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JULY 2023

INSIDE

Campfire Therapy • The Last Relic — Niobrara State Park Picnic Shelter
Less Ammo on the Range • A Summit Lake Staycation
Neligh Mill at 150 • Catfishing the Niobrara • The Ponca Sasquatch

SIGNAL BUTTE RANCH

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with a past full of archaeological and pioneer history.*



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HISTORY

A historical landmark known as Signal Butte stands prominently on this ranch, and is registered as a National Historical Site. The

Native Americans utilized this tall butte as a signal/religious site. The Butte was also an archaeological find in 1939. The artifacts from that discovery can be seen today, on display at the Smithsonian Institute. These artifacts are the oldest known evidence of human activity in all of North America.

Throughout the 1800's, pioneers used this historical ground as they made their way Westward carving out both the Oregon and Mormon Trails. Parts of these trails can still be seen on the ranch. A marked gravesite stands from 1866, a testament to the hardships that the pioneer settlers endured while crossing this rugged territory.

FACTS

- Three non-contiguous tracts available for sale as a whole or separately.
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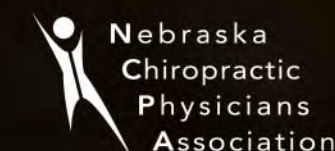
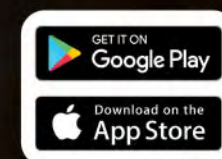
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NebraskalandMagazine.com



Cover: Some say that staring into the flames of a campfire can be relaxing and therapeutic. See the story on page 20.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

This page: Meadowhawk dragonfly (family *Libelulidae*) at Smith Lake Wildlife Management Area in Sheridan County. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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magazine

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Velvet will start being visible on deer antlers.
JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

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EQUIPMENT

Habitat tools like no-till grass drills and prescribed burn equipment are available through local chapters across the state. No-till drills are funded in partnership with local PF and QF chapters, The Nebraska Environmental Trust and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

In addition, statewide habitat programs and costshare assistance through your local chapter might be available. For more information and access to these options, visit our website at:



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upcoming issue.



Nate Riggins
West Des Moines, Iowa
Chimney Rock



Pam Whisenhunt, Lincoln
Storm Rolling North of Lincoln



Britton Bailey, Aurora
Male Rival Encounters

Corrections: All dogs are required to be on leash in Nebraska state parks for the safety of park guests; a photo at Branched Oak SRA misrepresented this regulation in the June 2023 issue.

We regret the error.

Send your comments and photos to:

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



PINE RIDGE COMET

Comet NEOWISE over
Saddle Rock and
Red Cloud Buttes at
Fort Robinson State Park
in Dawes County.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



At dusk, anglers converge at the boat ramp at Olive Creek State Recreation Area in Lancaster County. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

BOATING ETIQUETTE

By Jeff Kurrus and Shawna Richter-Ryerson

Boating is always pleasurable — until it's not. During these unfortunate moments, the problems in question usually come down to etiquette. Is the other boater using good manners? More importantly, are you a good example of what these manners should look like?

Start here to learn how to make more friends at the boat ramp and on the water.

At the Ramp

Get on the water and get out. The boat ramp is an area to launch a boat, not move supplies from your vehicle to the boat, rig rods or have a conversation with a person on the dock.

Give Ample Space

Offering significant space to others is paramount to a pleasurable outing

for all. Weigh on the cautious side when crossing a waterbody; you never know when you missed seeing that second tuber who fell off way before the one you do see. The same is true of passing anglers; pass hundreds of yards away to keep from ruining a productive fishing spot.

Parking

Do the right thing before you get on the water. Please don't leave your vehicle in a spot that compromises someone else's ability to get on the water or park. If you're not pulling a boat with a trailer, don't park in the spots specifically designated for trailers.

Sound Travels

Some of my fondest times on the water include music. Those who do this correctly keep their tunes at a

decibel level that doesn't interrupt the free time of a neighboring boater.

Anchoring Up

The first boat sets the precedent, so eye up others to know where to toss your anchor, how much line you should use and how much space you should leave between boats.

Don't Litter

If it was in your boat to start with, pack it out. Don't throw your trash, banana peels, cans, fishing line, worms or other goods overboard.

Be Polite

Every boat angler, skier, wakeboarder or kayaker has one thing in common: They love to have fun on the water. So, embrace the community and share a nod, a brief wave or a smile as you pass.

NEBRASKA LAND IS IN DEMAND



KNOX CO, NE 631.65 ± AC. | \$3,500,000

Exceptional opportunity at a large contiguous combo farm just a mile off the Niobrara River. This farm has it all! The property boasts two beautifully finished, furnished cabins/shops with a helicopter landing pad! The cabins are tucked in along Pishel Creek, which winds through the property for over a mile and a half. Cabin 1 (50x70) has in-floor heat, two bedrooms, a full kitchen, 1 ½ baths, a bar room, laundry, and a large deck, and the shop has floor drains and three overhead doors.

Cabin 2 (70x36) features four beds, 1 ½ baths, laundry, a wood-burning fireplace, a large deck, a shop with floor drains, and a long-range shooting tower. Both are fully furnished and ready to be enjoyed by the new owners!

