the regiment, they left Fort Belle Fontaine near St. Louis on August 30. Just as members of the Lewis & Clark Expedition had done nearly 20 years earlier, they rowed, poled and pulled 10 keelboats up the river. They made it as far as Cow Island, north of present-day Weston, Missouri, where they made winter camp on October 18, having traveled more than 360 miles in 50 days. They remained there, awaiting

the arrival of Atkinson and the rest of the expedition, which wouldn't set out from Belle Fontaine until July 4, 1819.

That winter, Field led or was part of several parties that explored the region, visiting a Kansas Indian village, and tracing the Platte and Nodaway rivers in Missouri. The following spring, he led a party to Manual Lisa's trading post just north of present-day Omaha and was to remain there until the battalion arrived. He apparently went farther, advancing to Council Bluff, the hill overlooking the Missouri River on the east edge of present-day Fort Calhoun, where Lewis and Clark held council with the Oto and Missouria Indians in 1804 and a site Clark identified in his journals as a good location for a trading establishment. On August 16, Gale wrote that Field "arrived from Council Bluff destitute of subsistence," with no explanation as to why he returned to Cow Island.

Atkinson and his troops left Fort Belle Fontaine in three steamboats loaded with supplies. The crafts, still in their infancy, weren't able to navigate the snags, sandbars and current of the river and were left behind, leaving troops to transport supplies in keelboats and barges. A fourth steamboat, carrying the smaller scientific and exploration party of the expedition and led by Maj. Stephen Long, made

it to Cow Island. Field and a party of soldiers in a keelboat accompanied Long as he continued north, setting up winter camp, Engineer Cantonment, just north Manuel Lisa's Post. The rest of the soldiers continued north, arriving between late September and early October at what would be their winter camp, Cantonment Missouri, on the banks of the river two miles north of Council Bluff. This was well short of their intended goal of reaching the Mandan Indian Villages in central North Dakota.

The excruciating work took its toll on the troops. "Nearly every man had suffered severely from sickness, and many experienced relapses, before arriving at our point of destination; nor did we then cease to suffer from dysentery, catarrh and rheumatism," Gale wrote in his journals.

While the exhausted troops took to building winter quarters, Field was given another assignment. With his background as a surveyor, he was to plot a course from Council Bluff to the location of the nearest post office near present day Brunswick, Missouri. With 10 enlisted men on horseback, he completed the task in 28 days, crossing what Field estimated to be 340 miles of what was then the Missouri Territory.

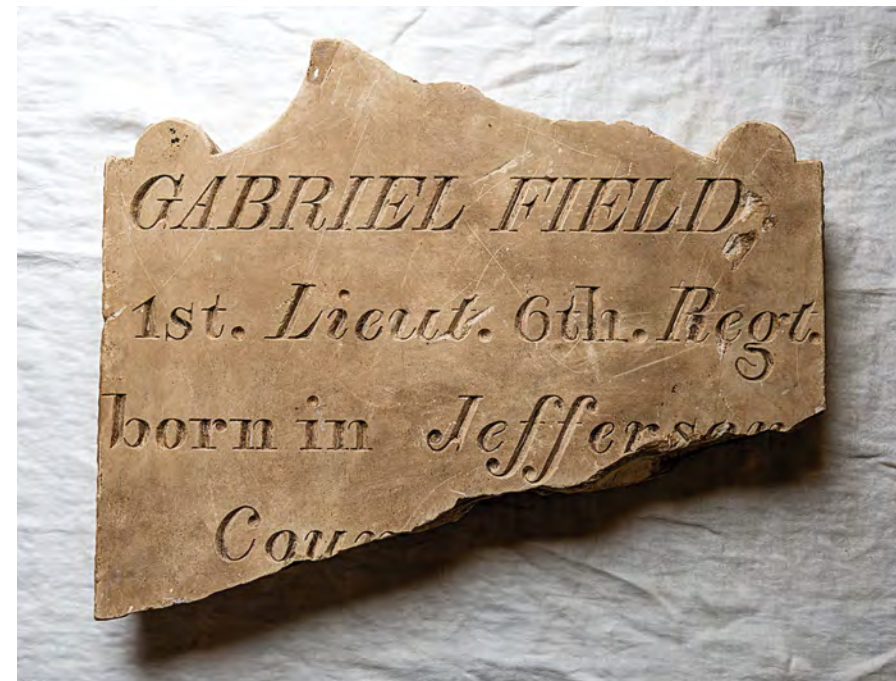
Field described the route, which he dubbed Field's Trace, in his journal, the original copy of which now resides in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. In it, he writes often of the expansive prairie that stretched for miles, the woodlands and rich soil they traversed. He mentions several times crossing trails made by Native Americans that had been recently traveled and meeting a band of Iowa Indians. He named each of the 60 streams they crossed, including Elk Creek, where their hunter killed the first elk on the route. "The Country here is more abundant in game than any we have passed through, which is in consequence of their having more shelters to cover them from pursuit," Field wrote.

