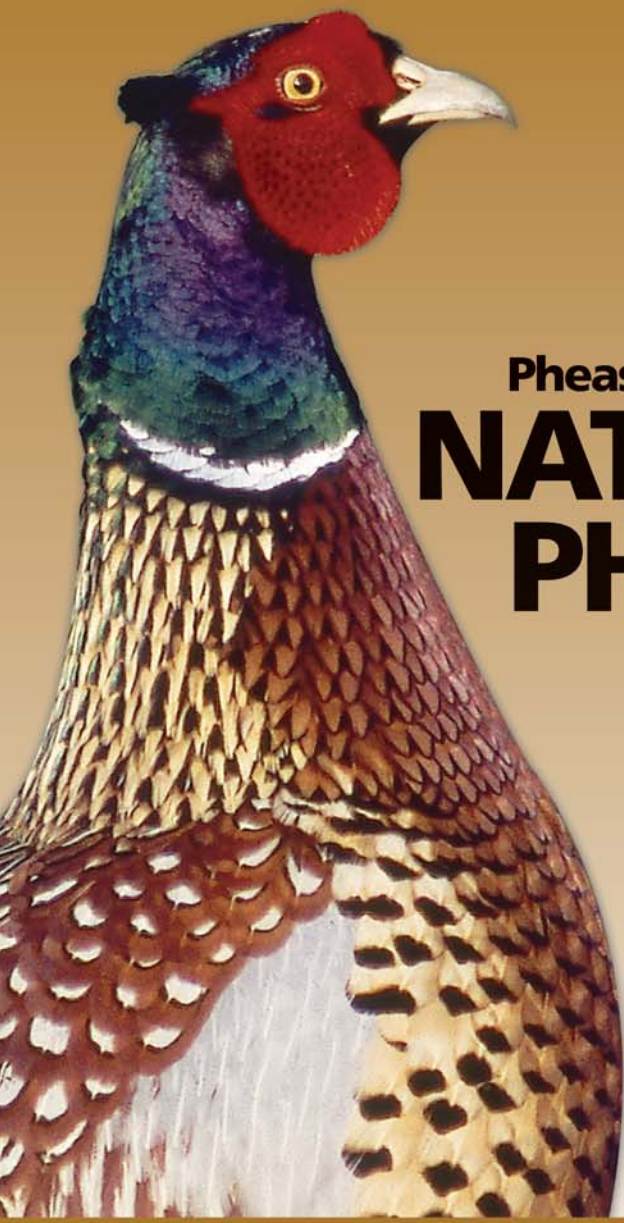




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NEBRASKAland

November 2010

A New Record

The
38-point
Buck



INSIDE

Sandhills From the Air • Barn Swallows
Live Decoys • Female Hunters on the Rise
Wildlife Winter Survival Strategies • In the Corn Excerpts

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NEBRASKAland

Volume 88, Number 9, November 2010

FEATURES

14 Live Decoys - Before There Was Robo Duck

Until they were outlawed, nothing pulled wild ducks and geese out of the air like live decoys on the water.

BY JON FARRAR

22 In the Corn

In her essay "In the Corn," *NEBRASKAland* contributor Lisa Knopp takes a look at how corn has influenced her life, as well as the lives of others on the Great Plains. BY LISA KNOPP

24 From the Air - a Look at the Sandhills

When photographing from the air you lose depth but gain scale. You also lose intimacy, but gain a much broader view.

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

30 Barn Swallows

I imagine very few people come to Nebraska to observe and photograph barn swallows. Too bad, for I recently found out how fascinating they actually are. BY JEFF KURRUS

34 Winter Survival Strategies

Because Nebraska's winters can be quite harsh, animals need a good method to survive. Here are several examples of what those methods entail. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CHRIS HELZER

40 Not Just a Boy's Club Anymore

Female hunters are on the rise both locally and nationally.

BY ELIZABETH MACK

42 The 38-point Buck

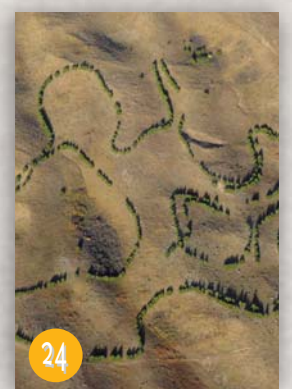
A Nebraska hunt by a native Texan results in one of the largest bucks ever shot in the Cornhusker state. BY JEFF KURRUS

DEPARTMENTS

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Cover: Wesley O'Brien, of Lexington, Texas, poses with his 38-point buck, one of the largest ever killed in Nebraska. See story on page 42. Photo by Jeff Kurrus. **Opposite:** Antique farm equipment brings to memory past days in the greens and browns of autumn grass. Photo by Jeff Kurrus.

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What Happened to Those Wings?

I recently made one of my periodic visits to Lakeside, our neighborhood lake, with a bag of corn and my camera. I settled in on the walking trail as a small group of Canada geese made their way toward me, looking for a handout. Putting a handful of corn on the ground, I was soon surrounded by many resident “beggars.”

I noticed one goose sitting near a tree and what I saw struck me by surprise. The enclosed photos brings to mind the questions how and why did this happen?

A walker passing by said the bird had been at the lake all summer and could not fly.

I am hoping that some of your readers or associates with Game and Parks may have a plausible explanation.

Jack Bosen
Omaha, Nebraska

Mark Vrtiska, waterfowl program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, replies:

“My suspicions are that the goose in the photo suffers from “Flip-” or “Twisted-Wing,” which is caused by a nutritional imbalance of proteins.

Basically the primary feathers (the long wing feathers) grow faster than the supporting muscle, which causes them to “flip over” due to too much weight. Afflicted birds cannot fly (as in this case) and longterm structural damage is probably caused, with the results that these birds will never be able to fly.

Remnants of the primary feathers – shattered and tattered from wear – are what can be seen poking out from the sides of the bird.”



Hidden Hummingbird?

While looking for the bug in the November issue, my husband saw what appears to be a hummingbird in Bill Hager’s picture of birds foraging for seeds on page 27. Do they actually eat seeds when nectar isn’t available?

Stella Amberry
Ansley, Nebraska

According to Joel Jorgensen, nongame bird program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, hummingbirds will occasionally eat small insects as a source of protein, but they do not eat seeds. Also, while I can see where he might have been mistaken (see inset picture), there weren’t any hummingbirds in this picture. – Editor



NEBRASKAland at the Beach

NEBRASKAland has been a staple of my monthly magazine reading since high school, where I often used the information presented in the featured articles for school reports and projects. Throughout college I would receive my parent’s read-worn editions in care packages, which continued to arrive even after graduation and my move to New York. Now I am a subscriber. NEBRASKAland keeps me current on the events and issues affecting my

native state and for that reason, it is the magazine that accompanies me on the subway, in waiting rooms and even... the beach. On a recent vacation to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, my July and August-September issues of NEBRASKAland Magazine were a beach necessity (second only to sunscreen).

Brook Hanna
Hartsdale, New York

Thank You NEBRASKAland

I just wanted to say THANK YOU for publishing NEBRASKAland Magazine.

I am 81 years old, born and raised in Nebraska, a retired Army Colonel with a lifetime Nebraska hunting and fishing permit.

Your magazine keeps me up to date with the outdoors sports that I loved so dearly, even when I was out of the country.

I used to hunt and fish in this state an average of 1½ days per week when the seasons were open and I was not overseas. Keep doing the outstanding job that is your hallmark.

Rolla Lush
Grand Island, Nebraska

NEBRASKAland Visitor Letters

We want to thank all 99 readers that sent e-mails and letters for last issue’s visitor, an earwig on page 47 (see page 13 for the winner, rules and this issue’s hint). Here are just a few of the many wonderful responses we received:

That’s an earwig on page 47 of the October 2010 NEBRASKAland Magazine. My guides are conflicting about whether it is the European or a Ring-legged species. Both appear to be present in the Midwest.

Though I now reside in New Jersey, I’ve been an avid reader of the magazine for many years. Raised in Omaha, I’ve returned frequently, sometimes to accompany my father on his pheasant hunts. The magazine keeps me in touch with Nebraska’s magnificent landscape.

The quality of NEBRASKAland Magazine is superior to other states’ outdoor magazines that I’ve read.

Keith Johnson
Livingston, New Jersey

My daughter Abby (6) and son Cameron (5) have begun to search for each issue’s visitor in NEBRASKAland. This month, they simultaneously found the earwig on page 47 on his way to the duck soup. Thank you for this fantastic magazine, which has been a good supplement to their education.

Andy Coen
Lincoln, Nebraska

Bug on page 47 of the October Nebraskaland issue, just above the bowls of duck soup. How could you? Dale and Margaret Nielsen
Lexington, Nebraska

Page 47, upper right. Looks like some kind of critter the bottom of my boots would see!!

Dave Madigan
Boyton Beach, Florida

Earwigs are nocturnal insects, scavenging for food at night and becoming inactive during the day. They primarily eat vegetation, but will also consume other insects. Their most noticeable feature is the pair of pincer-like projections, called forceps, attached to their last abdominal segment. While they prefer a moist habitat under organic matter, such as leaves and mulch, they are often noticed entering houses in the fall, looking for shelter.



Special thanks to Julie Van Meter, State Entomologist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture.

Send your comments to:
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Lincoln, NE 68503
or e-mail doug.carroll@ngpc.ne.gov. Please include your postal address and telephone number. Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

Story and photo submissions can be sent to the same address. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope for mailed submissions. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material.

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Book Review

Kelsea Nore

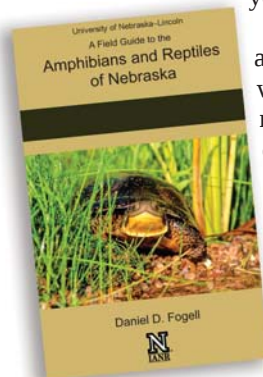
Daniel D. Fogell's "A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Nebraska" is an extensive and methodical guide to a vital group of animals within the state. The guide is also much needed, since the last Nebraska field guide of amphibians and reptiles was published almost seventy years ago.

The guide includes an identification key with cross-listed page numbers. Each and every snake, turtle or frog is matched with a statewide graphic that shows every county where these creatures can be found. Two or more color photographs

(taken by Fogell himself) are also attached, ensuring proper identification and up-close looks at defining characteristics. The physical descriptions, habitat, natural history and distribution information is exact, abundant and easy to understand.

The book also contains a glossary of terms, a checklist of every species and a section for notes.

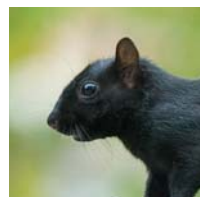
For the expert, student or the merely curious, this field guide is a great resource to the reptiles and amphibians of Nebraska.



Black Squirrel Update

Jeff Kurrus

It's been awhile since I've asked, but we're steadily getting phone calls and e-mails regarding the latest black squirrel sightings. The latest came from an unidentified man in Lincoln who had seen them on 33rd and Holdrege, right down the street from our NEBRASKAland offices. "There's coming for you Kurrus," regional editor Eric Fowler told me, so email me at jeff.kurrus@nebraska.gov to let me know if he's right.



What is That?

Jeff Kurrus

This month's photo essay "From the Air" by Michael Forsberg contains a curious photo of a group of trees in Cherry County that resemble, well, something. That something could be a little girl on a tricycle or a rocking horse. To each their own regarding what they see. However, what we want to know is if there is anyone in the region who knows the history of this tree line, or thinks they know its history. If so, email me at jeff.kurrus@nebraska.gov so that I can start looking at this photograph asking, "Was there a plan behind this



Upcoming Events

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

October 30

• **First Day of Pheasant and Quail Hunting Season – Statewide**
Call (402) 471-0641 or go online to OutdoorNebraska.org for more information

November 1

• **Ticket Sale, 16th Annual Historical Christmas Dinner – Fort Robinson State Park**
Tickets go on sale at the park office at 8 a.m. Call (308) 665-2900 or e-mail ngpc.fort.robinson@nebraska.gov

November 3

• **Deer Hunting Workshop – Lancaster County Extension Office, Lincoln**
Learn how to hunt deer: equipment, strategies, biology, Nebraska hunting laws and more. Register by visiting www.huntsafenebraska.com

November 8

• **Deer Hunting Workshop – Cabela's, LaVista**
Learn how to hunt deer: equipment, strategies, biology, Nebraska hunting laws and more. Register by visiting www.huntsafenebraska.com

November 13-21

• **Firearm Deer Hunting – Statewide**
Call (402) 471-0641 or go online to OutdoorNebraska.org

November 21

• **Longhorn and Buffalo Sale – Fort Robinson State Park**
The annual longhorn and buffalo sale is being held November 21, 2010. The sale is held at the Crawford Livestock Market. Anyone interested can contact Fort Robinson State Park prior to the sale for more information or to request a catalog.
Call (308) 665-2900 or e-mail ngpc.fort.robinson@nebraska.gov

November 25

• **Thanksgiving Day Buffet – E. T. Mahoney State Park**
A breakfast buffet will be available from 7:30 a.m. – 10 a.m.
Call (402) 944-2523 or e-mail ngpc.mahoney@nebraska.gov



Sheep Feet

Kelsea Nore

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) are well known for two things: their impressive curled horns and their equally impressive climbing abilities – an important survival skill that helps protect them from predators such as coyotes or mountain lions. Even their just-born lambs are able to easily navigate rocky terrain. Bighorn sheep are even-toed ungulates (hoofed animals), and their 3- to 3½-inch long black hoofs are firm at the edges but become softer in the middle. The two parts of each hoof separate as the sheep moves, which helps them grip loose ground and steep hillside. The soles of their feet are also cushioned, almost rubbery, which gives the sheep added traction. These adaptations help the sheep move safely, but in the event of a tumble the sheep has one other protective adaptation on its side – their sturdy horns help protect the head.



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Farm Bill Wildlife Biologists

These biologists are available through a partnership with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and the Natural Resources Conservation Service and offer landowners one-stop-shopping for technical assistance on the available conservation programs and incentives in the state. Landowners may contact them for site visits and program enrollment options.

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For further information visit www.NebraskaPF.com

A Look Back - November 1985

Jeff Kurrus

It's hard not to bring my personal desires into "A Look Back," hoping that you also find favor with my choices for the month.

This particular issue in 1985 struck me because my first question was "What was I doing in 1985?" I was in Mrs. Huber's class, learning my multiplication tables.

Jon Farrar, at that time however, was waterfowl hunting. And he had some things to say about some other "shooters" who sky bust while hunting in his essay "The Trouble with Hunting":

"Skybusting (those who shoot waterfowl out of range) makes the blood boil in anyone who loves waterfowl and waterfowl hunting," Farrar wrote. "It brings curses to the lips that would not be vented on rabid skunks. These people with shotguns and boats and decoys sitting in the marsh are not duck hunters, they are shooters."

It is a rare occasion when Farrar has written so frankly in *NEBRASKAland*, and I think you will enjoy it.

Also in this particular issue was Farrar's "Return to Horseshoe-Bar Ranch," a piece about Roe Black's life on the Dismal River; and "One Time in a Marsh," an essay written by the late-Mark Landgren about two boys waterfowl hunting near Hastings.

To read Farrar's essay, go to NebraskalandMagazine.com and click on "A Look Back."



PHOTO BY LUKE KATHOL

Dandelions

Kelsea Nore

When I was young, I was told that if you put a dandelion beneath someone's chin and the flower left a yellow streak, that person loved butter. Aside from the usefulness of this determination, the dandelion is a varied plant. Some consider it a pretty reminder of spring and summertime, while others classify it as a pervasive weed.

Dandelions are found in all 50 states, are native to both Europe and Asia, and get their common name from the French phrase 'dent de lions' (tooth of lions), in reference to their deeply serrated leaves. The bright, pointed petals they wear at first bloom also speak to a lion's mane, but the plants have been known as Monk's Heads and Puffballs as well.

