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magazine

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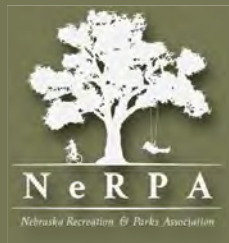
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Nebraskaland

Volume 98 • No. 6
July 2020

Cover: Colin Lodl of Omaha
flies off a flat ramp on the new
mountain bike trails at Platte River
State Park. Photo by Eric Fowler.

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PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

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Chadron State Park Sunset

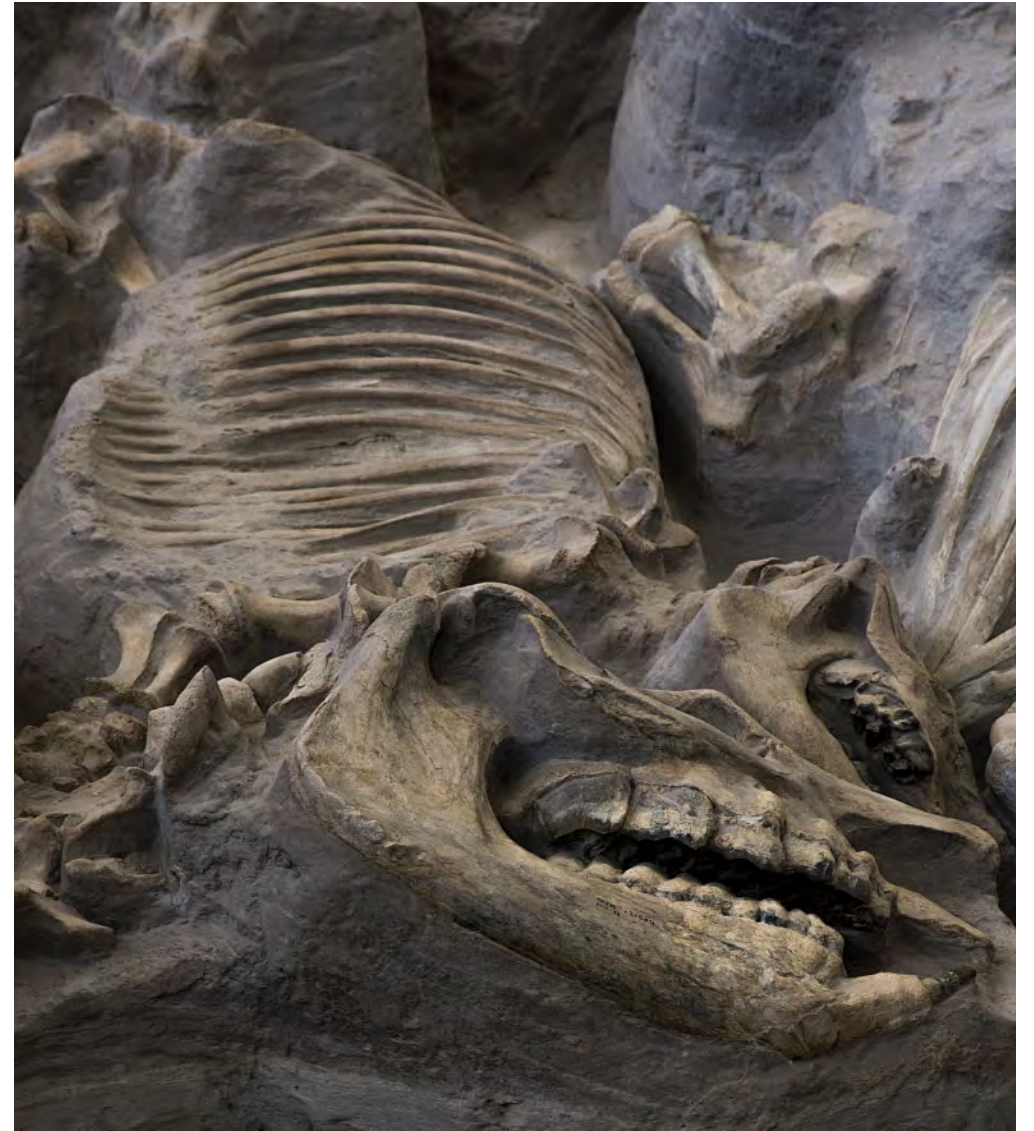




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Please include your postal address
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condensed and edited. Photographs are
also welcome.



PONDEROSA WILDLIFE
MANAGEMENT AREA

With a thunderstorm moving
in overhead, hoary vervain
and wilting purple coneflower
seem to be waiting for a dose
of moisture.

PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

THREATENED AND ENDANGERED: THE COLORADO BUTTERFLY PLANT

By Gerry Steinauer

The Colorado butterfly plant is a High Plains rarity restricted to a few counties in southeastern Wyoming, northcentral Colorado and far western Kimball County, Nebraska. Although it has seen drastic declines in Nebraska in recent decades, in other parts of its range, conservation of the plant has been a model of success.

A biennial to short-lived perennial, the Colorado butterfly plant (*Oenothera coloradensis*) produces only a leaf rosette its first year. The following years, it sends up flowering stems reaching 2 feet tall. The flowers have four pinkish petals and long stamens and style. In Nebraska, the plant blooms in August, and characteristic of the evening primrose family to which it belongs, the individual flowers open from late afternoon until dawn. The butterfly plant is mainly pollinated by night-flying moths.

The finicky plant inhabits wet meadows and other floodplain grasslands where a high water table keeps soils constantly moist, but only at elevations of 5,000 to 6,400 feet. Furthermore, the butterfly plant grows only in relatively open habitats created by disturbances, such as fire, grazing and flooding. If the surrounding vegetation becomes too dense, increasing competition for sunlight and other resources, the plant falters.

In 1985, the butterfly plant was first discovered in Nebraska when botanists also doing surveys in adjacent Wyoming found about 2,000 plants growing in sandy and gravelly soils in the Lodgepole Creek floodplain. Surveys in the early 2000s found the plant in decline, and a 2008 survey documented

only 12 plants. Several of the plant's habitats had been overtaken by the non-native and highly aggressive Canada thistle. The moisture-loving plant's collapse, however, was due mainly to a drastic decline in flows in Lodgepole Creek caused by center-pivot irrigation development, and the associated decline in its floodplain groundwater levels. During the last few decades, the creek has been, literally, pumped dry.

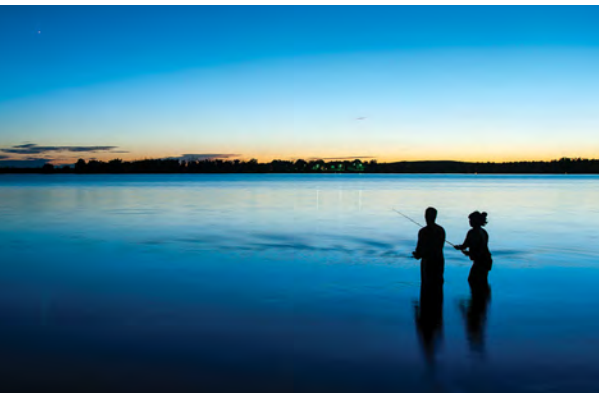
Fortunately, the Colorado butterfly plant's fate in Colorado and Wyoming is far more encouraging, making it one of the many successes of the federal Endangered Species Act. There, shortly after the plant's listing in 2000 as a threatened species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its conservation partners began efforts to conserve its habitat. The city of Fort Collins, Warren Air Force Base and 11 ranchers whose property contained the butterfly plant signed voluntary agreements to: limit herbicide use near plants, time haying to not

damage its flowers and seed pods, use prescribed fire and managed grazing to maintain early successional habitat, and maintain stream flows and groundwater levels. These efforts were so successful that in 2019, the Colorado butterfly plant was removed from the federal list of threatened species.

During surveys along Lodgepole Creek in 2018, seven butterfly plants were found in a small area where overflow from cattle tanks had saturated the floodplain soil. This gives hope that a seedbank still persists along the creek, and if its flows could be somehow restored, the plant may yet survive in Nebraska. But for now, it remains a state threatened species.



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NEBRASKA
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PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

OUTLOOKS, WATCHES AND WARNINGS

By Martha D. Shulski

We are well into severe weather season here in Nebraska. Severe thunderstorms with strong winds, damaging hail, tornados, flash flooding and lightning – all of these hazards are common in our little continental corner of the world.

On your local news channel, or if you're like me and have a NOAA weather radio, you have likely heard the terms **convective outlooks**, **watches** and **warnings** many times when it comes to severe weather.

Convective outlooks are issued by meteorologists at the Storm Prediction Center, based in Norman, Oklahoma. They determine daily which areas of the U.S. are at risk; five categories ranging from marginal to high are used to classify risk eight days out. As one would expect, the further out in time, the more difficult it is to make an accurate risk assessment. However, these outlooks tell us where to focus our attention, and perhaps, also where to focus your camera lens.

Watches are the next stage, and these generally cover large multi-county areas issued hours ahead of time. When a watch is issued, it tells you to be alert for specific hazards, check for forecast updates and monitor the sky, and most

importantly know where to take shelter should hail, high wind, flash flooding and/or a tornado occur. Whether on a lake, river, pasture or forest, it is at this stage you identify your safe place. This way, if a warning is issued, you know where to go.

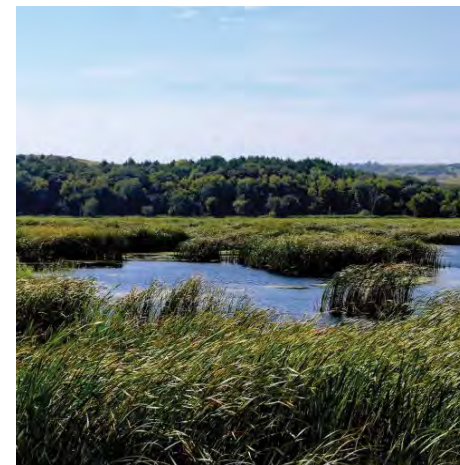
Warnings are issued by local National Weather Service forecast offices, six of which do so for Nebraska, and represents the time to take action. With a warning, severe weather is either happening or imminent, and these boxes cover a much smaller area (a few counties) and shorter timeframe (minutes) than watches. Advanced weather apps with radar are a good idea so you can track storm movement and intensity as conditions can quickly change.

It is advisable to have a severe weather preparedness kit, as you would a first aid kit. Water, nonperishable food, can opener, flashlight, batteries, infant needs and personal hygiene items are recommended. Part of this kit is a refresher on severe weather terminology as preparedness is the best defense.

Martha D. Shulski, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is the director of the Nebraska State Climate office.

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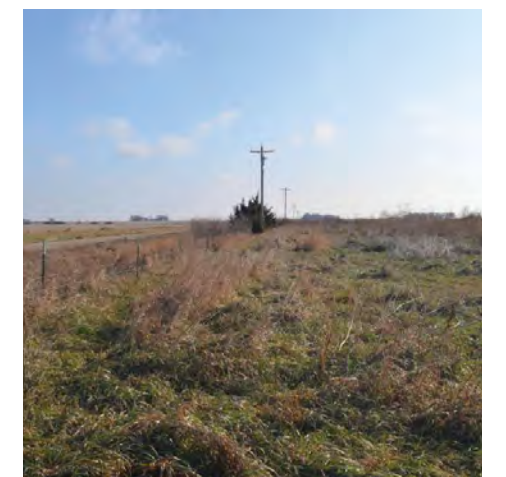


KNOX CO, NE - 737 AC.