Surveying the route was a difficult task, but things didn't get easier when the party returned to Camp Missouri. It would be January before the quarters were nearly completed, and it was a cold winter. The expedition wasn't sufficiently supplied, and many of the food supplies had spoiled. Subsisting on salted and smoke-dried meat, and lacking vegetables and fruit and vitamin C, scurvy first appeared in the camp in late January. By February, most were affected, and it wasn't until April, when natives showed them wild vegetables, such as wild onion, that had begun to sprout that the troops recovered. The malady had taken its toll, though, claiming more than 160 soldiers. Studies of Field's remains showed he was one of hundreds who survived scurvy.

Due to the lack of progress and high cost, congress halted the Yellowstone Expedition, and instead ordered Long

to explore the Platte River west to the Rocky Mountains. Atkinson's troops remained, but flooding inundated Camp Missouri, forcing them to relocate to high ground on Council Bluff. There, they built a fort that in 1821 would be named for their commander, Atkinson, who had been promoted to general and moved on, replaced by Col. Henry Leavenworth.

That fall, Field went to back to work on the Trace, making some corrections in the course to make it easier for wagons and to reduce the number of bridges and crossings soldiers would build on the rivers and streams it crossed. He kept a second journal, but the original and one known copy have been lost. It may have contained the true distance he



The fragment of Field's headstone found by John "Jack" Rathjen in 1954 now resides in the Washington County Museum in Fort Calhoun. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

measured by surveyor's chain of 257 miles. The trace would become more than a mail route. Staff with History Nebraska and other historians found settlers used it when they arrived in the 1850s, and mills and towns were built at some of the crossings.

Further budget cuts to the military in 1821 reduced the troop strength at Fort Atkinson by half to 548. Field was retained and transferred to the Sixth Infantry, showing his value as an officer. He became quartermaster, a position he resigned a year later when Leavenworth refused his request to build a new storage facility. He remained at the fort, however, completing other significant assignments.

Amputation and Death

The details surrounding Gabriel Field's untimely death are few. According to a paper by Carlson, Field was injured March



An 1820 sketch by Titian Ramsay Peale shows Engineer Cantonment and the steamboat Western Engineer on the Missouri River north of Omaha. During the Yellowstone Expedition in 1819, Field and a party of soldiers accompanied Maj. Stephen Long from Kansas to this winter camp. It was the farthest a steamboat had traveled up the river. AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

31, 1823, at Robidoux’s trading post, also known as Cabanne’s, located near what is now N.P. Dodge Park in northern Omaha. He was brought back to Fort Atkinson by boat and, on April 5, partially relieved of his duties “since illness may only be temporary.” On April 12, he was relieved of all duties, and his leg was amputated. He died on April 16.

“It has become the painful duty of the Col. Comdg to announce to his command that the gallant active and generous Lieut. Gabriel Field is no more. He died last evening at 10 o’clock in consequence of an accidental wound in the thigh with a sharp pointed knife by which the main artery and nerve were severed,” Leavenworth announced to his troops on April 17, 1823.

According to an account published in the Blair Courier in September 1890, Capt. Benjamin Contal, who lived at Fort Atkinson as a boy, said the injury was by Field’s own hand. “Lieutenant Field was playing with his knife, shutting it and throwing it one day, and it slipped and struck him in the thigh. This caused the amputation of his leg.”

The journal of another soldier also mentions the amputation. Yet military records and surgeon Gale’s log say nothing about his injury or the amputation of his leg. Jason Grof, superintendent of Fort Atkinson, and Susan Juza, a historian at the park, speculate Field had already been discharged from the military and was preparing to return to Kentucky.

