



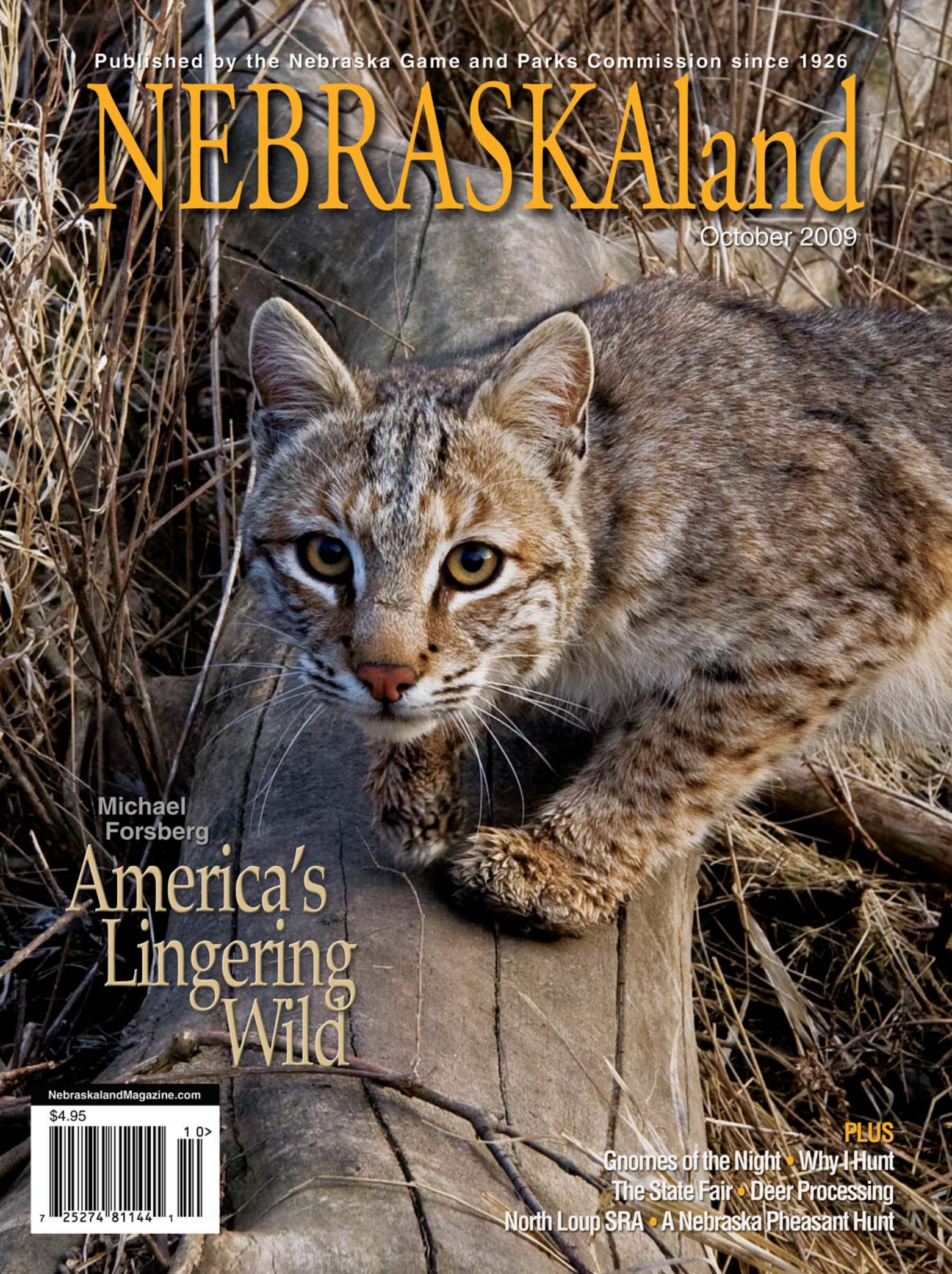
Autumn's diminishing light illuminates a cottonwood leaf at Bazile Creek Wildlife Management Area in Knox County. Photo by Michael Forsberg.

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NEBRASKAland

October 2009



Michael
Forsberg

America's Lingering Wild

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PLUS
Gnomes of the Night • Why I Hunt
The State Fair • Deer Processing
North Loup SRA • A Nebraska Pheasant Hunt



NEBRASKAland

Volume 87, Number 8, October 2009

FEATURES

12 America's Lingering Wild

Lincoln-based photographer Michael Forsberg traveled roughly 100,000 miles over the past four years while documenting the wild that still survives in the heart of our continent. The result is his latest book, *Great Plains – America's Lingering Wild*.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL FORSBERG

20 Why I Hunt

There are numerous reasons why people hunt – exercise, recreation, family time, relaxation, nutritious table fare – but the main reason they hunt is because someone once asked them to go. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

24 The State Fair Says Goodbye to Lincoln

The 2009 Nebraska State Fair bid a “fair”-thee-well to Lincoln this year when it wrapped up its century-long run in our Capitol City. These photos capture a bit of this year's fun before the fair moves to Grand Island next year.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DOUG CARROLL

30 Gnomes of the Night - Ord's Kangaroo Rat

Specialized to prosper without having a drink of water, these appealing mouse-like creatures are found in grasslands on sandy soils. They emerge from their elaborate underground burrows only in the dark of night.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JON FARRAR

36 A Nebraska Pheasant Hunt

The sights, smells and sounds of a Nebraska pheasant hunt is what sets it apart from any other type of hunting. Toss in good company, good stories and good food, and any birds harvested during the hunt are purely gravy.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

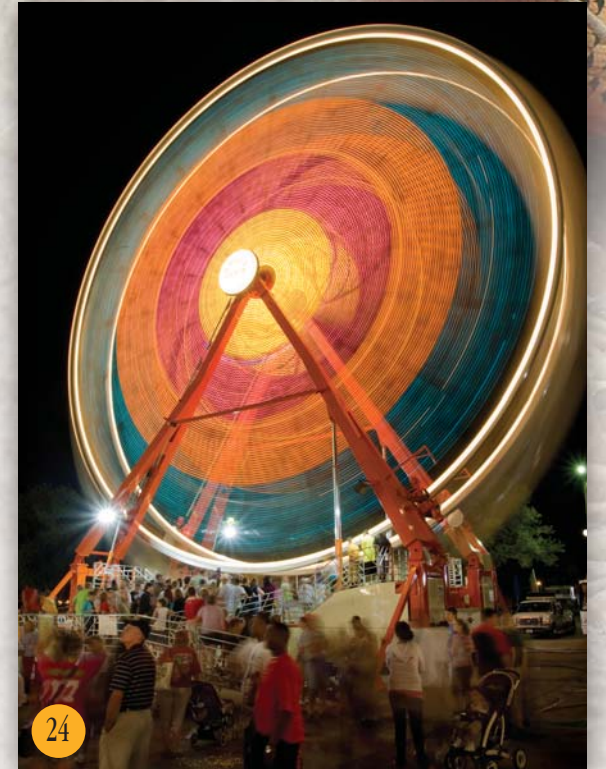
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Cover: Near sunset, a bobcat moves along a creek drainage at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie near Denton. See story beginning on page 12. Photo by Michael Forsberg.

Opposite: Wind has created a small sand dune area around a windmill and stock tank near Steer Creek Campground at McKelvie National Forest in Cherry County. Photo by Bill Hager.

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First Turkey

My 12-year-old grandson, Charles Hales, shot his first turkey April 25, 2009, while on a National Wild Turkey Federation mentor hunt in the Battle Creek area with his father, Joe, and friend, Roy Swoboda. He used a 20-gauge shotgun and, needless to say, was very excited.
Georgia Hales
Via e-mail

Snipe Hunting

I very much enjoyed Jon Farrar’s piece in the latest issue regarding “Snipe Hunting History.” One can never read too much about this wily (and tasty) shorebird. I would offer that the species we enjoy here in “the States” is now accepted to be the Wilson’s snipe (instead of the “common snipe” found in Eurasia). And I’d agree with Jon’s recommendation of using No. 7½ or No. 8 shot. I would just remind fellow snipers that non-toxic shot must be used while pursuing this majestic game bird. “Pass the snipe salt, please!”
Brad McKinney, President
Snipe Unlimited

Goose Lake Rebuttal

The Upper Elkhorn NRD was disappointed with the “Goose Lake Rebound” article in the July 2009 *NEBRASKAland*. The Upper Elkhorn NRD has a good working relationship with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission on programs

such as Wild Nebraska, various studies on the Platte River and, contrary to the article, even on Goose Lake. The article seemed to focus on the negative rather than the positive aspects that were achieved during our partnership of maintaining the lake for all recreational purposes. The Upper Elkhorn NRD testified in front of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission with the district’s position, concerns and observations of making it a 5 mph lake in October 2006. This testimony can be found on the UENRD website at www.uenrd.org.

The Upper Elkhorn NRD is funded by all property owners within its boundaries. The Upper Elkhorn NRD attempts not to distinguish these funds for specific uses and the district attempted to accommodate all recreational enthusiasts in the district. These property owners include water enthusiasts that enjoy fishing from the shoreline or from a boat, wildlife, hunting and recreational use that exceeds the 5 mph limit.

Many comments in the article criticized the Upper Elkhorn NRD and the operation of the irrigation well and the districts intentions; the district encourages anyone to read the testimony mentioned earlier regarding the district’s opinion. The article fails to comment that the Nebraska Game and Parks was involved in the decision process of when to pump the well. Due to budget constraints or spending limits set either by the Upper Elkhorn NRD or Nebraska Game and Parks, the irrigation well was pumped to provide the most beneficial uses.

It is true, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and the Upper

Elkhorn NRD did not agree on the 5 mph restriction and the district ultimately sold the well and pumping equipment and received payment from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission in 2007. However, it is disappointing to see an article that criticized the Upper Elkhorn NRD for concerns regarding aquatic vegetation as it impacts all boating, winter fishkills and depth of the lake and then later stated in the article that those were or are concerns of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.
The partnership between the Upper Elkhorn NRD and the Nebraska Game Parks is much more than the negativity written regarding Goose Lake and ultimately the District and lake deserved better.

On behalf of the Upper Elkhorn NRD Board of Directors

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Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.