Well-manicured lawns and gardens detest the presence of dandelions due to their deep, hard-to-kill root systems and the numerous seeds even one dandelion can release. On a single flower, approximately 50-150 seeds or cypselae are produced and the pappi (the fluffy white part we often blow off of the stem in a single breath) are carried away to germinate. The plant, proving that it's not all bad, is also edible. Dandelion wine is a popular concoction, and the leaves or greens can be used in salads. They have a slightly bitter taste. The roots have a medicinal history and are still used as a diuretic and a liver tonic.

Itching to Know

Kimberly Stuhr

It's the carbon dioxide we exhale. That's how those buzzing, biting, blood-sucking mosquitoes can always seem to find us. A female can detect carbon dioxide from 75 feet away. It's her signal that a potential blood meal, necessary for her to produce eggs, is near. And there you have it – an answer to your most skin-piercing question.



PHOTO BY CHRIS HEIZER

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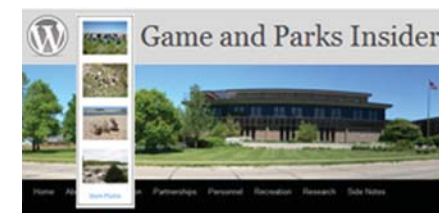
Pat Engelhard

If you are a fan of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission or other outdoor enthusiast, or just someone who wants to know what's going on in your own backyard, you should subscribe to the "NGPC Insider."

Intended as a way to keep Commission staff updated on what each division was doing each month, the "Insider" is now available to the public. Every month, we compile reports from the activities, events and projects that our agency is involved with across the state.

We feature successful partnerships and research endeavors, provide updates on habitat and wildlife, fisheries, hunting and conservation, and links to interesting resources. We also feature a photo gallery that provides our readers with a quick visual summary of our agency's activities. The "Insider" is a way for you to connect directly with the Commission through your comments and feedback, questions and observations.

So check out the NGPC "Insider" blog at <http://ngpcnews.wordpress.com/>, leave a comment and suggestion or two about what you find there and subscribe to our news feed to receive monthly updates, features, news and resources from Game and Parks all condensed into one monthly digest.



See You Out There ... But Where?



Do you know where this Nebraska photograph was taken? See answer at the bottom of page 13.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Popular Winter Trout Stocking Program Continues

Rainbow trout are once again being stocked in waterbodies across the state as part of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's popular winter trout stocking program.

Designed to provide trout fishing in areas that normally don't offer it, the program gives anglers a chance to catch rainbow trout in a local body of water that is only able to support this coldwater species during the winter months. The stocked trout are approximately 10 inches in length when released.

The following schedule indicates the date and number of trout that were to be stocked in these bodies of water as of press time. For more information about the winter trout stocking program, got to OutdoorNebraska.org.

Sept. 29 – Crystal Cove Lake, South Sioux City, 4,250; Birdwood Wildlife Management Area at North Platte, 2,304; and Rock Creek Lake State Recreation Area near Parks, 2,280.

Sept. 30 – Humphrey Pond in

Ogallala, 1,800 trout; Barnett Park in McCook, 1,000; Curtis Golf Course Pond, 450; Arnold City Park Pond, 850; and Bessey Pond near Halsey, 200.

Week of Oct. 4 – Niobrara State Park, 1,000; Qwest Lake, Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, 2,500; Fremont Lake No. 2, 5,000; TaHaZouka Park, Norfolk, 1,500.

Oct. 9 – Holmes Lake, Lincoln, 4,000; Bowling Lake, Lincoln, 400.

Week of Oct. 12 – Standing Bear Lake, Omaha, 4,000; Auble Pond, Ord, 1,500; Weeping Water Pond, 1,500; Lake Halleck, Papillion, 1,200; David City Park West Pond, 600; Pawnee Park West Pond, Columbus, 1,500.

Week of Oct. 18 – Towl Park Pond, Omaha, 300; Hitchcock Park Pond, Omaha, 450; Steinhart Park Pond, Nebraska City, 1,200; Auburn Rotary Club Lake, 1,400; Heartwell Park Lake, Hastings, 900; Such's Lake, Grand Island, 1,300; Standing Bear Lake, Omaha, 3,500.

Week of Oct. 25 – Benson Park Pond, Omaha, 1,050; Grove Lake, Royal, 1,500.



Photo by Steve and Bobbi Olson

WE ARE "GRAZING LAND LOVERS" THROUGH AND THROUGH dedicated to the enhancement of grassland by creating public awareness and improvement of the grazing lands in Nebraska. NGLC's focus is to provide voluntary technical assistance and educational opportunities on grazing land management. Healthy Nebraska grazing lands translate directly into forage for livestock, habitat for wildlife, economic benefits for landowners and rural communities, and clean water for much of the Great Plains.

We offer consultation and educational programs to provide training on the value of grassland stewardship and mentoring programs that allow grassland management to be handed down to the next generation of farmers and ranchers. Call us now to find out how you can join others on our quest to preserve Nebraska's grasslands.

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800-514-9113
Photos courtesy Arbor Day Foundation.

Mud Daubers

Chris Helzer

Mud dauber wasps are a spider's worst nightmare. Female daubers build mud tubes and then go hunting for spiders. When they find their prey, they

paralyze it with their stinger and carry it back to an empty tube. There they use their head to jam the helpless spider into the tube – sometimes alongside another spider or two – before laying an egg in the tube and sealing it up. When the eggs hatch, the paralyzed spiders become food for hungry wasp larvae.

You can recognize mud daubers in Nebraska by their long and very skinny “waists.” There are two species – one that is yellow and black and one that is a dark, metallic blue. Interestingly, the blue species actually steals nests (tubes) from the black and yellow wasps, and replaces the egg with one of its own. Because mud daubers almost never sting people – unless you try to handle them, which I advise against – you can feel good when you see one in your yard, knowing that it's just out looking for spiders to terrorize.



PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

Hoarfrost

Pasquale Mingarelli

Nebraska winters can be harsh, with numbing sub-zero temperatures, blinding blizzards and menacing freezing rain. But there is a gentler side to our weather that transforms a cold morning into a winter wonderland by painting the landscape with delicate crystals of white. This gentler side of winter is known as hoarfrost.

When the air is saturated with moisture, water must be released. That often happens in the form of fog or dew. Regular frost first forms as dew then freezes. However, if the dewpoint (the temperature when dew forms) and the object the frost forms on are below freezing, hoarfrost occurs. The water vapor changes directly from a gas to a solid without first becoming a liquid. This allows air to be captured in the ice, making a frosted area look very dreamlike.

Hoarfrost formations are very fragile and sunshine, a rise in temperature or wind will make them disappear.



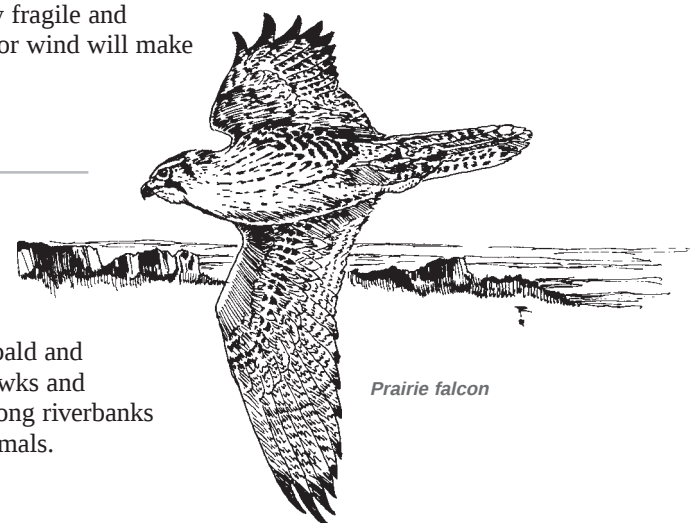
Hoarfrost on a spent shotgun shell.

PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Migrating Raptors

Patrick Mainelli

This November keep your eyes out for some of Nebraska's late-season migrating raptors. Many of these aerial hunters, including bald and golden eagles, rough-legged hawks and prairie falcons, can be found along riverbanks or in open fields riding the thermals.



Prairie falcon

Scope Clearance – and the importance of eye relief

Eric Fowler

If you haven't had the pleasure of getting smacked in the face by your riflescope yet, congratulations. You are one of the few. If you have, and aren't sure why, it is a simple matter of a specification of scope design known as eye relief.

Eye relief is the distance you must hold your shooting eye from the rear (ocular) lens of a scope in order to see the entire image produced by the scope. Hold it too close, and things get fuzzy around the edges. Too far and the image becomes a dot in the center of the lens.

Eye relief can vary between brands and models of scopes. It also varies between the short and long zoom ranges of variable scopes. On a 3x9 scope, for example, the range of eye relief is much greater at 3x than at 9x.

So how does eye relief translate into a cut above your eye? Simple. The recoil of the rifle throws the scope backwards. If the eye relief of your scope is not sufficient, the top of the scope will find your eyebrow.

Typically, the more magnification a scope provides, the shorter its eye relief. Eye relief is of much greater consideration with hard-kicking magnum rifles. Considering those two facts together, a 14x or 20x scope would be a bad choice for a .300 Winchester Magnum.

When mounting a scope on a rifle, it is important to first determine where the shooter's cheek naturally meets the stock when they mount the gun to their shoulder. When that is known, the scope can be slid forward or backward in the rings to match the eye relief. Mounting the scope first and forcing a shooter to lean into the gun more than they would otherwise can lead to poor marksmanship as well as scope eye.

If you often find your scope meeting your forehead, determine or measure its eye relief and then go buy a new scope with more, and your problem will most likely be solved.



Good sport Matt Marx shows off his scope eye.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

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Officer's Notebook

The Best Job in the World

In January 2006, at the tail end of my field training, I was working the Bridgeport area along with fellow Conservation Officer Heath Packett. Naturally, the weather wasn't the nicest that winter day, especially while learning how to kayak on the Platte River. During our excursion we were to be working waterfowl hunters to ensure they were following state and federal laws. After a very brief lesson on how to get into and out of a kayak in moving water, we were off.

Within a mile of the start of our trip we checked a group of nonresident hunters, one of which did not have the required permit and stamps. After Heath issued a citation we were once again heading downstream. Watching the sun rise and waterfowl fly low over our heads, I seemed to forget how cold the temperature was and any worries I might have had about the day.

As we continued moving downriver, along with some ice chunks large enough to sink a boat, we heard a few shots in the distance and soon came upon a pit blind with a small channel running between it and a sandbar. Beaching the kayaks, we approached the blind and were welcomed by two very polite hunters who invited us into the blind to check their permits, guns and share some hunting stories.

After making sure everything was in order and swapping stories, we wished both gentlemen good luck and headed back to the kayaks. One of the hunters stuck his head out of the blind and said, "You guys' have the best job in the world!" This is supposed to be your cue to gracefully get in the kayak and float off into the sunrise, but if you know me at all, you know that isn't going to be the case. While getting in the kayak, one of my feet became entangled in a root sticking out of the water, so with one foot in the kayak and one still stuck in the root, I stood there and watched my kayak start to float away with one leg still in it. At that point I knew I was doomed! I had only two options – do a belly flop in the water or drop to my knees and grab the kayak. Because the water was only a couple of feet deep, I didn't see any point in doing a belly flop, so I dropped to my knees. One would think a pair of chest waders would have been the clothing of choice that day, but I was wearing hip waders. Kneeling in water up to my waist, I realized just how cold the water actually was. One of the hunters asked if I wanted to sit next inside next the their heater – he didn't have to ask twice! Sitting in the blind in my long johns, drinking their thermos of coffee, we laughed and shared a few more embarrassing stories.

Another officer eventually arrived to take me back for a change of dry clothes and chest waders in order to finish the trip we had started. Thanking the hunters, I walked away in a pair of very wet and cold waders, but to this day I still have to agree with them that I have the best job in the world – where else can an officer spend the year meeting people who enjoy all the outdoor resources our state has to offer?

– Cory Krause, Conservation Officer, West Point



Deer Hides Needed

The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, known as the local Elks Lodge in most small towns, is again accepting donated deer hides from the beginning of the November firearm deer season through the end of the January antlerless deer season. Donated hides will be shipped to a tannery to be turned into soft leather and made into gloves for wheel-chair bound veterans or used for craft kits that are distributed to veterans at VA Medical Centers across the world.

Before the hides can be shipped, they have to have all excess fat, flesh and tails removed, then fine table salt must

be rubbed into all fleshy surfaces. Volunteers at the drop-off locations do most of this work, but hunters are welcome to do it themselves before dropping off the hides. Care must be taken in the skinning process, however, as even small holes can result in the hide being ruined during the tanning process. Hunters should call their local Elks lodge to find out about drop-off points in their area.

Fishing Records Certified

Summer fishing has yielded more state records certified by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Dustin Noble of Gothenburg set the underwater spearfishing record by taking a redear sunfish at a private sandpit in Buffalo County. The fish, taken on Sept. 4, weighed 1 pound, 4 ounces and was 10¾ inches long. That fish broke the record Noble had set on July 3 at the same sandpit by two ounces.

Also on July 3, Noble set the underwater spearfishing record by taking a 13-ounce hybrid sunfish that measured 9.7 inches in length.

Marlyn Wiebelhaus of Wynot set the state archery record on Aug. 12 when he took a 67-pound, 14-ounce grass carp at Bucksin Hills Lake in Dixon County. The fish was 52 inches long.

Outdoor Message Plates

Robert Miller of Beatrice says his interest in deer hunting is more of an obsession, especially archery deer hunting. Being retired allows him to hunt morning, midday and evening, and when the season closes he only slows down, shifting his focus to scouting, stand placement and keeping in touch with landowners.

Chris Reimann of Lincoln, formerly of Ogallala, advertises the brand of shotgun he carries while waterfowl hunting. Other trim details on his truck show the passion he has for the sport he's pursued for more than 30 years.

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



State Fair Winner

Tamara Walker of Plattsmouth was the winner of the 2010 State Fair's "Wild and Scenic Nebraska" division. Walker captured the winning photo on a "very cold December morning" just east of Plattsmouth near Randall W. Schilling Wildlife Management Area.

Said Walker, "I usually check the weather right before sunrise and if it looks like a good day, I grab my camera and off I go. The trees were covered with heavy frost that morning, so I headed down to the river and the morning sun was just coming up through the trees as the fog was rising off the Missouri River."



PHOTO BY TAMARA WALKER

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

When you're pheasant hunting, make sure you carry some markers with you. You fellas who have been hunting birds in the field, you know what I'm talking about. Especially when multiple birds are shot.

You hit one over here and the dog is 200 yards away. Then you look over and you're distracted and you forget where that bird is. Just take brightly colored tape and wrap it around a heavy object and use it as a marker.

I pitched baseball when I was a kid and my elbow is bad so I can't throw very far, but if you grab that and swing it, it'll go a long way. Make sure you carry a couple of them with you. ■



Don't forget to purchase your deer permit online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org

NEBRASKAland Visitor Winner and Hint

Last issue's winner of the NEBRASKAland Visitor drawing was Ron Macomber of South Sioux City, Nebraska who found the **earwig** on page 47.

Readers are encouraged to contact NEBRASKAland within 10 days after this issue's publication with the correct page number and name of this issue's "Visitor" – a bug found in Nebraska that just happened to find its way onto one of the pages of our publication.

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

Or e-mail:

Tim.Reigert@Nebraska.gov with "Visitor" in the subject line of the message.

HINT: This issue's visitor is not on page 3, 5, 8, 10, 13, 30, 32, 38 or 44.

Missouri River Basin Lewis & Clark Visitors Center, Nebraska City

LIVE DECOYS

Before There Were Robo Ducks

By Jon Farrar

Until 1935, when they were prohibited by federal regulation, nothing lured wild ducks and geese out of the sky like call birds on the water.