The farm has 27 acres of farmland that are secluded along the creek valley, surrounded by a great mix of hardwoods and cedars. This combination is paradise to the many deer and turkeys that call this farm home. Multiple Redneck tower blinds and deer stands are scattered throughout the farm. ATV trails get you to all corners of the farm with ease. Many ideal food plot locations exist to improve your year-round wildlife management. The east end of the farm has an additional 35 acres of farmland. A great tenant is in place for cattle and farming, and we would love to continue renting the farm.

Several spring-fed ponds are located at the ends of the tree-filled draws. Some are stocked with fish and are ready for summertime enjoyment. The draws flowing through the property offer excellent travel corridors for the deer and specifically make for some great bow-hunting opportunities. The diverse, rolling terrain provides exceptional views of the Pischel Creek Valley and surrounding countryside.

The farm offers great seclusion yet has good road access. This property has so much to offer and needs to be seen in person to appreciate all it has fully. Call today to schedule your private showing of this remarkable property. All showings brokers must be present.

JEFFERSON CO, NE 33.43 ± AC. | \$360,000

Situated just east of Alexandria lies this beautiful acreage where the 1.5-story home welcomes you as you pull into the lane. The home boasts a modern-day farmhouse feel and a large front porch to enjoy the quiet evenings. You'll find ample on-site storage and livestock facilities most recently used to house sheep. If you're into the outdoors, you'll fall in love with the acres on the south end of this property that feel much larger than what is measured. It will take a short walk to reach the timber along two small waterways. Pinched between crops and bedding, this is a sure hot spot to find the resident deer traveling through. You'll find Alexandria Wildlife Management Area and State Recreation Area just around the corner from this property. These add just over 1,200 acres of hunting, fishing, and camping outside your door! If you've been looking for a quiet acreage with tons to offer, this is your opportunity! Call today for your private showing!



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Using a gun cradle helps steady the shooter and limits the use of costly ammo. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

LESS AMMO ON THE RANGE

By Jeff Kurrus

Some of us like to shoot guns. We look forward to the activity, save money for it, and we definitely don't see dollar signs disappearing every time a cartridge is ejected. Yet there are others who pay attention to the rising cost of ammo prices, sweating each time a bullet leaves the barrel.

If you fit in the latter group, pay attention to these tips when getting your scopes locked in for hunting season. Sighting in a firearm quickly and accurately will conserve ammunition.

Bore-sight

This is an age-old, do-it-by-eye method that calls for centering a target through a rifle's open bore while simultaneously centering the same target through the scope. Laser bore sighters can help.

Start Close

There is no need to line up a rifle at 100 yards to start. Twenty-five yards makes much more sense, both for speed as well as saving a few bucks on ammo in the beginning.

Make a Cradle

While leaning against a vehicle or even resting the rifle on a table will help a shooter line up a rifle, creating a wooden cradle is an easy DIY project. When shooting with your rifle in the cradle, this device keeps you and the gun steady, which ensures maximum accuracy.

Making the Cradle

1. Using $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ plywood or strand board, create a stable base.
2. Cut two vertical boards and create

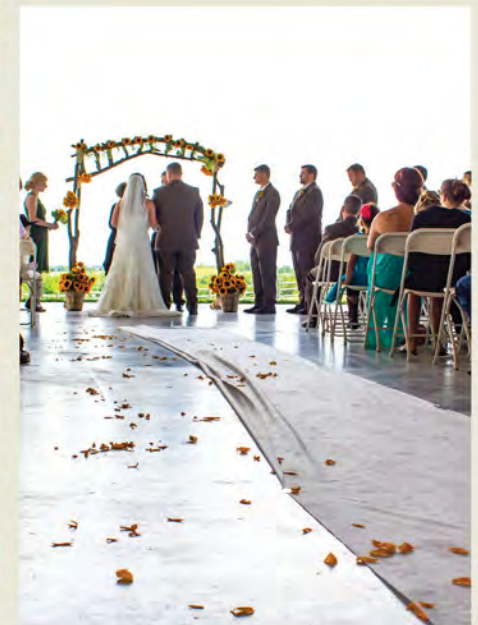
two grooves so that the gun you shoot will rest comfortably with the trigger housing outside of the boards.

3. Use L brackets to connect the base to the vertical boards.
4. Glue carpet or use self-adhesive rubber strips for the notches. Add carpet or rubber strips underneath for even more stability. You can also use a couple old socks filled with sand in the notches to raise or lower the front or back of the firearm.

Depending on the rifle's dimensions, the spacing on the slats can be adjusted. You're simply looking for stability when lining up a rifle, both for the game you're pursuing as well as the pocketbook you're carrying.

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NEBRASKA
— GAME — PARKS —



Fried bluegill crusted with Italian bread crumbs and Parmesan cheese. JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND

PARMESAN-CRUSTED BLUEGILL

By Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley

Here’s a summer fish recipe that will work with just about any fish in Nebraska, with the exception of trout. The Parmesan and bread crumb coating is light, salty and cheesy — a welcome change from all the beer batter and cornmeal you’ve probably eaten this summer.