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Red Headed Woodpecker



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Red Headed Woodpecker, Pheasant, and Gold Finch photos courtesy of Don Brockmeier



State Fair Photo Winner

A foggy morning photo of sandhill cranes on the Platte River won this year’s Wild and Scenic category of the Nebraska State Fair photo contest. The winning photographer, Linda Graham of Greenwood, had this to say about her winning entry:

“The picture of the sandhill cranes was taken on an extremely foggy morning in March from a blind on the Platte River at Rowe Sanctuary. I had been taking pictures into the fog where I could hear the birds and caught this picture just as the sun peeked over the horizon and the fog very slowly began to disseminate. The cranes were things of beauty to behold and I was glad to be able to capture a bit of the morning with a lens.”

Graham’s entry was one of 18 photos entered in the Wild and Scenic class. Overall, almost 2,000 photos were entered in this year’s state fair photo contest.

Burns Film on National Parks

Filmed in nature’s most spectacular locales – from Acadia to Yosemite, Yellowstone to the Grand Canyon, and the Everglades of Florida to the Arctic of Alaska – *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*, a new film by Ken Burns, is an epic story that’s a century long and a continent wide. Step into our nation’s most beautiful and sacred places and discover how they came to be preserved not for royalty or the rich, but for everyone. You’ll meet extraordinary people from every background, who devoted themselves to saving the lands they loved, and in doing so, reminded their fellow citizens of the full meaning of democracy.

The National Parks: America’s Best

Idea is a six-part series that will begin Sunday, September 27 at 5 p.m. CT on NET1 and in high definition on NET-HD. For details about the series, visit netNebraska.org/nationalparks.

The series will repeat on NET1/NET-HD on the “National Parks Weekend Marathon,” Saturday, October 3, from 12:30 to 7 p.m. CT (the first three episodes), and on Sunday, October 4, from 1 to 7 p.m. CT (the last three episodes).

Grand Reopening Sept. 26

The public is invited to come help celebrate the opening of the Nebraska Nature & Visitor Center (formerly the Crane Meadows Nature Center), located south of Interstate 80 Exit 305 near Alda.

The open house will be held September 26 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and features display booths, food, music, trail hikes, hayrack rides and a photo exhibit by Joel Sartore, a native Nebraskan whose work often appears in National Geographic.

For more information about the center or its grand reopening, go to www.nebraskanature.org or call (308) 382-1820.



Outdoor Message Plates

Nate Deminski of Ashland doesn’t impose limits on himself when it comes to bird hunting, making time to pursue dove, pheasants, quail, turkey, ducks and geese. His love for all bird hunting shows on his message plate.

If you have a unique 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.

NEBRASKA

Pheasants Forever & Quail Forever

EVENTS

Nebraska Fall Banquet Dates

Date	Chapter	Location
09-17-09	Burt County PF	Tekamah
09-17-09	Dakota/Thurston PF	South Sioux City
09-19-09	Kearney County PF	Minden
09-26-09	Cody Ringnecks PF	North Platte
09-26-09	Heartland PF	Omaha
10-03-09	Platte River PF	Lexington
10-10-09	Upper Big Nemaha PF	Tecumseh
10-15-09	Loup/Platte Ringnecks PF	Grand Island
10-15-09	Husker Covey QF	Lincoln
10-16-09	Cass County PF Youth Banquet	Plattsmouth
10-17-09	Oregon Trail PF	Gering
10-30-09	Four Seasons PF	Deshler
10-31-09	South Central Nebraska PF	Alma
11-07-09	Webster County PF	Blue Hill
11-13-09	Sandhills PF	Ainsworth
11-20-09	Central Nebraska QF	Boelus
11-28-09	Niobrara Valley PF	Atkinson

Nebraska Youth Mentor Hunts

Date	Chapter	Location
09-05-09	Cody Ringnecks PF	North Platte
09-26-09	Douglas County - West PF	Tekamah
09-27-09	Sandhills PF	Ainsworth
10-03-09	Boone County PF	Albion
10-03-09	Dakota/Thurston PF	Homer
10-03-09	Dixon County PF	Dixon
10-03-09	Elkhorn Valley PF	Norfolk
10-03-09	Heartland PF	Gretna
10-03-09	Little Blue River PF	Hastings
10-03-09	Loup River PF	Ord
10-03-09	Washington County PF	Blair
10-10-09	Golden Prairie PF	Neligh
10-10-09	Lewis & Clark PF	Hartington
10-10-09	Otoe County PF	Palmyra
10-10-09	Western Nebraska PF & Perkins County PF	Elsie
10-11-09	Dodge County PF	Arlington
10-15-09	Loup/Platte Ringnecks PF	Grand Island
10-17-09	Bazile Creek Ringnecks PF	Bloomfield
10-17-09	Cass County PF	Plattsmouth
10-17-09	Cornhusker PF	Syracuse
10-17-09	Franklin County Covey QF	Republican City
10-17-09	High Plains PF	Sidney
10-17-09	Lincoln Creek PF	Aurora
10-17-09	Logan Creek PF	Wayne
10-17-09	Republican Valley PF & Wachtel fur Immer QF	Arapahoe
10-17-09	Seward County PF	Brainard
10-17-09	Southeast Nebraska PF	Beatrice
10-18-09	Niobrara Valley PF	Atkinson
10-24-09	Antelope Valley PF	Oshkosh
10-24-09	Burt County PF	Tekamah
10-24-09	Corn Country PF	York
10-24-09	Custer County PF	Broken Bow
10-24-09	Four Seasons PF	Hebron
10-24-09	Great Plains PF	Holdrege
10-24-09	Heritage PF	Alliance
10-24-09	Kearney County PF	Minden
10-24-09	Lower Platte PF	Ashland
10-24-09	Maple Creek PF	Howells
10-24-09	Mile High PF	Kimball
10-24-09	Plains Sportsman PF	McCook
10-24-09	Ponca Creek Ringnecks PF	Gross
10-24-09	Prairie Hills PF	Kearney
10-24-09	Rainwater Basin PF	Sutton
10-24-09	Sherman County PF	Loup City
10-24-09	South Central Nebraska PF	Alma
10-25-09	Cedar River Ringnecks PF	Greeley
12-12-09	Nemaha Valley PF	Humboldt






For further contact information or dates visit www.NebraskaPF.com

From the Kitchen

By this point in the season, odds are you've shot a few squirrels.

Now what do you do? Squirrels are often one of hunters' least popular dinner choices, but can be easy to cook for even the novice chef. The following is a squirrel recipe taken from the *NEBRASKAland* Wild Game Cookbook, currently available at Outdoor.Nebraska.org.

Roast Squirrel

Ingredients:
3 squirrels
¾-cup cooking oil
¼-cup lemon juice
2-cups bread crumbs
½-cup cream
1-cup sliced mushrooms, sautéed
½-tsp salt
⅛-tsp pepper
½-tsp onion juice
4-tbl olive oil or bacon fat

Dress and clean squirrel. Wash in several water baths and dry. Cover with cooking oil mixed with lemon juice and let stand for one hour. Moisten crumbs with cream and combine with mushrooms, salt, pepper and onion juice. Stuff squirrels with this mixture, sew and truss. Place squirrels in a

roaster. Brush with olive oil or bacon fat. Roast uncovered at 325 degrees until tender, 1½ to 1¾ hours, basting every 15 minutes. Serve with pan gravy. Serves six.

– Maudia Coldiron, Norfolk, Nebraska

Animal Names

Jon Farrar

If you are interested in animals, and amused by words, go to the Internet, select a search engine like Google, type in "names groups animals" and be prepared to smile. A good site to start with is: <http://www.writers-free-reference.com/172groupnames.htm>.

There are plenty of expected names for groups of animals – like a herd of deer, colony of ants, swarm of bees and covey of quail – but also many creative and archaic word choices that seem to fit just that group.

Animals presumed wise, such as owls, gather in parliament. Magpies, also intelligent birds that reportedly can be trained to speak some of our words, occur in tidings. Nattily-dressed and pious birds like plovers are found in congregations, and eagles in convocations.

Many names for groups of certain animals seem prejudicial – like a murder of crows, a scold of jays, a mischief of mice, a skulk of foxes or a sneak of weasels. Locusts come in plagues and grasshoppers in swarms. Similarly, gatherings of domestic cats have earned

rather disparaging labels such as a clutter, glaring, destruction and even a nuisance of cats. A company of badgers, a most unlikely situation, is called a cete. That word is derived from Latin and, well, look it up in your dictionary if you are curious. Bats at their communal roosts are at their colony but a swarm of them in the air is termed a cloud.

Group names for animals admired or held in high esteem fare better. Larks issue their sweet territorial calls while on the wing, and so a gathering of them becomes an ascension or exaltation. Finches and hummingbirds gather in charms.

Some names of animal groups are descriptive of where they live. A gathering of bitterns, cranes or herons is called a sedge or siege. I prefer sedge, and as wetlands are often lined with plants called sedges, that would be an appropriate place to find a gathering of these long-legged water birds. A flock of teal may also be referred to as a spring, which perfectly describes how they leap from the water when alarmed. Otters, as might be expected, are found in rafts. A group of butterflies is called a flutter, a swarm of buzzards is termed a wake, caterpillars come as an army, cockroaches as an intrusion, cormorants in a gulp, gulls in a screech, coots in a fleet, opossum in a grin and porcupines in a prickle.

Other terms for groups of animals describe their social organization or flock formations, such as a coterie of prairie dogs; a skein or wedge of geese;



Map showing black squirrel sightings sent in by readers.

or a kettle of hawks swirling in circles during migration.

The names for some animal groups seem somewhat inexplicable, like a bale of turtles, a knot of toads, a dray of squirrels, a husk of rabbits or a rumba of rattlesnakes.

My personal favorite is a wisp of snipe, which I assume refers the bird's wispy body, not a swirling smoke-like flight, as they are seldom seen in flocks.

Squirrel Sightings

Jeff Kurrus

In the July 2009 issue of *NEBRASKAland*, I sent out a request for black squirrel sightings. My request was answered – the map above lists the black squirrel sightings sent in by readers. Populations are very sporadic, much like what was stated in the original October 2007 article on black squirrels. Rumors run rampant regarding how populations landed where they have, and stories about squirrels hitching rides on cars and trains, being trapped and transferred, or simply migrating have been submitted.