Priced to sell! This diverse tract has something for everyone. It is enrolled in a perpetual WRP easement (Wetland Reserve Program) which will help to preserve the quality habitat that makes up this incredible recreational property. Views from the bluff overlooking the Missouri River along Highway 12 are going to be hard to beat. Thick hardwood timber flows through the draws and is loaded with beat down deer trails. Several ponds are scattered along shelves down below the ridgeline providing secluded water holes for the wildlife. The southern portion of the property boasts open views of the rolling native grass-covered hills.

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If you have been looking for huntable acres that won't break the bank, you've got to see this one! Located just outside of Rising City, you'll find this property nestled among seemingly endless tillable acres. This parcel was entered into a conservation easement through the NRD for the primary purpose of maintaining rangeland as well as wildlife habitat. Grazing is still allowed on the property as well as haying after July 15th. Hay next to the marshy areas in late summer and give yourself the opportunity to run floating and field decoys in the fall for an irresistible waterfowl spread! You're not going to want to miss this opportunity!



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PHOTO BY GERRY STEINAUER

STINKHORNS – THE NAME SAYS IT ALL

By Gerry Steinauer

My first encounter with a stinkhorn mushroom was during a college botany field trip. Our professor pointed out the mushroom and then he had a few of us smell it. Its odor was putrid, like rotting flesh.

The dune and common stinkhorn are widespread in Nebraska, growing summer through fall in lawns, gardens and grasslands. The mushrooms develop in an egg-sized structure located just below the soil surface. The two stinkhorns are identical in appearance except the common stinkhorn's egg is pure white, while the dune stinkhorn's egg is white with a purplish tinge.

The mushrooms erupt from the egg seemingly overnight, growing up to 4 to 6 inches in a few hours. Once erupted, the coating on the stinkhorns' cap quickly breaks down into vile-smelling, spore-filled slime that attracts flies, beetles and other insects. Some insects consume the slime while others wade through it looking to lay their eggs. The foul smell tricks them into believing they are depositing their eggs on decaying flesh on which their larvae can feed.

Unlike other mushrooms, which have wind-dispersed

spores, stinkhorn spores are insect-dispersed. The wide-ranging insects leave the mushrooms with spores stuck to their feet or in their gut, which are later expelled in their feces.

Though they are non-toxic, it is hard to imagine anyone would eat stinkhorns, but in China and central Europe the odorless eggs are considered a delicacy. Here, they are pickled raw and often sold in markets under the name "devil's eggs."

One mushroom connoisseur described them as "delicious" when sliced and fried like Wiener schnitzel. Others have a less favorable opinion regarding the egg's edibility.

Last summer, about 25 dune stinkhorns sprouted in our front yard in Aurora. They were soon thick with flies and other insects that, after a few days, had licked the mushrooms' honey-combed heads clean of its sticky goo. They then became less pungent and their caps faintly resembled a morel mushroom in shape and color. At this stage, one could envision a novice mushroom hunter mistaking a stinkhorn for a delectable morel. It would be a mistake they made only once.



Nebraska Game and Parks biologists shock and net fish from a resting pool in a fish bypass built at Spalding Dam on the Cedar River in Greeley County. The fish were caught and tagged as part of a study to measure the effectiveness of the bypass.

We're working to preserve beautiful Nebraska for years – and generations – to come. #MakingItLast

MAKING IT LAST

NEBRASKA
– GAME  PARKS –



PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAAG

NEBRASKA'S WOOD-PEWEES

By Joel Jorgensen

Sitting among friends and family at a wooded campground is a great way to spend time during the summer. It is also an opportunity to hear the simple song of a wood-pewee if you pause from the conversation and listen closely.

Wood-pewees are drab brown, tyrant flycatchers closely related to the more visible and sharply-colored eastern and western kingbirds. Like their kingbird cousins, there is also an eastern and a western wood-pewee. Unlike the kingbirds, which both occur statewide, the wood-pewees are mostly divided by the eastern and western portions of the state. In other words, which wood-pewee's song you're hearing depends on where your campground is located.

Prior to European settlement, the two wood-pewees' ranges were disjunct. Eastern wood-pewee were breeders in the woodlands of the east and western wood-pewees were restricted to the limited forested lands of the west, such as the Pine Ridge. As woodland vegetation spread, especially along major river corridors such as the Platte, each wood-pewee expanded their range toward the center of the state. Now, these two species' breeding ranges narrowly

overlap in central Nebraska and this has led to instances of hybridization between the wood-pewees.

The two wood-pewees appear nearly identical. They are best distinguished from one another by voice and by range. The eastern wood-pewee's song is a plaintive whistled "pee-a-wee." The western wood-pewee's song is similar but the latter syllable is downslurred and sounds like "pzzeeyeer." Mercifully, wood-pewees tend to sing at all hours of the day, so you won't have to get up at the crack of dawn on your camping trip to hear one. All wood-pewees prey on insects which they typically catch in mid-air by making short flights from a favored perch. Wood-pewees are a Neotropical migrant, arriving in a majority of the United States by May, and they winter primarily in South America once breeding has finished in August.

So while you enjoy those long summer days, take a moment to add the simple songs of the wood-pewees to your outdoor soundtrack.

Visit birdsofnebraska.org for more Nebraska bird information.



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PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

VENISON DIRTY RICE

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Servings: 6-8
Prep Time: 2 hours
Cooking Time: 30 minutes
Ingredients:

- 2 cups of uncooked long-grain white rice (and required water)
- 3 ounces of deer liver, minced
- 1 pound of ground venison
- 2 tablespoons of olive oil, separated
- Half a red bell pepper, ribs removed and diced
- Half a green bell pepper, ribs removed and diced
- 2 ribs of celery, chopped
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 jalapeno pepper, chopped
- 2 cups of chicken or game stock, separated
- 2 teaspoons of paprika
- ½ teaspoon of garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon of dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon of dried oregano
- 2 tablespoons of butter

- Kosher salt, to taste
- Lawry’s Seasoned Salt, to taste
- Cayenne pepper, to taste
- Freshly cracked pepper, to taste
- Scallions, freshly chopped
- Hot sauce, optional

1. Cook rice according to package directions and allow to cool completely. (Day-old rice that’s been refrigerated is preferable).

2. In a large skillet, heat 1 tablespoon of oil over medium-high heat. When it begins to smoke, add the ground venison and minced deer liver, flattening the meat out onto the hot surface of the pan. Leave it alone to caramelize for a couple of minutes, and then break it up into small pieces and stir to brown completely. Season to taste with kosher salt and freshly cracked pepper. Transfer to a bowl and set aside.

3. In the same skillet, turn heat down to medium and add remaining oil. Add chopped onion, celery, green bell, red bell and jalapeno peppers. Season with a pinch of kosher salt and sauté until all of the “veggies” soften and become slightly caramelized, about 5-7 minutes. Stir in paprika, garlic powder, thyme and oregano. Add ½ cup of stock, scrape the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon and then allow the liquids to boil and evaporate almost completely.

4. Next, add the cooled rice and cooked meat mixture into the skillet, and stir well to combine. Stir in remaining stock and allow moisture to evaporate, stirring frequently. Stir in butter until melted. Season to taste with Lawry’s Seasoned Salt, cayenne pepper and freshly cracked pepper. Garnish with chopped green onion. Serve with a vinegary hot sauce.

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This one-stop compilation offers a variety of resources:

- Fun, age-appropriate lesson plans
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- Videos and chats
- Craft activities
- Wildlife identification guides
- Email experts for your nature questions
- Learning resources for all ages
- Facebook posts and updates

PRACTICE MAKES BETTER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

I'm 5 feet 2 inches, female, right-handed and left-eye dominant. Out-of-the-box firearms typically don't fit me, and youth models have made poor substitutes. As if learning to shoot at a flying target, left handed, wasn't difficult enough – throw in an ill-fitting gun and it becomes a recipe for frustration.

I took up shooting and hunting in my early 20s. My husband, Rick, introduced me to it, and since then, my journey has been like a roller coaster, one that broke down a lot and got stuck in inconvenient places. I am satisfactory with the rifle – decent enough to get venison in the freezer, anyway – but wing shooting was another story. The most disappointing part was I really wanted to be good at it.

If I had to pick between dozing off in a deer blind or walking a pheasant field, I'd choose upland hunting nine times out of 10. There's just something about walking under big sky, toting an over-under and following dogs that I find more romantic than anything else. Sadly, I let several failed attempts on the range and in the field defeat me. I

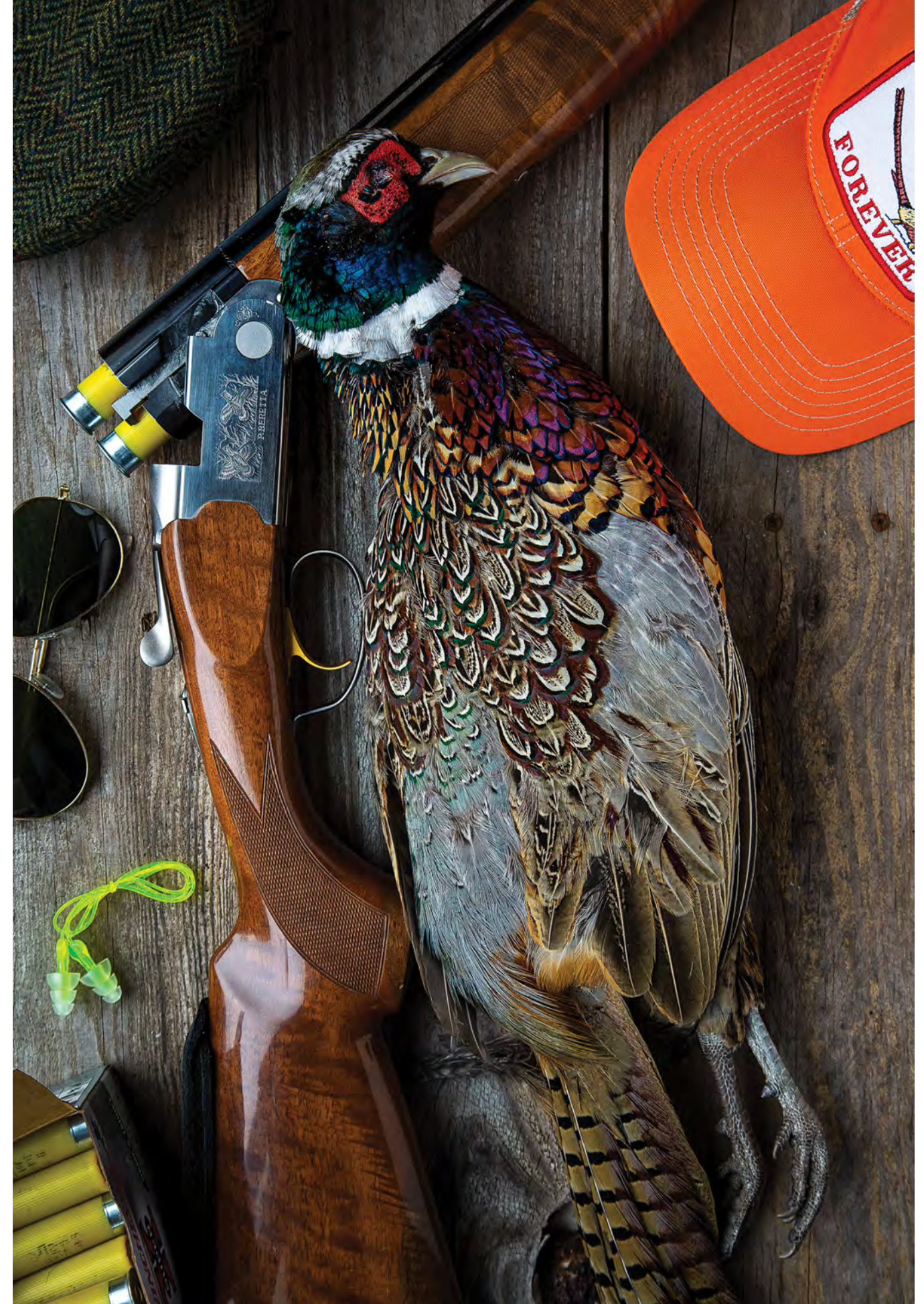
didn't touch my Beretta Whitewing for years. That is – until I picked it up again last summer.