Enjoy this Parmesan-crusted bluegill with a zesty salad. The balsamic-vinegar tossed greens, shown above, goes well with the flavor of Parmesan. Or, if eating greens isn’t your speed, you could always fall back on fries. In either case, cold beer applies.

Servings: 2

Prep Time: 15 minutes

Cooking Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 8 bluegill fillets
- ½ cup of Progresso Italian-style bread crumbs
- Heaping ½ cup of grated Parmesan cheese, plus extra
- 1 egg
- 1 tablespoon of milk
- ¼ cup of all-purpose flour

- Canola or vegetable oil for frying
- Salad greens for two
- Small handful of cherry or grape tomatoes, halved
- Balsamic vinaigrette, to taste
- Salt, to taste

1. In a wide bowl, combine bread crumbs and cheese. In a second bowl, beat 1 egg with milk until egg whites are no longer visible. In a third bowl, add flour. In a frying pan, heat about ½ inch of oil to 325 degrees Fahrenheit. Meanwhile, coat bluegill fillets in this order: flour—shaking off excess, egg and bread crumbs. Lay coated fish on a cookie sheet while oil comes to temperature.

2. When oil reaches about 325 degrees, carefully add the coated fish. Do not crowd the pan — fry in batches if needed. Fry until golden and then flip to fry the other side. Drain fried fish on paper towels and season with salt to taste.

3. Add salad greens to a mixing bowl and toss with balsamic vinaigrette, tomatoes and Parmesan cheese. Serve immediately with warm fish.



Ambition guides her

like a wand,

to lakes and ponds

and far beyond.

There’s something

in the water.

Women who fish have significantly greater grit and confidence than women who don’t. Find your *best self* on the water.





Campfire Therapy

By Eric Fowler



The flames dance. The coals glow. The wood crackles and pops. The combination of these elements is mesmerizing. It is therapy.

Sit there alone and stare into a campfire's depths, and you can't help but relax as the warmth melts your worries away.

Sit around a fire with friends or family, and you can rehash old times, solve the world's problems and make future plans. In Boy Scouts, it was the perfect setting for telling ghost stories. Build a bigger one, invite more friends and you can call it a bonfire.

The campfire functions the same in the dead of winter or the heat of summer. The only difference is that during the former, you stay closer to the flames, turning repeatedly, as if on a rotisserie, always keeping one side warm. During the latter, a fire can fight off the evening chill, or warm you up while you drink your morning coffee. But not even the hottest summer night can negate the need for a fire.

You don't have to go camping to enjoy a fire. And a campfire isn't required when camping. But it should be. It is to many, myself included, one of the absolute best parts. 🍿

PREVIOUS PAGES: ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

TOP: Claire and Jeff Valder; Chris, Annika, Stephanie and Daniel Kuchar; Leslie and Travis Pillen and Kyle Eley relax around a campfire at Wagon Train Lake in Lancaster County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

TOP RIGHT: Nothing goes better with a campfire than marshmallows.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

BOTTOM RIGHT: Stars fill the sky above a backcountry campsite at Indian Cave State Park in Richardson County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND





TOP LEFT: Tammy and Scott Wiebe, their dog Brandi, and Pat Goracke, all of Lincoln, relax around their campfire at Indian Cave State Park in Richardson County.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

BOTTOM LEFT: Kids gather around an igloo campfire in Sarpy County.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

TOP RIGHT: Eli, Jeff, Laura and Maddie Kurrus create a backyard camping evening in Sarpy County.

JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND

BOTTOM RIGHT: The night before the hunt, Cole Beyke from Laurel, Will Beyke from Ida Grove and Keith Craig from Diller talk around the campfire at Toadstool Geologic Park in Sioux County.

EMILY BURCH



Outdoor Nebraska

By Renae Blum

July is Nebraska’s hottest month, and despite the heat, there are plenty of reasons to get outdoors and have fun. Try fishing, visiting a state park or floating a water trail! 🌳



Celebrate the Fourth of July at a state park

Statewide

A Nebraska state park is the ideal place to celebrate the Fourth. Bring the family and enjoy an afternoon of grilling, swimming, fishing and camping. Don’t forget the s’mores! Visit OutdoorNebraska.gov to learn about fireworks restrictions at the parks and park events.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND



Ready your hunting equipment

Throughout the month | Statewide

While there’s not much hunting happening right now, summer is a good time to organize your hunting equipment for fall. Set aside some time to repair, clean and organize your gear; you’ll be glad you did.