What also runs rampant among these readers and others is the large amount of observing that people do when they come across these squirrels. I've never seen a creature garner so many opinionated voices regarding a squirrel's day-to-day activities. Carl Throckmorton of Hastings said, "We feed half a dozen fox squirrels animal crackers in a box with a hinged top that they must lift with their noses to reach the crackers. The fox squirrels are more adept than the black ones at doing this."

Elaine Umstead of Osceola, however,

has seen black squirrels for several years and has a different opinion:

"They seem to be a little smaller than the others and smarter," said Umstead. "I have a bird feeder that is supposed to be squirrel proof, but he or she manages to get their paw through enough to get some of the seed out, and then down to the ground they go to pick up their treasure. I have also seen a hybrid."

The "hybrid" question comes up quite often, either directly or indirectly. "I have seen squirrels that had a traditional fox squirrel coloration," said Dan Dibbern of Fremont, "however the face and underbody were black. Is it possible that the red and black variety mated?"

Ron Mortensen of Omaha, claims that his wife recently noted to him that a black squirrel appeared to be mating with a gray squirrel, while Mark Brohman of the Nebraska Environmental Trust stated, "What I like about them is that when they are in bright sunlight, you can see a hint of red, and the squirrel almost appears maroon in color."

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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.

September 19-20
• Missouri River Outdoor Expo – Ponca SP

September 20
• Arbor Lodge and Nebraska City Apple Jack Festival

October 2-4
• Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Workshop – 4-H Camp, Halsey

October 3-4
• Pioneer Longrifle Rendezvous, Indian Cave SP
• Fort Atkinson SHP Living History Demonstrations
• Autumn Harvest Art Show 2009 – Eugene T. Mahoney SP

October 4
• Arbor Lodge SHP Living History (also October 11, 18)

October 9-10
• Indian Cave SP Haunted Hollow Hayrack Rides (also October 16, 17)
• Indian Cave Campground Decorating Contest (also October 24)

October 10
• Ponca SP's Hallowfest

October 11-12
• NECTRA Competitive Horse Trail Ride – Indian Cave SP

October 17
• Ponca SP's Hallowfest

October 16-17
• Indian Cave SP Haunted Hollow Hayrack Rides

October 18-19
• Youth – Cock Pheasant, Quail, and Partridge Hunting begins Statewide

October 23-25
• Holiday Craft Show / Old West Cookout – Eugene T. Mahoney SP

October 24
• Indian Cave Campground Decorating Contest

October 25
• Cock Pheasant, Quail, and Partridge Hunting begins Statewide

November 2
• Fort Robinson Christmas Dinner Reservations – (308) 665-2900

Jeffrey Lake Property - 255 acres canyon rangeland, adjoins west side of the lake, just off I-80, south of Brady. Perfect site for home or cabin, multiple recreation opportunities, Elk.

North Platte River - 258 acres, 1 full mile of river frontage & accretion, cropland for food plots. Great waterfowl and whitetail deer potential, 1 mile south of Mitchell, Nebraska.

South Hills Acreage - Beautiful home; 137 acres rough canyon, 16 miles south of Maxwell in elk hunting/management area! 3,300 sqft home, yard sprinklers, trap shoot and golf areas.

Pine Ridge Recreation - 840 acres - **can divide** - rugged canyons, heavily treed, six miles south of Crawford off NE#2 - Ponderosa pines, small creek. Good access to the property yet secluded, minimal trespass potential. Deer, elk, turkey - close to Fort Robinson - beautiful

Big Mac Canyon Pasture - 1,768 acres rangeland south of Lake McConaughy. Has good access, yet private; rough canyons, big Mule deer; cattle grazing income.



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Officer's Notebook

Dead Floorboard

A few years back I was patrolling east of Geneva along the Turkey Creek drainage when I came upon an elderly couple dressed in hunter orange and stopped at an intersection. Noticing a deer in the back of their vehicle, I had stopped and was checking on their permits when a brand new Ford pickup approached the intersection from the east. Finished looking over their paperwork, I said my goodbyes to the couple and decided to check the approaching truck, which I could now tell contained two gentlemen in hunting clothes.

Suddenly the new Ford came to an abrupt stop just short of the intersection and a young man came piling out of the driver's door, screaming and hollering profanities.

That's odd, I thought – they usually don't start cussing and screaming until after I've checked them and started writing tickets. The young man went to the front of the truck and opened the hood, still hollering profanities.

As I got closer, I could see an older gentleman still sitting in the truck, so bypassing the still-agitated driver, I poked my head in the driver's side of the truck and asked, "What happened – did you kill the truck?"

The older man turned green and muttered something that I couldn't make out. I noticed the smell of fresh gunpowder in the truck's cab and remembered that as the truck approached, I'd thought I'd heard what sounded like a muffled gunshot but passed it off as my imagination. From the man's look and gun powder smell, I realized a rifle had been discharged in the truck.

As it turned out, the older gentleman was the driver's father-in-law, and when he saw me at the intersection, he hurriedly tried to unload his son-in-law's rifle, which was sitting between them with the muzzle pointed down. Trying to get the shells out of the bolt-action, he must have had a finger on the trigger when he chambered a round and the gun had gone off. Needless to say, the driver was not pleased.

– Jerry Pecha, Conservation Officer, Kearney

Questions will always be raised about this curious creature. And many people, such as Donna Necas of Lincoln, will always remember where and when they first saw them.

"I grew up in Hastings in the 1960s and 70s. We thought we were special when I was growing up because we had black squirrels in our yard but never saw them anywhere else. I moved to Lincoln in 1977, but did not see black squirrels until the late 1980s and then it was only in the middle of town. Now I see them regularly in my neighborhood in Havelock."

If your hometown is not represented on the map, continue to send in your sightings to jeff.kurrus@nebraska.gov.

Telecheck Available

This year, for the first time, many Nebraska deer hunters won't have to haul their harvested game to a check station before taking it home or dropping it off at a meat locker – they'll be able to either check the animal by going online or by calling a toll-free telephone number.

While traditional check stations will still be available for all deer seasons this year, beginning September 15 all deer harvested outside of the November firearm season can also be checked in any time day or night by calling (800) 405-7700 or by going online to www.nedeercheck.com. The successful

hunter will be asked to provide their deer unit and permit numbers, the species, sex and age of the animal harvested, and the date and county of kill. Hunters will then be given a seal number and security code to write on their permit. The permit must be kept with the deer until it is taken home or delivered to a meat locker.

According to Kit Hams, big game program manager for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, this change is a classic win-win situation: "This is good for hunters in that it should save a lot of time and fuel costs, and it's good for us in that we will get our data sooner and cheaper."

While the traditional check stations will still be open for all deer seasons this year, in 2010 the manned check stations will operate only during the November firearm season. This change is expected to save the Commission \$10,000 this year and \$30,000 next year, according to Hams.

Hunters having problems using either telecheck system can call (800) 418-4400 from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. CST Monday through Friday for customer service and will still be able to take their deer to a traditional check station.

October Antlerless Deer Season

Eric Fowler

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologists hope last-minute changes to a new antlerless deer season set for October 9-11 in eastern Nebraska will make meeting the goal of that season – harvesting 3,500 more white-tailed does – even more attainable.

As initially established in March, hunters needed to purchase a special permit for the three-day season that allows center-fire rifles to be used in Season Choice Areas (SCA) 18 and 21, which cover the eastern end of the state from South Sioux City to Kansas, as well as land within three miles of the banks of the Platte River east of Central City. Changes made in August now allow hunters with landowner, youth and SCA 18 or SCA 21 permits to also use firearms to harvest antlerless deer in those areas during that time.

Big Game Program Manager Kit Hams said the Commission had heard from many hunters who purchased

A Look Back - October 2001

Jeff Kurrus

"How Nebraska Has Changed," by James Stubbendieck, featured both historical photos and rephotographed scenes of Nebraska's landscape during the past 100 years.

Images of the loess hills in Gosper County, the long-since developed tract of land named Roger's Woods in Lancaster County, and Hackberry Lake in Cherry County are some of those included in the collection. Rocky Hoffmann's "Pike on the Ice" told of six women, all recent graduates of a Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) session, and their first battles with northerns at Pelican Lake.

Bob Grier's "Longhorns" states that this animal's story "twists and weaves through American history – from its European roots, to tales of long drives across the plains, to near extinction." And *NEBRASKALand*, like it did every issue of 2001, replaced "Portraits of the Past" with "100 Years of Game and Parks," tracking the history of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's involvement in the preservation of this state's natural resources.

those permits who thought they would be able to hunt during the new October season. "Our goal is to increase antlerless deer harvest in those areas and we certainly didn't want to end up in a situation where we were writing people tickets for harvesting deer on SCA 18 or 21 permits," Hams said.

Thanks to the liberal issuance of bonus tags, a record 32,387 antlerless white-tailed deer were harvested in Nebraska last season, 9,700 more than in 2007. Yet while nearly half of the antlerless harvest came from the eastern

fourth of the state, Commission biologists felt harvest needed to be even higher along the Missouri and Platte rivers to reduce the herd size and number of crop damage complaints, so the October season was created.

Most hunters are expected to use centerfire rifles during this season, but harvest is also allowed with bow and arrow, crossbows and muzzleloaders. The Commission is encouraging landowners who have experienced crop damage to open their land to anyone who asks permission to hunt.

"If they've got too many deer, it's another opportunity when the does are very vulnerable," Hams said. "They haven't been shot at yet. When you get into the January antlerless season, if they hear a truck they're crawling under the first bush they can find."

HIP

Migratory bird hunters are reminded that they must register with the Harvest Information Program (HIP) before taking to the field this year. With the exception of residents under the age of 16 years old, anyone hunting dove, duck, goose, snipe, rail, coot and woodcock in Nebraska must register with the program and carry their HIP number with them while in the field. To register, call 1-877-634-8687 or go online to OutdoorNebraska.org and look at the Hunting portion of the web site. Information gathered from HIP registrants is used to help set season dates and bag limits for future years.