In summer 2019, Rick and I received an invitation to hunt grouse in western Nebraska. The opportunity was too good to pass up, and I'll admit, the fear of looking like a fool dug into my sides the hardest. I asked around and got connected with a shooting instructor in Blair. I figured that with a few pointers, I'd be up and running by the fall. Alas, my journey toward becoming a better upland hunter wasn't as simple as I'd hoped.

To put it simply: My gun was made for a right-handed shooter, which meant that in a left-handed shooter's hands, it was inaccurate.

Shooting coach Greg Preston said I had two options: I could take a chance and buy a left-handed gun or I could see a gunsmith to modify what I already have. After fruitless hours researching left-handed shotgun options for vertically-challenged women, which were virtually nonexistent, I decided it would be more economical to see a local gunsmith.

Pictured is a Beretta Whitewing 20 gauge over-under shotgun.



ANATOMY OF A SHOTGUN

Bird hunting is reflex, reactionary-type shooting, making gun fit paramount to success in the field. Three gun fitting problems include the drop, cast and length of pull. The drop of a shotgun determines whether your pattern lands high or low, whereas the cast determines the right and left. The length of pull is the measurement between the trigger and the butt.

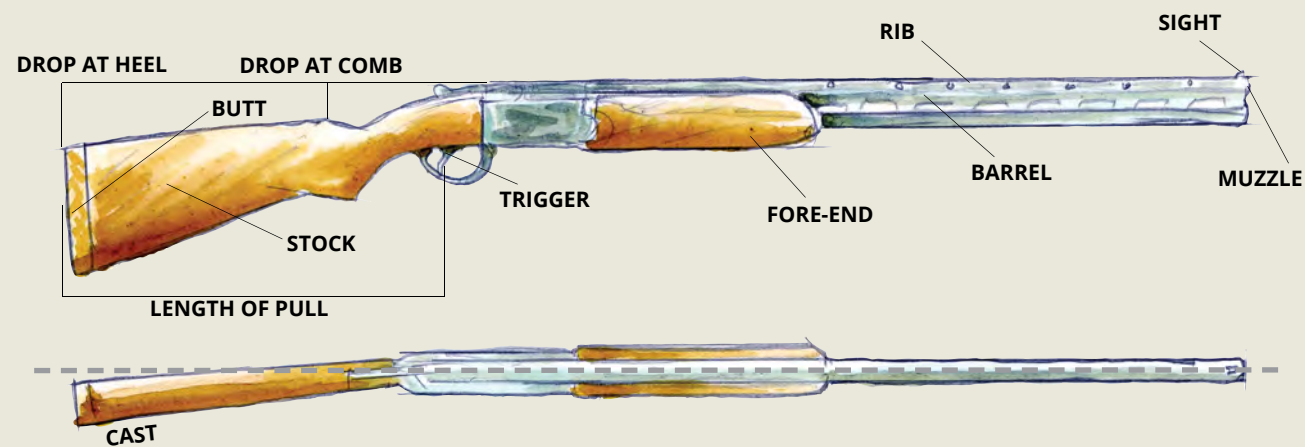


ILLUSTRATION BY TIM REIGERT

Now that I had made the decision to “stick to my gun,” the task of finding a willing, knowledgeable gunsmith turned out to be surprisingly complicated. After what seemed like a wild goose chase, the third gunsmith was the charm: Stephen Reynolds at Midwest Gunstocks was the man. He

cut down my gunstock to shorten the length of pull, shifted the gun’s cast to fit a left-handed shooter and stuck on foam to temporarily heighten the comb to adjust my shotgun’s drop. Stephen was also generous with his knowledge. He took the time to explain what he was doing and kept in contact with Greg throughout the entire process.

It was a solid month and a half from the time I first met with Greg to when I was finally able to hit targets over a trap house. I got in two shooting lessons before my grouse hunt out west, fewer than I had hoped, but still, I felt good about it. My gun was finally shooting where my eye was looking, and if I missed – which was often, still – then it was on me. The difference was that I could actually see where I was making mistakes and improve.

I had more fun on that September grouse hunt than I had in a long time. I successfully connected with my first sharp-tailed grouse and experienced that heart-pounding, gut-wrining miss on my only chance at a greater prairie chicken.

My shotgun recently went back to Stephen for installation of a permanently raised cheek piece, and I look forward to getting back out to the shooting range this summer with Greg. But more than ever before, I’m excited about this upcoming upland season, and that’s because this time, I’ll be ready. 📍



Rick and Jenny Wheatley of Omaha sharp-tailed grouse hunting on public access land near Minatare.



Left: Gunsmith Stephen Reynolds working in his shop, Midwest Gunstocks near Herman.

Below: Pictured is a gunstock that Reynolds made for a left-eye dominant client to shoot right-handed.

Stephen Reynolds is a master-class skeet shooter with 40 years of gunsmithing experience. Stephen modifies and builds custom gunstocks out of his shop, Midwest Gunstocks, near Herman. Contact Midwest Gunstocks at 402-208-8080.

Greg Preston is a master-class sporting clay shooter and head coach of Blair’s high school trap team. He is a level one National Sporting Clay Association instructor, an NRA shotgun certified instructor and an Orvis-endorsed wing shooting instructor. Greg is also a hunting guide at Pheasant Bonanza.

I asked Stephen and Greg to provide insight on why practice and fit is so important in wing shooting.

Gunsmith: Stephen Reynolds

What motivated you to become a gunsmith?

SR: I got into shooting because I had an interest. Then I started realizing that you can’t give a 10-year-old grandpa’s gun. Grandpa probably weighs 260 pounds and is 6 foot 2 inches – you can’t give his gun to an 80-pound wet kid, and then laugh and take it away because the gun threw him on his butt. I think that’s abuse. If you’re going to get people to go out and shoot, you need to make sure that their tools are





Reynolds helped Wheatley pattern her shotgun before and after he modified her gunstock. The top target shows the before pattern and the middle shows after.

right and the process is right.

Another thing that got me going is if you go to the local gun store – there are guys that do hunt and shoot, but 99 percent of the time, they’re often the same guys who would’ve sold you golf clubs during the summer. It makes no sense to buy a \$2,000-\$3,000 rig from someone who has no clue which end of the gun they’re supposed to hold. That is a problem.

Seventeen percent of the country is also left-handed and is overlooked by the shooting industry. Manufacturers are trying to be better about it, but they really don’t want to make left-handed guns. Honestly, manufacturers don’t want to make super accurate guns. If they made them too accurate, then you wouldn’t buy as many shells.

What mistakes do people make when they purchase a shotgun?

SR: The biggest mistake is fit. If it doesn’t fit, it doesn’t hit. If the gun isn’t looking where you are looking, I don’t care how expensive or new that model is.

I had a guy come in with a \$22,000 Krieghoff, and he said, “I gotta get this figured out. My wife is [angry] at me. I bought it because I thought it looked cool, but I can’t hit [anything].



Julia Plugge of Lincoln pheasant hunting during a Becoming an Outdoors-Woman event at Clear Creek Hunting Lodge in Bartlett.

My Browning shoots better than this gun.”

Second, if you can’t pronounce the name of the gun, there’s a good chance you won’t be able to get parts for it. Make sure you’re not buying a one-run gun.

Also, know whether you’re left- or right-eye dominant. I do believe that if your eye is saying you’re a right-handed shooter, then you should follow through with your right eye, and vice versa.

When purchasing a shotgun, what should a buyer look for?

SR: Look for length of pull when mounting the gun – do

you feel like you’re working for it or do you feel like it comes to you? Are you fiddling your head too much to resettle the gun? Look it over and make sure it’s in sound shape. A new gun can have a cracked stock or a blemished barrel, which can explode, crack or shatter.

Make sure you’re ready for the recoil. It’s rare, but ask if you can test-fire the gun. This is the strangest business. You can buy a car and test drive it, used or new, but to buy this \$1,400 gun, you must purchase it to see if you like it, and then you can’t return it. The industry has that wrong. Every gun that’s sold should be allowed to be test fired.

How can a gunsmith help?

SR: I let the operator tell me what’s bothering them. The gun can’t do any talking. I can’t feel what they feel. Is it hurting you? Does it pop you in the chin? Does it rock your shoulder too much?

Then I look at how the gun fits and where the pad is resting on the shoulder. Before I do anything to the gun, I check to see if the shooter has a flinch by asking them to shoot with empty shells. If there’s a bad flinch, then we have to clean that up before proceeding. There’s no one-size-fits-all diagnosis for every person. You have to bring the patient in and go over it.



To warm up, take advantage of shooting clay targets before a bird hunt. If available, hunting guides will often be more than happy to offer instruction.

Also, kids change their shoes every six months, and the same goes for their gun. Kids grow rapidly, and their body mass and muscles are changing. You need to readjust the gun to the shooter as he or she grows. Do a gun check and gun fitting every six months, especially for youth shooters. For women, we say they gain muscle. For men – well, we get fat.

Any tips for the female shooter?

SR: Every female shooter should look up the biography of Annie Oakley and study it. That lady paved the road for every woman in this world. She destroyed the men in her class and was the best of the best.

In my years of teaching, I've found that women are typically better operators. They can process better. They are more detailed, and they listen. The world's best shot [Frank

E. Butler] went up against Annie Oakley and failed. He ended up marrying her. This is good inspiration for the new female shooter. They have more than hope – they have someone who has already done it.

How does gun fit translate to success in the field?

SR: Stop wasting shells and get your gun fitted. That's my slogan. Always pattern your gun. Then get shooting lessons, which you shouldn't take as a joke.

I've hunted big game and small game – I love all of it. I always teach people that it isn't the thrill of the kill. I don't want them to think about volume. I want them to think it's a one-shot gun. One shot, one kill. It shouldn't take three shots. Make it clean.

Shooting Instructor: Greg Preston

What is the No. 1 problem you see with hunters who don't spend enough time shooting before the season?

GP: Hunters who don't spend time shooting in the off-season are not fluent and comfortable with their shotguns during the hunting season. It's like any other sport – practice is what makes a good wing shooter. Shooting sporting clays, such as trap and skeet, and making sure you learn good shooting fundamentals is one of the best ways to become a good bird shooter.

What are other mistakes?