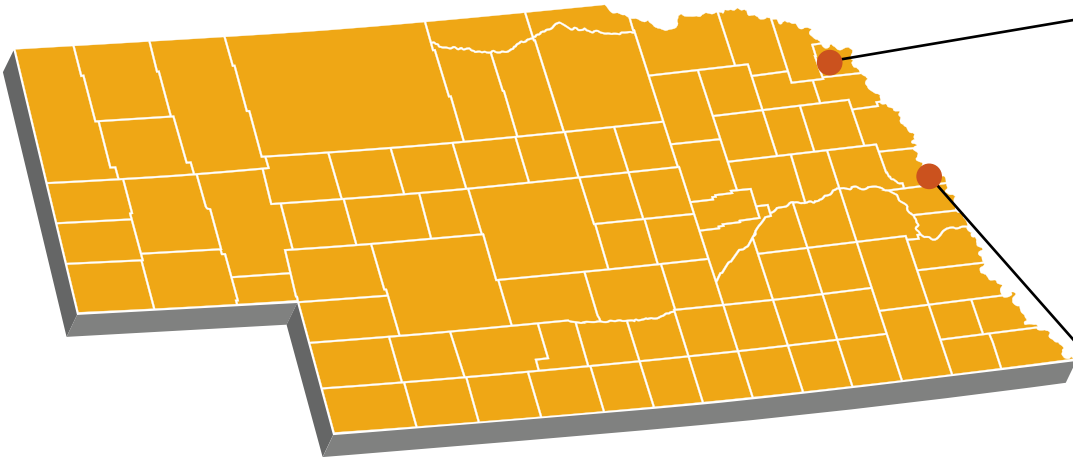
JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



Fish for largemouth bass at Kramper Lake

All month | Danish Alps State Recreation Area

Kramper Lake is a new reservoir, and it’s just at that age where fish populations are at their peak. So the fishing at Kramper is excellent right now — and that includes largemouth bass. Topwater baits, particularly scum frogs, are a good choice; throw some out early and late in the day. JEFF KURRUS, NEBRASKALAND



Float a water trail

All month | Statewide

Summer is a perfect time to float Nebraska’s water trails. It’s a great way to relax, clear your mind, get some fresh air, view wildlife and make connections with friends and family. Find interactive maps and additional information to plan your trip at OutdoorNebraska.gov.

ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Fort Atkinson Living History: Fourth of July Celebration

July 1-2, 10 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Fort Atkinson State Historical Park

Travel 200 years back in time for Fourth of July weekend at Fort Atkinson. Visitors will be able to glimpse the holiday activities that would have taken place at this 1820s-era outpost and see reenactors portray military and civilian life. Learn more at Calendar.OutdoorNebraska.gov.

JENNY NGUYEN-WHEATLEY, NEBRASKALAND



An Outdoor Staycation

Summit Lake State Recreation Area

Photos and story by Jenny Nguyen-Wheatley



Boaters fish at Summit Lake State Recreation Area near Tekamah.

Set down camp on lush, green lawns and manicured campsites. Drop a line from a picture-worthy fishing pier, or slowly work your way across a no-wake lake inside a boat. Then at the end of the day, sit back with a drink to watch the golden light sink below the glistening lake at your feet — it's like you've arrived in paradise without having to hop onto a plane. Find these comforts and more at Summit Lake State Recreation Area near Tekamah, where metro-area Nebraskans can have their summer family getaway just a relatively short drive from home.

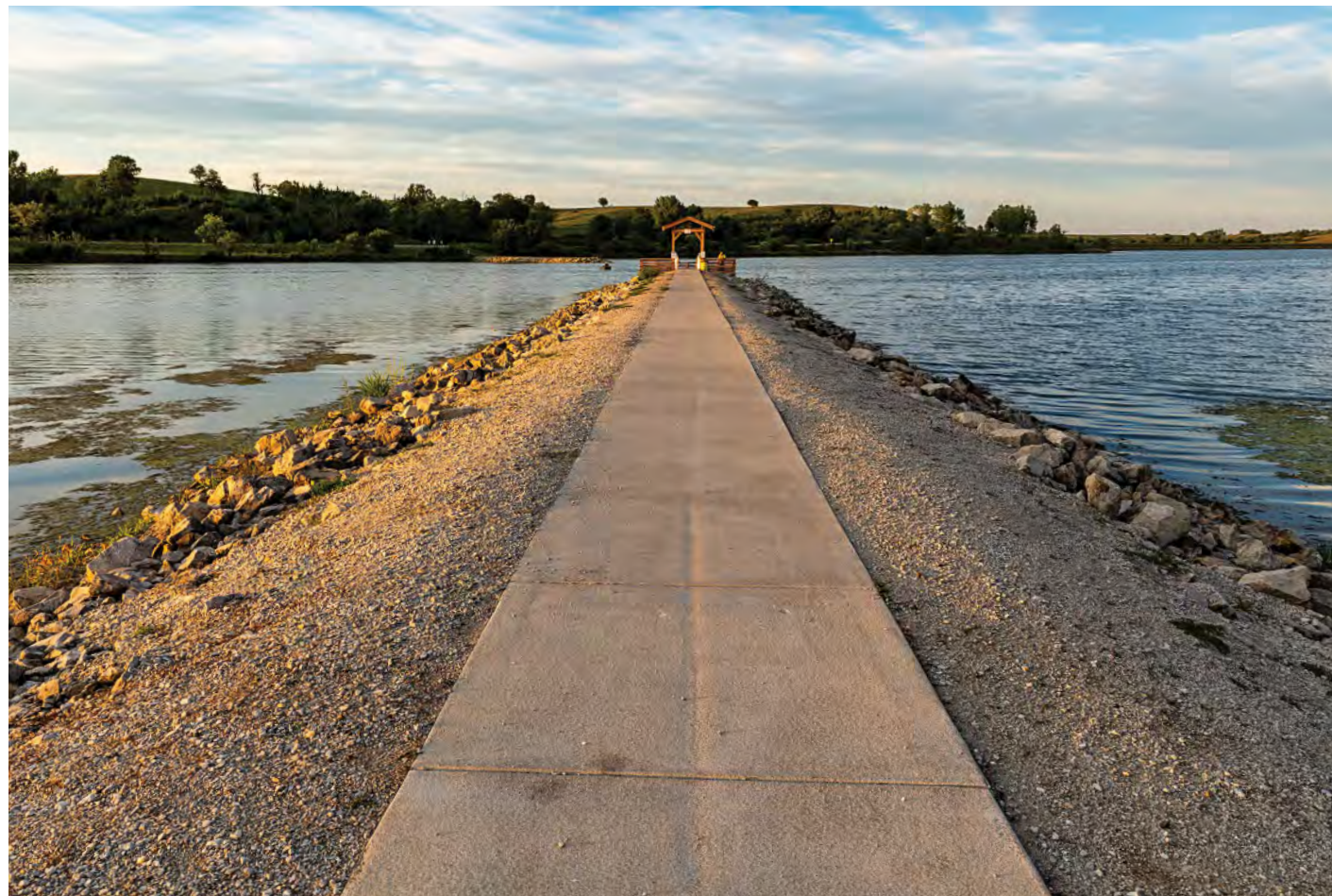
Summit Lake SRA is a great place to land, whether you're a yearlong planner, weekend warrior or a pick-up-and-go adventurer. Campers can snag one of the park's 33 first-come, first-served basic campsites or 43 electric campsites, half of which can be reserved in advance. Those wishing to stay longer will appreciate the modern, centrally-located shower house. And families with young children will love the newly-built playground.