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

I've got three poles ... the rods are fine but the reels are bad ... I'm going to re-do that line and I've got to take it off ... my wife had the egg beater sitting here so this is ideal to use. It'll take that line right off there and I can do that in just a matter of minutes. Try this, it works. ■



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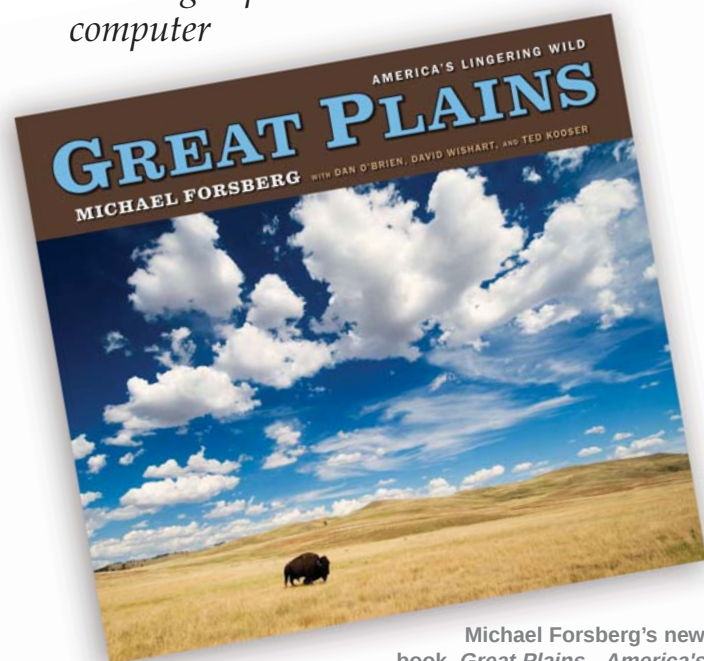
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America's Linging Wild

Text and photos by Michael Forsberg

Early March 2009 found me on a tallgrass prairie near Denton, Nebraska, looking hard at the image shown on the viewing screen of a digital camera and not believing what I saw. I had been tending to a remote “camera trap” system I had set up along a game trail in a creek drainage, trying in vain to capture an image of a creature that had eluded me the last five months. With a book deadline fast approaching, I had no more chances. It wasn’t until I got home and pulled the image up on the computer



Michael Forsberg's new book, *Great Plains - America's Lingering Wild*, will be released in October by University of Chicago press.

that I actually believed it was real – a bobcat had finally materialized out of the tallgrass and taken its own picture before vanishing back into the prairie.

Somehow this image made only 15 minutes from my home in Lincoln seemed a

fitting way to end a book project that had taken me on a roughly 100,000-mile journey the last four years, criss-crossing the heart of a continent and trying to document the wild that still survives in North America's Great Plains.

The idea for the book took shape nearly a decade ago when I spent several weeks throughout the summer in western South Dakota photographing the lives of burrowing owls in sprawling prairie dog towns. I will never forget the first time I came eye to eye

with the piercing gaze of one of these fierce little owls up close through the viewfinder. Nor will I forget photographing two black-footed ferret kits in almost the exact same location two years later – one of the continent's most endangered mammals, brought back from the brink of extinction – as they paused outside their burrow just before dawn.

What struck me most during those prairie summers was the number and incredible diversity of prairie wildlife I encountered –

ferruginous hawks, pronghorn, swift foxes, long-billed curlews, Great Plains toads, ornate box turtles, dung beetles, harvester ants, dragonflies and many others. Yet I knew that to the vast majority of people speeding down the highway that sliced through the prairie off in the distance, the landscape appeared as if there was nothing there at all.

That perception can be a tough one to shake. We've all heard the remarks about these Plains we call home – “it's flyover



Near sunset, a bobcat moves along a creek drainage at Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie near Denton.



country,” “one big flat cornfield,” “a place you drive through, not to.”

To be fair, it’s not a landscape that wins you over at first glance like the majesty of the Rocky Mountains or the rugged coastline of the Pacific Northwest. You can’t appreciate it after a five-minute stop at a roadside pullout – to see the true beauty of the Plains you must linger. Before you know it, the big sky wins you over, the prairie pulls you in, and you realize it can be every bit as remarkable.

At roughly a million square miles, the Great Plains stretches from the prairie provinces of Canada to the arid grasslands of northern Mexico. It is the second largest of all temperate grasslands on earth. It is so vast that if it were its own country, it would be the tenth largest in the world.

Although its foundation was laid millions of years ago, the modern day Great Plains contains a relatively young ecosystem where grass began to rule over trees after the end of the last ice age. Shaped by a

In central Nebraska, white-tailed deer pause on a sandbar while trying to cross the Platte River through a roost of migrating sandhill cranes.

The White Cliffs, famously noted in the journals of Lewis and Clark, are reflected in the waters of the Upper Missouri River in eastern Montana.





Jill Morrison, rancher and community organizer for the Powder River Basin Resource Council, rides the range on her family's land near Sheridan, Wyoming.

harsh continental climate, hundreds of diverse natural communities and tens of thousands of species have evolved here. Most of them are broadly adapted, wide-ranging species that have been engineered to move on or hunker down in response to the region's natural cycles of drought and flood, extreme heat and cold, fire and grazing.

Less than 200 years ago, the Great Plains was one of the greatest grassland ecosystems on earth – at least 30 million bison, a

billion or more prairie dogs, huge herds of elk, pronghorn and deer, plains grizzlies, wolves, unimaginable bird life and a rich collective of indigenous cultures that lived and moved with the rhythms of the seasons. Then, in the blink of an eye as the United States and Canada grew westward, much of its wild grandeur was gone. Today the Great Plains is one of the most altered natural landscapes and most endangered ecosystems on the continent. But all is not



A rainbow arches over butterfly milkweed in a tallgrass prairie during a morning thundershower in the Flint Hills of Kansas.

lost on the prairie.

Between the fall of 2005 and the winter of 2008-09, I traveled six months a year from Montana to Iowa, Canada to Mexico, to try and make pictures that would help put a face on the lingering wild that survives here, to shed light on the conservation challenges at hand and why they matter.

Over the course of the project, I was able to experience things I never thought I would in my life: I witnessed migrating herds of pronghorn traveling hundreds of miles between Canada and Montana, placed my hand in the muddy paw print of a grizzly bear on the shortgrass prairie near the Rocky Mountain Front, swam alongside a feeding shoal of native minnows shimmering with all the



In early January, pronghorn migrating south from the Canadian prairie move through the Milk River breaks in Phillips County, Montana.



In early August, over a million Mexican free-tailed bats empty out of a cave and into the western Oklahoma night. Each bat can consume more than 3,000 mosquitoes and other flying insects during a nighttime foray.



In North Dakota, a view from the air shows a former prairie pothole wetland landscape now overlaid by fields of wheat and canola in the Missouri Coteau region, a stronghold for breeding ducks in the Northern Plains.

colors of the rainbow in a Kansas Flint Hills prairie stream, and stood for nearly an hour underneath a steady stream of bats filing out of a cave into the Oklahoma night. But I certainly did not do this project alone.

Writer/rancher Dan O'Brien, geographer David Wishart and poet Ted Kooser have all lent their powerful, independent voices to help shape this book. So too have hundreds of people I met along the way – ranchers,



Photographer and author Michael Forsberg after a muddy day of fieldwork with amphibian biologists in northeastern Wyoming.

scientists and others – who are anchored to the land and whose passions and perspectives are as wide and varied as a prairie sky. But the common bond that stitches all these people together is their deep love of the land itself, its natural diversity and their commitment to conserve it for generations to come.

The Great Plains will continue to be an important working landscape that helps feed the world and helps fuel our energy needs, but can it also exist as a functioning, dynamic ecosystem that keeps our rich natural heritage intact? I say yes.

To be sure, the conservation challenges are complex and time is short. Then again, the people of the Plains have never been shy of a challenge. ■

A regular contributor to *NEBRASKALand Magazine*, Lincoln-based wildlife photographer Michael Forsberg's work has appeared in publications such as *Audubon*, *National Geographic* and *National Wildlife*.

For more information about this book, contact the Michael Forsberg Gallery, 100 North 8th St., Suite 150, Lincoln, NE 68508, call (402) 477-5030, or go online to www.michaelforsberg.com.

Why I Hunt

By Eric Fowler

I like to hunt. I really like to hunt. A lot. You could say it's who I am.

Why? The normal clichéd answers might be that I enjoy the recreation, exercise, spending time with friends and family, the taste of game meat, or even that I'm satisfying primordial urges. All of these are important, but what I enjoy most is that hunting melts the stress of everyday life from my body. When I hunt, whether I'm sitting in the whitetail woods or the goose blind, or following my dog through a CRP field in search of a rooster pheasant, I'm solely focused on the task at hand. I have no worries. That's the only logical reason I sometimes subject myself to extreme wind chills and sore feet after long walks, knowing that in many cases the odds of success are stacked against me.

But in truth, that's not why I hunt. The sole reason is simply that someone asked me to go. Actually I blame it on three different people who asked me, and another who taught me to shoot and let me borrow his shotguns until I had my own.

You see, my dad, Dave, doesn't hunt. I don't fault him for that – he wasn't exposed to it as a youth growing up in Indianapolis, and it didn't stick with him after a few trips in Nebraska.

I, on the other hand, was surrounded by hunters while growing up in Ogallala. As a teen, I worked at a gas station/bait shop/sporting goods store, and listening to the hunters' stories there, and from friends at school, sparked my interest. I knew I wanted to try it, and my eyes, if not my hands, were always on the used guns in the corner of the store. "Wouldn't it be cool if I could own one of these?" I must have asked myself a thousand times. Eventually, I did: my first .22-caliber rifle and my first deer rifle.

I passed my hunter education course

and learned to shoot thanks to Larry Einspahr, father of my step sister and step brothers. But who would take me? I wasn't old enough to go on my own.

Enter Larry Chandler, the husband of a woman who worked with my step-mother, Gloria. No one remembers for sure, but I would suspect that when Gloria and Sherry's conversation at work one day turned to my interest in hunting, Sherry said she'd ask Larry if



I was a skinny 17-year-old in 1986 when Jamie Vasa guided me to my first goose near Sutherland.

he'd take me.

Larry was somewhat like me in that his dad didn't hunt. "My grandpa took me when I was about eight years old," Larry said recently. "He took me duck hunting and pheasant hunting and all that stuff. And I don't know, ever since then, I've just always wanted to help little kids go hunting."

"I thought, well heck, it doesn't matter to me who goes just as long as

I've got somebody to go with me. Because I still, if somebody comes and says 'My boy wants to go hunting,' I say, 'Well, load up and let's go.'"