Live tame ducks make probably the best decoys to be had for mallard and black-duck shooting, but they are such a nuisance to take care of and transport that they are seldom used in the West. It would almost seem as though they took an especial delight in seeing their kindred killed, from the continuous calling and quacking they keep up whenever a flock of wild ones come in sight; and they seldom call in vain, for on the wild ones hearing them they immediately turn and come in.

— *American Wild-Fowl Shooting* by Joseph W. Long, J.B. Ford And Company publishers, 1874.

Back in the late-1800s and early-1900s, when wildfowl was still exceedingly abundant and laws regulating the taking of ducks and geese, if they existed at all, were unconscionably liberal – those who could hunt the most at the best places and worked the hardest at it killed the bulk of the birds. That was certainly true of market hunters. One of the key tools of the trade for wildfowl hunters in those days was live decoys, also known as call birds. Wild ducks and geese found the sight of a live bird moving on the water and calling skyward irresistible, just as Joseph W. Long wrote, and dropped down to their death far more often than they did to bobbing wooden decoys, sheet-iron profiles and the mixed-bag of noises hunters sent skyward from their mouth callers.

Because live decoys were so effective, it is not surprising that in the mid-1930s, in the heart of the continent’s worst historical drought and plunging waterfowl numbers, they were declared illegal; and other restrictions were imposed to reduce the killing – the prohibition of shotguns larger than 10 gauge or holding more than three shotshells, sink boxes and baiting. There was a hue and cry from hunters not wanting restrictions on the way they had always hunted, but most sportsmen knew it was necessary and demanded, or at least supported them. Of all the new regulations imposed on waterfowl hunters, probably none had a greater impact reducing the kill than the prohibition of live decoys.

Jodi McNeel of North Platte, who died in 2006, hunted over call ducks and call geese when he was a young man.

“I know why they banned them,” McNeel said in a 2004 interview. “They was just too damned effective, that’s what it was.”

Most sources trace the development of call ducks back to Holland in the 1600s, where tamed “Coy ducks” were confined in wire-covered pens over water, their name coming from the Dutch word *de kooi*, translating as to trap or cage. At one end of the pen was an opening that grew increasingly small as it extended deeper into the pen. The confined birds would call to wild ducks, they would alight nearby, and eventually some would move down the funnel into the trap. Once inside they found it difficult to find the small opening through which they had entered, particularly if panicked when the game keeper came to gather them.

Not surprisingly, as the British have a long history of sport hunting, Dutch call birds had found their way to England by the 1850s and were used to attract wild ducks close to hunters’ guns. American hunters were quick to employ English call ducks, but bred them to be as unBritish as possible; although small, near-black English call ducks remained in widespread use by hunters until they were banned in 1935. Call birds used by American hunters from the late-1800s into the mid-1930s ran the full gamut from essentially pure English call ducks to tamed wild birds and everything between – ducks and geese many generations removed from their wild, free-flying ancestors; and duck crosses between wild mallards, barnyard mallards and English call ducks.

Some hunters took wounded birds home and nursed them back to health to employ in subsequent hunting seasons. Other would-be breeders stole eggs from wild mallard nests and incubated them under a farmyard hen. Eventually, a thriving market developed for eggs, young and adult call birds. The classified ad sections of newspapers and outdoor magazines were awash with call birds for sale, particularly in the early-1900s as wildfowl grew increasingly scarce and competition between hunters to shoot what was left intensified.

The November 1925 issue of *Field and Stream* quoted the following prices: Black or gray English callers \$6 per pair, young black mallards \$7 per pair, “old stock” black mallards



Three unidentified hunters were proud enough of their goose shoot on the Platte River they brought not only their shotguns and their kill but three of their call geese to the studio of G. Calkins in Kenesaw to preserve the day.



During the early-1900s, sporting catalogs and magazines frequently ran advertisements for devices to hold live decoys. The above ran in the November 1925 issue of *Field and Stream*.

\$9 per pair, and Canada geese \$15 per pair. Those prices, give or take a dollar or two one way or the other, were typical of the 1920s and early-1930s, varying slightly with how proud the breeder was of his stock, how many he needed to sell and how close it was to the opening of the waterfowl hunting season. Bargain prices were found once the hunting season was underway and breeders wanted to reduce their stock before winter.

“The first step in the training of ducks is to cultivate their confidence and overcome the natural fear that all have of the presence of human beings or the sound of their voices,” Dr. William Bruette wrote in his 1929 book, *American Duck, Goose, and Brant Shooting*. “This is accomplished at feeding time. In training live decoys it is customary to pen them while young where they will be in constant contact with those who are to handle them. The presence in the pen of older, thoroughly broken birds will facilitate matters, as ducks are very imitative and gain confidence from one another. It does not take the young birds long to decide that they have nothing to fear from those who feed them regularly. The men who are training them signal their approach by a feeding call or a sharp blow on the side of a boat, feeding box or bucket. The older birds answer with their quacking, the young birds imitate them, and it becomes their habit. It is only a short time before all of them, as soon as they hear the call or the signal, will begin



A scene rarely captured in a photograph shows a typical layout for duck and goose hunting on the central Platte River during the early years of the 1900s – a willow blind on a sandbar, canvas goose decoys stuffed with straw and three live mallards for decoys.

to quack and run towards the feeding place.

“The next step is to lay a trail of corn from the pen over to a boat,” Bruette continued. “As soon as the birds hear the call or signal to which they are accustomed and the attendant begins talking to them, they answer back and if the pen door is open they will follow the trail of the corn as surely as a bird dog follows his nose and are soon busily engaged in climbing over the deck and into the cock pit for the kernels that have been scattered about to attract them.

Sound unbelievable? McNeel said that in the 1920s he and

his hunting partners used about 35 call ducks and transported them to the river in a boat covered with chicken wire and having a 24-by-24-inch door.

“When we fed the ducks, we always would shake a can of corn,” he said, “and the birds came to know when they heard that they were going to be fed. So when you would shake that can of corn, they would hop in that duck boat, and then we would close the door and go to the river. When we got done hunting in the river, we would just pull the duck boat ... up there on the sandbar, shake the corn, dump it in the duck boat and wham, in they would go, close the door and go home. They loved that damn hunting as much as we did.”

“When used as decoys on the shooting grounds, the birds are placed according to the habits of the birds on such grounds,” Bruette wrote. “Generally the ducks [hens] are tethered by a ring around the neck or a cord attached by a loop or preferably a rawhide device around the leg between the hock and ankle. The drakes are left loose to swim about freely. They will not leave the ducks [hens]. Sometimes they circle or make short flights in the air, and attract passing ducks.”

Devices to tether live decoys basically were of three types: Those attached to the bird’s leg, those placed around the bird’s neck and harnesses fitted over the bird’s body. Each type had advocates. Harnesses were said to be least apt to injure the live decoy, but some hunters believed they restrict-



DUCK SHOOTERS!

GIBBS' LIVE DUCK DECOY ANCHOR ATTACHMENT

Snaps on and off. Will not snarl in any manner. No lame ducks, no snarled-up ducks, no escaped ducks. Guaranteed perfect.

\$3.00 per dozen, Postpaid—Discounts to Dealers.

W. A. GIBBS & SON
Makers of the famous Two-Trigger Game Traps
DEPT. C-9 CHESTER, PA.

Leg-hold devices were probably the most commonly used, particularly for Canada geese. The advertisement above ran in the October 1927 issue of *Field and Stream*.

ed their movements, making them less effective at attracting passing wild birds.

“We made a [leather] harness for ‘em,” Rudy Fick, who grew up hunting the Missouri River near

Blair and was a state game warden in the late-1930s and early-1940s, recalled in a 1987 interview. “We had a little old iron ring [on the harness] and made a trot line...with a lot of little snaps on it, that’s the way I had mine, and iron stakes, you could drag one end and the other end would hold. I used to go up there all alone and set out 50 live decoys.”

“As has been said, the value of a stand of ordinary wooden decoys is many times increased if there are added to them a couple of live decoys,” wrote George Bird Grinnell in his 1901, classic wildfowling book, *American Duck Shooting*. “These, when properly trained, are usually on the watch for birds in the air, and will quack vociferously at black birds, buzzards, herons, or wild geese.

“It is only the female that can quack,” Bruette continued. “The drake makes only a little jabbering half whistling noise. A most common ruse to increase activity of the decoys, when the position permits, is to put a noisy duck [hen] in a clump of rushes out of sight of the rest of the flock. Her calls to them will keep them working.”

“We got our decoys all out, the wooden floats, head on, as far out in the channel as we dared put them, the profile geese on the windward sand bar, and our callers – a trio of live half-breed mallards and one full blood a little nearer the blind; three of them in front of us and one across the bar behind, where she could not see her companions but could keep in touch with them in a conversational way,” Sandy

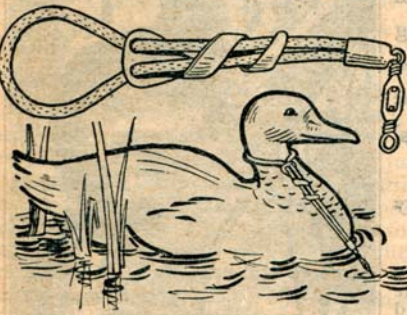
Griswold, outdoor writer for the *Omaha Bee* from 1886 into 1898, and for the *Omaha World-Herald* from 1898 into 1929, wrote in his description of a duck hunt on Platte River in a December 7, 1919 column. “This isolated caller was a beauty – a little full-blood, wild mallard hen, very dark in plumage, and the very best caller I ever shot over. She was wild as her native relatives while on the river, but as tame as the rest of them when off duty. She is the keenest eyed bird I ever saw, and her work is truly wonderful. Not a single crow could winnow his black shape across the river, for a mile or more, up or down, but what she called our attention to it, and so it was, even to the illusive little snowbirds and juncos, which were always flitting in intermittent gusts athwart our sand bar hide, or over our decoys.”

“It is often a great advantage, when shooting over wooden decoys, to have a live duck to throw in the air when wild ones are approaching,” Long wrote. “She should be secured by a light, strong line, of from fifteen to twenty-five yards in length, to the blind to prevent escape, and should be blindfolded by a hood drawn over the eyes; then, not being able to see how far she has to fall after being thrown up, she will spread her wings and allow herself to drop gradually with feet extended as is the usual manner of ducks when alighting. The attention of the other ducks being attracted toward the decoys by her motions, they come in without hesitation.”

Fick said he trained his call ducks for use as flyers by taking them to the depot in Blair and releasing them. “I’d throw ‘em up and they’d fly back [home] and light right back in the pen. I done that all fall.

“In those days, when the flight started,” Fick continued, “generally just ahead of a storm, and you could look up all day long, day in and day out, several days anyway, ducks by the thousands, every 100 to 150 to 200 yards a bunch of ducks going south, looked like sparrows, so damn high. Well, I’d take and throw up a couple of these call ducks, I’d have the decoys out there, and I’d take and throw ‘em up

COOK LIVE DECOY HOLDER



Hold your decoys by the neck. Ducks with sore legs will not swim around.

No snaps, strapping, dislocated legs, catching in weeds, splashing in the boat. Can be used on the leg if desired.

To attach, slide holder up to neck or foot and wind the cord in the holder. To loosen, reverse operation.

Price, each, net.....\$0.15

The neck-hold tether above was advertised in the Wm. R. Burkhard Co., St. Paul, Minnesota, 1913 hunting catalog.



Some game farms sold call ducks and geese to hunters. When prohibited, many were probably returned. William H. Lemburg's son, Earl, is shown hand feeding captive Canada geese. Lemburg's game farm was located near Boelus and later near Cairo.

back of me and they'd fly around and all the [tethered live call] ducks would cut loose calling. So, I'd give 'em two more. I had six that I'd trained that way. And so, we'd throw two more. They'd just make a circle around like that. I'd just take and toss mine over my head, back behind the blind, and they'd fly over the river and come right in and light with your ducks staked out. Oh, it was fun."

As with call ducks, most hunters wanted two traits in their call geese – small size and clamorous. Pound for pound, more call geese could be transported if they were small, and so a four- to six-pound bird was ideal. Larger geese were used, though, particularly on the Platte River. Many of the call goose flocks in places like North Platte were put together from wing-tipped wild geese before 1900, back when the large "giant" Canada geese were still pausing along the Platte River during migration and nesting in the Sandhills just to the north.

"One time I was putting decoys out on the point of this towhead," Earl "Goldie" Haworth of Sidney recalled in a 1987 interview. Haworth hunted ducks and geese on the

North Platte River from the late-1910s into the 1990s before dying in 1994. "We'd usually put the gander on one end and the hens down below so they'd call between them. And those old ganders would get so damn mad they would just bawl. [One time] I was out and a flock of geese showed up...and Ed [Haworth's brother-in-law] says, 'Here comes a flock of geese.' And I just laid down flat and held this goose by the leg. And you ought to have heard that old goose call – called 'em in." Haworth said: "We'd see one bunch of geese and you was mad if you didn't get into it."

Long-time waterfowl hunter Ralph Kohler of Tekamah, in a 1989 interview, recalled hunting with his uncles on the Missouri River in the early-1930s. He said there would be three or four spreads of live goose decoys in a three-mile stretch of river. One hunter had more than 100 call geese, including white-fronted geese. Hunters deploying large numbers of geese often built pens on sandbars to confine the call birds, as tethering each was too time consuming. Kohler said his uncles only used six or seven birds and they rigged them just like their call ducks, with leg bands and small

chain. He recalled the Tekamah Gun Club used 40 to 50 live call geese.

"You would hear them shoot," Kohler said of hunting close to the Tekamah Gun Club hunters. "In about two minutes you would hear them shoot again. Then they would shoot again. Pretty soon it was quiet, and you knew that they killed every one of them in that flock. [Those wild geese] would just keep going back to those live birds [in the pen]. They just kept calling them back. [With] those call geese, if there were 20 in a bunch, they shot them all. I didn't like that." Kohler said it was "the best thing that ever happened" for geese when call birds were prohibited."

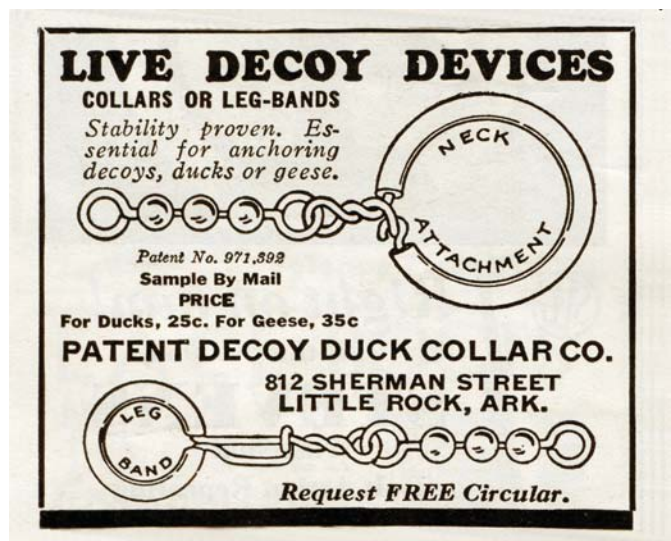
Unlike call ducks, geese were always penned, tethered or someway constrained.

"I don't know anybody that had any geese that they would let loose," McNeel recalled. "Most of the geese had this harness that came up over the wings. You put it over the wings, and then it crisscrossed in the back, and down right at the belly you had your ring. You hooked that ring into the chain, drove the stake into the sandbar. Some of the guys used a leg strap."

Sentiment against the use of live decoys was already building nationwide in the 1920s in response to plummeting waterfowl numbers, but it took the duck depression of the 1930s to advance legislation to prohibit it.