Trading posts were off limits to soldiers because of the alcohol they might procure there. Yet that is where Field and Capt. Charles Pentland ended up. When Pentland showed up for roll call the next day, he had to answer to where his friend,

Field, was. Court martial records from later that year show Pentland was charged with neglect of duty for leaving his post unattended. Witnesses say he was intoxicated. Field is mentioned, but nothing specific. Grof and Juza believe that is because he was a civilian and not under military law. “It’s all speculation, but I’ll say because of the place it happened, we can assume alcohol was involved,” Grof said.

Regardless of how the accident occurred or what Field’s military status was at the time, Grof and Juza aren’t surprised at the outcome. The lack of sanitation and available medical science on the frontier would have been similar to that of the Civil War era, when it is well documented that many soldiers would have survived their wounds had it not been for the infection that followed. There were no antibiotics to ward off infection, and no anesthesia to accompany the amputations that were often conducted to try and stop its spread.

“Just a shot of whiskey and a block of wood [to bite down on]” Juza said.

“Even though they amputated his leg, personally, I don’t think he would have survived,” Grof said. “Everything was stacked against him.”

Discovery of Tombstone and Remains

When Fort Atkinson was abandoned in 1827, so was the cemetery that contained the graves of the hundreds of soldiers and civilians who died there. As was the case with the fort’s structures, they had mostly deteriorated and disappeared by the time settlers began arriving in the 1850s. Soon, the town of Fort Calhoun and farm fields covered

the site.

In the early 1900s, graves were found in two locations west of the fort. Portions of other headstones also were found. Jack Rathjen’s discovery of a broken piece of limestone, 16 inches wide, and 2¼ thick, inscribed with “Gabriel Field, 1st. Lieut. 6th Regt. Born in Jefferson Coun ...” about one mile north of the location of the fort, however, was significant.

In 1956, Marvin Kivett, director of the state museum with History Nebraska, led an excavation at the location. In the 50-foot by 5-foot trench, they found five graves, two containing adult males, two containing children and one empty, with no artifacts to indicate the military standing of the males.

Two years later, Kivett returned after amateur archeologists uncovered another grave only feet from his earlier work. In it they found the remains of an adult male in a hexagonal coffin, the right leg having been amputated. At the foot of the grave, in a rectangular wooden box, they found the rest of that right leg. The headstone, examination of the skeleton and two historical references to Field’s amputation, however, left historians certain these remains were that of Field.

There is no record of the location of the Fort Atkinson cemetery. The location of these graves so far north of the fort, however, makes sense to historians. It is on the edge of the bluff overlooking the location of Camp Missouri, where so many died of scurvy that first winter. With so many buried, it made more sense to continue using that cemetery rather than creating a second.

Most grave markers were made of wood and lost to the elements. Because Field’s was made of limestone, “That shows how much he was liked here from his troops, the people he was stationed here with,” Grof said.

Reburied at Fort Atkinson

Bill Rathjen is the fifth generation to farm the ground north of Fort Atkinson. His great, great, grandfather, Henry Frahm, settled there in 1856. Bill was born a century later, in 1956, two years after his father, Jack Rathjen, uncovered Gabriel Field’s headstone.

He grew up hearing the stories of the area’s history, and the discovery of Field’s grave, from his father, who passed away last September. “He was always a history buff,” Bill said. “He was interested in the local history. He lived all that as a kid. He got stories from the generations before him. He loved to tell stories and he retained all that.”

Bill’s parents supported the effort to preserve the fort that began with the creation of the Fort Atkinson Foundation in 1961. The foundation and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission purchased the property in 1963, creating Fort Atkinson State Historical Park. Bill remembers University of Nebraska students staying in tents on their farm during excavations that followed and helped guide the reconstruction of the stockade and other buildings found at

the park today.

His father always hoped Field’s remains would be reburied at Fort Atkinson, Bill said. Work by Game and Parks staff to do just that began in the 1990s. In 2013, with funding provided by the foundation, the Monument to the Deceased was dedicated east of the Visitor Center. In recent years, staff followed up on previous genealogical searches conducted by Carlson to see if there were relatives of Field who might want to claim his remains. None were found in Kentucky, where Field is a common name. Other descendants were known to have lived in Ohio and Indiana. Few were found, and none knew of Gabriel Field. That cleared the way for Field’s remains, which have been housed in the archives of the Smithsonian Institution, History Nebraska and other locations for the past 65 years, to return to Fort Atkinson.