Most of my memories from that first hunt in 1983 are seeing the frozen carcasses of pheasants protruding from snow drifts in southern Keith and northern Perkins counties. That winter was hard on pheasants, and losses were high. But I shot my first pheasant that year with a Remington 870 20-gauge shotgun I borrowed from Einspahr, and was hooked.

The following fall, thanks to some friends who reached that all-important milestone of age 16 a year before I did, was spent hunting doves, pheasants and ducks. A year later, there were more dove hunts in September, but I had even bigger plans. My sister's boyfriend, Tim Rowley, was a hunter from Imperial who had captivated me with his hunting tales. When he offered to take me deer hunting, likely to score brownie points with sis, I jumped at the chance.

I drove dad's 1965 Ford pickup through the snow from Ogallala to Imperial on the eve of the opener. In my billfold was a driver's license, hot off the presses, and in a case next to me was the Remington 740 pump action .270 rifle I had eyed in the corner of the bait shop for months before I saved enough money to buy it.

A serious case of buck fever cost me my first chance at a deer. I missed again on my second chance, too ... sort of. My first deer was actually standing behind the one I was aiming at. But that hunt still added more fuel to the fire and was the first of many with Tim, who soon became my brother-in-law and took me along to hunt pheasants, ducks and geese, and was there when I bagged my first Nebraska pronghorn and my first elk in Colorado.



With Abe Moore on his first turkey hunt near Chadron in 2000.



Brother Mike Einspahr with his first deer at Enders WMA in 2002.



With brother-in-law Tim Rowley after my first pronghorn hunt near Crawford in 1993.



With college hunting buddy Gregg Sweley and a limit of geese near Scottsbluff in 1997.



With John Albro, Vasa and a limit of geese near Lewellen in 1987.



Vasa and I pheasant hunting with my lab, Nikki, in 2008 near Grant.



Steve O'Hare and I have spent many fall mornings hunting geese since we began working together 10 years ago.

Invite Someone to Step Outside

Anyone who hunts and fishes knows people who don't. Just because they don't doesn't mean they won't. It could be that the only reason they don't is because you haven't asked them.

That's where all of us can help. Whether it's a coworker who listens intently as you tell your tales from the field around the water cooler on Monday morning, or your child's friend, who lives with his single mom, it's not hard to find someone who might want to try your favorite outdoor sport.

Asking is the easy part. But there is a lot more work to be done before you go. Here are some things to keep in mind.

Let them know what to expect – Give your guest a detailed rundown of what their trip will involve.

Start with the basics – If they've never hunted or fished before, you will need to teach them the things that have become automatic to you. Be patient, make it fun and don't forget to instill safety standards, etiquette and ethics.

Gear them up – Loan your friend a gun or rod or find someone who can, and if it's cold, make sure they have warm clothes and boots.

Start simple – At the range, start with easy shots to instill confidence. In the field, pick a quarry suitable for a first-timer (decoying geese are easier to shoot than wild-flushing quail). On the water, find a lake or pond chock full of fish where success is a guarantee.

Keep them going – Continue to be a mentor until they feel comfortable going on their own.

The number of hunters and anglers is declining, and many are aging and will soon leave the ranks, not because they want to but because they have to. Replacing those individuals is critical, because the fees hunters and anglers pay for permits and the excise taxes they pay on equipment pay for the majority of all fish and wildlife conservation programs in this country. If the decline continues, state and federal conservation agencies will have two choices: raise permit fees or cut programs.

It's up to all of us to make sure that doesn't happen. So share the joy of the great outdoors and ask someone to Step Outside. For more ideas, go to StepOutside.org.



PHOTO BY DOUG CARROLL

That following fall, one of my summer coworkers, Jamie Vasa, introduced me to what has become my true love: goose hunting. He was there, sitting in a pit we had dug in a cornfield south of Sutherland, when I shot my first goose. For the next few winters, whenever he came home from Chadron State College for the weekend, we would lay in a corn field between Oshkosh and Lewellen. When I, too, went to Chadron State, we often rode home together on weekends, if for no other reason than to hunt geese. Sometimes we took Shotgun Red, Jamie's beat-up 1980 Chevy pickup that used as much oil as gas. Other times we would take my 1982 Ford Escort hatchback, which held an amazing number of decoys and had just enough ground clearance to deliver them to the middle of the field. We hunted geese the morning of his wedding and the morning after.

Most of my best friends today are the people I hunt with. In some cases, hunting trips actually sparked the

friendship. Yet I often wonder where I would be today if Larry hadn't offered to take me on that first hunt. I may have still caught the bug when someone else did, but maybe not. I doubt my parents would've let me hunt with my high school friends had I not already hunted with an adult. And I might have been pulled in a different direction and my interests in hunting would have faded. That's what the experts say happens if kids don't start early. Had that happened, I probably wouldn't have my dream job working for this magazine, a job that allows me to pursue wildlife with a camera year-round, which is just as good as doing so with gun in hand.

I suppose I'd watch more

football in the fall. Maybe I would have introduced my step-brother, Mike, to something else. But "guiding" him to his first deer a few years ago, and three more since, is something I'm proud of. I've introduced people who were already hunters to goose hunting, but Mike is one of the few greenhorns I've introduced to the sport. I need to do more of that. We all do. I can't wait to take one of my six-year-old son Mace's friends hunting, and return the favor Larry did for me. ■



Larry Chandler



Even before he was old enough to come along, I involved my son Mace, now six, in my hunts after the fact. As a three-year-old, he got a kick out of one of my pheasants.



The State Fair

Says Goodbye to Lincoln

Photos and text by Doug Carroll

The 2009 Nebraska State Fair bid a “fair”-thee-well to Lincoln this past Labor Day when it wrapped up its century-long run in our Capitol City. Next year, barring any changes, the fair will have a new home in Grand Island, but it will still feature those things that make a state fair fun: Food too good to be healthy, carnival games and rides too enticing to pass by without trying, and booths and exhibits featuring everything imaginable. Here’s to the future.



Left: Members of the Nebraska Balloon Club “glow” their balloons at the 2009 Nebraska State Fair. Above: Fairgoers enjoy a variety of plantings in the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission’s area of the fair.



Above left: Antique tractors are a popular part of parades at the state fair.

Left: “They’re so cool!” said Jordan Duchesneau of Lincoln as she holds a newly hatched chick in the birthing pavillion.

Above right: Alicia Dierberger of Seward shears a sheep prior to judging.

Right: Lynn and Kathy Gloystein of Henderson check out some of the corn entries at the fair.





Above: The “fish tank” in the Commission’s portion of the Lincoln state fair has long been popular with young and old alike.



Left: Nate Vontz of Lincoln does a backflip as he enjoys a combination trampoline/bungee cord offering at the fair.

Right: Youngsters (and their parents) enjoy a caterpillar rollercoaster ride on the last day of the fair.



Gnomes of the Night

Ord's Kangaroo Rat

Text and photos by Jon Farrar

Specialized to prosper without having a drink of water, these appealing mouse-like creatures are found in grasslands on sandy soils. They emerge from their elaborate underground burrows only in the dark of night.

Despite the unappealing and inappropriate word “rat” in their common name, it is easy to grow fond of Ord’s kangaroo rats (*Dipodomys ordii*). To see them, however, you must adopt their nocturnal habits. They shun daylight and even bright, moonlit nights, preferring to be above ground near a new moon or on overcast nights. Drive a road passing through land with sandy soil – trail roads bounded by grass and weeds are the best – and you will soon see these long-tailed, shoe button-eyed elfins bounding down the tire tracks in your headlights. It is the only glimpse most will ever have of them, which is unfortunate as when viewed close at hand they are lovely little mammals. Their appeal grows in knowing the resourceful ways they have evolved to eke out a living in rather inhospitable environments.

Kangaroo rats are not of the same family as the despised Norway rat, black rat and house mouse; rather are closely related to our native pocket mice. The name of the genus *Dipodomys* is derived from the Greek *di*, meaning “two,” *podos*, meaning “foot,” and *myos* meaning “mouse;” an appropriate name for a large mouse that bounds along on two oversized hind legs. Nineteen species of kangaroo rats are currently recognized by the American Society of Mammalogists. Of those, the Ord’s kangaroo rat has the widest distribution, from southern Saskatchewan and Alberta into Mexico, and central Nebraska westward to central Oregon and eastern California. Ord’s kangaroo rat was named in honor of early 19th century zoologist George Ord, president of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia when the species was first described from a specimen collected near El Paso, Texas in 1853. It is the only kangaroo rat species found in Nebraska, although two races, approximately separated by the Platte River, exist here, with the more southern race being slightly smaller. Ord’s kangaroo rats once were found wherever there were sandy-soiled, sparsely vegetated grasslands across central and western Nebraska, but their distribution shrank back as center-pivot irrigation and cropland crept over the low, rolling terrain of the central Sandhills margins, and they virtually vanished from similar habitat in the southwestern counties.

Long Leaps

Kangaroo rats are eight to 11 inches long, of which about half is tail. The tail has a dark stripe on its top and bottom, white stripes on the sides, and is tipped with a tuft of longer hairs. The extravagant tail serves as a prop when the animals are sitting or standing on their hind legs, as a rudder to execute midair changes in direction, and as a counterbalance when landing. When hurried or alarmed, they bound along in leaps of six feet or more and two feet high. When not alarmed they hop along on their hind legs in increments of inches. The small forelimbs are used when walking, gathering and handling seeds, stroking seeds from cheek pouches, grooming and rearranging soil in burrows or at the burrow entrance.

Ord’s kangaroo rats are stocky mice, in part because of their oversized hind limbs, in part because the head seems to sit directly on the body, the result of compressed cervical vertebrae. Relative to their body size, kangaroo rats have large heads, which in part is explained by their unusually large auditory bullae – bony, hollow chambers encasing the inner and middle ear that enhance audio acuity. As a result, the hearing of kangaroo rats is said to be about four times as acute as human’s.

Ord’s kangaroo rats weigh from 1½ to 3½ ounces. Their silky soft fur is a rich, yellowish-buff on the upper half of the body, lightly washed with a scattering of black hairs on the back, and white on the underside. Matched white bands sweep across their flanks. Long whiskers radiate out from the nose and are ancillary guidance devices, supplementing large eyes designed to draw in light on even the darkest nights. Proportionally, the eyes of kangaroo rats are larger than those of a great horned owl. Like a beaver, the upper and lower pairs of incisors grow continuously throughout life, and so must be worn down by use.