The 190-acre lake offers bountiful fishing, with crappie, bluegill, bass, catfish and walleye in its waters. And hopefully with spring and summer rains, the park's swimming beach will return to its former glory; to remove sediment, a lake renovation in 2022 required part of Summit Lake to be drained, said park superintendent Jordan Swenson. Two serviceable boat ramps allow for no-wake boating.

Hikers, cyclists and horseback riders will enjoy the surrounding 345 acres of gently rolling land. New this year, the park's former two miles of multi-use trail has been extended to nearly 10 miles, thanks to the Nebraska Trailriders Association who spearheaded the project. Another amenity: Bowhunters can keep up with practice at the archery range.

Finally, after a full day outdoors, head back to camp to enjoy a meal by the fire or take advantage of the park's 73 picnic tables, 64 grills and two picnic shelters. Or, if you don't feel like cooking, visit Way North Restaurant and Lounge, which you can't miss, as the restaurant picturesquely overlooks the lake on County Road G.

Summit Lake SRA is the staycation you wish you knew about sooner. [N](#)



TOP LEFT: No-wake boating is permitted on Summit Lake State Recreation Area near Tekamah. Hungry park visitors can enjoy food and drink at Way North Restaurant and Lounge across the road.

BOTTOM LEFT: The same view of Summit Lake from several steps back on the jetty reveals plenty of room for multiple bank anglers.

TOP RIGHT: Elton Jones of Fort Calhoun RV camps with his dog.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Elizabeth Wheatley of Omaha enjoys the new playground at Summit Lake SRA. The playground was made possible by the Burt County Economic Development, Tekamah Area Community Committee, Tekamah Community Foundation and Donald E Nielsen Foundation Inc.





TOP LEFT: Summit Lake SRA offers 43 electric campsites, half of which can be reserved. The park also has 33 basic campsites, which are first-come, first-served.

BOTTOM LEFT: The golden light of sunset illuminates the fishing pier.

TOP RIGHT: Brett and Chris Naber RV camp with their dog, adding an outdoor rug to make their staycation even more comfortable.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Summit Lake attracts a plethora of migrating waterfowl, including these American white pelicans in early spring.



Summit Lake State Recreation Area is a 190-acre lake, surrounded by 345 acres of land. The area offers fishing, hiking, hunting, swimming and camping, among other activities.



Neligh Mill at 150

By David L. Bristow,
History Nebraska

Neligh Mill, in the northeastern Nebraska town of Neligh, is a place where the past doesn't feel all that long ago — as if the mill workers have gone for coffee and will be back shortly. The 19th century machinery is still in place, and longtime site supervisor Harv Ofe can tell you how it all worked. Yellowed notices and posters adorn the walls, and penciled graffiti shows the math of long-ago transactions and the dates of noteworthy local weather.

John Neligh began building the water-powered mill in 1873. Another local businessman completed the work and opened the mill the following year. Neligh Mill operated for nearly a century before becoming a state historical site maintained by History Nebraska.

Humans have been grinding grain into flour for thousands of years, mostly by hand. The oldest known mortars and pestles date to about 35,000 B.C. The use of millstones — also known as burrs — in water-powered gristmills dates back more than 2,000 years.