That pleases Bill Rathjen and his wife, Glenda, and would please Jack, as well, they said.

“It’s something that is important for Bill and me to pass down to our grandkids,” Glenda said. “We want them to know this story and their great-grandfather Jack’s part in it.”

Like Jack, “He was a veteran, and we need to honor our veterans,” she added.

“Dad was always concerned that he wasn’t reburied,” Bill said. “It bothered him that he was, for years, in a drawer in Lincoln and then in the Smithsonian.

“He would have been thrilled to know [Field] was going to be reburied at Fort Atkinson.” 

A reinterment ceremony for Lieut. Gabriel Field will be held at noon, April 16, 2023, at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park in Fort Calhoun.



Archaeologists uncovered Gabriel Field’s remains, including his amputated leg, in 1856. HISTORY NEBRASKA

Trapping Turkeys

*Photos and story
by Justin Haag*

A new research effort is aiming to uncover mysteries about Nebraska's wild turkeys.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln researchers have teamed up with Nebraska Game and Parks to trap turkeys, measure them, collect samples and outfit them with GPS transmitters and leg bands. Over time, researchers will learn about turkey movements, habitat selection, nesting success and genetic diversity.

These variables all play a role in wild turkey population numbers, which have shown a decline in many regions of the state and nation in recent years.

Trapping began in late January and February at multiple sites near Crawford and Trenton. About 60 turkeys, with a desired ratio of toms, hens and juveniles, will be tagged in each the northwest and the southwest regions for three consecutive years. Data collected will be used to inform management of the game bird, which has a lifespan of 3 to 5 years.

"Understanding wild turkey populations will allow us to hone in on the most important variables leading to their declines," said Andrew Little, assistant professor at Nebraska and co-lead on the project. "We know with any ground-nesting bird, it's a complex situation."

He looks forward to calls from hunters who harvest banded turkeys this spring. Hunters will learn a little about their birds, including where they were trapped. 🦃

Follow along with the project at awesmlab.unl.edu, necoopunit.unl.edu or outdoornebraska.org.



Erin Ulrey of the University of Georgia carries a turkey to its release after equipping it with a GPS transmitter and leg band. Two members of Georgia's personnel joined early trapping efforts to assist with training.



TOP LEFT: A sock with its closed end cut off is placed over the turkeys' heads to keep them calm during processing.

BOTTOM LEFT: Kayli Newkirk, research technician for the Nebraska Applied Wildlife Ecology and Spatial Movement Lab, assesses a turkey's body condition as it is held by Nicholas Bakner of the University of Georgia.

RIGHT: Chris Becker, Game and Parks wildlife biologist, carries a turkey to be processed.





TOP LEFT: A trap sits empty after turkeys were removed for processing. Researchers attract turkeys to the enclosures with feed. They trigger the door's closure from a blind nearby.

BOTTOM LEFT: A researcher equips a turkey with a GPS transmitter.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Researchers take blood samples and a variety of measurements before returning them to the wild.

TOP RIGHT: Erin Ulrey uses a rivet gun to place a leg band on a turkey.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Nebraska doctoral student Surya Deepika Garagu releases the first turkey to be processed during capturing efforts. Watching the release is Nicholas Bakner of Georgia.



FORT ROBINSON HORSEBACK UPGRADES

By Justin Haag

Horseback riders are among those sure to appreciate upcoming improvements to Fort Robinson State Park.

Plans include a \$1.2 million addition of campsites and facilities for visitors traveling with horses, said Jim Miller, park superintendent.

Late this summer, construction will begin on an expansion to the equestrian campground at the northwest corner of the main park complex, doubling its size. Included will be 24 additional sites with hook-ups to 50-amp electricity, water and sewer. Also new will be an adjacent 30-pen enclosure for stalling horses outside. That facility will complement the recently renovated historic Mare Barn, which also still will be available for boarding horses.

“Not everybody likes to have their horses stalled inside, especially during the hot weather,” Miller said. “They’ll have a choice this way.”



Horse trailers with living quarters are a common site at the equestrian campground at Fort Robinson State Park.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

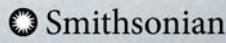


Horse owners will find themselves even more at home at Fort Robinson State Park’s equestrian campground.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



AMERICAN DEMOCRACY ★ A GREAT LEAP OF FAITH



February 09, 2023 - May 20, 2023
history.nebraska.gov/museum



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WINTERKILL

By Justin Haag

Winter Storm Diaz, the massive blizzard that moved across the state in December 2022, has claimed less visible victims — countless fish in at least 35 lakes of the Sandhills and other parts of northern Nebraska.