Kangaroo rats meticulously groom their silky-soft fur, right down to the hair tufts on the ends of their tails. Long whiskers radiating out from the nose are tactile guidance devices helping them negotiate the darkest of nights.





All species of North American kangaroo rats have fur-lined, external cheek pouches for storing and transporting seeds, an anatomical feature they share with pocket mice and pocket gophers. Interestingly, the jerboas of Asia and Africa, rodents that evolved to fill similar ecological niches on those continents and much resemble kangaroo rats in form and habits, did not evolve pouches for transporting food, probably because their diet is more varied than that of kangaroo rats and includes leaves and insects as well as seeds. Rather, they stuff their mouths as full as possible and carry food to their caches.

Kangaroo rats have a specialized oil gland between their shoulder blades, assumed to serve in dressing the hair and skin to keep them from drying in arid or semi-arid environments. They frequently bathe by thrusting their sides and back through dry sand, presumably to distribute the oil. Held in captivity without a sand substrate to rub off excess oil, their fur soon becomes excessively oily. Some mammalogists believe the gland's secretion contains scent useful in identifying sex and even individuals, and is used to define territories and lay down scent markers during the breeding seasons. Kangaroo rats are meticulous groomers, "washing" their heads, feet and tail many times each day.

Kangaroo rats are aggressively territorial, claiming and defending enough land to support their foraging needs, usually about 25 yards in all directions from the burrow system, but more or less depending on the

Kangaroo rats live in elaborate underground burrow systems. Except when young are present, only one animal occupies a burrow. Each burrow typically has more than one entrance, often located at the base of substantial plants such as the prickly poppy, left. To keep the burrows cool in summer and warm in winter the entrances are plugged from within when occupied. The large hind feet are used to propel their leaping bounds and in excavating tunnels.





Relative to their body size, the heads of kangaroo rats are large, in part because of the hollow chambers on the back of the skull that encase the inner and middle ear, enhancing audio acuity. Like most rodents, their incisors continue to grow and must be worn down by constant use.

abundance of food. They are solitary except for mating encounters and when females are raising young. In the wild, they chatter their teeth and drum their powerful hind limbs against the earth as a warning to trespassers; and engage in physical combat if such threats fail. Individuals retreating from a confrontation have been heard to utter “faint chuckling noises and squeaky snorts.” If two kangaroo rats are artificially confined in the same enclosure, one will kill the other.

Courtship has been described as something of a playful dance where the male and female hop around each other, the female rushes at the male to incite him, and the male pursues the female. Potential mates may also engage in ritualized sparring and mock sand bathing. If the courtship is successful, it is consummated when the female rubs her body back and forth in the sand until occupying a shallow trench where she accepts the male. Females are in estrus for a few days during the breeding seasons. An amorous male approaching an unreceptive female may be pushed, clawed, butted and pummeled.

Underground Labyrinth

Because they live in relatively hot and dry environments, particularly the desert species, kangaroo rats have evolved specific survival strategies. Foremost is a largely fossorial life; living in elaborate underground tunnel systems. Except when a female is with young, only one animal occupies a burrow system. Each burrow has multiple entrances, but the primary entrance is often located at the base of a perennial plant such as soapweed. These tunnel systems typically have two, three or even four levels. Terminal and side chambers, some as large as 10 to 12 inches in diameter, serve as food caches and nests. Food caches are usually high in the burrow system where soil moisture is lower and stored seeds less likely to germinate or mold. Nests and sleeping quarters are usually lined with shredded soft grass, rootlets or other plant material. The kangaroo rat’s burrow system provides a moist, cool environment through the heat of summer and warm

chambers in the cold of winter. Entrances are plugged with sand when the burrow is occupied. Kangaroo rats reportedly remodel their burrow system frequently, sealing off old chambers and tunnels, perhaps for sanitary reasons, and excavating new ones. Burrows in prime locations may be occupied for decades by an uninterrupted succession of individual kangaroo rats. Short, straight escape tunnels are frequently dug throughout the foraging grounds for quick escapes from predators.

Even efficient digging predators such as badgers, perfectly capable of excavating a kangaroo rat’s burrow, find it is seldom worth the effort as the occupant simply escapes out another passage to the surface. Weasels and rodent-eating snakes that can

enter the burrow system are perhaps more successful, but the resourceful little mice are quick to plug tunnels or escape out other entrances. Unless trees are nearby, nocturnal owls, such as great horned owls, are probably not a significant predator. The two species of grassland owls native to the Sandhills region – short-eared and burrowing – are likewise not serious threats as burrowing owls are not equipped to capture prey so large as a kangaroo rat, and short-eared owls are crepuscular, most active at twilight and dawn when kangaroo rats are rarely above ground.

Never Want a Drink of Water

The kangaroo rat’s principal foods the year-round are seeds from grasses and forbs, hence their preference for living in disturbed sites being colonized by annuals, such as sunflowers, that produce heavy seed crops. Because of the more abundant food these sites provide, kangaroo rats typically increase in abundance on overgrazed land. They do not estivate in summer, as do some fossorial rodents, nor do they hibernate in winter, although they are rarely active above ground in winter at latitudes as far north as Nebraska, so ample stores of seeds must be set aside. Researchers have found 25 to 50 quarts of seeds and dried grass in one burrow. Food stores are largest in the autumn when seeds are most abundant and a larder adequate for the winter must be set aside. Food gathering is an obsession of the species, and if food is abundant they may gather far more than they can consume before the next crop of seeds becomes available. Insects comprise only a small percentage of a kangaroo rat’s diet.

Kangaroo rats have evolved to exist with no “free water.” They can survive indefinitely on metabolic water – a byproduct of the breakdown of fats and starches found in seeds with oxygen in the air. An ounce of fat consumed by a kangaroo rat can produce as much as an ounce of water. Also, an advantage of storing seeds underground is that they swell with moisture, as high as 30 percent. Furthermore, kangaroo rats are water misers – they have no sweat glands,

their nasal cavities are specialized to cool air and extract moisture before it is exhaled, and their kidneys are extremely efficient at retaining water and excreting salts, reportedly about four times more efficient than human kidneys. Kangaroo rat urine is concentrated and viscous, quickly crystallizing when exposed to air.

Good-Time Babies

The peak breeding period for kangaroo rats in Nebraska is probably during May and June, with a second litter possible in late summer, although the breeding habits in the wild are poorly understood for obvious reasons. There are fewer litters per year in the species’ northern range because the growing season is shorter. The gestation period is about 30 days. The young, an average of three, are born pink, with eyes closed and nearly naked, typical of most small rodents. The small litter size compared to other small rodents

suggests survival is good, even though individuals probably rarely live longer than two years in the wild. Within a week sparse hair appears over the young kangaroo rats’ bodies, and their eyes open at about two weeks of age. By two months they are almost adult sized and self sufficient. In regions more arid than Nebraska, as the desert Southwest, reproduction is correlated with precipitation and swelling food sources, hence more young are produced when rainfall is abundant. Studies suggest consumption of green vegetation initiates hormonal changes, stimulating mating.

Kangaroo rats are a harmless but important component of the food chain. They do not create disturbed rangeland; they only take advantage of it. As do all burrowing animals, they play a role in adding organic matter to deeper layers of sandy soil and recycling nutrients. In the larger scheme of life, though, the existence of no animal should be justified solely on its usefulness to man, certainly not a creature so appealing to the eye as Ord’s kangaroo rats. ■



Weedy plants on disturbed land produce large quantities of seeds that are the kangaroo rat’s principal food.

A Nebraska Pheasant Hunt

Text and photos by Jeff Kurrus



As soon as I met him, I knew the old man was my gauge. He had pulled up in the Soo Paw Motel parking lot, dressed in referee stripes, and was asking about the next day's pheasant hunt on his farm outside of Trenton. It was to be the last hunt on that farm while he still lived there. Keith Miller, now 67 years old, and his wife, Sandy, were moving east to Omaha. She had given over 21 years to the farm and now he would give the rest of his years to the city.

It was his genuine smile that pulled me in, that obvious joy that emerged when he began a conversation with Sterling Chapman, one of the hunters. "How's everyone?" Mr. Miller asked.

"Really well," said Sterling. "You?" "Doing fine."

"You calling a game tonight?"

"Yeah, up near North Platte."

"You calling it fair?" Sterling asked, smiling.

"The athletic director usually slips me \$50 beforehand to make sure I do."

"That's good," Sterling laughed, turning back as Russ Schellpeper, another one of the hunters, emerged from his motel room. What followed was a sarcastic barrage from Sterling to Russ, and then from Russ back to Sterling, the kind of remarks that repeatedly reveal men as nothing more than boys who can now legally drive.

As the old man laughed at their dialogue, my nerves calmed immediately.

To that point I had been cursed by the other hunters as soon as we had first met, as if we had known each other for years instead of the 30 minutes that we had actually spoken. A native Tennessean, I was in McCook with Lincoln resident Scott Miller and his friends in search of the traditional "Nebraska" pheasant hunt. To the locals that participate each year, the hunt is friends, family, food, and definitely folktales. To the nonnative, however, a pheasant hunt on the plains of Nebraska carries so much more: rolling hills and old fence rows, orange morning light shining off of prairie grass and a pointing dog's face.

Pheasant farms can be found across the nation, where customers can be fed breakfast while their quarry is released from its pens and their final bill may depend in part on the weight of their game bag. But even the people who spend at least a few days a year in this part of the world still search for those same images I longed for, those sights, smells and sounds that were just as important, if not more important, than birds on the tailgate by lunchtime: the aroma of an expired shell; the rustling of pant legs on prairie grass; the distant sound of a cackling bird. To make the trip truly memorable, however, there

also had to be characters whose words would resonate for the next 30 years.

"We would drive by that one bar toward Trenton, and the shaking flag pole outside always let us know there was dancing going on inside and it was time to stop," said Russ. "But that was during our younger days."

For this group of aging hunters, the nights before the opening morning now consisted of dinner at Nebraska Sports Café in Trenton, a couple beers at Frank's, and in bed around midnight. Men who started this hunt in their teens, twenties and thirties were now in their forties and fifties. Their honkytonk memories still came up, but much more often their dialogue now consisted of past hunts and the potential to cramp after a long day of walking. And through all of it has been Mr. Miller.