High water in 1914. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3551-0-95



Neligh Mill and its original “brush dam,” circa 1884. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3551-0-5

Neligh Mill, in other words, is based on ancient technology that was refined over the centuries. But it also reflects the rapid technological

advances of the 19th and early 20th centuries as well as the unpredictable nature of the meandering, flood-prone Elkhorn River.

Using water power meant building a dam that was tall enough to have adequate “water head” — the height of water backed up behind the dam. The water was diverted into a flume where it turned a turbine that powered the mill.

Early photos show water pouring over a brush dam, a crude type of dam made by anchoring piles of brush with pilings and covering it with earth and rocks. Such dams were prone to being washed out by high water.

Neligh Mill replaced its brush dam with a concrete-based frame dam in 1903. The new dam was both stronger and taller, powering ever more machinery inside the mill and even providing power for the town’s first electrical grid.

But there was no taming the Elkhorn River, which was prone to floods, ice jams and burrowing muskrats that undermined dikes and dams. After a flood in 1915, the mill installed a large



Neligh Mill employees in 1911 with bags of So-Lite flour, one of several brands the mill produced. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3551-0-26



Starting in the mid-1880s, roller mills replaced millstones — also known as burrs — and sped up the milling process. HISTORY NEBRASKA



The 1903 dam was stronger and taller to provide more power for the mill.

HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3551-0-17

diesel engine to provide reliable power. Several years later, mill owners tried to return to water power, but gave up after a flood in 1920.

Meanwhile, new technology was changing the process of milling itself. After two millennia, the use of millstones became obsolete in the 1880s with the invention of steel roller mills. The rows of roller mills at Neligh may look old fashioned today,

but at the time, they represented a big investment in the latest technology to greatly increase the mill’s output.

Neligh Mill produced its last flour in 1959. It continued grinding livestock feed for another 10 years before closing entirely. Fortunately for us, the owners left everything in place so that the mill could teach future generations about Nebraska’s agricultural history. [N](#)



Would you cross the rickety suspension bridge over the dam? Circa 1915 photo. HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG2836-0-1599



Stacks of Gold Medal flour in 1909. General Mills bought exclusive rights to the Gold Medal name in 1940.

HISTORY NEBRASKA, RG3551-0-29



The dam is gone, but the flume remains beside the river, though no longer connects to it. The wooden structure at front center is the headgate, which regulated the flow of water into the flume. On the right end of the flume is the penstock, which houses the turbine. The big flywheel was connected by a long belt to another wheel inside the basement.

HISTORY NEBRASKA

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

Catfishing the Niobrara

One Man's Lifetime of Fishing

By Gerry Steinauer, Botanist

Paul Allen's rugged, weather-worn appearance has been earned from decades of running cattle on the Niobrara River breaks of Boyd County. In line with his cowboy persona, his manner is down-home and friendly, his laugh is hearty, and he slides easily into storytelling. Yet, there are contradictions to the cowboy stereotype: His past includes stints as an elementary school teacher and Peace Corps volunteer; in a land of beer and whiskey drinkers, he prefers Cabernet Sauvignon; and his passion is catfishing the Niobrara.

Raised on his family ranch that stretches for more than 4 miles along the Niobrara's north bank, Allen began fishing as a toddler, willow pole in hand, eyes glued to a bobber. He soon advanced to running setlines with his older brother, Max, and, as a high-schooler, fishing with rod and reel. Their ranch was located a few miles downstream from Spencer Dam, and unbeknownst to the boys, they were casting their bait into exceptional catfishing waters.

After high school, Allen left the Niobrara for other adventures, but returned a few years later to run the ranch. He then began to refine his catfishing skills and now, as he approaches his 80th birthday, he is still wrangling cats from the braided prairie stream.

Childhood Fishing

Allen was "a spring calf," born in 1944. As a child living 7 miles of dirt road from the nearest town, the Niobrara River and its surroundings were his main entertainment. He and

Max explored on foot and horseback, trapped beaver and muskrats, hunted ducks in spring-fed backwaters and, of course, fished for channel catfish in the river.

Max taught his little brother the ways of the river, how to rig his pole and bait his hook with nightcrawlers and grasshoppers. "We tried to catch the great big lubbers," Allen said, referring to the Plains lubber, also known as the homesteader, Nebraska's largest grasshopper and quite a mouthful for a catfish.

"As fishermen, we didn't know what we were doing, but we weren't fishing for sport, we were fishing for something to eat," Allen said. "I guess there was some sport to it. I remember Max crying once when he let a big cat slip out of his hands."

In their household, catfish was standard table fare. "Pancakes and a little fried catfish were a treat for breakfast. Max's birthday was April 15, and mom always hoped for an early spring catfish bite and for snow to linger in the deep ravines so she could make fish and ice cream for his party." She floured and fried the skinned fish in oil, which is how Allen prefers them to this day.

The brothers also ran setlines. In summer, they prayed for rain so their dad would free them from working in the hay fields. "We would run down to the river to catch grass [northern leopard] frogs and toads for setline bait, or we would use chicken guts if we had recently butchered," Allen said. They scrounged most of their setline tackle from around the home place, cutting flexible willow stems from riverside thickets for poles, scrounging broken iron from the farmyard for weights and pilfering old chalk line from the shop. They bought hooks in town.