Low oxygen levels were recorded in many of the region’s shallow, highly vegetated lakes this winter, and ice anglers reported dead plants and fish on their underwater cameras, said Al Hanson, fisheries supervisor for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s northwestern district. Winterkills can occur when ice is thick and deep snow covers a lake for a long time. These variables combined prevent light from reaching the plants below.

“When the photosynthesis stops, imagine that as a big hay meadow down there and all that hay has died,” he said. “As it decays, it creates hydrogen sulfide, reduces oxygen levels, and creates toxic conditions for fish and other aquatic species. Unfortunately, we can’t do anything about it.”

Low water levels from drought worsened the problem.

Oxygen tests administered by Hanson and his coworkers found numerous lakes below the level at which fish begin to die, about 1½ parts per million.

Fisheries staff are conducting surveys to assess winterkill severity. Hanson is hopeful some fish have survived to serve as breeding stock for coming years. Based on survey

results, Game and Parks will prioritize lakes that need initial restocking with largemouth bass, bluegills and yellow perch, and hatcheries will do their best to meet demand.

He is optimistic the lakes will recover and offer outstanding fisheries as they have in the past.

“In three growing seasons, we can have perch up to 10½ inches in these lakes. Bluegill get about 7 inches and bass about 12 to 14. We’ll rebound, but it’s not going to be a one-year thing.”

Hanson said this winter is similar to those of 1996-’97, 1984-’85 and 1978-’79, when prior large winterkills occurred.

Anglers wanting updates about specific lakes may contact fisheries staff at Game and Parks offices in Alliance or Norfolk.

Low Oxygen — Not Just A Winter Thing

Low concentrations of dissolved oxygen can be problematic to fish in summer, too. Oxygen is quick to escape warm water because molecules move faster than they do in cold.

Algal blooms can prompt summerkill. Although algae produces oxygen through photosynthesis during the day, it consumes it during night. Furthermore, bacteria, which thrive in heat, consume oxygen as they feed on organic matter. Waters with poor circulation polluted by excess nitrogen and phosphorous are especially susceptible to fish die-offs.



Deep snow and thick ice covers Walgren Lake in this bird’s eye view captured about two months after Winter Storm Diaz.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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SNAPPERS

By Monica Macoubrie

In the United States, biologists recognize three snapping turtle species — the common snapping turtle, native to Nebraska, the alligator snapping turtle and the Suwannee alligator snapping turtle, which is native to the southeastern portion of the United States. Both species of alligator snapping turtle are not found in Nebraska, yet common snapping turtles and the two alligator snapping turtles are distant cousins and look oddly similar to each other. Upon further inspection, however, you’ll notice some pretty striking differences.

The Shell

The carapace, or the top of the shell, of the alligator snapping turtle is more like that of a cactus. This turtle shell has three prominent ridges down the back. These spikes, or projections, really give this animal that prehistoric look. In contrast, the common snapping turtle’s shell is smoother.

The Body

On average, an adult common snapping turtle in Nebraska has a shell length of 9-11 inches and weighs less than 50 pounds. However, larger specimens have been observed, including “Big Snap Daddy” at the Schramm Education Center aquarium; he weighs around 100 pounds. Alligator snapping turtles are much larger, though. Typically, this species weighs 175 pounds but can be as much as 250 pounds or more. They are the largest freshwater turtles on the planet.



Common Snapping Turtle. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Alligator Snapping Turtle. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

The Head, Mouth & Face

To start, the common snapping turtle has an oval-shaped head, while the alligator snapping turtle’s head is more triangular-shaped. Both turtles have a beak, made of keratin, with the common snapping turtle having a slight hook to theirs.

Inside their mouths, the alligator snapper has a blood-filled appendage affixed to the animal’s tongue. This appendage is lure-like, mimicking the color, shape and movement of a worm. By wriggling this, and keeping the rest of its body perfectly still, this turtle will draw an unsuspecting fish into its open jaws. Being able to hold its breath for around 50 minutes gives the alligator snapper plenty of patience to outwait their prey and strike when they get within distance.