GP: Another mistake I see in the field is that a lot of people rush the shot. Take that split second to adjust your feet and get to the leading edge of the bird. Take the time to make a good mount with your gun, which will help you get into a position where you will have plenty of swing and follow through to make a good kill shot.

In what ways can practicing at the range translate to more success in the field?

GP: As a hunter, shooting sporting clays is a game that was designed to help and improve the shooting skills of hunters in the field. Sporting clays will help you become smooth and comfortable with a shotgun. It will also help you understand foot positioning when shooting targets at different angles – whether it be a clay target or a live bird. The game will also help a person develop a good mount and a good follow through, which is crucial in bird hunting.

As a shooting coach, what's the first thing you work on with a new student?

GP: With a new student, I always discuss safety first, and then I check to see if they are right- or left-eye dominant. Gun fit is also important. A lot of people try to shoot a shotgun like a rifle with one eye open. It's always best to have both eyes open when shooting a shotgun.



Shooting coach Greg Preston of Omaha instructing student Jager Leichter of Tekamah at a trap range in Blair.

What's the most challenging aspect of shooting at a flying target?

GP: The most challenging aspects are keeping your eye on the target and not the barrel of the shotgun, and seeing how much lead is needed to kill birds moving at different speeds – whether it be a flushing bird such as a pheasant or quail, or shooting at a crossing bird such as a duck or goose.

Is there a certain skill that new students find most difficult to master?

GP: Every shooter is different, but I often find that people don't trust their own hand-eye coordination, which will cause them to look at the barrel of the shotgun instead of focusing on the target.

People also have trouble keeping their head down on the gun, and then finally getting into position and mounting before shooting. By practicing during the off-season, you learn to trust yourself. You need to trust your lead hand. If you're a right-handed shooter, your lead hand is your left hand, and vice versa. Trust that hand and follow with your eye to lock in and pull away from the target to make a clean shot.

How can an instructor help to improve a hunter's technique versus them practicing solo?

GP: A shooting instructor will help you pick out and fix problems that you didn't even know you had. They can help simplify your movements and help you understand what moves to make in different situations. They will also teach you how to stand during hold points and break points of a clay target. Practicing by yourself and not understanding what you're doing wrong or why you are missing will lead you to develop bad habits. And for young shooters, it's best to start with an instructor so that doesn't happen. After a few lessons on clay targets, most people find that when they go hunting, the skills that they learned will automatically happen when a bird flushes.

How does a hunter or shooter get connected with an instructor?

GP: You can find an instructor through the National Sporting Clays Association or the National Skeet Shooting Association websites. Or contact your local shooting range, and they should be able to connect you with someone. If not, contact me at 402-699-2317, and I will be able to provide lessons or help you get connected with an instructor in your area.

Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

Summer’s long days are here, and it’s prime time to enjoy green parks, cool water and nights under the stars. Here are a few other ideas of what to do this month. 📌



HORSEBACK RIDING AT FORT ROBINSON STATE PARK
PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Go horseback riding at Fort Robinson State Park

Throughout the month

Fort Robinson State Park offers 22,000 acres of some of the best horseback riding you will find, with breathtaking scenery and marked trails. Trails on top of the buttes wind through pine trees and open up to some amazing views. Both easy and challenging trails are available; choose what you and your horse are ready for.

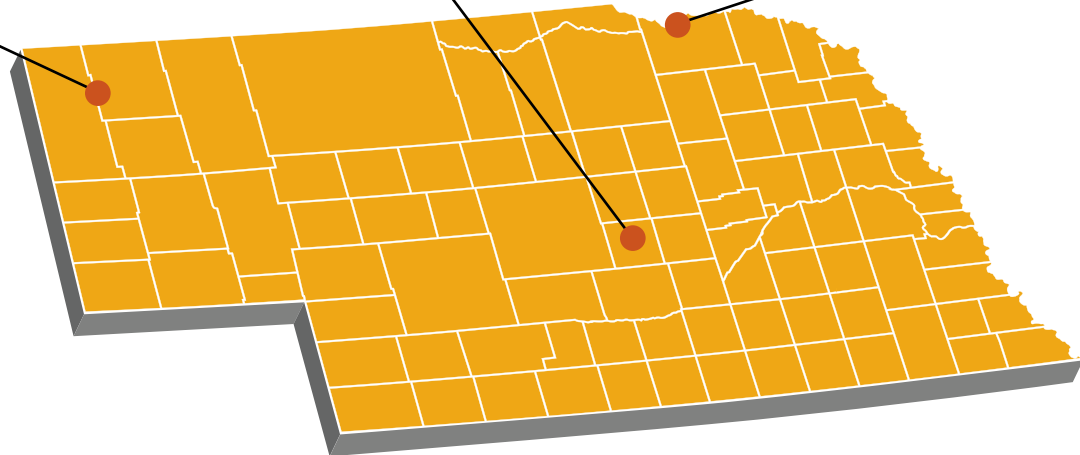


WHITE BASS FISHING
PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

Fish for white bass at Sherman Reservoir

Through October

White bass are relatively easy to catch even when temperatures heat up, making them a popular summer game species. Anglers should have good luck at Sherman Reservoir; according to sampling reports, it’s one of the best white bass fisheries this year. The area also offers boating, picnicking and several miles of hiking trails.



SAILING IS POPULAR ON LEWIS AND CLARK LAKE SRA
PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Go boating at Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area

Throughout the month

Nebraska’s second largest lake, Lewis and Clark Lake is popular for boating. The lake has lots of access points, is typically calm and large enough that you can usually escape the crowds. Boating opportunities don’t stop at Lewis and Clark; the lake also offers access to the Missouri River.

Ready your hunting equipment

Throughout the month | Statewide

While July is a slow month for hunting, you can prepare for a great hunt now by cleaning, repairing, restoring and organizing your hunting gear. You can also replace batteries, waterproof tent blinds, clean firearms, sharpen knives and check your first aid kit.



HUNTING EQUIPMENT
PHOTO BY JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY

Look for monarch caterpillars

Throughout the month | Statewide

Monarchs hatched in late July will make the 1,500-mile journey to Mexico in September and October. View them as caterpillars by searching for milkweed in prairies, meadows, roadside ditches and grasslands. If you don’t see caterpillars, don’t get discouraged; you can still appreciate all the other species that use milkweed – on average there are about seven of them at all times on a milkweed plant.



A MONARCH BUTTERFLY CATERPILLAR ON A COMMON MILKWEED
PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

It's a Wasp!
It's a Mantid!
It's a Fly!

It's a Wasp Mantidfly

Story and photos by Chris Helzer



Do you remember being a kid and drawing beasts that combined the features of several different animals? “Look what I made! It’s a creature with the head of a lion, the wings of a dragon and the body of a zebra!” If a group of entomologists got together to play that game, one of them might come up with something that looks like the wasp mantidfly (*Climacella brunnea*).

“Look what I made! It’s a creature with the head of a lacewing, the front legs of a mantis and the body of a paper wasp!”

The wasp mantidfly is most closely related to lacewings and antlions. It is a predator that uses its praying mantis-style front legs to capture small prey. In addition, it sometimes feeds on liquids exuded by certain plants. Its wasp disguise likely helps the mantidfly avoid being eaten by potential predators, since most of those predators are savvy enough to recognize the problems associated with trying to catch and eat a paper wasp. Wasp mantidflies can be found across Nebraska and most of North America, but they are commonly overlooked because of their successful mimicry.

Female wasp mantidflies lay hundred of eggs in long rows on leaves. When the eggs hatch, the larvae hang out until they spot a passing spider. When that happens, they attempt to attach themselves to the spider, and if successful, act as parasites by feeding on the spider’s blood. However, the larvae are really waiting for the spider to lay eggs, which are the main food source of mantidfly larvae.

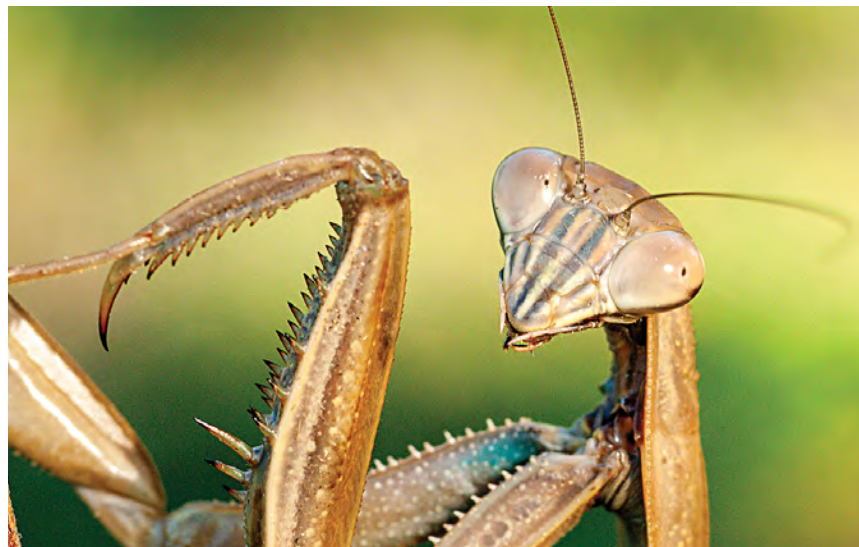
If a mantidfly larva ends up on a male spider, it will wait for an opportunity to hop over to a female – often during mating. The larva then allows itself to get wrapped up in the spider’s silk-covered egg sac, where it can feed on those eggs and tiny spiderlings at its leisure. Once it has eaten enough, the mantidfly larvae creates its own silk covering as protection while it metamorphs into an adult.

Despite being formidable predators, both as adults and larvae, wasp mantidflies are harmless to humans. In fact, their weak flying ability makes them easy to catch and observe, and they’ll readily feed on flies or other small prey you provide for them. The trick, of course, is to find a wasp mantidfly in the first place. Most creatures that look like paper wasps really are paper wasps, after all, and there can be risks to examining each one closely enough to see if it’s faking. **N**

Chris Helzer is a contributing editor to *Nebraskaland*.



Antlion (above), praying mantis (below left) and paper wasp (below right).



Riot in Loup City

By David L. Bristow, *History Nebraska*

Loup City may be one of the last places you'd expect a riot. But the central Nebraska town was not immune to bitter conflict during the Great Depression.

By 1934 Nebraska had struggled for several years under the combined weight of economic depression and prolonged drought. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs were underway, but some people were turning to more radical solutions. The Farm Holiday Association encouraged farmers to withhold their products from the market in the hope of driving up the prices they received. Some farmers even temporarily blockaded highways in Nebraska and Iowa to keep other farmers from selling.

Some of the Farm Holiday leaders had ties to other radical leaders, such as Ella Reeve "Mother" Bloor, who was a national speaker and organizer for the Communist Party U.S.A. The 72-year-old Bloor led farmer strikes in the Midwest and spent time in Nebraska. She and other communists were highly critical of the New Deal, arguing

that it was merely an attempt to save capitalism by blunting its worst effects.

Loup City's largest employer was the local Fairmont Creamery. The company also operated a poultry plant where female workers plucked chickens. Complaining of long hours, low pay and bad working conditions, the "chicken pickers" planned to strike.

Farm Holiday leaders, including Mother Bloor, organized a Loup City rally in support of the strikers. It was set for Flag Day, June 14. Truckloads of farmers from neighboring counties arrived and gathered on the courthouse lawn.