Paul Allen, at age 7 in 1951, shows off one of his first catfish while standing in the family farmyard with the Niobrara River in the background. PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL ALLEN



Allen stands in the doorway of his shop. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

Their method of setlining on the sand-bottomed Niobrara remains the standard to this day. They pushed the poles into the river bank or shallow water above a deep channel or hole, letting the line drift into the deeper water where weights pulled the bait to the bottom. They avoided fast currents, as there the lines would "sand in." Through setlining, the boys learned to read the river's depth and speed from the texture

of the surface water. This was especially important for Allen, who could not swim.

They baited their lines after supper and checked them early in the morning before chores or school. Although rather unskilled pole fisherman due to their primitive tackle, the boys were adept setliners, catching most of their catfish, including lunkers weighing up to 12 pounds, this way.



Allen holds an old baitcasting rod and reel with which he caught countless channel catfish from the Niobrara.

GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND

Leaving the Niobrara

When Allen graduated from high school in 1962, his parents gave him \$100, a saddle and a suit. Leaving home, he worked summers on western Nebraska ranches and attended Wayne State College during the school year. At Wayne, he took classes for two and half years until flunking a required statistics class, killing his dream of earning a business degree.

He then attended Chadron State College for a year and earned a teaching degree. After graduation, he taught at a Sandhills country school with five students for a year and elementary school in Henry for two years. During his time out west, Allen rode the weekend rodeo circuit to earn a few extra bucks until a hard kick in the face by a bucking bronco



CHANNEL CATFISH (*Ictalurus punctatus*) are North America's most numerous catfish species. They are also the official fish of Nebraska. Shown are male top, female bottom.

ARTWORK BY JOSEPH TOMELLERI

left a scar and knocked enough sense into him to give up the business.

In 1969, Allen married his first wife, Diane. She had grown up in a ranch house located in the shadows of Spencer Dam and had been friends with Allen since childhood. A year after their marriage, fulfilling a desire to help others, they joined the Peace Corps, spending two years in Venezuela teaching Spanish-speaking residents how to speak English and helping them improve their farming practices, the latter of which mostly failed. "No matter what you try, you just can't grow alfalfa in Venezuela," Allen said with a laugh.

After the Peace Corps, the couple moved into Allen's childhood home on the Niobrara, his parents having moved into town. "By then, the old house wasn't much more than a shack," Allen said. "There were bees living in the walls and we had no well." They hauled drinking water in five-gallon cream cans from an artesian spring that flowed into the river. Five years later, Allen built a new house low on the bluff, something he had promised his bride when they got married. They would raise four children there. Diane passed away in 1991.

Refining His Craft

Back on the Niobrara, Allen began to refine his angling skills, and fishing downstream of Spencer Dam, he was doing so in catfisherman heaven.

Built in 1927 for hydroelectric power generation, Spencer Dam was located 39 miles upstream from the Niobrara's confluence with the Missouri River. The powerhouse and 500 foot-long concrete spillway jutted out from the river's north

bank, while the remainder of the dam — a 3,200-foot-long, 26-foot-tall earthen bank — spanned the valley bottom.

As the swift-flowing Niobrara pooled behind the dam, sand settled out of its slowed waters and over time formed a huge delta. Meanwhile, the clear, sand-free water exiting the dam was highly erosive and scoured deep channels and holes in the river downstream, including Allen's stretch. In addition, the dam blocked the migration of catfish moving out of the Missouri and up the Niobrara during their late-spring and early-summer spawning run, and they stockpiled below the dam. In a nutshell, Spencer Dam gifted Allen with deep, stable waters teeming with hungry cats.

Over the decades, Allen fished these waters almost exclusively during the cool evening when catfish most actively feed. "I start fishing after supper, usually about 6 o'clock, and leave the river before midnight," he said. "The peak bite is usually about 10 o'clock and trails off after that. In early spring, you can get by fishing during the day, but not during the heat of summer. On a summer day, you might catch a cat or two from a hole, but that's about it."

His best fishing has always been during the spawning run when catfish are on the move and hungry. During the heat of late summer, the fish become less active, and the bite slows. Allen suspects that many fish move down into the deeper and cooler Missouri River during this period. As temperatures drop in September, fish move back up the Niobrara and the



Allen's mother, Gertrude, holds a stringer of three nice catfish and a sucker Allen and his brother, Max, caught on setlines in the mid-1950s. PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL ALLEN



A bundle of Allen's old setlines, rigged with hooks and cast cement weights, age in a corner of his shop. GERRY STEINAUER, NEBRASKALAND



A 2017 aerial photo shows Spencer Dam looking westward. The dam's cement spillway is located on the right while its earthen bank extends to the left. Sand carried downstream by the Niobrara River has settled out of the still water and filled the former lake behind the dam. The clear water flowing out of the dam carried little sand and was highly erosive, scouring deep holes in the river channel downstream. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

bite picks up again.