A surprising feature of the common snapping turtle is the bite force – which is greater than that of their cousin. Common snapping turtles have around 209 Newtons of force, while alligator snapping turtles have a less forceful bite of around 158 Newtons — surprising given their big size difference. To put this in perspective, humans can exert around 1,300 Newtons between our second molars.

Despite their many differences, one similarity pervades. It’s probably not a good idea to be bitten by either one.

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Trout fishing from Lake McConaughy, 1973

Kevin Clemens, David Isom and Jeanne Clemens around 1973 with trout from Otter Creek at Lake McConaughy. Submitted by Kevin’s sisters, Lisa Hadenfeldt and Kim Schaaf.

– Lisa Hadenfeldt, Scottsbluff



Waterfowl hunting main Loup River, 1935

My grandfather, Lavern “Curly” Jacobsen (left), and Virgil Welsh (right). Dr. Leschinsky took this photo of 72 mallard drakes and one goose shot on the main Loup River between Palmer and Fullerton. At the time, the limit was 35 ducks a piece.

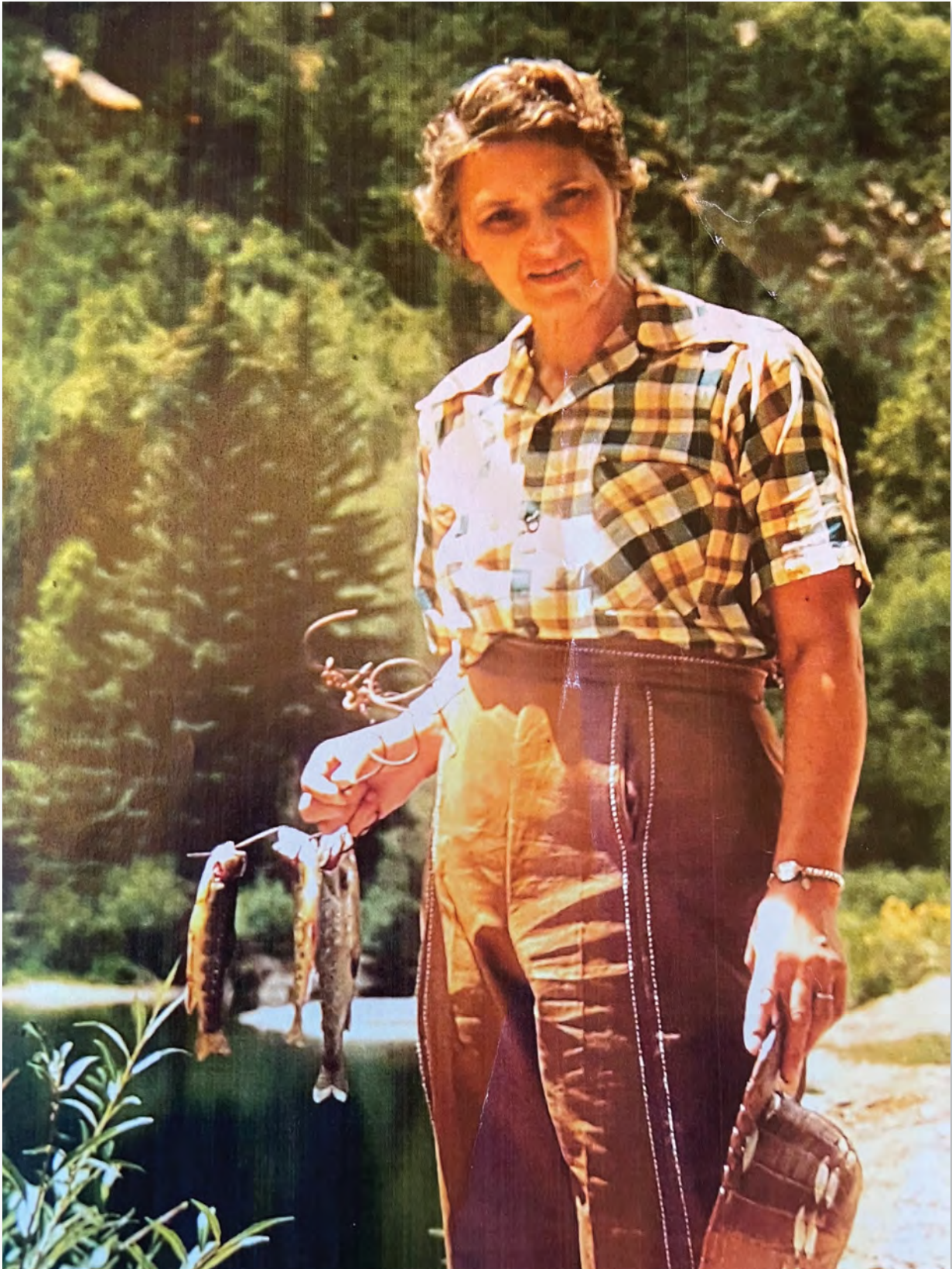
Curly taught his children and grandchildren to hunt, fish and love the outdoors. He served on the Game Commission for a period of time and was instrumental in the building of Sherman Reservoir, even donating the water rights to the project. Virgil owned Citizens Bank, and both resided in St. Paul. Dr. Leschinsky was a dentist in Grand Island.