Meanwhile, local business owners were alarmed that "communist agitators" were coming to their community. The local sheriff hastily deputized 40 extra men. They were said to be young men who knew how to fight.



A crowd gathers on the Sherman County Courthouse lawn. History Nebraska RG2543-4-19



Strike supporters hope to give speeches, but the gathering becomes a standoff. History Nebraska RG2543-4-23

Both sides later accused the other of starting the brawl. Somebody yelled "Hey, Rubel!" – circus carny slang to call for help in a fight – and the brawl was on. The men fought with fists and blackjacks for the next 10 minutes or so. Within the crowd a photographer managed to capture some of the chaos without getting his camera smashed.

The fighting ended when somebody shouted, "They have killed Burt Sell!" Sell, of Arcadia, was one of the Farm Holiday men. He wasn't dead but lay unconscious with a broken jaw.

Though it wasn't clear who started the fight, only one side faced legal consequences. Mother Bloor and eight other strike supporters were convicted of inciting a riot. They were

fined \$100 each and sentenced to 30 days in jail.

Today, a state historical marker on the Sherman County Courthouse lawn says that the jail sentences "marked the end of the attempt by the far left to organize farmers and workers in Nebraska." But that wasn't the only thing that undermined the Farm Holiday Movement. Another factor was the popularity of the New Deal. The federal programs designed to provide jobs, housing, Social Security and economic stimulus were controversial, but in 1936, Nebraskans helped re-elect Roosevelt, giving him 57 percent of the state's vote. [N](#)

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



Demonstrators gather outside the creamery building. History Nebraska RG2543-4-17



The fighting begins when somebody shouts, "Hey, Rubel!" History Nebraska RG2543-4-22

Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area

Big Changes at the Big Lake

By Julie Geiser

Nearly everything about Lake McConaughy is big. At 30,000 surface acres, it is Nebraska's largest reservoir, its dam is among the largest of its kind in the world, and its fish grow to trophy proportions, accounting for several state records. Even its nickname, "Big Mac," reflects its size.

Located 8 miles northeast of Ogallala, Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area is known to most Nebraskans and residents of neighboring states as a great place for outdoor recreation. Lake Mac's white sand beaches and clear waters are highly valued by those seeking outdoor fun. The lake draws campers, boaters, wind surfers, swimmers, picnickers, scuba divers, hunters and anglers.

Located on the east side of Kingsley Dam, Lake Ogallala is known locally as "the little lake" and is small, gentle and sedate at 320 acres. This state recreation area is a well-known family destination, renowned for its fishing, birdwatching, camping and kayaking opportunities. Though it lacks the

sandy beaches of its neighbor to the west, its protected shoreline wards off winds, providing visitors peace.

In 2016, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission approved the Lake McConaughy/Lake Ogallala Master Plan, a collaborative effort between the Commission and state and local stakeholders, to develop the parks for the future and protect critical natural resources.

Since its implementation in 2017, Game and Parks has invested more than \$4 million in repairs and improvements to the parks, upgrading campground utilities, restrooms, boat docks, angler access areas, and park entrance stations, and improving accessibility.

The Commission and local stakeholders will continue to make significant investments in infrastructure and services. By expanding recreational opportunities and providing safe, family-friendly outdoor experiences, our hope is to bring this area into the future for the next generation of park users. [N](#)



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Sailboats and campers on the beach at Lake McConaughy State Recreation Area.



TOP LEFT: Jamie Vasa, an Ogallala native, holds a walleye caught at Lake McConaughy SRA in Keith County.

TOP RIGHT: Lake visitors take advantage of bank fishing in pursuit of wipers, walleye and catfish at Lake McConaughy SRA.

BOTTOM RIGHT: An aerial photo shows campers lining the beach in the Arthur Bay Area at Lake McConaughy SRA.

BOTTOM LEFT: One of the big draws to Lake McConaughy is recreational activities on the water; people come from all over Nebraska to boat, tube, fish and enjoy family fun at the big lake.



PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER



Infrastructure Upgrades

Lake McConaughy

- Little Thunder, Lone Eagle and Cedar View campgrounds have been upgraded with new utilities, restrooms, tables, grills and more than 400 new trees. Financial assistance from the Keith County Visitor's Committee made many of these projects possible.
- Little Thunder has 8 full-service sites with electricity, water and sewage, and 34 sites with newly upgraded 50-amp electrical hookups and a new vault latrine.
- Lone Eagle has 84 full-service campsites with electrical, water and sewer hookups and a new vault latrine.
- Cedar View now features 85 modern sites with 50-amp electrical and water hookups, along with 13 basic campsites. A new shower and restroom will be installed in the near future.
- New shower facilities have been installed at Martin Bay with more planned in the near future. A wastewater treatment facility was installed at Martin Bay in 2019 to help facilitate increased visitation and future expansion.
- Contracted services, including refuse removal and portable restrooms, have been expanded to improve the quality of beach users' experience.
- Improvements have been made for beach access along Shoreline Road. Walk-in, day-use areas with new parking lots at multiple locations will accommodate increased traffic. Improvements to the road's 18 beach access points will better facilitate beach-bound vehicles.
- A new gate house was installed at Cedar View in an effort to help visitors with park questions and to collect required fees to the area, along with expanded operating hours at park gate houses.

Lake Ogallala

- The East Campground at Lake Ogallala has been upgraded with new utilities and amenities, with financial assistance from the Keith County Visitor's Committee, including 82 50-amp electrical pedestals, a new shower facility and vault latrine.
- Angler access improvements have been made in the northwest corner of the reservoir, which features an accessible peninsula along with a 160-foot floating fishing bridge.
- New boat docks were installed on the west side of Lake Ogallala; the northern dock features an accessible kayak and canoe launch – the first of its kind in western Nebraska.
- A new park gate house was installed in an effort to help visitors with park questions and to collect required fees to the area, along with expanded operating hours at all park gate houses.



A new boat dock was installed at Lake Ogallala on the west side, which features an accessible kayak and canoe launch, the first of its kind in western Nebraska.



Danielle, left, and her sister, Trista Lamberty, of Colorado proudly display a stringer of fish their family caught at Lake Ogallala.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

The sheer size of Lake McConaughy allows boats of all sizes to navigate its waters for fishing and recreation.

Future Development

Additional improvements will include an improved boat ramp with new amenities at Martin Bay, enhancements to an existing ramp at Cedar View, new campgrounds, parking areas, gate house installations, showers, restrooms and more.



A hike and bike trail starts in the campground at Lake Ogallala and leads park visitors on a 1.8 mile, one-way trip to the diversion dam.



A 160-foot floating bridge connects a peninsula to the northwest shore of Lake Ogallala. A portion of the funds for this angler access bridge was provided by the Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District.

Those Fiery Redheads

Beauty or beast, this woodpecker has an eye-catching appearance

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JUSTIN HAAG

Aerial proficiency to swoop and snatch prey from the sky. Symmetrically arranged talons for clinging to vertical surfaces and a chiseled beak that hammers hardwood surfaces at 1,000 times the force of gravity. A long barbed tongue, three times as long as that self-sharpening dagger-like bill, for retrieving victims from deep within a crevice. All that, and a fiery red head.

If readers were to consider that description alone, they might assume it applies to a mythical monster dreamed up by a Hollywood scriptwriter. Instead, it is an illustration of the red-headed woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*), the handsome bird affectionately referred to as the “flying checkerboard” that can be found throughout Nebraska.

With its stunning red, white and black appearance, the red-headed woodpecker has aptly assumed the role of a “spark bird” for many birdwatchers. That is, a species that sparks a person’s interest in nature. After all, the bird has a range throughout the continental United States east of the Rocky Mountains, and the bright plumage on its 9-inch body can often draw attention from vehicles as it clings to the sides of power poles and fence posts.

Similar to all woodpeckers, redheads are attracted to “snags,” the dead still-standing

trees that not only provide potential for digging a nesting cavity, but also house nutritious insects on and beneath the wood’s surface and provide perches.

With fossils of the red-headed woodpecker dating back 2 million years, the species has survived many challenges. The overall population of red-headed woodpeckers has sharply declined in recent years because of habitat loss and changes to the birds’ food supply, however. A number of human-related actions have been harmful to populations, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology reports the species has faced a cumulative decline of 70 percent since 1966. It has occasionally been placed on conservation watch lists and given “near threatened” status.

Regardless, unlike many other regions of North America, data shows the species is doing well in Nebraska, especially the western part of the state.

In nature’s kingdom, one species’ struggle can serve as another one’s boon. Maladies that kill off trees, such as Dutch elm disease and chestnut blight, have helped woodpecker populations thrive in those areas. After large catastrophic wildfires in the Pine Ridge of northwestern Nebraska, the most recent of which was 2012, red-headed woodpeckers have become a familiar sight among the blackened snags that

A red-headed woodpecker brings a dose of color to a burned stand of ponderosa pine trees in northwestern Nebraska.



A red-headed woodpecker chick awaits a food delivery from one of its parents. Both adult males and females have a role in rearing young.



A red-headed woodpecker uses zygodactyl toes to cling to a fence post. The arrangement of two toes forward, two toes back, helps them grip sheer surfaces.



With its bold, bright plumage, the “flying checkerboard” is considered a “spark bird” – one that sparks an interest in nature.



A juvenile red-headed woodpecker, with a head of brown, packs an insect into a crevice of a fence post in early August. Redheads are one of four woodpecker species known to store food.

remain – much like the proverbial blooming rose in a bed of sand.

Joel Jorgensen, nongame bird program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, said red-headed woodpeckers are drawn to such places and fires have the potential to increase local populations, depending on the severity. Research shows that fires not only create more snags, but also can create more open forest stands for flycatching. As long as fires do not destroy active nest cavities, they can be beneficial.

“Dense woodlands are less desirable and host lower densities of birds,” Jorgensen said. “So, a good fire can produce a lot of primo red-headed woodpecker habitat, but if it burns everything and there are no snags, there may be little or no habitat left.”

Chaley Jensen of Scottsbluff, Nebraska’s education coordinator for the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, said no red-headed woodpeckers were captured in nets in the first seven years of the conservancy’s banding station at Chadron

State Park. However, one was caught two years after fire burned through the park, and the station has captured and banded seven others since. Perhaps the captures were just coincidence, but those birds surely have used the burned trees of the area.

With an increasing number of trees from the 2012 fires decaying and falling to the ground, any boom brought by that event may be on the downward slide. Regardless, there is still a lot of forest remaining in the Pine Ridge, and undoubtedly more wildfires to come – although land managers are working to make them much less severe. Research shows that prescribed burning can also have positive effects for woodpeckers and many other species.

Adult males and females, which both help rear their young, have the same conspicuous appearance, but chicks have gray-brown plumage that serves as camouflage as they stick their heads from the holes in dead trees waiting for parents to deliver food.

While primarily insectivores, the redheads are the most

omnivorous of woodpeckers, with a diet that changes throughout the year. It is one of four woodpeckers known to store food and the only one known to cover stored food with wood or bark. It often packs insects in crevices, sometimes alive, to be eaten later.

Limiting use of insecticides and leaving dead trees standing are among the best ways to help the species. As with other woodpeckers, suet is the best attractant for feeding stations. Nut-bearing trees attract them in winter, but most Nebraskans are not apt to see the species then.