"You are what sportsmen term an old-timer; you can remember, as I can also remember, when it was no trouble at all to go get a mess of ducks in the spring or fall, on any creek or stream; there were millions of ducks and I couldn't count the geese," J.B. DeFort of David City wrote Griswold in a letter appearing in the February 17, 1924 edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*. "Now, why don't we have at least a good flight in the fall? You know why and I've wondered why you never have written along these lines. Decoy shooting, and especially call ducks, is the answer."

Griswold responded sarcastically: "What you say about the abolishing of the live decoy is all relevant enough and would surely help in lessening the possible bag of the hunters, but wouldn't it be better to abolish all shooting and



Popular neck and leg tethers were made by an Arkansas company. The above ad is from *Sports Afield*, November 1934



Patent Decoy Duck Collar Co. leg and neck tethers as shown in the advertisement.



Earl Haworth, left, with hunting partner Al Zlomke, and Canada goose call birds used on the North Platte River near Lisco.

make the thing sure?”

In a column published September 27, 1925, while not calling for the banning of live decoys, Griswold wrote that without them most wildfowlers would be disappointed with their times on marsh and river: “The days of what seem an inexhaustible supply of birds have flown now these several years, and more and more with the recurring of each season they will become scarcer and the necessity of greater knowledge of the sport and greater care and cleverness in its pursuit is more and more apparent.

“For one thing in recent years, they have failed to decoy in the fall – now our only open season – anything like they used to in the days of their enormous plentitude, and in fact, hardly decoy at all, especially to our old-fashioned wooden decoys which are almost nil, insofar as any help they may be to the gunner. Of course, I am speaking in general terms, because the birds will still occasionally decoy to these wooden counterfeits just like they used to but you will find that where one flock responds, there will be twenty that gives your stool the go-by.

Restrictive regulations for sport hunting was inevitable, and it would be federal legislation as the federal government had the authority to regulate sport hunting of migratory birds under the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty. In 1931, the season length and bag limits set in the spring were both reduced by presidential proclamations in late-August and early-September. Knowing there would be fierce opposition, it seems the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to incrementally prohibit the use of live decoys, as 1931 federal regulations allowed no more than 10 call geese be used at a blind but did not prohibit the use of call ducks.

Regulations related to the use of live decoys was a terrible

tangle for hunters to sort out in 1932, 1933 and 1934, as promulgation of state regulations often lagged far behind changes being made at the federal level; and changes made at the federal level were sometimes made only weeks before the waterfowl hunting seasons opened. As a consequence, much of what appeared in print, including information published by state game departments, for those years is inaccurate.

What appears to have happened in 1932 was that federal regulations issued early in the year restricted the use of live decoys to 25 ducks and 10 geese per blind. Apparently, protests from hunters were powerful enough that by the time hunting season rolled around the use of live decoys was only restricted in California, where at the state’s request, live goose decoys were prohibited. Regulations apparently were essentially the same in 1933 and 1934. References can be found stating there was a 25 bird limit on the use of call ducks, but no mention of the use of call geese. Regardless of what might be found in print, the 1934 hunting season was the last year that the use of live decoys of any type in any state was legal. Before the 1935 hunting season, sportsmen and conservation organizations had gathered enough clout to push the federal government to act to protect the still declining waterfowl numbers. What likely moved sportsmen who objected to a prohibition on live decoys was the very real possibility there would be no waterfowl hunting seasons at all in 1935. “Close the duck season for 1935, and as much longer as may be necessary to save the breeding stock,” was the vote of the Izaak Walton League convention in Chicago in April 1935, stated Seth Gordon in his July 1935 *Field and Stream* column.

“The new drastic restrictions limit the season to thirty consecutive days in each of the two major zones,” the *Field and Stream* editorial continued, “cut the daily bag and possession limits to ten ducks, eliminate live decoys entirely, prohibit shooting over baited land or water, and outlaw floating devices [blinds] of all kinds, except for scoters. Shooting hours are fixed from 7:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., instead of from one-half hour before sunrise to sunset as heretofore, and the new restriction on magazine guns, limiting them to three shells at one loading, will go into effect this year for the first time.”

Almost immediately sportsmen began nostalgically



Swivels were used to prevent tethers from becoming tangled. Above advertisement from *Field and Stream*, November 1928.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DORA WENNERSTEN

Carl Wennersten, right, and an unknown hunting companion with a cage of call mallards after a hunt. Wennersten lived in Shickley in Fillmore County and hunted Rainwater Basin wetlands, at one time for the market, later as a guide for wealthy sportsmen.

looking back at the “good old days” when live decoys were allowed.

“Above all, duck shooting should not be reduced to a sordid sport reckoned by meat in the bag,” an editorial in the November 1935 issue of *Field and Stream* stated before expressing the loss many wildfowlers were surely feeling “There are men who would rather not hunt ducks or geese than to do so without live decoys. To them an old gander or a ‘Susie,’ tied out in front of the blind, adds the thrill and glamour felt by the bird hunter when following his favorite pointer or setter.”

Waterfowl numbers recovered significantly during the World War II years, and there was a push to again legalize live decoys, even in Nebraska. At their May 11, 1944 meeting, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission board of commissioners passed a resolution that the head of the agency should “...instruct the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Commission’s suggestions in the following instances: That the 1944 Migratory Waterfowl Season be established along the same lines as the 1943 season, with the exception that the use of live duck decoys be permitted.” And at the June 1945 meeting the commissioners passed a resolution to be presented to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: “That a limited number of live decoys per blind be permitted when the duck population reaches a point which will provide adequate hunting by such methods for the returning servicemen and other sportsmen without seriously affecting the future production figures of such migratory waterfowl.”

“Now, no duck hunter in his right mind will deny that it is a lot more fun and a lot more effective to shoot ducks over live birds than over wooden blocks,” wrote *Field and Stream* publisher Eltinge F. Warner in the magazine’s October 1945 issue, in opposition to a bill introduced in the U.S. Congress by an Illinois senator and an Illinois representative to again

allow the use of live decoys. “Even one wise old Susie can make a lot of difference, particularly on one of those glassy days when the blocks sit out there without a ripple. All this, however, is beside the point. The point is that these bills...represent very definitely a step back toward the past, when our fish and game were at the mercy of politicians.”

The congressional bill and the lobbying of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to legalize live decoys died for want of sufficient support.

In the blink an eye, live decoys could no longer be legally used. What to do with all of them? Some probably continued to live on the farm, perhaps crossing with domestic varieties until the wildness in their blood was hardly detectable. Some no doubt ended up on the dinner table at Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Many live decoys were given to game farms, city parks, zoos and other places that kept birds for public display. Many of the Canada geese used by North Platte hunters were given to Cody Park in that city, for example. And herein lays the afterword to the story of live decoys.

By the early-1900s, the mid-continent race of Canada geese, geese that weighed nine to 14 pounds, was believed to be extinct. In the 1960s, when biologists began looking for individual “giant” Canadas, where did they find them? Cody Park and places like it in other Great Plains states. From these survivors, state and federal restoration programs raised and released goslings for more than 20 years, until today they are a self-sustaining population. They are, no doubt, the descendants of some old hunter’s prize “Judas goose.” ■

Editor’s Note: A longer version of this article containing addition information on the history of live decoys is available at NebraskalandMagazine.com. While there, check out the magazine’s blog, “Afield and Afloat.”

IN THE CORN

By Lisa Knopp

In her essay “In the Corn,” NEBRASKAland regular contributor Lisa Knopp takes a look at how corn has influenced her life, as well as the lives of others, on the Great Plains. The following excerpts represent some of Knopp’s most poignant passages from her essay.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

What is most curious about these ears is that if one of them dropped to the ground and the seeds germinated, they would have died from overcrowding. Unless humans gathered and planted the seeds, corn would have become extinct in just a few generations. Corn was and continues to be dependent on people.



PHOTO BY JOEL SARTORE

Though during a typical year the total number of acres of corn in the pre-Civil War Deep South surpassed the total number of acres of cotton by about three to one, and though the value of the corn crop was more than twice that of the cotton crop, this area was known as the “cotton belt,” the place where cotton was king.

Every war fought in the United States or what would become the United States from the beginning of the French and Indian War in 1756 through the Civil War, as well as most Indian treaties, concerned control of corn lands.

I’m always surprised to find that the furrows between the rows permit easy passage, since from a distance, they seem closely set. Since the first hard frost has drained the green from the leaves, stalks, and husks, everything seems blond and gray. When I pull back the loose husks, the gold kernels are the brightest thing in the field.



PHOTO BY JOEL SARTORE

I remember orange pyramids, heaps of sunlight, each at least as tall and as wide as my house, rising near the train tracks and panpipe-like grain elevators and train tracks in every little town along two-lane highways in southern Nebraska. For most of my life, corn was the constant, the background, the seemingly unremarkable always-there. I have known corn and cornfields for so long that I don’t have a first memory of either.

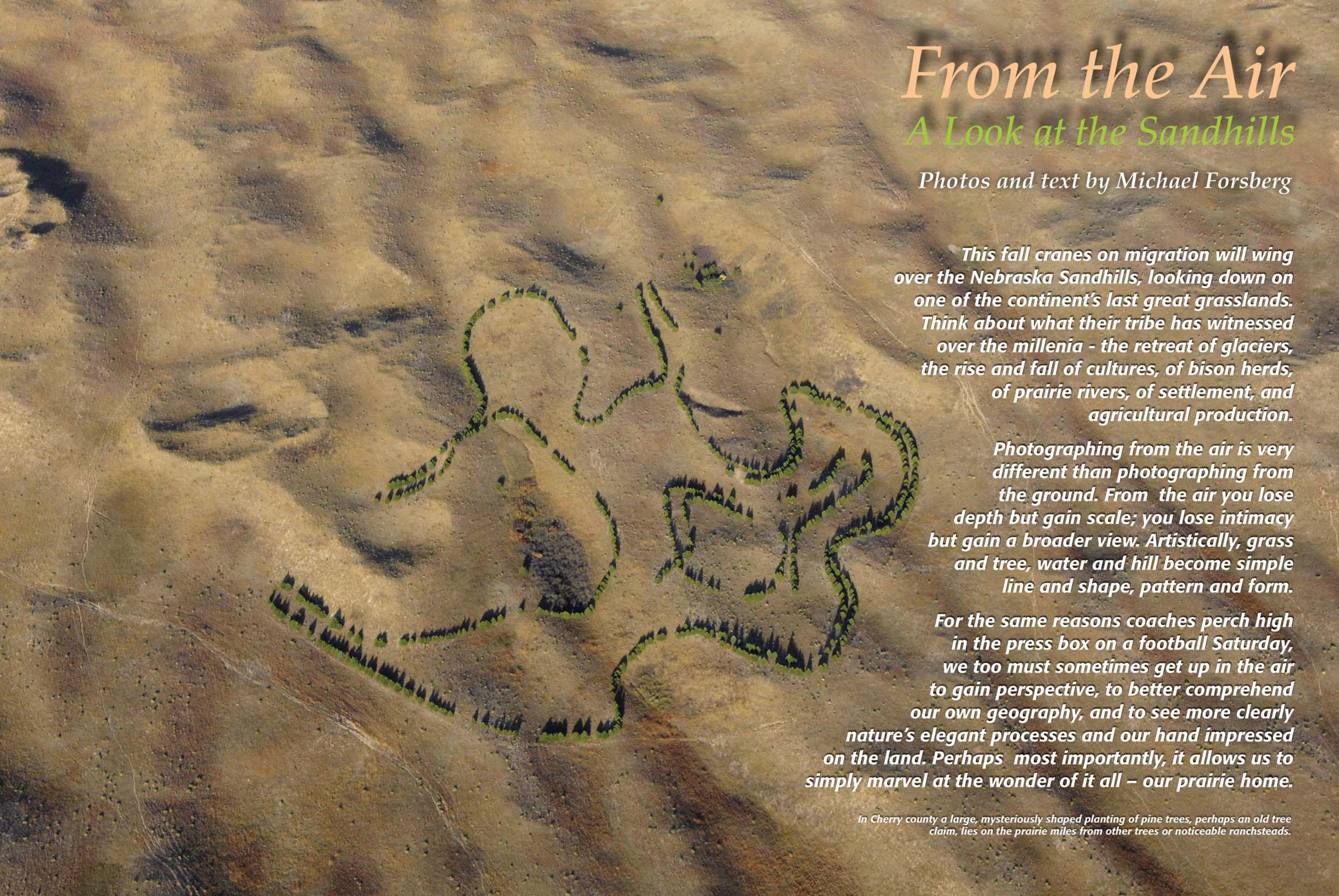


PHOTO BY CHRIS HELZER

About three-quarters of the dried corn kernel is starch; the remainder is protein, oil, sugar, fiber, and ash. Seventy-five percent of the starch locked in corn kernels becomes cattle and poultry feed, which in turn becomes meat, milk, eggs, cheese. The remaining cornstarch is used to produce syrup, textiles, leather, adhesives, detergents, beer, paint, ink, candy, tortillas, toothpaste, crayons, batteries, mouthwash, baking powder, salad dressings, yarn, soda pop, paper, soap, gravy, peanut butter, shoe polish, plastics, embalming fluids, pharmaceuticals, ethanol, and so on. We could go decades without eating anything that looks like a corn kernel, but we probably couldn’t go more than a few minutes without relying on something made from cornstarch. It is our staff of life.

Lisa Knopp’s “In the Corn” is one of 16 essays featured in her collection *Interior Places*, published by University of Nebraska Press and available at nebraskapress.unl.edu. Read the complete essay at afieldandafloat.wordpress.com.





From the Air

A Look at the Sandhills

Photos and text by Michael Forsberg

This fall cranes on migration will wing over the Nebraska Sandhills, looking down on one of the continent's last great grasslands. Think about what their tribe has witnessed over the millenia - the retreat of glaciers, the rise and fall of cultures, of bison herds, of prairie rivers, of settlement, and agricultural production.

Photographing from the air is very different than photographing from the ground. From the air you lose depth but gain scale; you lose intimacy but gain a broader view. Artistically, grass and tree, water and hill become simple line and shape, pattern and form.

For the same reasons coaches perch high in the press box on a football Saturday, we too must sometimes get up in the air to gain perspective, to better comprehend our own geography, and to see more clearly nature's elegant processes and our hand impressed on the land. Perhaps most importantly, it allows us to simply marvel at the wonder of it all – our prairie home.

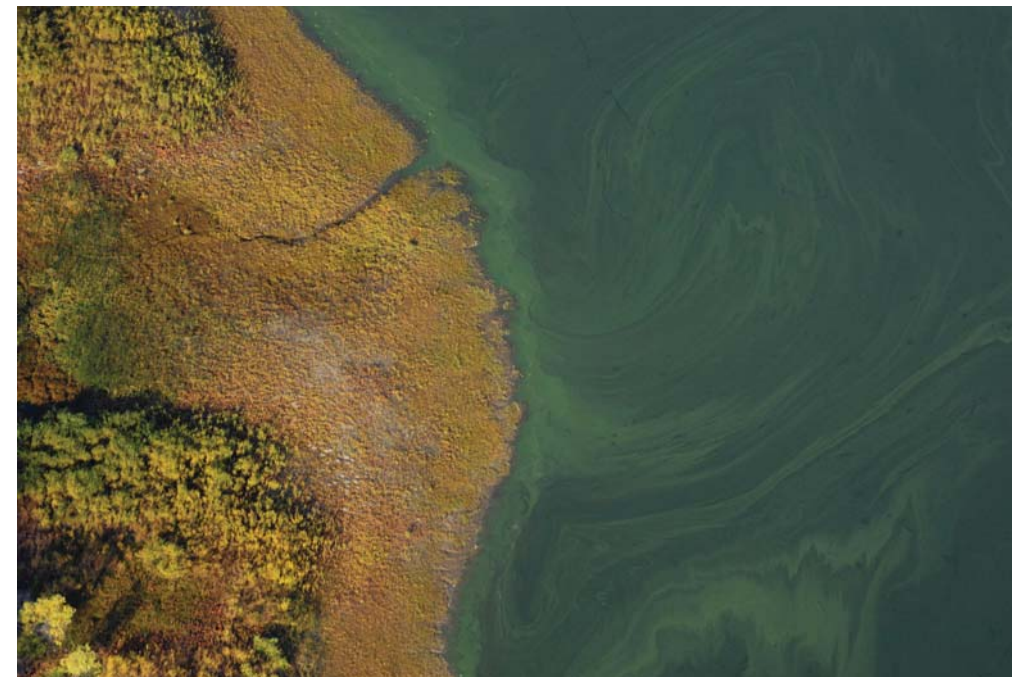
In Cherry county a large, mysteriously shaped planting of pine trees, perhaps an old tree claim, lies on the prairie miles from other trees or noticeable ranchsteads.