– Shane Jacobsen, Park City, Montana

Deer hunting near Crawford, 1967

Circa 1967: Pictured from left to right: “Unknown military GI from Texas” and the late brothers, Lester and Lawrence Hillen, of Leigh. By Lawrence’s account, he and Lester were with a hunting party on a ranch on the Pine Ridge south of Crawford. After a morning set, the entire party walked back to the ranch house for lunch. The GI from Texas spotted this deer on an opposing ridge, leaned against a pine tree and took the buck with one shot. Lawrence estimated the shot at “300 paces,” based on the walk to retrieve the deer after the shot.

– Lawrence’s grandson, David Franzen, Columbus



Trout fishing near Chadron, 1950s

When my uncle passed away a few years ago, he had a large collection of family slides. Upon reviewing them over time, I found this beautiful slide of my grandmother circa 1950. We believe this may have been taken by Chadron. Her name was Amelia “Millie” Lang. She lived in Omaha and enjoyed fishing with her husband, PJ Lang. Such style and class! Thanks for considering.

– Grandson Ed Wieger, Omaha

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



AERIAL HUMOR

By Eric Fowler

If you spend any time perusing online maps featuring satellite photos, or you're one who opts for the window seat when you fly, you've surely seen what is a growing trend — rooftop advertising.

But people were spelling things out on the ground to be read from the air long before the Internet came along. The first time I stumbled across it was on a photo flight that took me over Wagon Train Lake State Recreation Area near Hickman. There, spelled out in trees in the wildlife management area on the southeastern corner of the area, was the year the trees were planted — 1967. I laughed, knowing the staff in what was then known as the Resource Services Division had a sense of humor.

Those trees at Wagon Train have grown up, and others have grown up beneath them, making the year hard to read. But if you turn the history slider back in Google Earth every time I fly over that corner of the lake, I smile.

I saw some more creativity in 2020 while I was flying between Calamus Reservoir and Goose Lake. Spelled out in cedar trees on the hillside behind the house on a Sandhills ranch was “Sostad Forest.” Jon Sostad, of Kearney, said he couldn't recall if it was his father, Dale's, idea, or a plan hatched by the people planting trees on the property in the 1990s.

I laughed again in 2009 when I was capturing aerial photos of the construction of Maple Creek Reservoir near Leigh. Soil was needed to build up Highway 91, which would serve as a

sediment dam protecting the lake, and plans called for it to be taken from a borrow pit along the road. But Game and Parks Commission staff helping design fish habitat in the lake told Matt Pruss of Pruss Excavation in Dodge, which was doing the dirt work on the site, they didn't want a simple, square pit: they wanted an undulated bottom that would be more fish friendly.

The request gave Pruss an idea, and that night at home, he “spent way too long on the computer” designing letters nearly 300 feet high, 150 feet wide and 10 feet deep that spelled out “Pruss” in the lakebed. When he presented his plan to the powers that be, they loved the idea.

Pruss heard more than once from those who viewed his creation from Highway 91 that the name was up-side-down. But the tech-savvy businessman didn't intend for it to be read from the road. It would, after all, be under water. He knew which way was up when it came to maps, and hoped new aerial or satellite imagery would be captured before the lake filled. It was, in June of 2009, and for a time, Google Maps and Earth displayed the name. It can still be read using the time slider in Earth.

Also a fisherman, Pruss knew his creation would still be viewed by anglers looking for contour maps of Maple Creek. “I knew there would be a lake map and knew it would be impossible to miss that,” Pruss said. “I figured I'd leave a mark on the world that way.”

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