The red-headed woodpecker’s breeding range extends throughout Nebraska, but only the southeastern corner of the state is identified as wintering range. Jorgensen said Indian Cave State Park in the state’s southeastern corner provides birdwatchers the best bet for seeing one on public land in colder months, but “abundance that time of year is variable and linked to the supply of acorns.”

Many cavity-nesting birds and mammals that do not create their own holes benefit from past work of the woodpeckers.

As with many of those cavity-nesters, nonnative European starlings have been detrimental to populations of red-headed woodpeckers by stealing nest sites.

Yet, in addition to insects, there are members of the woodland community who surely see the red-headed woodpecker not for its beauty, but rather as a feared menace. They are ferocious defenders of their territory and have a reputation for terrorizing nests of other birds within it, going as far as puncturing or ejecting eggs.

In early colonial America, when small cornfields and orchards were interspersed among woodlands, the woodpecker was viewed as an agricultural pest and a two-pence bounty was paid for each red head. With today’s large fields and monoculture, damages are considered much less and the bird has a more positive reputation.

The “flying checkerboard” may have a checkered history and tough demeanor, but most surely agree that these birds have a way of brightening our landscapes and certainly bring a splash of color to roadsides and dead trees. 🌲

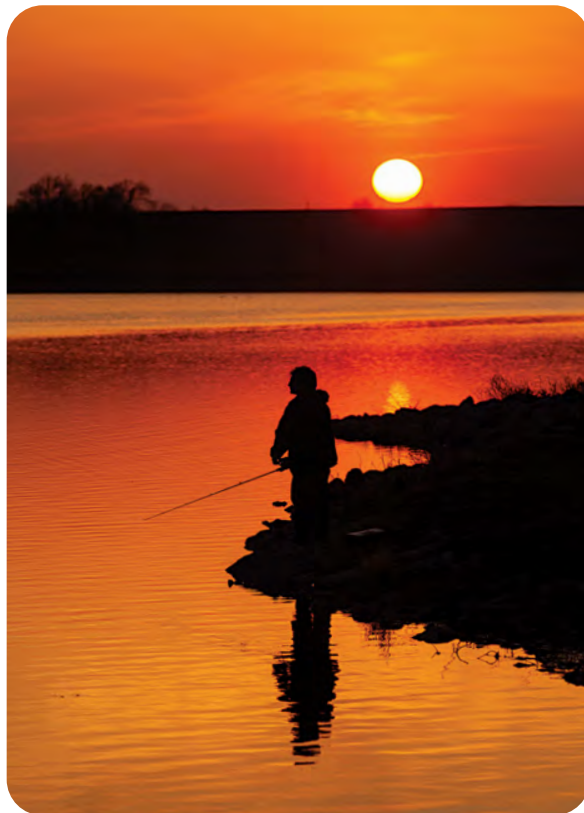
Techniques for July Bass

Story and photos by Jeff Kurrus

July is the perfect time to fish for largemouth bass. Because of the heat, boat traffic on non-ski lakes is often minimal and your chance to fish your favorite spots, especially in the middle of the day, increases as the temperatures do. Whether new to dog-day fishing or a sweaty, seasoned veteran, try a few of these techniques to increase your summertime success.

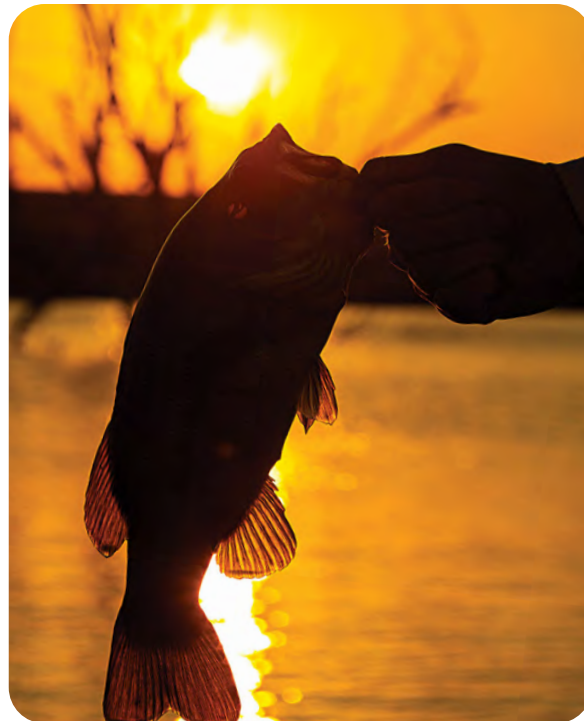
Tip 1: Night

"The night is where it's at," a longtime friend always told me before I finally started to listen. He was right. The sheer mystery of night fishing, especially with a partner, makes it that much more enjoyable. Fish weedless lures on unfamiliar waters and open up your entire tacklebox at places you've fished before. Usually, fish don't hold as tight to cover as they do during the daylight, so you might be surprised what you find in the open water – especially if there is underwater vegetation.



Tip 2: Sleep In

For the hundreds, if not thousands, of times I've been on the water, I can count on one hand the number of sunrise bites that blew me away. Quite often, I feel as if I'm catching the same fish I would have caught had I slept for an extra two hours. However, there have been countless summer sunsets when the fishing heated up to a frenzy. While topwater options are always the norm in the late afternoon, crankbaits and spinnerbaits can be especially productive when fish aren't hitting on top as fast as you want.



Tip 3: Plastic Worm

There are so many prey options in the water in July. From insects and frogs to crayfish and minnows, there is plenty to eat. But there's nothing that seems to get fish going more than an old standard – the Texas-rigged plastic worm. Whether fished slow and weightless to swimming it through cattails and bulrushes, this weedless option has worked for decades, and will continue to do so. Red and black has been a family favorite for years at lakes across Nebraska and the rest of the country.



Tip 4: Constantly Adjust

Fishing in July is so much fun because the spawn is over, autumn seems like a million days away, and you can pattern fish on a daily basis – as long as you're willing to adjust. Pay attention to where you catch each fish, where you don't, and at what depth. Last year while fishing in the Sandhills, my partner and I blitzed largemouth bass above open water submerged vegetation on Day 1, but couldn't find a fish in that same type of water Day 2. On that day, they couldn't have been in thicker bulrushes. Same miserably hot weather conditions, different fish locations.



Tip 5: Midday Topwater

Topwater isn't restricted for twilight times. While bass sometimes bury themselves in thick cover in the heat of the day, they are still willing to violently attack nearby prey if given the opportunity. Weedless creature baits, frogs and the like will provide all the action you need once you convince yourself that they'll hit on top in the middle of the day. Because they will.

Photo Captions:

Tip 1: Sunset can be the start of a July fishing trip, not the end.

Tip 2: This was the only bass caught at Prairie Queen Lake near sunrise this day. From 9 a.m. to noon, we caught 25 more. We should have slept in.

Tip 3: When all else fails, go to the tried and true Texas-rigged worm.

Tip 4: I watched Marty Hughes of Lincoln fish a number of habitats at Lake Wanahoo before jigging near the flooded timber and catching this big bass.

Tip 5: This Pibel Lake lunker hit near high noon on a topwater frog imitation, destroying the entire bait in the process.



Platte River State Park Bike Trails

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

Paul Sonksen of Lincoln and others take a log ride across a ravine on the new mountain bike trails at Platte River State Park.

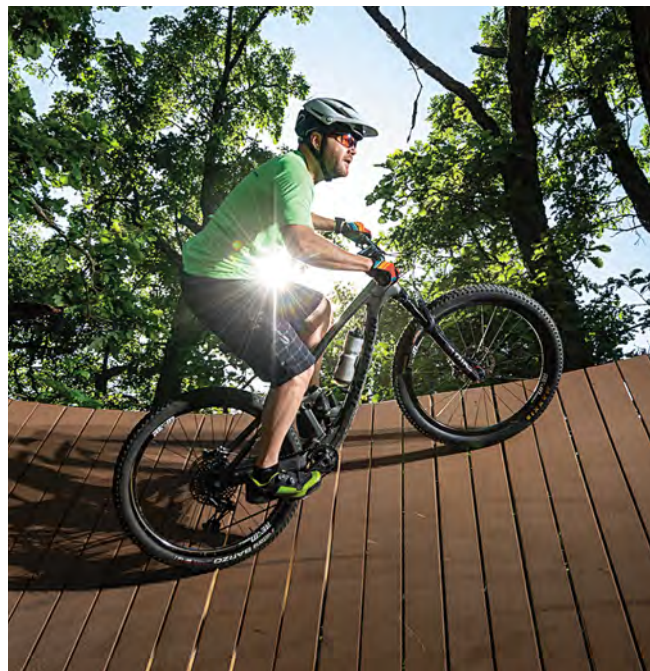


Mountain bikers have been riding the trails carved into the bluffs at Platte River State Park for decades, its hills and rocks providing a challenge many yearn for, with the scenery providing the icing on the cake. Now they have a new set of singletrack trails loaded with unique features all for themselves as part of an addition to the park that could become a mountain bike destination for riders from across the country.

Along with 4.4 miles of new trails, mostly tailored to intermediate and advanced riders, are features that include stair-steps, drop-offs, a boardwalk, log rides, curved wall rides, numerous switchbacks, a launch pad, flat ramps, low-water crossings and table top ramps. A new access road on 358th Street, a mile east of the park's main entrance, leads to a new parking lot and trailhead, which is equipped with a restroom and a repair station. A skills track near the trailhead will help riders test their abilities before heading out into the hills.

The new trails grew from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Outdoor Venture Parks, an innovative public-private partnership, on a 46-acre addition to the east side of the park, which now covers 510 acres. The addition was completed in 2012 with the help of the Nebraska Game and Parks Foundation. Construction of the trails began in the fall of 2018 and, other than adding a few signs and two scenic overlooks, is mostly complete.

Eighty percent of the project's \$700,000 cost will be reimbursed by the Recreational Trails Program, a Federal Highway Administration program that dedicates a portion of fuel excise tax paid by off-road recreational vehicles for trail development. A significant portion of the remainder of the cost was covered by a donation by Lee Stuart of Lincoln



Paul Hunter of Omaha tackles one of three curved wall rides on the new trails.



Trisha Kramer of Lincoln rides around an old oak tree that some speculate may have been bent as a sapling by Native Americans to mark a trail.

through the Lee and Debby Stuart Family Foundation, which is funded by Lee's grandfather, James Stuart.

The trails were designed and built by a contractor and laid out to preserve the park's terrain. Troy Nelson, an engineer with the Commission, attended the International Mountain Bike Association's Trail Lab in Bentonville, Arkansas, to learn more about sustainable trail design, with the goal of making the trails more resistant to erosion caused by weather and general use. Nelson was integral to construction, helping to select enjoyable and safe trail sites for users. Some features were moved, ensuring riders could see the obstacles in time to decide if they wanted to go over or around them, and some trails were rerouted to make uphill sections easier to ride.

Some trails in the area, including the popular Stone Creek Trail, predate the park, having been part of the youth camps that were there prior to the Commission acquiring the area and opening the park in 1982. Mountain bikers likely found their way to the trails soon after the heavy-duty, wide-tire bikes, born in California in 1978, hit the production lines of

existing manufacturers and startups in the 1980s.

Paul Sonksen of Lincoln has been riding the park's trails for more than 25 years. When he started, he didn't know about the trails across Decker Creek on the east side of the park.