Like spokes on a wheel, all cattle trails lead to water at a windmill stock tank in Cherry County.



Cattle spread out in a line, feeding on a freshly unrolled bale of hay.



Swirls of algae-laden waters and grassland converge on a shoreline at Merritt Reservoir during a late-October afternoon.

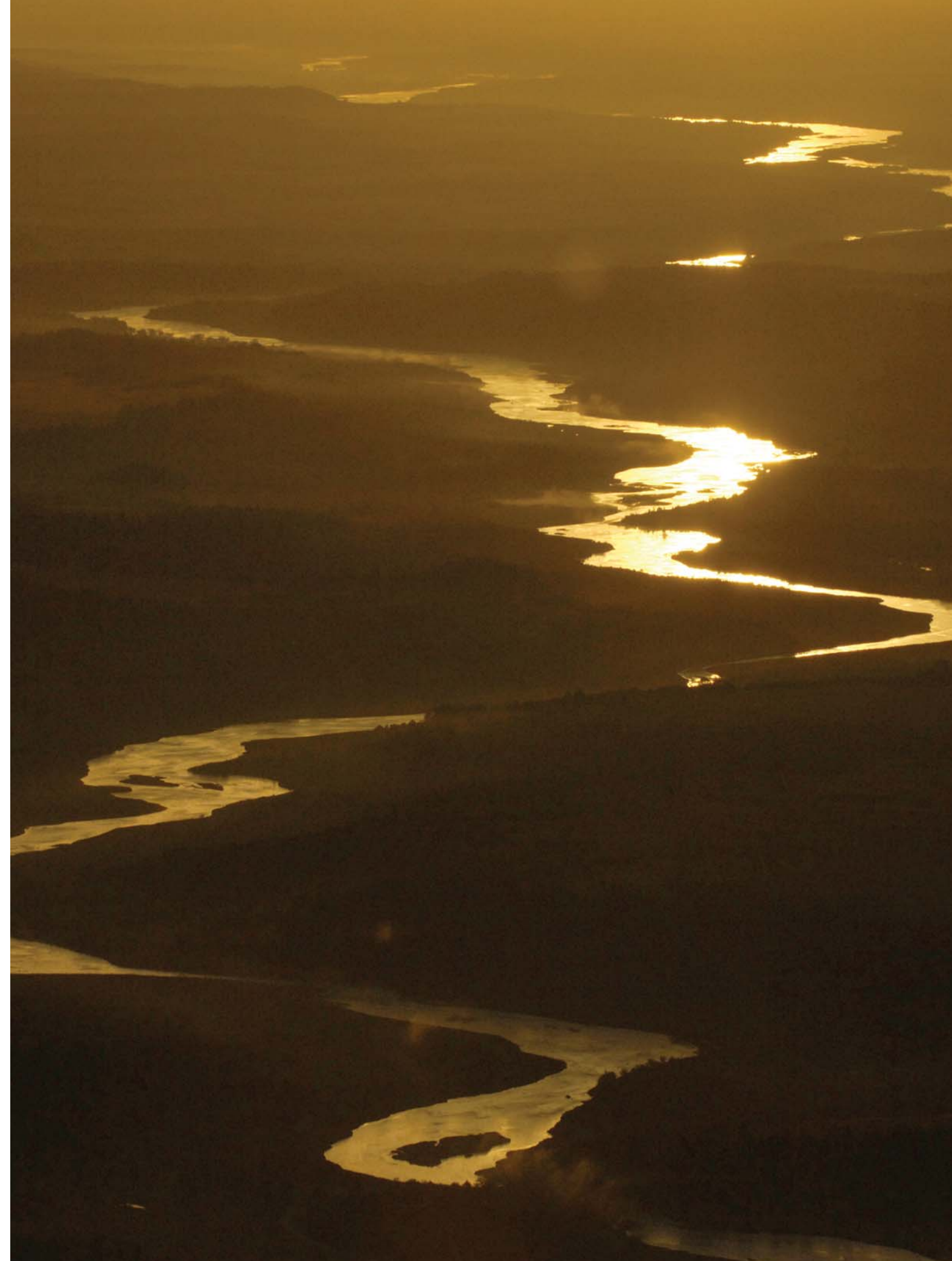


Above: The sharp southeastern edge of man-made McKelvie National Forest cuts like the bow of a ship through an ocean of grass.



Left: From 1,000 feet, round bales of hay as tall as a man appear with their shadows as mere dots on a broad, Sandhills meadow.

Opposite: Sunrise is reflected in the spring-fed waters of the Niobrara River winding its way along the northern tier of the Sandhills.



Barn Swallows

Nebraska's often unappreciated, yet fascinating, backyard bird.

By Jeff Kurrus



An adult barn swallow (left) feeds a younger bird in mid-air. This is an important step to independence for the younger bird, which starts with nest feedings; then mid-flight feedings (as pictured here); to feedings when parents drop food and new fliers catch their meals in mid-air; to total self-sufficiency.

PHOTO BY DAVID HEMMING

In the *Sibley Guide to Birds*, David Allen Sibley writes about the barn swallow: "Very elegant with long, slender, pointed wings and long, deeply forked tail." This "elegant" bird, however, will probably never draw birders to Nebraska. Actually, this passerine known for living in close proximity to humans is often viewed as more pest than benefit. I, however, knew no better when I first saw multiple swallows flying beneath my overhanging deck last spring, which sported the beginnings of a nest.

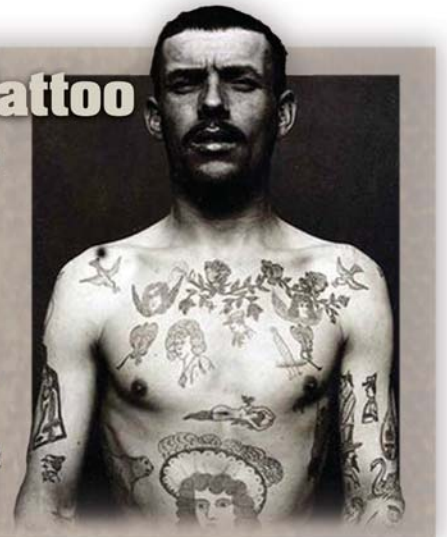
Barn swallows, the most widespread bird of the swallow family, are found in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, and those that breed throughout North America typically winter in South America. They are first observed in the southern U.S. between March and April after a predominantly daytime, drifting round-trip migration that may cover 14,000 miles. Barn swallows will fly, forage for multiple days, and then fly again many times during their migration, mainly staying near land where they can forage most effectively.

They will return to the same nest site if successful there the previous year, or start a new nesting site as they did near my newly built home last spring. In first-year birds and those whose mates did not return from the year before, males will call to nearby females, attracting them with his tail streamers and plumage. Specifically, tail-streamer symmetry is very important because it provides an aerodynamic advantage, stating to possible mates that a male is both a better forager and healthier than his competitors. In addition, plumage color brightness also reflects a healthy mate.

In addition, past researchers have revealed that female barn swallows are more likely to remain monogamous if their mate is brightly colored. Recently, researchers at the University of Colorado-Boulder darkened the feathers of male barn swallows in the study to a deep red known to attract females, which increased the amount of testosterone in the males, either because of additional interactions with females or more negative interactions with jealous males. "A male barn swallow can't look in a mirror and assess his social status," said researcher Rebecca Safran. "But if he flies into a group of other swallows, the birds will quickly assess it for him and give him a sense

The Swallow Tattoo

The barn swallow tattoo was a symbol of nautical expertise, with one legend claiming that a sailor earned a tattoo for traveling over 5,000 nautical miles on the sea. The tattoo was also seen as a conduit for the soul to heaven if some unfortunate drowning incident occurred while on the water.



of where he fits in."

Besides the male having an accentuated plumage color and longer, more pronounced tail streamers, visual gender differences are minimal. Both sexes have steel-blue plumage on the crown, wings, back and tail, and rust-colored feathers on the forehead, throat, breast and abdomen.

In my backyard, fitting in was easy for this male, as he had the entire area to himself. Or so I thought. He and his mate worked diligently for nearly two weeks to form a cup-shaped nest made of mud pellets and plant fibers beneath my deck. The spot was ideal for a species coveting open country that will readily nest on man-made structures, including bridges, culverts and open barns.

Over the next few days, I watched the swallows beneath my deck. Most active in the early morning and late afternoon, both birds periodically returned to their new nest when not foraging in nearby fields. Swallows feed and drink while in the air, catching and eating mostly flying insects such as flies and dragonflies, and skimming nearby

water sources to drink.

During one of these departures, I approached the nest and peered inside to see four white and brown spotted eggs, each not much larger than a marble. This was about midway between the typical clutch size of two to seven eggs, which hatch in 12 to 17 days following incubation by both the male



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

The typical clutch size of barn swallows is two to seven eggs, which hatch in 12 to 17 days following incubation by both the male and female.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

Seven swallow species, including the barn swallow, can be found in Nebraska.

Swallow Bugs

If you are fortunate enough to have barn swallows on your property, don't worry about the swallow bugs that sometimes inhabit their nests – these bed bug relatives co-evolved to parasitize cliff swallows and have only recently been found in barn swallow nests. Also, swallow bugs are bird specialists and don't feed on other kinds of animals, so people needn't be concerned that they will infest the house. The ones found in barn swallow nests are not known to carry any diseases and occur in such small numbers that they don't affect the birds very much. Although swallow bugs resemble bed bugs in appearance, they are actually quite different genetically. Unlike bed bugs, which can live year-round in warm houses, swallow bugs live only in bird nests and don't travel on the birds very much. Therefore they have to endure long periods in the fall and winter when the birds (thus their source of food) are gone, and have adapted by undergoing long periods of dormancy. Swallow bugs are one of relatively few insects that can survive cold Nebraska winters as adults (see "Winter Survival Strategies" beginning on page 34).

– Mary Brown



and female, with the female doing the majority of the incubation at night while both sexes incubate during the day, never leaving the nest unattended.

It was at this moment that I found out how close the foraging swallows actually were – both parents suddenly appeared, flying mere inches from my face and calling incessantly. This call was just a sample of the sounds a barn swallow can make – with this alarm call they also have courtship calls and calls to their offspring.

Nearly two weeks later, I heard the latter. And while I was unable to tell the difference between calls, the four new mouths emerging from the nest could. One parent would remain close to the nest while the other went hunting. Mere minutes later, the forager would return to feed the offspring and its mate would go off in search of food. This pattern happened repeatedly while I watched from afar.

Barn swallows feed their chicks insects compressed into tiny pellets, the size of green grapes, which are transported in the parents' throats. Each time one swallow returned to the nest, the feeding parent would call to its

After leaving the nest, barn swallows often gather in communal roosts sometimes hundreds, or even thousands, strong.

offspring and four mouths would shoot into the sky. So the question became: who gets fed first?

It depends on what chick's mouth is the reddest. Typically, the inside of a barn swallow chick's mouth is yellow. Yet during digestion when blood is needed for digestion, less blood flow to the mouth results in a redder mouth, revealing to the parents who isn't currently digesting and needs to be fed. For the first-time observer, these feedings were the tiniest of miracles to witness, yet researchers have noted that barn swallows may feed their nestlings up to 400 times per day.

Each day for the next two weeks, the birds in the nest grew significantly. Their movements were less awkward and soon they were teetering on the edge of the nest. Within a few days, they would be flying, starting their short lives where sexual maturity will occur in one year and death, on average, will

occur in five to seven years. However, if they can survive their first migration, barn swallows can live 10 to 12 years.

Before they left the nest, however, their parents continued to protect their every move. One couldn't walk within 30 feet of the deck without being accosted by protectors. Yet days later, the nest and surrounding sky were completely void of swallows. The nestlings had fledged and my morning and afternoon viewings were empty.

It wasn't until late August that more barn swallows returned. This time they made their nest on top of a light fixture. As the swallows finished their nest a little more than a week later, I approached it for the first time to see if any eggs had been laid. A large number of swallows, at least 12, dove at me from all directions, alarm calls sounding.

These defenders could have come from multiple sources. First, unmated

adults, often males, will aid other swallows in nest defense and building, incubation and brooding. Second, offspring from the first brood will often assist adults with the second brood.

As I observed these swallows for the next two weeks, their mannerisms were nearly identical to their earlier nesting. Yet just like the sky had cleared earlier that spring, it soon did so again – no more swallows.

It will be several months before I see them again, yet because the adults have a tendency to return to the same place year after year, I hope to view them next year at my home, where they, and the warm weather they bring, will most certainly be welcome. ■

Thanks to Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologist Joel Jorgensen and Mary Brown from the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership for their assistance with this article.



PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

With annual upkeep, the survival of a barn swallow nest is typically 10 to 15 years. It is unlawful to destroy these birds or their nests, as they as they are protected by the International Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Winter Survival Strategies

Text and photos by Chris Helzer

Because Nebraska's winters can be quite harsh, animals need a good plan to survive. Here are several examples of what those plans entail.

Winters in Nebraska can be brutal, so the fact that so many animals survive the long, cold winter each year is extraordinary. It's no less extraordinary that many other species leave Nebraska each fall to travel many miles south and then return to the same woodlot or prairie the next season. Whether they stay and try to scrape out a living in the harsh cold or strike out for warmer climates, winter survival is one of the most difficult challenges animals face.

Generally speaking, there are four strategies animals use to survive the winter. First, they can simply tough it out, gathering what food is available and finding shelter where they can from the coldest storms. Second, some animals hibernate, or go into some kind of dormant stage in which they slow down (or even stop) their body's processes enough to survive several months without feeding. Third, many animals enter a kind of semi-dormancy, where they essentially sleep through the toughest periods of the winter and emerge from their burrows or other shelters to wander and feed whenever the weather warms up enough to be comfortable. Finally,

many animals simply leave before winter arrives and return when it warms back up in the spring.