"The Great White Hunter has been here since 1942," Scott said of his father while a jukebox echoed Johnny Cash behind us. "We call him that because no one has ever seen him kill a bird. He'll pull the trigger here and there, but no one thinks he even shoots in a bird's general direction." Mr. Miller couldn't speak for himself. He was already home asleep, away from the sound of billiard balls and bottles on bar. It would only be a short matter of time before these same hunters exaggerating old war stories on wooden stools would be settling in before the Late Show themselves.

There was also a young contingency with them that weekend, but it was small. Sterling's son Nick, Wes Dalrymple, and Jerry Hosfelt were there, all attending their first opening day hunt on Mr. Miller's farm. Scott's sons, 13-year-old Jacob and 10-year-old Trenton, had joined us as well, but they were back at the farm. Seeing the next generation on a hunt always begs the question: Will the young ones continue to travel multiple hours for the chance to shoot a pheasant when they can shoot all they want with a BB gun only minutes from their own homes? I had watched the two young boys shooting their BB guns earlier that afternoon, and could already

LEFT: Keith Miller shows a harvested pheasant to grandson Trenton last October in western Nebraska.
OPPOSITE: With orange hat and vest, Sterling Chapman safely flanks the buckbrush thicket on the Miller farm.





“The birds have always been here,” Scott Miller (third from the left) said before the hunters began walking his father’s farm near Trenton. With the right combination of habitat, it was clear how good Nebraska’s pheasant hunting can be.



Jacob Miller takes a quick midday break while he watches his dad’s friends and family hunt. He shot his first pheasant shortly after this break, hopefully the first of many for him.

guarantee that they had shot more that day than they probably would the next one. So was the hunt I was looking for destined for retirement?

The following morning the Miller farm looked just as large as the fields in my mind. Milo was encircled by CRP grass on the uplands, and one of the longest buckbrush thickets I had ever seen was the starting point. Minutes before shooting time, Scott pointed at the thicket. “The birds have always been here. Dad counted over 100 birds getting up the first time Russ and Sterling hunted here, which was in 1994. Russ didn’t even shoot on the first rise because he was so surprised at how many got up. There are more pheasants here than you could imagine.”

As Scott and I spoke, the other hunters compared over-and-unders with pumps and automatics. Browning was

represented, as was Remington. During times like these one wonders why companies would pay actors for television commercials that speak of hunting’s lore and nostalgia. Show up at an opening day pheasant hunt and they could attain all the footage they desired.

Separate conversations regarding bird counts, estimates as to when flannel button-downs would change to short sleeves, and a cell phone call to a friend unable to make the trip slowly ended as positions were called out for the first walk. Two hunters and a dog would work the thicket while others flanked both hillsides. One hunter stayed back to catch birds coming the other direction. A blocker stood on the far end. And then they walked.

Mr. Miller’s gun rested comfortably in the crook of his arm. Sterling, Russ, Scott and the rest of the hunters held

their shotguns in a ready position. Jacob walked close to his dad. He had started this annual hunt a few years prior, carrying his BB gun before graduating to a pellet gun, and now holding a single-shot 20-gauge. Trenton followed close behind, a plastic gun in tow for the first year of his apprenticeship.

This method of introducing young ones to hunting is not far from what many experienced hunters do with newcomers, but there continues to be that overarching problem: “Not a lot of kids hunt that I go to school with,” 8th grader Jacob said a few days before the hunt. “Maybe three, four at the most.” It’s a problem often heard among outdoor circles, as those who have hunted for years try to figure out why young ones often do not.

You have to have someone take you – it takes nearly too much initiative to start hunting or fishing by one’s self. Plus, watching an hour of outdoor television programming makes hunting seem as if you need a loan application to begin. An experienced hunter can cut through the excess and pinpoint the necessities. It is only then that newcomers can see all of hunting’s attractors. For me, as a 10-year old, it was early morning breakfasts at local restaurants whose doors opened during the 4 o’clock hour; being called “sir” by adults; and having my hands swallowed by the hands of adults when shaken.

I saw that in Jacob and his brother that weekend. Making the traditional stop at Cabela’s in Kearney; riding a golf cart on granddad’s farm; staying up late in the basement, lying in sleeping bags and laughing yourself to sleep with your brother; or pretending to sleep until the first old-man snoring begins.

While their age, my best friend Rob and I were on one of these trips in southern Mississippi. Once the snoring began, we snuck a *Playboy* from one of the bunks and tip-toed to the kitchen to ‘read.’ Five minutes later, entranced with each turn of the page, one of the older hunters walked in. We quickly shut the magazine and watched him. He scratched himself a couple of times

while getting a glass of water, then walked by us without saying a word and went back to bed.

These are the times we still laugh about, regardless of how little our non-hunting wives understand, and they will be the same types of memories that bring these boys back, much like they have for their older counterparts.

By lunch of opening day, past stories were briefly interrupted by new ones. The group sat again at the café in Trenton, the only orange hats in the room while the Nebraska game played in the background.

The older guard compared shots made, shots not made, and new



No Nebraska pheasant hunt is complete without proper companions in the field.

injuries. They then thought about naps, but discussed afternoon plans. It was warming up – t-shirt time – and there were more volunteers wanting to block.

That afternoon, more walking led to more shots. Jacob downed his first pheasant of the year, and Mr. Miller shot what the group believed was his first pheasant ever. They paused as Sterling and Russ shook his hand, and Scott hugged him. With the farm in the



Pheasant hunting is a way of life for Russ Schellpeper (left) and Sterling Chapman (right), as seen from an inside view of Russ's pickup.

background, Scott hugged his dad for much more than a point well placed.

The following year, they would still have permission to hunt most of the farm but Scott and the boys would be staying in the local motel. And it wasn't the motel's box elder bugs that were the problem, it was the absence of walking through dad's front door the night before opening day.

In the waning hours of light, the group lost the two young boys. More fun was to be had near the farm as the men, still hunting, discussed the day's longfeather contest more and more.

The contest began in 1990, and gave a prize to the hunter who shot the bird

with the longest plumage. "We've had cups, crystal balls, a couple trophies, even a metal cut-out," Russ said, describing past awards. "One year Scott made a terrible-looking beer mug, so we all pitched in a little cash to make sure the winner wouldn't feel so bad about winning."

At nightfall, it was determined that Sterling had won for the fourth time. No money was needed this year, the group stated, for Scott's choice of a glass-cut award was deemed "very nice" by the group.

I was on the road shortly after. As accommodating as the group had been

to a newcomer, it was time to go. They were hunting the next morning before driving back east, and I imagined that the group that had hunted such a place for so long would want a bit of time to themselves before leaving.

As I stopped at gas stations on the way home, needing either a roadside nap or a shot of caffeine, I no longer saw trucks filled with men and orange hats guarding dashboards. And as I began to recount the hunt that night and for the following days and months, I no longer tried to compare what I thought it would be to what it actually was. Each time I revisited that day, whether in a Cass County deer stand or

at a Cherry County pond, all I could see was orange grass and vests backdropped by a western Nebraska sunset, all I could hear was the mumblings of the Husker football game from Mr. Miller's truck radio during a midday break, and all I could smell was impending winter so near.

My senses very rarely take me to the shooting itself. And if Miller and his friends continue to make this annual trip, those young boys will seldom think of the shooting either. If they are like their grandfather, they'll remember the men they shared their long walks with, and always wonder why they never did this more than one time a year. ■



Strict scientific measurements are required when judging the longest tailfeather contest.



Sterling accepts his longest tailfeather award from host Keith Miller as Russ looks on.



From the 2008 opening weekend pheasant hunt on Keith Miller's farm near Trenton: (back row, left): Jerry Hosfelt, Nick Chapman, Sterling Chapman and Russ Schellpeper (front row, left): Wes Dalrymple, Scott Miller, Jacob Miller, Trenton Miller and Keith Miller.

Choosing a Deer Processor

For me, not just any deer processor will do.

By Jeff Kurrus

Choosing a deer processor can be one of the most important decisions a hunter makes. While some people will process all of their own meat, many will take most, if not all, of their deer to a processor. Because there could be a long list of people who will refuse to eat the wild game that you bring home, you need to make sure that what you get back is something you and your friends and family will like. But how do you know who to trust your deer with?

Finding a person to process deer the way you want it is not difficult – ask a few hunters, look in your local yellow pages and you'll soon have a big list, including phone numbers, of potential processors. Here's what to ask once you get them on the phone.

1) Will you get your own deer back? Unfortunately, many meat lockers are large operations. By the end of the firearm season, a locker might have a hundred or more deer carcasses stacked like cordwood. While you may have properly handled your deer while field dressing it, other hunters might not have been so careful with their deer. If your processor is handling all the deer en masse, then you may get at least part of someone else's deer back, including whatever bile or excrement they may have spilled on their meat.

2) What will the processor do and how do they prefer the deer to be brought in? Do they want to skin the deer themselves, or can you take it in quarters? Because I like to cook the shoulders myself and I never let anyone else touch my deer's backstraps and

tenderloins, I need a processor that will let me bring in just the hindquarters. Also, does this processor just make deer burger, or do they also provide items such as jerky, summer sausage, steaks, chops or other cuts?

3) Price? If you and your family are



extremely pleased with the processed deer meat you bring home, then price may not be a big issue. However, you also don't want to be paying a large amount of money when you don't have to. Try to get your ground deer made for a price you find fair, which should be considerably less than the beef you find in the grocery store.

4) Do they process deer only during the season? If you decide to quarter the deer yourself, can you take a couple hindquarters to your processor after the season to have it cut? At my house, sometimes a batch of deer burger is so good that we use up 30 pounds of meat before fishing season begins. If this happens, it's nice to know you can have more made during the off-season.

All of this might make a processor feel like they're applying for a job, but in sense they are: You're entrusting them to handle your deer and it should be handled in a way that you, your family and your friends like. Ask a lot of questions. Even ask for a sample to try. If they want your business, they'll answer your questions and make you feel confident they are best suited for you. If not, there's always another processor down the road. ■

Deer Processing DVD

Learn how to process your own deer with this DVD – Dick Turpin highlights proper care of deer in the field and UNL extension meat specialist Dennis Burson describes how to safely process venison. Total run time approximately 39 minutes. Price: \$9.95. To order, go online to NEBRASKALandMagazine.com and click on "Nebraskaland Gift Collection," then "Videos & DVDs."