"There were a bunch of guys I didn't even know that were maintaining the trails and building more," he said. "I was riding the old trails over by the cabins in the main park. Then one of the guys in the shop said, 'Have you ridden east?' They called it the race route. He took me out and there were all of these trails in here."

About the time Sonksen started riding in the park, trails advocacy group Trails Have Our Respect was formed – a local chapter of IMBA. THOR members volunteer their time and grab shovels, hoes, trimmers, chainsaws and any other tool they might need to build and maintain trails in 11 locations in and around Lincoln, Bellevue, Fremont, Lincoln and Omaha, and Council Bluffs, Iowa. Sonksen is trail leader at Platte River State Park for the group, which has helped create miles of new trails and helps park staff with trail maintenance.

"They definitely take pride in helping maintain those singletrack mountain bike trails," said Adam Johns, park superintendent, adding that without the help of the group, "We probably wouldn't have a park full of trails."

The trails are used heavily, with only mud and deep snow keeping riders at bay. As the trails became more popular with mountain bikers, however, conflicts arose, especially with the horse trail rides conducted during the summer months. To access the trails on the park's east side, riders needed to use the same access road along Decker Creek, and the Owen Bridge across it, as the horses did. "We'd meet the horses on the trails and, for some reason, horses are scared of the bikes," Sonksen said. So from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day Weekend, trails were closed to bikers from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Eliminating those trail conflicts was one of the driving forces behind the project and one of the reasons Lee Stuart, who is also involved in the Game and Parks Foundation, helped fund it through his family's foundation. Stuart grew up in California in the same area where mountain bikes



Chris Spargen of Louisville catches air off the launch pad.



Scott Bigelow of Lincoln takes a corner on the new trails.

originated. He bought his first mountain bike when he came to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1987, and it has been one of his top outdoor pursuits ever since. He didn't discover the trails at Platte River State Park, however, until after he returned to the state in 1997. "I'm a mountain biker, but I live in Nebraska and guess what: There aren't any mountains around," Stuart said. "But we've got some amazing mountain biking here, including at Platte River State Park."

Not being able to ride those trails during the day for much of the spring and summer, however, was far from ideal for Stuart and others who ride the trails. "It made it hard for guys like me to get out on the weekend," Stuart said.

With the expansion, the trails used for horse rides are now for horses only, and the older trails will continue to be shared by hikers and bikers. But the trails on the new addition are for mountain bikes only. Stuart said he's happy he was able to play a small part in resolving that conflict and is glad more people can get out on the trails and use the parks as a result.

When Sonksen and other THOR members heard Game and Parks was building new trails, access and parking at the park, "We were all for it," he said. "Any added mileage is a plus."

Sonksen and others in the group weighed in on features and design, and continue to do so, suggesting changes



Members of Trails Have Our Respect relax in the new parking lot following their weekly ride.

where needed. "The features are great," he said. "It will be interesting. We're riding it, and when you ride a trail for a while, you find the line, so it's going to need some altering."

Word is getting out on the addition: The new parking lot is sometimes full. "Hopefully it will put us on the national mountain bike map," said Johns. "We hope it becomes a mountain bike destination, where somebody from Texas is going to stop on their mountain bike trail tour and want to spend the night and ride the trails and visit our stores and help with our local economy."

"It's getting there," said Sonksen, noting that IMBA standards require 20 miles of trails to be a true destination. The park now sits at 17.5 miles. "For Nebraska, it's a lot of miles, and a lot of elevation. It's actually pretty good."

Good enough that his friends from Colorado following his rides on a fitness app are impressed to see he can get 1,500 to 2,000 feet of elevation change on a 12-mile ride. "You get a workout here, that's for sure."

Stuart enjoys showing off the trails as well. "I take pictures and videos and send them to my friends that I grew up with in California and say: 'Hey, this is what you think of when you think of Nebraska, you think of cornfields. But look what we've got!'" 📸

The Perfect Tacklebox

Story and photo by Jeff Kurrus

"Dad, why do you have so many empty tackle boxes?" my 8-year-old son, Eli, asked me the other day while cleaning out the shed.

"Because I haven't found the perfect one for me yet," I responded, "and I've been looking for 35 years."

It started with a double-sided Plano, I told him, that I would frequently forget to clasp before overturning a pile of crankbaits into the bottom of my family's childhood johnboat.

To combat this issue, I bought a gray over-and-under unit with lawn-mowing money that resulted in the same issue as the box before – lures in the bottom of the boat when I got in a hurry and opened the box before clasping the top trays in place. Yet this box offered one unique difference from my first – it had a tinted plastic top that looked really cool.

Following this box, I adopted a multi-tray box that would amaze family and fellow anglers when I opened it up and revealed a bevy of crankbaits, spinnerbaits and topwater lures. Very few anglers are immune to the pause that follows the opening of one of these boxes, their eyes looking for both the familiar and exotic. As an aspiring fishermen and seeker of attention, it was right up my alley.

Until its plastic hinges buckled under the weight of a teenager's graceful touch.

Next came a series of satchel-style, Indiana Jones-type totes with plastic trays where I could not only strategically categorize my tackle so my friends could awe in amazement, but they could also marvel at the sheer volume of lure options I had for fish.



This style became my long-time go-to for out-of-town trips to the Sandhills and beyond, taking up way too much room in the johnboat and limiting any chance I had for bringing a lunch along on my trips.

But this particular style did bring forth the advent of the plastic tray in my life – a 9-by-14 inch container that is

always with me when I fish.

"Dad, that's all you're carrying?" Eli asked when he saw this for the first time, unimpressed by the small collection of spinnerbaits, crankbaits and soft plastics I was planning to bring to the lake.

"That's all I need," I said. "If I can't catch 'em on what's in

here, then it's time to go and do something else."

He just shrugged, loaded up his six tackle boxes into the boat and offered me a faint look of disgust as we climbed into the truck.

I had never seen that look before, but I'm pretty sure my dad did when I was growing up. 

NEBRASKA WEATHER, WHETHER OR NOT

By Roger Welsch

A couple days ago a local television weather anchor warned us of the potential for a hail storm that evening and in his grim warning – unrealized, of course – he described our impending doom with descriptions of potential hail the size of peas, 50-cent pieces and tennis balls. This would be like advertising steaks on a menu not as a 6-ounce, 10-ounce and 16-ounce, but as “the size of a shoe heel, an IHOP pancake and T-ball home plate.” We need some standardization here, folks, or at least stick with one gauge when forecasting hail ... maybe nothing but coins, or nothing but fruit and vegetables, or even dog ears – hail the size of Chihuahua ears, Toy Boston Bull Terrier ears, Doberman ears and beagle ears.

I’ve heard descriptions of snow as “the size of BB shot” but is that double ought or No. 4 shot? Snowflakes “as big as pillow cases.” Ice crystals, pogonips (look it up if you don’t believe me!), powder and “crud.” This is not helpful. All too often we wind up getting “2.5 inches of 30 percent chance of snow” or “4-foot drifts of likely flurries.” And what of rain drops? Sprinkles? Toad chokers? One-pint, two-pint, three-pint drops? When does fog transition into mist? Mist to drizzle? What is the standard gauge for rain? Do meteorologists stand out in storms and watch rain drops pass through a template for sizing like the one I use to size bolts? And where can I get one of these tools?

Equally bewildering are temperatures, which this inquiring mind would think to be the most measurable of weather entities. But no, we have Fahrenheit, Celsius and Kelvin. (Kelvin ... I can only guess that Hobbes has his own scale, too.) Even sticking with Herr Fahrenheit’s gauging we get “92 degrees and mild” and “24 degrees and mild.” And just what the heck does “seasonal” mean in Nebraska, where it has snowed every month but July. As if that were not enough confusion, in the summer, we have a “heat index” to show us how miserable we really should feel, and then in the winter wind-chill index to do the same the other way. Why can’t at least one forecaster give us summer wind chill and winter heat index so we feel better instead of worse?

Don’t get me started on wind. I once put up a wind vane here. A neighbor looked at it, shook his head, and said, “That’ll never work in Nebraska, Rog. It only points in one direction at a time!”

Compounding all these unnecessarily imposed variations, we live in Nebraska. I don’t know about you, but Nebraska weather provides this born, grown and stayed Bug Eater enough variety. But no. It’s not enough to put Continental Climate – as satisfying as a “continental breakfast” – on our plates. Every evening we are also dished up “averages,” “typical” and “normal.” Hahahahahahaha! “Average!” In Nebraska! If there ain’t no crying in baseball there is most assuredly no “average” in Nebraska. It’s merely another device used to make the extremes all the more so. What’s normal in Nebraska is extremes. The only thing “average” is what we don’t expect. A Nebraska farmer was once asked how the corn was doing over his way. He provided the perfect Nebraska answer: “Not as good as expected but then no one thought it would be.”

A large proportion of my bibliography consists of books and articles about tall tales. That speaks not only to my personal tastes in humor but to what I believe to be a specialty of the region. I have called it “reverse bragging,” because Nebraskans seem actually quite delighted when weather deals out its worst. “Hot enough for you?” “That was some wind last night, wasn’t it?” “So dry, a catfish came up to our sprinkler to get a drink!” Always said with a grin. I have long suggested that our state motto should be “It could be worse.”

So, OK, I’m going to back my way out of this rant and instead go with the flow. My Lakota name designates me as a Contrary, because the wise Oglala who dubbed me commented that I “laugh at things other people take seriously and take seriously what other people laugh at.” And now that I think about it, one of my favorite exhibits at the National Liars Hall of Fame, once located here in Dannebrog, but now driven out of business by professionals and specialists in mendacity, was a box of golf balls the size of hailstones.

Yeah, that’s it. Let’s leave weather where it is and start changing everything else to fit. Golf balls the size of hailstones. “Why, that beagle’s ears are as big as the snowflakes that fell at my place last January 15th!”

Roger Welsch is an author, humorist, folklorist and a former essayist for CBS News Sunday Morning. He has been contributing to Nebraskaland Magazine since 1977.



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ASIAN GIANT HORNET

By Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist
Nebraska Department of Agriculture

In December 2019, two reports of Asian giant hornet (*Vespa mandarinia*) were confirmed near Blaine, Washington. These are the first confirmations of this invasive pest in the United States. Due to these finds, the Washington State Department of Agriculture will be conducting an extensive survey for AGH in 2020. Any nests found will be eradicated.

Asian giant hornets, also called murder hornets, are large insects, approximately 1.5-2 inches long. Their head is large and yellow to orange. They have black eyes, a dark thorax and a black abdomen with yellow/orange stripes.

The AGH nests primarily on the ground and can form large colonies. AGH are predaceous, feeding on honey bees and other insects. When feeding in groups, AGH can destroy an entire honey bee hive in a very short time.

There is no evidence of AGH anywhere in the U.S. outside of Washington. However, there are other large, brightly colored wasps and hornets that could be confused for AGH. The cicada killer (*Sphecius spp.*) and horntails (*Tremex spp.*) are two large insects found in Nebraska that could be mistaken for AGH.

The cicada killers are large, solitary, ground nesting wasps.



They commonly nest in loose soil around homes and gardens, and even flower pots, and are a common sight in the summer.

Cicada killers are 1.2-2 inches long, with a smaller head than AGH. Their head and thorax are yellow to orange, and their abdominal bands are yellow.