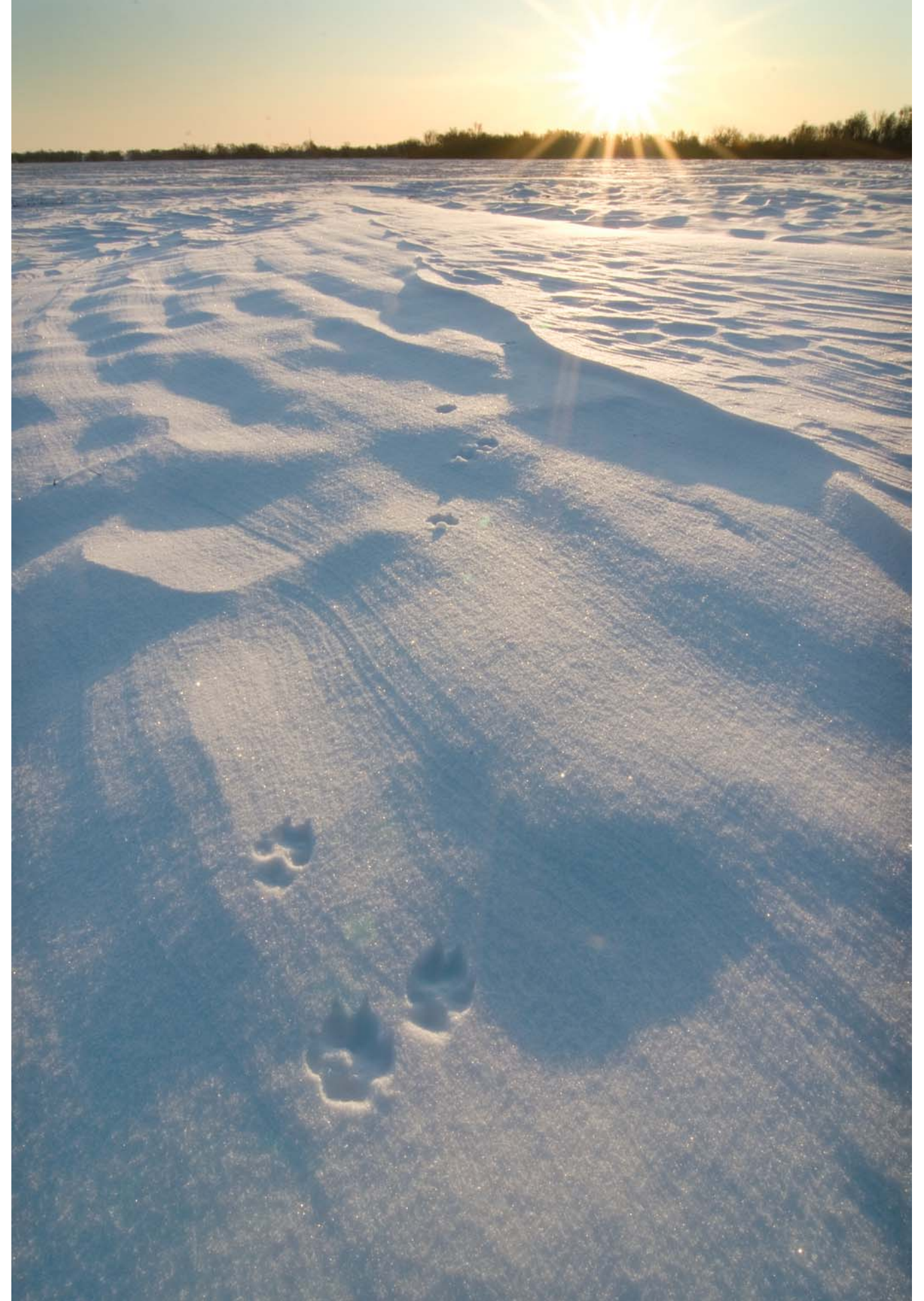
Toughing it Out

Although winter is a difficult time to find food, many animals usually manage to scrape by. Examples of species that simply tough it out include white-tailed deer, bison, coyotes, cottontails, voles and many birds, including northern cardinals, chickadees, red-bellied woodpeckers and other species common to backyard bird feeders. Even these species will seek shelter in the most inclement weather, but because they have to eat to survive, they venture out whenever possible to look for food.

Most animals that are active in the winter have very different diets than they do during the growing season – birds and mammals that primarily eat insects during the summer usually switch to eating seeds in the winter. Some of these seeds are gleaned from the ground or off of plants, but some animals (such as squirrels and other small mammals) also live off supplies gathered during the fall. Cottontails and deer switch from green leaves and stems to whatever tender twigs and buds they can find. Grass feeders, such as bison, depend heavily upon cured grasses during the winter, particularly species such as blue grama that maintain relatively high nutrition when they're dormant. In addition, many sedges stay green much of the winter and thus are important food items for bison and other animals.

Proper preparation is one of the keys to winter survival for animals who stay active throughout the cold months. Mammals tend to grow a thicker coat of fur prior to the winter which helps them keep warm, but while the cold is a big challenge, most animals lose body condition in the winter months because they're eating lower quality food and less of it. To survive, those animals have to come into winter in very good condition, including a healthy layer of fat that helps insulate

Left: Juncos are something of an aberration among Nebraska animals. They breed to the west and north of the state but spend their winters here.
Opposite: Coyote tracks in the snow are a reminder that many animals stay active all winter.





Deer mice have cozy nests to help keep them warm, but still have to venture out in search of food in order to survive.

them from the cold, but more importantly is fuel for their bodies to stay warm. They’ll burn that fat as the winter progresses, both for regular activities and to provide energy for shivering – their body’s natural way of creating heat.

Hibernation

Some animals spend part or all of their winter in some kind of dormant state. There is a lot of discussion among scientists about what is or is not true hibernation, but in general, hibernation involves deep sleep, a dramatic slowing (or stopping) of breathing and heart rates, and a significant drop in body temperature. A few examples of Nebraska animal species that fit that definition are little brown bats, woodchucks, garter snakes, snapping turtles and Woodhouse’s toads. They build up fat reserves in the late summer and fall by feeding heavily. Most hibernating animals have what’s called “brown fat” in addition to the more common “white fat” of most animals. The advantage of brown fat is that it allows animals to transform it directly into energy without having to shiver.

One of the most amazing aspects of hibernation is that animals have the ability to survive extremely slow breathing and heart rates as well as very low body temperatures. Heart rates can drop to as much as two to three percent of normal in some animals, and breathing rates can drop by 50 to 100 percent. While there is great variation, the body temperatures of many animals can drop to very near freezing, particularly in reptile and amphibian species. Most hibernating mammals have a kind of thermostat that kicks their metabolism into

gear when their body temperature drops to a particular point – the animal continues to sleep while their body burns just enough fat to keep their temperature above that set point.

The majority of hibernating mammals spend the winter underground. Woodchucks, for example, burrow down below the frost line and build a sleeping chamber lined with an insulating layer of dried grass. When it’s time to hibernate, woodchucks seal up the entrance to their sleeping chamber with dirt, both for insulation and to avoid having interlopers barge in. They then curl up to sleep and their breathing rates drop from an average of 2,100 breaths per hour to about 10, while their body temperatures drop from about 100 degrees Fahrenheit to between 40 and 55 degrees. Despite the decreased metabolic activity, woodchucks still lose between one-third and one-half of their body weight over the winter.

One hibernating mammal that doesn’t burrow is the little brown bat – this tiny animal doubles its weight prior to winter and then finds a hollow tree, small cave or some nook or cranny of a house to crawl into. Houses are particularly attractive to the bat because it’s looking for a spot that stays between 30 and 40 degrees Fahrenheit. If it gets warmer than that while its hibernating, its metabolism will run fast enough that it risks starving to death. However, temperatures below 30 degrees are bad too, and if the temperature drops too much, the bat will wake up and fly off to find a new roost site. Once it finds an appropriate location and falls asleep, its body temperature drops to very near the outside temperature and its breathing slows to about once every five minutes.

Like mammals, most reptiles and amphibians spend their winter underground. Most snake species find underground burrows to spend the winter in and many hibernate in large groups. Prairie rattlesnakes and garter snakes are two species that can be found huddled in large masses in burrows borrowed from other animals or other underground caverns. Box turtles and most toads also overwinter underground by burrowing down beneath the frost line, but don’t group together like snakes. During hibernation, box turtles slow not only their own metabolism, but also the development of the eggs already inside pregnant females.

Aquatic reptiles such as frogs and many turtles tend to hibernate underwater, which obviously presents a number of challenges. One advantage of being at the bottom of a deep pond, however, is that the temperature tends to stay well above freezing. A quirk in the physics of water means that the deepest water in a pond tends to be about 39 degrees, so as long as the pond doesn’t freeze completely, bottom dwellers don’t either. Aquatic species such as snapping turtles and painted turtles often bury themselves in the mud at the bottom of a pond or other body of water where breathing isn’t possible, but the turtles have an adaptation that allows them to survive anyway – around both the throat and anus of aquatic turtles are high concentrations of small blood vessels that can extract oxygen from water through the skin. Since their metabolism is slowed almost to a stop during hibernation, that little bit of oxygen exchange is typically enough to get them through the winter.



During winter, leopard frogs hibernate underwater on the bottom of streams and ponds.

Leopard frogs also tend to hibernate at the bottom of ponds or streams. They may cover themselves with a thin layer of sediment or lay exposed, but they always leave open space around their sides because, like turtles, they can extract oxygen through their skin and this happens most effectively along the sides of their body. In contrast to leopard frogs, some frog species, such as chorus frogs, simply bury themselves in leaf litter, beneath logs or underground and wait out the cold months. Because they’re not underwater like leopard frogs, chorus frogs are exposed to temperatures well below freezing, but they don’t usually freeze solid – the outer layers of their bodies may ice up, but their vital organs have high levels of glucose that prevents them from freezing. Often their hearts will stop beating completely, but the frogs revive when warmer temperatures return.

Winter anglers know that most fish species feed through the winter, although it can take a patient fisherman to catch them. Those fish tend to slow down dramatically during winter and go to deep water to keep from freezing, but they generally maintain their metabolic rates while minimizing their movements. However, some carp can actually bury themselves in the mud and become dormant for up to a month, ceasing their breathing and allowing their body temperatures to fall as low as 34 degrees.

Semi-Dormancy

Most animals don’t truly hibernate during the winter, but many sleep for long periods of time (days or weeks) during times of particularly harsh weather. Common animals that employ this strategy include badgers, raccoons, skunks, prairie dogs and opossums. While sleeping, their heart and breathing rates don’t slow significantly, so they emerge on warmer days to look for food and rebuild lost fat reserves. Some animals store food in their sleeping chamber so they can wake up and eat without having to go outside.

Badgers are a good example of an animal that becomes less active during the winter without actually hibernating. Because they are superior diggers, burrowing is no great challenge and winter burrows have been found that are up to 30 feet long and 6 feet deep, with the entrance plugged with



Garter snakes hibernate underground, often in large groups.

Insects in Winter

Like vertebrates, insects and other invertebrates also have a wide variety of strategies for surviving the winter. They can survive as adults, eggs, larvae/nymphs or pupae. In most of those cases, growth and development, as well as metabolism, is greatly slowed or stopped during the winter, but in invertebrates the process is called “diapause” instead of hibernation.

Those invertebrates that overwinter as adults, such as the mourning cloak butterfly, mosquitoes, lacewings and chinch bugs, try to find hiding places underneath the bark of a tree, beneath layers of leaf litter, or in underground tunnels where they can escape cold temperatures and hungry predators. Spiders often find cracks or crevices where they make a cocoon or other similar shelter out of insulating layers of silk. Many aquatic insects also pass the winter as adults – some



Galls like these are common on goldenrod plants and allow the fly larva inside to spend the winter in an insulated and edible chamber.

hibernate in sediment at the bottom of water bodies but others, such as water boatmen, remain active as long as the water isn't frozen. Many terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates that overwinter as adults can survive being frozen solid - they simply thaw out and resume their lives in the spring.

An interesting contrast exists between two bee species that live through the winter as adults. Honeybees stay inside their hive during the winter, surviving on stores of honey collected during the growing season. This honey fuels a curious behavior that helps them stay warm – when temperatures drop, the bees cluster together in a large ball and those in the center “dance,” warming the cluster (and hive) with their increased body heat. The bees constantly change position within the cluster so that they take turns being on the outside and inside of the ball. The heat generated by the activity thus allows the entire hive to survive the winter. Bumblebee colonies, on the other hand, survive only by virtue of their female queens – as fall changes to winter, the majority of bumblebees in a colony die, leaving only the queens to search out underground tunnels for hibernation. In the spring, the surviving queens lay eggs and begin to build new colonies.

Insects that survive the winter in the egg stage usually either lay those eggs underground – as seen in grasshoppers and crickets – or surround them with some kind of silky or foamy insulation to help prevent desiccation and survive intense cold. Ping-pong ball-sized praying mantis egg cases, or oothecae, can often be found in grasslands and shrublands in the late fall. Inside these oothecae are hundreds of eggs waiting to hatch and emerge when temperatures warm again in the spring.



Water boatmen stay active until the water freezes. This one will likely thaw out and continue its life in the spring.

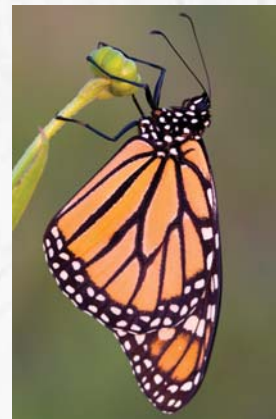
Many insects and other invertebrates pass the winter as larvae or nymphs. One of the most recognizable of these is the woolly bear caterpillar – an immature tiger moth – which spends its winter curled up in layers of leaf litter or prairie thatch. Several butterflies employ the same strategy, including viceroys and regal fritillaries. Other butterflies and moths overwinter as pupae. Tiger swallowtails, luna moths and cecropia moths are examples of species that spend the winter hanging from vegetation in a cocoon or chrysalis.

Some insect larvae pass the winter inside plant galls (swollen lumps on leaves or stems). The most well-known of these in Nebraska are goldenrod galls – quarter-sized lumps on the stems of large goldenrod plants. The galls are formed when a fly lays its egg on the stem of the plant, the larva hatches and bores a hole into the stem. Once the larva is inside, the plant responds to the irritation by making extra thick layers of plant tissue around the site. The resulting gall provides the larva food, insulation and protection from predators.

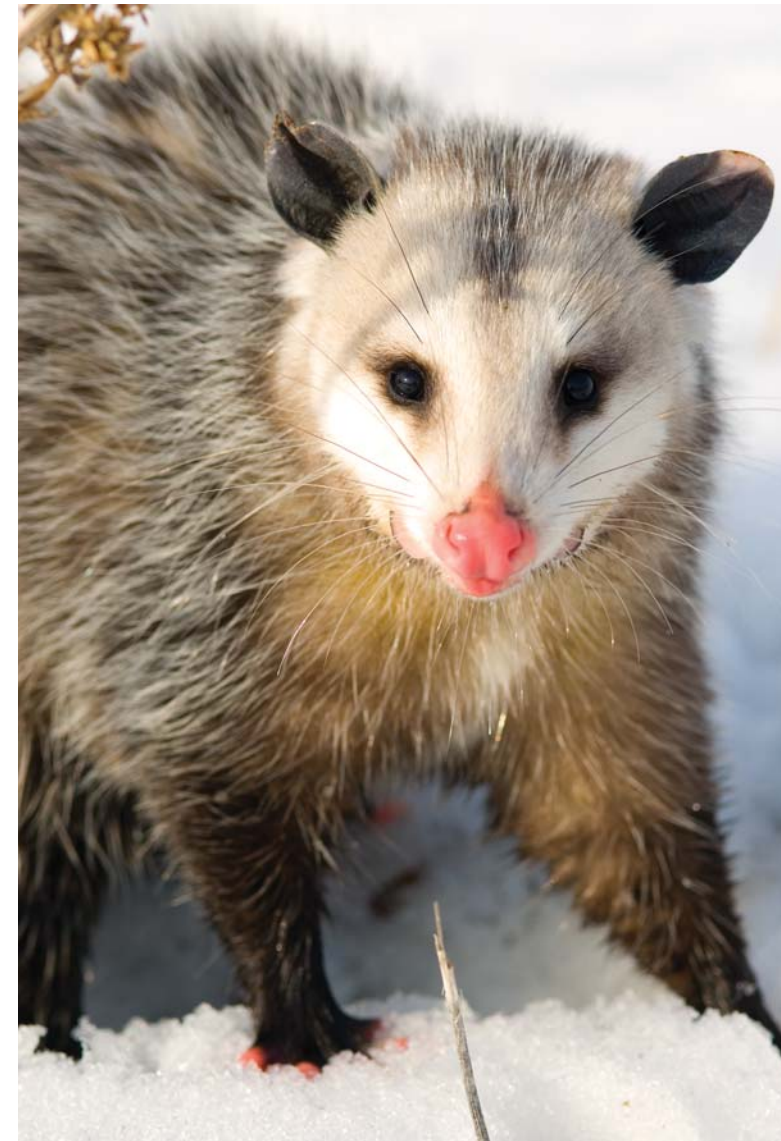
Insects that have aquatic larvae, such as dragonflies, damselflies and mayflies, can survive the winter months underwater. Those larvae can maintain at least some feeding and other activity until or unless the water freezes.