Deer Exchange Program By Eric Fowler

Do you like to hunt deer but have to quit hunting when you've harvested as many as you want to eat? Do you like to eat deer but aren't able to hunt? The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Deer Exchange program may be for you.

Launched last year, this online program matches deer hunters with meat to give away with individuals eager to find room in their freezer for delicious and nutritious venison. About 300 deer were donated through the program, with 800 people requesting deer and 500 hunters offering to donate it.

"We've certainly got room to expand, and it's up to the hunters to do that," said Kit Hams, Big Game Program Manager for the Commission.

Hams said the program was created with the hope that hunters would utilize more of the record 66,000 bonus antlerless permits the Commission issued to help reduce the white-tailed deer population. In the past, many of those permits went unfilled, presumably because hunters didn't want to put a second deer in the freezer.

But it was also created to help provide a nutritious source of protein for individuals who can't, or don't, hunt. According to nutritiondata.com, 100 grams of ground, pan-broiled venison has 187 calories, compared to 246 for the same portion of 80-percent lean, pan-broiled ground beef. Venison has 26.5 grams of protein, compared to beef's 24, and 8.2 grams of total fat to beef's 15.9. Venison is also low in sodium.

Other states offer similar programs, including Iowa's Help Us Stop Hunger (HUSH) program. In 2008, Iowa hunters donated more than 7,300 deer to the program, which is funded by a \$1 surcharge on all permits. Participating lockers receive \$65 for each deer they skin, bone, grind and package. The meat is distributed to the needy by local service agencies. Nebraska's program leaves most of the work to those who choose to participate. Both hunters and those wanting deer register on the Commission's web site at OutdoorNebraska.org and look for someone wanting deer or with deer to donate. The parties then work out the details of when, where and how the deer is delivered.

Based on responses to a voluntary online survey conducted by Aaron Hildreth, a University of Nebraska - Lincoln student, 45 percent of the recipients picked up their deer from the participating hunter. About 72 percent of the deer were only field dressed, while other hunters handled all or part of the processing, donating skinned, quartered, boned, ground or packaged meat. A few even donated jerky or sausage. Approximately 64 percent of the recipients processed the deer they received themselves, and 30 percent took the deer to a meat processor. About 90 percent of participants said donating or receiving meat was easy. Participating hunters donated an average of 1.4 deer through the program, and half of the hunters said they harvested additional deer because of the program.

Hams said he had hoped that 1,000 deer would be donated during the program's first year, but that he wasn't disappointed with the lower number. "It was a good start," he said, adding that he expects the program to grow in the years to come. With nearly 90,000 bonus antlerless deer tags authorized for the 2009-2010 deer seasons, the addition of a new October Antlerless season and a record harvest of more than 80,000 deer expected, there will definitely be more opportunities for hunters to participate.

"It's a good way to help out the deer herd and help out the hungry," said Hams.



North Loup State Recreation Area

This little-known destination offers more than meets the eye.

By Bob Grier

At 20 total acres, including a seven-acre pond, diminutive North Loup State Recreation Area (SRA) is a little-known but popular destination for its primitive camping, family picnic and fishing opportunities. It's also a relaxing stop-over for travelers using nearby U.S. Highway 281. This timbered SRA is located three miles north of St. Paul on the north shore of the historic North Loup River in central Nebraska. It provides access to the North Loup's banks for wading, swimming and catfishing. In the pond anglers will find large-mouth bass, bluegill, channel catfish and carp.

The North Loup SRA's primitive camping is free to the public on a first-come, first-served basis and stays are

limited to 14 days maximum. Tent and RV campers looking for quiet, fully-shaded camping sites have access to 10 non-pad sites, as well as nearby mowed sites and parking areas that provide additional camp sites. Although no electrical hook ups are available here, primitive restroom facilities, picnic tables and a water source are located on the area's grounds.

Camp sites and picnic tables are almost always available and the number of campers attracted to North Loup SRA usually peaks for major holiday weekends during good weather throughout the camping season.

Fall is a special season along the North Loup River, and the SRA's walnut, sumac, cottonwood, mulberry and catalpa trees, as well as other

vegetation and trees, add their cheerful fall colors to the river valley and nearby landscapes. Wildlife on the recreation area includes turkey, dove, quail, rabbit and squirrel, as well as wood ducks and other waterfowl. Hunting is permitted on many SRAs from the first Tuesday following Labor Day through the conclusion of the spring turkey season, unless prohibited or restricted by appropriate signs or specific area regulations. Hunting is prohibited within 100 yards of any public use facility or activity area, including picnic areas, campgrounds, private cabins and concession areas, boat ramps and parking lots.

Nearby public hunting access is also available on two Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Wildlife

Management Areas (WMA) that permit public, walk-in hunting access in season, including the 153-acre Marsh Wren WMA in Howard County located southeast of North Loup SRA (2½ east, 1 south of Elba on county roads) and the 328-acre Leonard A. Koziol WMA located 2½ miles north of St. Paul on U.S. 281, 2 miles east on a county road, then a ½ mile north.

Combined the WMAs offer an additional 2½ miles of North and Middle Loup River frontage while providing deer, dove, pheasant, quail, rabbit, squirrel, turkey and waterfowl hunting



North Loup State Recreation Area is located three miles north of St. Paul on U.S. 281 in Howard County.

Electric and nonpowered boats are allowed on the area's pond, and access to the North Loup River is available. This area offers camping, fishing, picnicking, a playground and primitive campsites.

A Nebraska State Park Entry Permit is required to enter the area.

For more information, contact North Loup State Recreation Area, 7425 S. US Hwy 281, Doniphan, Nebraska, 68832-9526, or phone (308) 385-6211.

in season. The Conservation Reserve-Management Access Program (CRP-MAP) offers additional hunting access, and each year's CRP-MAP Atlas is available from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and online at the Commission's web site www.OutdoorNebraska.org.

Additional information on North Loup SRA and other Nebraska state parks, state recreation areas and state historical parks, including facility details and prices, is also available on the Commission's web site by following the "State Parks" link found on the site's opening page. ■



Although diminutive, North Loup State Recreation Area offers a variety of options for both local residents and travelers.



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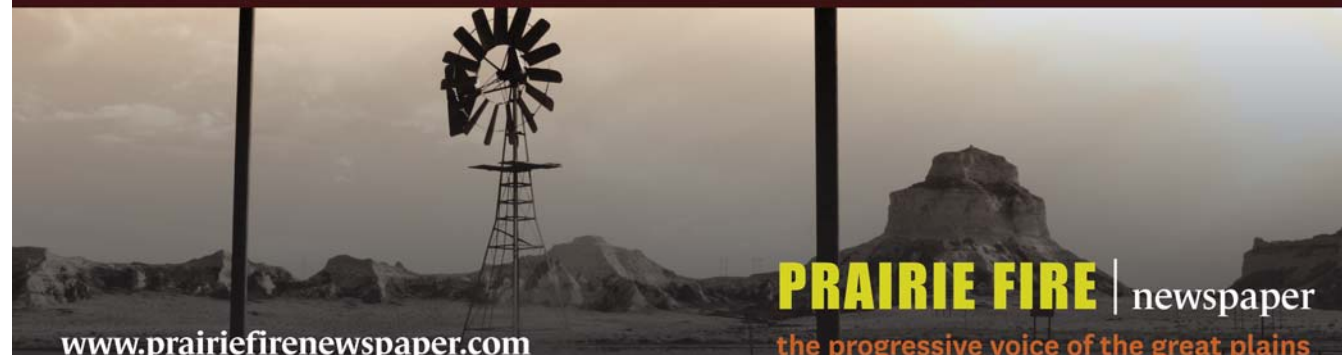
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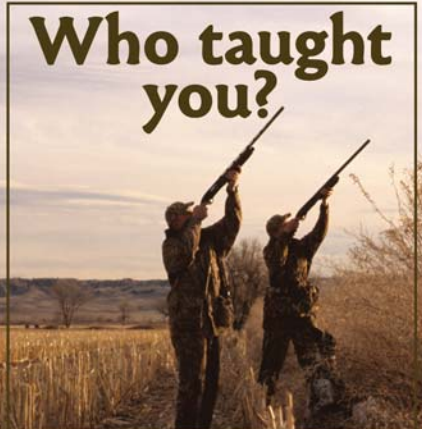
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▲ This picture is of my dad, William F. Bolling, and was taken in the mid-1930s. He hunted on the Missouri River south of Bellevue and north of the mouth of the Platte River in Sarpy County. This is the first year he owned the Browning over-and-under shotgun shown, which I still have.

My family enjoys your magazine. Keep up the good work.

— Richard Bolling, Bellevue, Nebraska



▲ Pictured is my father, Kenneth Purvis, and myself. Ken lived in the Bartley area all his life and worked for the Bureau of Reclamation in McCook for 30 years.

We fished and hunted deer, pheasants and ducks together until he passed away in 1999. He loved the great outdoors of Nebraska.

Pictured are 72 crappie we caught at Medicine Creek Reservoir while fishing from noon until 6 pm in May of 1968.

— Gene Purvis, Bartley, Nebraska



◀ This picture is of my grandfather, Wayne Weber (right), and his fishing buddy, Ernie Syler. It was taken near Harlan County Reservoir in July of 1955. They would fish the Republican River south of Alma, just west of the bridge. It was not unusual for them to catch their limit by using setlines or fishing from a small boat. Harlan County Reservoir was a special place to my grandfather. He passed away in November 2008 at the age of 85.

— Molly Kircher, Hickman, Nebraska

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



▲ The Psikal boys – Emil, Hank and Joe – were “Bohemian farm boys” and sons of Czech immigrants who settled in the Monroe Precinct of Saline County in the 1870s. They lived out their lives in the old country tradition of self-sufficiency and simplicity. At the time this photo was taken (early 1920s), hunting was not only a sport but also an important activity for providing food and predator control. And, in lieu of Cabela’s, matching hunting garb was evidently important, even in the good old days.

These gentlemen were cousins of my father-in-law. The immigrant elders homesteaded in a dugout a little over a mile from where we live.

— Kathy Palky, Dorchester, Nebraska

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Great Escape #1: Pine Ridge



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