Tremex, or horntails, are also large, 1-1.5 inches long, with yellow/orange and black markings. These are wood borers and can easily be distinguished from the AGH by their lack of the typical “wasp waist” between their thorax and abdomen.

If you suspect you have found AGH in Nebraska, take a picture and report the insect to the Nebraska Department of Agriculture at agr.plant@nebraska.gov.



JESSICA LOUQUE, SMITHERS
VISICENT, BUGWOOD.ORG

WHITNEY CRANSHAW,
COLORADO STATE
UNIVERSITY, BUGWOOD.ORG

BECOMING A BIRDER – A LIFELONG HOBBY

By Julie Geiser

Birding is a hobby enjoyed by many across the world. If you enjoy the outdoors, the pursuit of adventure and science, along with quiet times in the woods, then birding might be for you. Birding can become a lifetime pursuit. It is appropriate for all ages, offering a pastime that will keep you outside and discovering for years to come.

When I first started birding I didn’t have a clue about how to get started. I began by looking for birds that I was familiar with already, which were waterfowl. I started studying and identifying them, and then I moved on to shore birds that come through Nebraska in the spring. Slowly, I added to my knowledge of birds with the help of field guides. A few good books are *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, *Birds of Nebraska Field Guide* and *Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America*.

The internet has made birding a lot easier compared to when I first started. There are many apps available for download that can help you identify birds from the field; most of these apps help identify birds by region, size, color, sound, photos and more. Some good apps include Audubon, Merlin, Ibird Pro, Sibley, Peterson, eBird and Chirp O Magic, and many of which are free.

Once you’ve obtained a few field guides and apps, you’ll

need an inexpensive pair of binoculars. If later you decide to delve deeper into birding, you may want to purchase better binoculars and/or a camera to showcase the beauty of the birds you find.

We are fortunate to have many places to find birds; you’ll find various species of birds in unique landscapes across Nebraska, including city parks, state parks, recreation areas, wildlife management areas and nature centers. There is also a Nebraska birding trails network at nebraskabirdingtrails.com that offers many resources for birders, such as ecological regions to go birding, maps and birding links.

Start birding slowly. It’s easy to get overwhelmed. Putting up a bird feeder and watering area in your yard will help get you started. Find out what birds are in your area during different times of the year by using location maps in field guides and apps, then set out and see what you can find. Take a friend with you or someone with birding knowledge to make the experience more fun. Once you get going, you’ll find that birding will become an activity that will constantly pull you back outside to find more. You’ll learn to have a better appreciation for birds.

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To report potential emerald ash borer, contact the Nebraska Department of Agriculture at 402-471-2351.

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A group of children birding at the Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo.

RECYCLING SPENT SHELLS

By Jarrod Spilger

Following a really good dove, duck or goose shoot, the ground around your stand or blind will literally be littered with numerous spent shotgun shells. Obviously, these empty hulls need to be picked up, both to prevent litter and to be respectful to the landowner, but what do you do with them afterward?

Unless you reload, they probably just end up in the trash, but that seems like such a waste. Here are a few ways to put those discarded hulls to good use.



Mojo Pick Stick

Post-hunt clean-up of empty shotgun shells can take time, but it's worth it because it keeps the landowner happy, polices the area, and even prevents other hunters from knowing where your hot shooting spots are.

Mojo's magnetic Pick Stick makes shell pick-up quick and easy. Simply extend the magnetic pole and it'll do the rest, attracting as many as 25 empties at a time. Then rake the shells off the stick into a bag or bucket. It beats bending down to grab each shell and is especially useful for retrieving empties out of water.

Best of all, the Pick Stick is just as handy on the trap range as it is in the dove field or duck blind. Visit mojooutdoors.com for more details.



Shell Flags

I've recently been making Shell Flags for both myself and my hunting partners. Admittedly, this idea was inspired by the large shotgun shell flag hanging on the clubhouse wall at Crooked Creek Gun Club south of Aurora. I merely tweaked the concept a bit to fit my space constraints.

The first needed supplies are 12-gauge shotgun shells in the colors red, white and blue. Federal's Top Gun Patriot Target Load is a great choice since each box includes a mixture of shells in these three colors. Otherwise, you'll have to do some mixing and matching yourself. Gamebore and Rio both offer 12-gauge hulls in blue, while Federal Gold Medal Grand shells come in white. An excellent source of red shells is Winchester's USA Game and Target load. Each shell is stamped with "USA," giving them a distinctively more patriotic feel than plain red hulls.

I use an 8-by-10 shadow box to frame my Shell Flag because that's what was available locally at Hobby Lobby. Larger shadow boxes could also be used or you could even make your own custom-sized frame if so skilled. The downside to my 8-by-10 box is that only nine red and white stripes fit inside it, and the flag has a somewhat square rather than rectangular shape. The upside is that the compact flag will fit nicely on virtually any wall. My personal Shell Flag occupies a patriotic space on my garage wall next to posters of ducks and quail.

To make the flag, arrange the blue hulls in the top left corner of the frame, and then alternate rows of red and white shells to create the stripes. As indicated, the size of the frame will determine how many stripes the flag has. Use Gorilla Glue to ensure the shells stay in place. This last item is important, because I've used other glues only to have sections of the shells fall out. Save yourself some time and aggravation by using Gorilla Glue to begin with.

Shell Santa

Several years ago, I saved all my spent shotgun shells for a coworker who wanted them for a "project" she was working on. By the end of the season, I'd given her bucketfuls of shells, and she begged me not to give her any more!

Her project was making Shell Santa Christmas tree ornaments, and she gave me one for my contribution of raw materials. It adorns my Christmas tree each year. On the shell, she painted a face with a white beard and topped it off with a Santa hat made of folded-over festive fabric with a jingle on the end and white pipe cleaner for the "fur" trim. A simple piece of wire inserted into two holes near the top of the hull allows the ornament to be hung from a tree branch.

Obviously, red hulls are more traditional, but you could certainly use other colors to give your Santa Shell a unique look.



Christmas Tree Lights

Another holiday use for discarded empties are shotgun shell Christmas tree lights. For this project, gauge doesn't matter and all colors of shells are welcome – red, green, yellow, blue, purple, white, whatever – the more colors the better.

My dad made me a string of shotgun shell lights a few years ago. First, he bought a strand of simple white lights. Next, he punched out the primer from the base of each shell to provide ventilation and dissipation of heat. Then, he placed a shell over each white light, folding the crimp back together to hold it in place.

The result is a festive strand of multi-colored lights that gives the Christmas tree a folksy flair.

These are only three examples of repurposing empty shotgun shells. By using your creativity and imagination, you can probably think of more ways to turn what otherwise would be trash into outdoor-themed art.



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BACKYARD PHOTOGRAPHY

By Gerry Steinauer

When the photography itch hits, I sometimes head to picturesque Nebraska landscapes; my favorites include the Niobrara River valley, the Wildcat Hills and Indian Cave State Park. Sometimes, however, I fulfill my cravings by staying close to home and taking photos in my own backyard. In



this period of limited travel, it has been an outlet for fun and creativity.

My methods are simple. In early morning and evening, when the sunlight is warm and ideal for photos, I wander about the yard with camera in hand searching for subjects. Occasionally, I will bike to a nearby park. I shoot mainly close-ups using a 105mm macro lens with a tripod or handheld with the lens vibration reduction on.

My favorite haunt is our prairie garden. With about 40 species of native wildflowers and grasses, it is ideal for photographing flowers, seedpods, leaf patterns and the many insects that the plants attract. Our blooming fruit trees – we have 14 crowded into our yard – and ornamentals, especially



lobelias and sedums, also attract an array of bees, bumble bees, butterflies and other pollinators that I cannot identify. Other backyard wildlife I have photographed include a Woodhouse’s toad, a tree frog and even a rare albino squirrel. If I had a telephoto lens, I would also pursue birds. Most enticing are the colorful spring passerines that flit about our trees and bushes and the turkey vultures that roost and wood ducks that nest in the neighbors’ maple trees.

Being restricted to our yard has forced me to get creative. My photo subjects have included lichens growing on tree bark, sap dripping from trees, garden crops and frost patterns. The last two wet summers our lawn and woodpile have been flush with another photo subject – mushrooms. Lucky for me, our chemical-free yard supports far more fungi species than our neighbors’ more manicured lawns.

If you are into photography, I suggest you explore your own backyard. You might find some interesting topics.



PHOTOS BY GERRY STEINAUER



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A limit of birds on a beautiful day near Laurel in Cedar County with, left to right: Mark Bressler from Wakefield, Tom “TJ” Anderson (me) from Laurel and Bill Steinman from Emerson.

– Tom Anderson, Wynot



Here I am, going to look for a pheasant back in the fall of 1974. We didn’t need to wear helmets those days.

– Curt Koehler, Bee

This is a photo of me, Henry (Hank) Topil, taken in November 1968 when I was 16 years old. This was the first year I was old enough to have a firearm deer permit. I was asked by my older cousins, the late Tom Topil and Rich Topil, to go hunting with them. Larry Skinner also hunted with us. We hunted on private land south of Columbus on Clear Creek and the South Channel. I harvested this 4-by-4 buck right at sun up on opening day. I can still remember shaking with “buck fever.” I still enjoy hunting with my sons, although we have switched more toward archery. I enjoy reading *Nebraskaland* every month.

– Hank Topil, Rising City



Here is Claire Hirschman, Luthar Asbra, Chuck Hirschman and Ron Hirschman on one more great deer hunt around Laurel.

– Charles Hirschman, Coleridge



Pictured from left: my father John Gilbert of Omaha, uncle Jerry Gilbert of Bellevue and uncle Jim Gilbert of Falls City. The photo was taken between 1946 and 1950 near Randolph. The three brothers were part of a hunting party of six to seven. Dad said the limit was five roosters each.

They all grew up hunting, fishing and trapping on a farm near Rulo in the first half of the 20th century.

– Mike Gilbert, Bellevue



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 1990. 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.



PHOTO BY GERRY STEINAUER

CALLING IN A DONKEY

By Gerry Steinauer

An evening in early May, two big tom turkeys were gobbling and strutting in the pasture behind my mother-in-law's farm house. Having never photographed displaying toms, this was my big chance. Luckily, my camo, box call and hen decoy were still in my car from a hunt, with a shotgun, a few days prior.

Early the next morning, I set my decoy in the pasture, hid myself in a cedar row, readied my camera and started scratching on my call. The turkeys were gobbling a few hundred yards away behind a rise in the neighbor's alfalfa field. I was excited – this was going to be easy.

It was about an hour later, and still no turkeys, when I heard rustling in the grass behind me. Slowly, cautiously I turned my head and saw three, not turkeys, but donkeys headed directly my way. Earlier, they had been grazing,

along with the neighbor's horse herd, at the far end of the pasture. Either my calling or the decoy had attracted them.

Two of the donkeys stopped short, but the third warily approached the decoy and then settled into a nose-to-nose stare down with it. Not surprisingly, the Styrofoam fowl won the competition, when after a few minutes, the donkey, its curiosity apparently satisfied, slowly backed away and walked off with its buddies.

The toms never did show up. When I finally crawled out of the cedars and looked, they were still in the alfalfa strutting and fanning for three hens. With real ladies present, my mediocre calling had little chance of enticing them away. My photographic endeavor, however, was not a complete loss. I did take my first ever donkey photo.

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