Insect Migration

Most people are familiar with the migration of birds, wildebeest and even whales, but fewer people are aware of insect migrations. The best known insect migrant is the monarch butterfly, which can migrate from Nebraska to Mexico and back – though it takes four generations to complete the journey. Other butterfly species, such as the buckeye, make their way up to Nebraska during the summer, but can't survive our winters. Ongoing research will probably identify many more examples of insect migration than we're currently aware of. One of the more interesting recent projects put tiny radio transmitters on dragonflies and is finding that some of the larger species appear to migrate from north to south late in the year.



Monarchs migrate long distances and do not overwinter in Nebraska.



An opossum searches for food in the snow near Wood River.

dirt to help keep the cold out. When they are out and about, badgers will scavenge on dead deer or other animals, but also eat live prey, including rabbits, skunks and just about anything else it can find. Badgers will often bring food back to the burrow so they can eat and sleep in turns while the food lasts.

Opposums are similar to badgers in that they are active most of the winter but den up during the coldest parts. However, opossums don't dig their own winter dens and often try to share those of other animals, including rabbits, skunks, raccoons and woodchucks. Although they don't hibernate, opossums are known to put on brown fat in the late fall to help get them through cold periods. While the brown fat helps keep their body core warm, opossums are prone to frostbite on their hairless ears, nose and tail. Opposums are normally nocturnal animals, but in the winter they are active much more during the day. Because they're omnivores, opossums will eat just about anything they can find during the winter, including carrion.

Some animals have the ability to go into a state called “daily torpor,” during which their body temperature drops a few degrees lower than normal. Typically that drop happens

overnight, and while it is only a few degrees, that reduction can save a significant number of calories from being burned. At least a few species of mice and other small mammals can employ this tactic, especially during times of food stress. Some birds, such as the black-capped chickadee, also use daily torpor to save energy during cold nights.

Migration

Many bird species, of course, migrate south in the late summer or fall. In fact, while Nebraskans tend to feel that “our birds” return home every spring to breed, most of those birds spend more time down south than they do up north. Migration northward to breed allows those southern birds to spread out during the breeding season and find plentiful food and space for nesting territories – something that would be impossible if they all stayed in warmer climates.

Researchers know much less than you might think about migration, although recent technological advances including advanced radar and tiny radio transmitters have helped. What we do know is that some bird species migrate long distances, but others only move as far south as they need to go to escape the worst winter conditions. Dickcissels are an example of a long-distance migrant, wintering in Venezuela and nearby South American countries before coming north to breed in North American grasslands. In contrast, western meadowlarks can often be seen during much or all of the winter in Nebraska, and appear to go just far enough south to find the weather and food sources they need to survive. Many waterfowl and their predators (such as bald eagles) also move north and south according to varying winter weather conditions. While eagles tend to follow concentrations of waterfowl, they will also congregate where the water stays

open enough to allow them to fish and hunt. For example, Nebraskans can see large numbers of eagles below Kingsley dam at Lake Ogallala and at Central Nebraska Public Power's J-2 Return south of Lexington during many winters.

Whether they stay active, sleep for part or all of the winter, or leave for warmer climates, every animal species in Nebraska has to have a strategy for getting through the winter. Not surprisingly, the diversity of strategies matches the diversity of species we have in the state. As more research is done here and elsewhere on winter survival tactics, we'll surely find even more fantastic stories. In the meantime, bundle up out there – it's cold! ■

Chris Helzer has been a contributor to NEBRASKALAND since 1995 and is author of the book *The Ecology and Management of Prairies*, published by University of Iowa Press. Next month Chris will discuss how Nebraska's plant species survive the winter.



Not Just a Boy's Club Anymore

Female Hunters on the Rise

By Elizabeth Mack

Walk any given field during the hunting season and that hunter you see in full camo gear and toting a rifle might very well be female. And that shotgun blast you hear? That's the sound of another crumbling stereotype, the one of the delicate woman who would rather do her nails than gut a deer.

While the number of male hunters has declined nationally in recent years, the percentage of female hunters has seen a steady increase. According to the most recent National Survey of Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife-Associated Recreation published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there was an 11 percent decline in hunters nationwide from 1991 to 2006, but female numbers grew and now make up an estimated 10 percent of the nation's 12.5 million hunters and more than 11 percent of the hunters in Nebraska. One of the largest increases is found in the numbers of female bowhunters, which one National Sporting Goods Association survey indicated had risen 176 percent from

2001 to 2005.

Janice Spicha of Nebraska is one of those bowhunters, and she isn't surprised by the statistics: "I attribute the increases to stereotypes being broken, women being accepted as hunters nowadays."

Spicha, who recently became the first female chairperson in the history of the Nebraska Bowhunters Association, believes mentoring programs such as Becoming an Outdoors Woman, put on by groups such as the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the National Wild Turkey Federation's Women in the Outdoors, have also helped attract female hunters.

"Women come into these camps and they have their makeup cases and all the trappings we women are supposed to have," said Spicha. "When they get there, I tell them this is probably the first time in their lives most of them are going to be allowed to discover themselves and not be a mother, sister, wife, girlfriend. I tell them they can chuck all the trappings

of the world – chuck it all out if they want. By the third day, the trappings are gone and the women discover themselves. It can be life changing."

Jeff Rawlinson, assistant administrator in the Commission's information and education division, says they have seen a steady rise in female participation in NGPC's various outreach programs. Although some states have had to cut funding due to budget constraints, Rawlinson says funding remains in place, at least for now, for the Becoming an Outdoors Woman program: "We have discussed the overall efficacy of the BOW program and will continue to review its impacts each year. The involvement by women in hunting, shooting sports and fishing has increased nationally over the last 10 years and the demand for outreach programs like this one has increased with it."

And it's not just adult women who are coming to hunting in large numbers – from 2001 to 2006, young girls ages 6 to 15 taking to the field increased a whopping 50 percent from just a

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRIUS



Above: Angela McDermott and her husband, Dave, teal hunt at Ducks Unlimited's Verona Complex in Clay County earlier this year. Previous page: Leslie Hershberger with a white-tailed doe she shot in Otoe County.

decade earlier. Many fathers, such as Tom Ronsick of Omaha, are finding out that hunting is a great way to spend quality time with their daughters: "My 11-year-old daughter Elizabeth has been deer hunting with me for two years in a double stand. At first I think she just wanted to spend some quality time with her dad, but eventually she got caught up in the actual hunting."

Spicha, who also hunted with her father, believes that even though men of earlier generations might hold onto old female stereotypes, once men find out that their daughters have an interest in hunting, most jump at the chance to introduce their daughters to the sport.

However, Spicha, who retired last year and has hunted or fished virtually every day since, believes that in order for daughters to have an interest in hunting, it's important to get the moms involved: "There is a saying that if you teach a man to hunt, he goes hunting. But if you teach a woman to hunt, the whole family goes hunting together."

Retailers are finding this out as well –

Cabela's, Bass Pro Shops and others are even targeting women with some lines of hunting clothing.

Females still constitute a relatively small percentage of total hunters nationwide, but Spicha believes the numbers of females going hunting for the first time will continue to grow. "It's a sport women can be good at one-on-one – it doesn't matter if you're fat or skinny, rich or poor," said Spicha. "You can excel at hunting no matter what you are in life. It's for anyone who loves and respects nature and the outdoors. I think we are learning hunting is not a gender-specific sport." ■

Elizabeth Mack is a freelance writer living in Omaha. Her last feature story in NEBRASKALAND Magazine was April 2010: "Sublime Beauty – The American White Pelican."



Becoming an Outdoors-Woman

Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) is a program offered by the Outdoor Education Division of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and is designed to encourage women to become active participants in the great outdoors. This includes activities related to hunting, camping, boating, backpacking, hiking and fishing, just to name a few.

BOW offers a unique opportunity for women to learn skills associated with a variety of outdoor recreation activities.

The workshops are geared toward adult women, but anyone 18 years of age or older who wants to learn outdoor skills in a non-intimidating and friendly environment is welcome to register.

BOW workshops are offered at Ponca State Park and the State 4-H Camp at Halsey each year, and Advanced BOW programs are often offered throughout the year in various locations across the state. BOW participants gain camaraderie with new friends, discover and enhance diverse strengths and experiences, and develop an appreciation for the wild and what it takes to develop hunting and outdoor skills in a mentored setting.

For more information, call (402) 471-5482 or go to www.NebraskaBOW.com.

The 38-point Buck

By Jeff Kurrus

Because Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium is between where I hunt and where I live, I frequently stop during the November firearm season to see what big Nebraska bucks have been checked in. If any are really big, I snap a couple of photos for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and possible *NEBRASKA* use. When I stopped by on opening day last year, two men stood beside their pickup, nice 4-by-4's in the back.

"You guys mind if I get a couple of photos of your deer?" I asked.

"You can," one of them said, "but the one you really want to see is in that truck over there."

I walked to the camper-covered truck, shielded light out from both sides of my face with my hands, the way a six-year old might look through a candy shop window, and turned back to the two men. "Yeah, I think I'll pass on your deer," I said. We all laughed.

Inside the truck was a deer unlike any animal I had seen before. All you could see was points.

A few moments later, the shooter of the deer, Wesley O'Brien of Lexington, Texas, emerged from the aquarium with a throng of people at his sides as even more people waited in the parking lot. "You guys waiting on me?" he said with a smile, then opened the tailgate. A barrage of camera phones came from nowhere, taking as many photos as they could of what was quickly named the "O'Brien buck."

This massive and gnarly whitetail, taken in the southeastern part of the state on private land in Richardson County, became one of the most talked about whitetails across the country last year. *Rack, Great Plains Game & Fish, Deer & Deer Hunting, Texas Fish & Game*, as well as both the *Omaha World Herald* and the *Lincoln Journal Star* either have either already run



O'Brien's massive buck was shot in Richardson County on private land. It is easy to see why photos of this rack have been viewed from coast to coast.

articles or will do so in the near future about this buck. "It's a remarkable deer," said Tony Korth, Ak-Sar-Ben aquarium director and certified antler scorer.

A March 19 posting on Boone & Crockett's web site stated, "We have received the entry materials for Wes O'Brien's buck. It has an official entry score of 284 and has 134³/₈ inches of

abnormal points. This still has to be verified before it becomes official." If this measurement stands, it will eclipse not only Nebraska's current state record for a nontypical firearm of 242⁷/₈, taken by Robert Snyder in 1961, but also Nebraska's state record for any weapon (as well as the former non-typical world record archery buck), Del Austin's

In a Rut?

By Jon Farrar

How important is it to hunt deer during their rutting season? Certainly it is to a hunter's advantage to have bucks on the move and more reckless than they behave the rest of the year. Back in the old days, when there was one firearm deer hunting season, it was traditionally set for about the second week of November, when biologists calculated the rut would peak. In those days a rifle hunter had two concerns – will the bucks be in rut and will most of the corn be harvested. Even now the rifle season still falls in mid-November, yet with so many season options today, over such a long period of time, hunting the rut probably assumes less importance than it once did for many deer hunters. That said, deer hunters are like every other variety of hunters in formulating theories to improve their chances of bringing home freezer meat.

If you are a hunter with a mathematical bent, you can count backwards from when most deer are born in Nebraska, the peak usually being in early-June. Both white-tailed deer and mule deer have a gestation period of about 6½ months (200 days plus or minus 12 days), so back counting gets you to the peak of mating in mid-November. There is, of course, a range in when does mate and how long they carry fawns. Deer in southern states typically have a broader breeding-season window, but in our latitude it is to the species' advantage to have fawns self-sufficient before the onset of their first winter, but not born before the last of spring snow storms.

What triggers the rut in deer has been attributed to many factors – moon phase, weather, herd age-structure and sex ratio, to name a few. Believe what you will of the various theories to narrow the time of rut to a certain hour of a certain day if you want, but there is no doubt photoperiod – the ratio of daylight hours to nighttime hours – triggers the timing, and that is consistent from year to year. As the days shorten in late-summer and early fall, the pineal gland in the brain (often called the master gland, as it regulates the release of hormones by other glands in the body) secretes a hormone



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Probably the best time of year to harvest a nice buck is during the rut, when deer are on the move a lot more and are less cautious.

called melatonin. Testosterone levels in bucks rise, leading to the shedding of velvet on antlers, increased aggression and sperm production, and an increased interest in does. The necks of the bucks swell to strengthen them for sparring with other bucks, and they seem to be constantly on the move, scanning for competition for does, noses sampling the wind for the scent of receptive does (often called the "seeking" phase). When does are entering estrus the bucks begin following and chasing them. Bucks are most vulnerable to hunters during the seeking and chasing phases of the rut. A similar transformation is occurring in does as a result of increasing levels of estrogen and progesterone that will dictate estrus and ovulation. So, the pineal gland can be thought of as a deer's chemical clock, a clock that runs on solar energy.

While the bulk of deer breeding occurs in a relatively short period, perhaps two weeks, bucks are occupied with mating for as long as two months or more, during which they exhibit pre-rutting behavior (rubbing small trees with their antlers, pawing scrapes with their feet and marking them with scent, sparring with other bucks and following does) and post-rutting behavior as they incrementally back off from all the behaviors leading to and exhibited through the rutting period.

While photoperiod triggers the timing of the peak of the rut, weather can play a role in when the peak actually occurs; and the physiological state of individual bucks and does determines the level of mating activity within that time frame. All variables considered, though, look for the deer rut in Nebraska to be in November and peak about the middle of the month.

1962 buck nicknamed "Old Mossy Horns," which scored 279⁷/₈.

O'Brien's buck was shot with a .270 Weatherby Magnum a few minutes before the end of legal shooting time on the opening Saturday of last year's November firearm season. He and two hunting partners, Brandon Rhodus of Lexington, Texas, and Dave Haveman

of Louisville, Nebraska, were scouting for Sunday's hunt when they saw the buck about 250 yards away.

O'Brien worked his way through a patch of timber to get a shot within 100 yards. The deer ran 30 yards and dropped. "I'm just lucky," he said. "A good hunter doesn't kill that deer. A lucky one does." ■

To purchase a deer permit, go to www.OutdoorNebraska.org and click on **Buy a Permit**. Permits for November's firearm season are still available for most units and statewide buck permits are unlimited.

Parasites Affecting Mule Deer

Chewing lice and meningeal worms not helping mule deer population.

By Eric Fowler

Already on the decline in some parts of their Nebraska range, mule deer have two new threats that have biologists worried.

Chewing lice, which cause hair loss and in severe cases death, have been confirmed in 10 mule deer in eight Nebraska counties since 2009. Meningeal worm (aka brain worm) which is common in but has no ill effects on white-tailed deer, has also been confirmed in mule deer following an unusual increase in reports of sick deer in Nebraska in 2008 and 2009.

The louse (*Bovicola tibialis*) problem first appeared in Washington in 2003 when the state began receiving reports of hair loss among black-tailed deer, but wasn't identified until 2005. It is believed to have come to North America game farms on fallow deer imported from Europe.

The louse soon spread to mule deer and can now be found in several western states. Bruce Trindle, wildlife research and disease specialist with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, said while only 10 cases have been confirmed in eight counties, it is likely present throughout mule deer range in Nebraska.

Trindle said lice and other parasites are generally species specific and typically don't cause harm to their host. "These lice make a living by chewing on their host and sucking their blood," Trindle said. "When you're a parasite like that, it doesn't do you any good to kill your host, but these foreign lice haven't evolved with mule deer. Not only do they overproduce and get heavily infested, they also cause an allergic reaction and quite a bit of itching and scratching."

The constant scratching can cause hair loss, which can lead to death by hypothermia, said Trindle. It can also result in a decline in body condition that makes the deer vulnerable to other ailments, including infections. The malady is most visible in the fall and winter, and should not be confused



A chewing louse infestation was readily apparent on this mule deer collected by Commission biologists in 2009.

with the normal seasonal hair loss or molting that deer go through.

While it is not known for certain if chewing lice are the sole cause, mule deer populations have fallen 30 to 50 percent in some parts of Washington. The implications for Nebraska's mule deer aren't yet known. "Maybe we'll get by," said Trindle. "Maybe the thing won't do as well in this stone cold climate we've got. We'll have to see."

The louse is not a threat to humans or livestock, and does not appear to be a threat to white-tailed deer or elk.

The confirmation of meningeal worm in free-ranging mule deer in Nebraska is rather unusual. Biologists became concerned when reports of sick mule deer in 2008 rose well above the 30 taken for all deer statewide in a typical year. In 2009, 133 reports of sick mule deer were received, mostly from central Nebraska, where mule and white-tailed deer ranges overlap, including many from Custer County.

"We received reports of deer walking in circles or showing other neurological problems such as lying on the ground and spinning in circles. Others were just unafraid of humans," said Trindle.

Biologists were able to cull and test 44 sick deer, 18 of which were found to be infected with brain worm. Many of

the deer that did not test positive, however, showed symptoms identical to those that did.

"We need to refine our diagnosis of this thing," Trindle said.

The meningeal worm lives a complicated life-cycle that begins in the brain of a white-tailed deer. There the worms lay eggs that move through the bloodstream to the lungs, where they hatch and grow. When deer cough, the larvae can be sprayed onto grass, or swallowed by the deer and passed in the mucous covering its feces. Once on the ground, larvae attach to the foot of a passing snail and continue to develop in this intermediate host. When these snails are inadvertently eaten by browsing deer, the larvae penetrate the deer's stomach, migrate through its nervous system to the brain, develop into worms and restart the cycle.

"In low numbers, they're easily tolerated by whitetail deer," said Trindle. "Evidently mule deer just don't like worms crawling around in their system and it's causing them problems."

Trindle said that until recently, sick or dead mule deer could readily be tied to epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD), which is spread by biting midges and causes fever, hemorrhaging of internal organs and, in most cases, death. These two latest threats to mule deer come on top of the 2000 discovery of chronic wasting disease, which also causes neurological problems and death.

Biologists are currently modifying the protocol they use when responding to reports of deer that look sick, are behaving unusually or are dead, in order to better pinpoint the cause. "Some of these deer can look pretty rough and some can look healthy," he said. "We've got to determine what's killing them."

Trindle said reports of sick mule deer have declined this year, for whatever reason, but asks that people continue to make reports to their nearest Commission office so the prevalence and spread of these maladies can be accurately tracked. ■



In the Beginning

The Nebraska State Legislature created Chadron State Park in 1919.

By Jon Farrar

A case can be made that Nebraska's state park system had its beginning in 1919 when the Nebraska Legislature set aside one section – 640 acres – of school land in the Pine Ridge south of Chadron for public outdoor recreation. For two years the land sat idle as no state agency or department was designated to manage it. In 1921, a State Park Board within the Department of Public Works was created to develop and manage Nebraska parklands. Two years later, Arbor Lodge in Nebraska City and Victoria Springs near Anselmo were added.

"Nebraska has been slow in getting such work underway yet progress has been made, foundations have been laid and, if present development continues in future years, Nebraska will have ample facilities for entertaining its own people and visitors from other states as well," a October 1926 *Outdoor Nebraska* article noted.

On April 22, 1929, the State Park Board was dissolved and merged with the Bureau of Game and Fish to create the Game, Forestation and Parks Commission. Later that year, five new cabins were built at Chadron State Park and five older cabins repaired and updated. The Commission's report to the governor noted: "All of these cabins were of rustic design, in keeping with the scenic effect of the country and were fitted with cots, stoves and other accommodations for tourists and visitors." The park had always been a popular destination for picnics but that same year other outdoor recreation opportunities were added – horseback riding, walks "through the rugged country thereabouts," and a cafe and store where campers could buy supplies sprouted up.

In 1932, a water carnival was staged at the park and attended by about 6,000 people. Three large piers were constructed at the park entrance using rocks from the Black Hills, and roads through the park improved. Attendance



Trail rides are popular at Chadron State Park, which also has dozens of scenic trails open to hikers and bikers.

was down in 1933 because of the Depression, and because 200 men of the Civilian Conservation Corps were building cabins from some 200,000 feet of lumber "salvaged from the aged trees." Federal public works programs continued to develop the park through the 1930s, and it remained the largest park in the state system.

In a conspicuous attempt to keep Nebraskans enjoying outdoor recreation, even during the hard days of the Depression, an advertisement in the summer 1937 issue of *Outdoor Nebraska* proclaimed there was "health, rest and fun" to be found at Chadron State Park. Visitors were tempted with the promise of "Cabins in the Woods, Swimming, Horseback Riding, Skyline Hiking, Picnic Shelters" in "acres of pine forests where the nights are cool and exhilarating." By that year, the park's size had grown to 800 acres and there were 30 cabins in "varied sizes and locations" and all were "fully equipped for light housekeeping with the exception of dishes and cooking utensils."

Today, the 972-acre park offers 22 two-bedroom cabins from mid-April to mid-November and a conference building. There are 70 modern RV camping pads with 30-amp electrical hookups and 18 non-pad sites without

electricity. Visitors can still do all that visitors did decades ago – hike, ride horses, boat on small lakes or just kick back, relax, and enjoy the solitude. For more details about Chadron State Park, visit the Commission's website at OutdoorNebraska.org and click on "Parks" at the top of the homepage. Many changes have been made at Chadron State Park since its early years, most of them making it more accessible and comfortable for visitors, but the reason the park was established remains unchanged – to provide public access to the rugged Pine Ridge country. "Man has done little here," the April 1931 issue of *Outdoor Nebraska* reported. "Nature is shown in her untouched mood." ■



Chadron State Park is located nine miles south of Chadron on U.S. 385. The 972-acre park lies in the heart of the Nebraska National Forest and is dominated by ponderosa pines. There are 22 two-bedroom housekeeping cabins available from mid-April to mid-November.

DeSoto Buck Study

Deer movement study produces information useful to hunters.

By Eric Fowler

If you scouted a trophy buck all summer and aren't seeing him now that deer season has opened, don't despair – he's probably not far away, according to a University of Nebraska – Lincoln study conducted at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge near Blair in recent years.

"People watch these big velvet bucks all summer," said Greg Clements, who conducted the buck study as part of his graduate studies at UN-L. "They think, 'Yeah, I want to hunt that deer and he's been coming out on that bean field all summer long.' Then once you get to fall, you really don't see them any more and you wonder where they are and if somebody else shot them, or are they just completely nocturnal."

Clements' study found a mature buck's summer home range – the area in which it spends the majority of its time – sometimes has very little, if any, overlap with its fall home range.

"If you don't have much land to hunt, it doesn't take much of a shift and you may not see them during the fall," said Clements.

UN-L students have tracked more than 500 deer at DeSoto since 1991, making it one of the largest and longest-running deer studies in the U.S. Between 2004 and 2008, Clements put radio collars on 85 white-tailed bucks (40 fawns, 20 yearlings and 25 adults) – some caught in walk-in traps, others immobilized with a dart gun – and tracked their movements. He found that the average annual home range of bucks in the study was 1,100 acres – 1.7 square miles – nearly three times the annual home range of does that had been previously tracked on the refuge. Clements found mature bucks, like does, typically remain in the same home range from year to year, other

than slight shifts that usually are related to crop rotations.

The core area of a buck's annual home range, typically centered around



Greg Clements poses with a white-tailed buck after immobilizing it with a dart gun and attaching a radio collar.

bedding areas, averaged 240 acres. As could be expected, seasonal home range size was highest during the breeding season – twice the summer range – when bucks are seeking does

While some of the information Clements gathered is useful to hunters, the study was designed to find out how deer movement could spread diseases among free-ranging deer and how wildlife managers might be able to control the spread through culling efforts. It found that 71 percent of the yearling males that were tracked moved a mean distance of 11 miles to new habitat either in the spring, when does chase them from their home range as fawning season approaches, or in the fall, when they are chased out by dominant

bucks. One buck was killed by a vehicle 75 miles away near Quimby, Iowa, east of Sioux City. Most young bucks followed the riverbottom north or south and set up new home ranges in or within three miles of the riverbottom.

"Because the yearlings travel the most and have the greatest potential to spread disease, that's one of the age classes you'd want to focus on," Clements said. "So then being able to know that the vast majority stay in the river valley, you could focus your culling efforts in that area."

The study also reinforced what others have suggested and should give hunters another reason to harvest does: During the study, the refuge increased antlerless deer hunting opportunities in an effort to cut the deer population. As more adult does were harvested, fewer yearling bucks dispersed. "They'll stay put, hopefully on your property," Clements said of those young bucks.

As had been found in previous studies on the refuge, most adult bucks "rode it out in thick cover" within their core range during hunts on the refuge, which primarily target antlerless deer, Clements said.

While mature bucks typically stayed close to home, they were prone to making short excursions of an average of 1.6 miles outside their home range. However, two adult bucks took weeklong walks of 12 and 22 miles.

Clements said mature bucks typically move into thicker cover in the core of their home range during the fall. Identify that core area, and you can still be successful. Clements also said to remember that if a seasonal shift in home range means a deer is no longer using your property, a similar shift may bring other bucks onto your property from neighboring land. ■

Habitat Share

Conservation groups kick in to help improve habitat on public land.

By Eric Fowler

Thanks to an increase in federal funding and contributions from Nebraska Pheasants Forever and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), 1,500 acres of habitat improvement projects have been completed on 40 wildlife management areas in Nebraska that may not have otherwise been possible.

Each year, Nebraska Game and Park Commission biologists use a variety of techniques to improve wildlife habitat on these areas, including clearing eastern red cedar and other invasive trees from grasslands and hardwood forests, disking and interseeding aged grasslands to create early successional habitat to benefit ring-necked pheasants and other grassland birds, restoring native grasslands, prescribed burning, and managing food plots. But the work is expensive, and the amount of funding available doesn't go as far as biologists would like.

When one of those funding sources, the federal Wildlife Restoration Program, unexpectedly increased by \$2.3 million to \$7.7 million in 2010, the Commission was in a quandary – the program, created by the Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937, returns the federal excise taxes that

The National Wild Turkey Federation has 34 chapters and 3,000 members in Nebraska working to improve wildlife habitat on public and private land. For more, go to NWTF.org.

Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever have 64 chapters and 15,000 members in Nebraska, where the organizations have helped improve three million acres of wildlife habitat since 1987. For more information, go to NebraskaPF.com.



Contractor FDC Enterprises of Ohio used a fleet of skid steers equipped with chipper heads to remove hundreds of acres of invading cedars and planted tree rows. Chipping cedars is often more efficient than shearing, piling and burning.

hunters and shooters pay on guns, ammunition and other gear to the states, which use this funding to pay all but 25 percent of the cost of qualifying projects. The Commission typically uses proceeds from hunting permit sales to match federal dollars, but this year it didn't have enough budget authority to utilize the unexpected windfall, and staff feared it would have to return unused funds at year's end, something that rarely, if ever, happens.

Luckily the Commission can also pass Wildlife Restoration grant funding on to conservation partners willing to come up with the state match. When the Commission approached Pheasants Forever, hoping it could rally its members to do some of the work as an in-kind match, the organization did one better and provided \$150,000 of what became a \$600,000 project that hired a contractor to come in and do the work on more than 30 areas. The NWTF followed suit with a \$9,300 contribution toward \$37,000 of work done on four additional areas. Most of the work was done on WMAs in central and southeastern Nebraska, and involved invasive tree removal.

"We spend quite a bit of money on our own areas, but this partnership really

intensified what we would've done on a normal basis," said Alicia Hardin, assistant administrator in the Commission's Wildlife Division. "We really wanted to make a big impact on the WMAs, so when we did tree clearing, we didn't want to just do a couple of acres here and there, but do 200 acres or more on one area and really make a difference. It was almost like you waved a magic wand over some of the needs that biologists had on these areas and it was taken care of."

The Habitat Share program was the first time Pheasants Forever had partnered with a state agency anywhere in the country to do work on public land with Wildlife Restoration funds. Habitat Share will help Pheasants Forever accomplish one of the goals laid out in its Reload Nebraska initiative, which was launched in 2009 and aims to establish and improve 1.1 million acres of wildlife habitat on public and private land across the state.

The NWTF has contributed \$270,000 toward 72 projects on public land in Nebraska since 2000. With matching funds, the total cost of the projects was more than \$800,000. It plans on spending another \$175,000 on public land projects in 2011. ■

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◀ This is a photo of my first deer, harvested December 7, 1953, in the Crawford area. After drawing unsuccessfully for two prior years, I finally received a permit the third year and was able to take this nice mule deer that field-dressed at about 200 pounds. I was 17 years old at the time and now, at age 73, I continue to return to Nebraska to hunt almost every year. The other photo shows a trophy mule deer harvested in November 1954 by my brother, Roger Plooster, Sr. (now deceased), also in the Crawford/Pine Ridge area. It scored 188 $\frac{1}{2}$ by Boone & Crockett. The other deer was taken by Dick Shepard, who was a coach at Crawford High School at the time.



– Donald G. Plooster,
Forest Lake, Minnesota

▼ This photo was taken in front of the August Widhalm farm home north of Humphrey in 1928 or 1929. The house burned to the ground during a dense fog in the mid '60s. My father, Al Widhalm, is on the right, and his cousin, Bill Widhalm, is on the left (Bill spelled his name with an "e" rather than the "a" of Widhalm). Handsome men, nice birds, neat Chevy – and if you look closely you will find the dog!

– Helen Fuchs, Columbus, Nebraska



◀ These photos were taken in the late '40s and show my father, Martin Konopik Jr. (left), with his friend Ross, and Ross with some of his friends on our farm six miles north of Richland.

Ross came out from Omaha every fall to hunt and it was quite a treat for us. They brought fancy guns, chokes – everything that they thought a hunter needed. They were our window into the outside world and the event broke the humdrum of daily life. Our father let anyone who asked hunt our land and liked this group in particular because they appreciated the opportunity and brought hunting courtesy to a high level.

– Martin Konopik
Las Vegas, Nevada

Send contributions to: Portraits from the Past, NEBRASKAland Magazine, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370. Or e-mail to tim.reigert@nebraska.gov. Photos should show people enjoying Nebraska outdoor activities, such as camping, boating, hunting or fishing, and must have been taken before 1980. We will give priority to unusual photos or activities. When possible, please include a story about the photograph and identify the people, places and approximate date it was taken. Photos will be returned.

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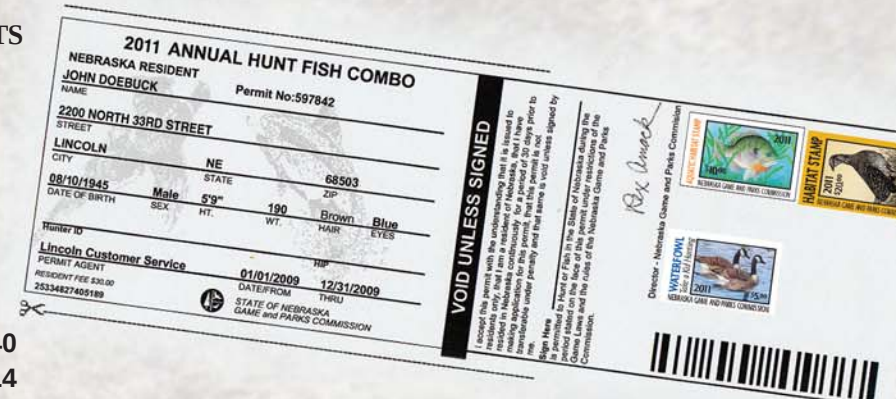
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