No matter the time of the year, Allen always fishes from a sandbar or the bank, never wading out into the river. “Catfish are smart. If you disturb the water or make noise, they know something is up and they’ll stop biting,” he said. His favorite fishing spot is a hole that formed below a chalk-rock ledge exposed in the river. “Before Spencer Dam went out, I could catch my fill of 5-pound catfish there,” he said. “It was easy.” The biggest cat Allen ever landed on rod and reel, an 8-pound fish, came from that hole. He has hooked bigger catfish, but fighting with the current, these fish usually break the line or straighten the hook and escape. From the rock-bottomed hole, he occasionally catches sauger, the river-inhabiting cousin of the walleye, but only when fishing in September and when using nightcrawlers as bait.

In addition to nightcrawlers, Allen sometimes baited his hook with chicken intestines, preferring them to chicken livers, a common catfish bait, saying “they have more stink.” About 15 years ago, however, he switched to shad guts as his go-to catfish bait, and now buys them by the case in frozen pint jars. “The gizzard in the guts is really tough and when hooked through it, they stay on, and they really stink!” he said. “Fish can smell them from a long way downriver, and they really come after them.”

Allen usually fishes alone. Until recently, a few times each summer, he enjoyed the companionship of two longtime friends with whom he would run setlines throughout the

night and wearily clean their catch after sunrise. Both of these friends, however, passed away, and “getting up and down the river bank to check lines just got too hard on this old timer,” Allen said. “I stopped running setlines.”

Allen’s catfishing had changed, and it was about to do so again in dramatic fashion.

The Night Spencer Dam Burst

On March 13, 2019, a rare bomb cyclone dropped more than two inches of rain over northeastern Nebraska, melting the foot of snow that covered the region. Unable to soak into the frozen soil, the water rushed down feeder streams into rivers throughout the region. The iced-covered Niobrara rose to historic levels, the river ice breaking free in chunks as large as pickups. The torrent of water and ice swept away highway bridges as if they were built of old barn siding, and then gathered behind Spencer Dam. In the early morning hours of March 14, the dam could bear no more, and the earthen bank breached in two spots, sending an 11-foot-high wall of mayhem cascading downstream.

Allen and his second wife, Lana, were awakened by a phone call from his son, Cody, saying the dam had broken. Allen rushed outside and was startled to see water just 15 feet below their house. “When daylight came, I could see the mess we were in,” he said.

His first concern was his cattle. The panicked animals were



An aerial photo captured in June 2019 looking eastward shows Spencer Dam and the U.S. Highway 281 bridge that were both destroyed by the catastrophic March 2019 flood. With the dam no longer interrupting its flow, the Niobrara River now carries a heavy sand load and has filled many of Allen’s longtime fishing holes along his ranch 5 miles downriver. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

trapped in paneled pens on the edge of the riverbottom: The gates were open, but the cows would not go through the deep, fast-moving water to get to them. Allen and his daughter-in-law, Kari, struggled to open the gate of one pen located in only knee-deep water, but its bottom was frozen in mud. He hurried to a shed for a handyman jack and, standing in ice-cold water and with tears in their eyes, they pried the gate out of the mud to free 60 cows. They were left to watch helplessly as 80 head in other pens drowned.

By evening, the floodwaters had receded, leaving ice, logs, brush and miscellaneous trash scattered across the riverbottom. Along with the debris, a thick layer of “powder sand” coated Allen’s previously rich hay meadow. Parked in the bottom, his tractors, a caterpillar, combines and new pickup were ice-dented and waterlogged, mostly ruined. He later salvaged the caterpillar and a couple tractors by flushing their engines with oil and making other repairs, but now questions the effort. “It cost me \$10,000 to fix one tractor worth \$7,500. Does that make sense?” he said. It took his son, Nyal, weeks to pile the logs and trash in the meadow for burning. Allen considers himself lucky that he hadn’t built his house on the floodplain.

His brother-in-law, Kenny Angel, who ran Angels’ Straw Bale Saloon located on the floodplain just below the dam, lacked Allen’s luck and encountered tragedy that night: His house near the saloon was washed away by the flood waters, his body never found. Allen said that Angel’s pickup, tractors

and campers have also never been found, and likely lie buried deep under sand. Recently, he found the toolbox from Angel’s pickup on his ranch; it had been exposed by river cutting.

A Changed River

With Spencer Dam no longer interrupting its flow and hijacking its sand load, the lower Niobrara once again functions as a natural, braided prairie stream. The river is now wider with constantly-shifting sandbars, pools, riffles and runs. The deep, stable holes Allen once fished no longer exist. “It’s a different river. It changes so fast,” he said.

In addition, migrating catfish, as well as other river fish, are now free to keep swimming upstream, and no longer stockpile below the now-breached dam. For Allen, this means that there are fewer catfish to catch, but on the flip side, those fishing upstream of the dam have more.

Despite the changes to the Niobrara, Allen has few complaints. While he is no longer pulling big cats hand over fist from his rock-ledge honeyhole, his fishing is still good overall. Since the dam breached, the main river channel has swung away from the ledge, and the hole is shallower. But Allen still fishes it. “I’ll be there next summer,” he said. 📍

Gerry Steinauer is a botanist for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. He has been writing and photographing for Nebraskaland Magazine since 1990.

The Last Relic

By Eric Fowler

Woulda, coulda, shoulda.
Our lives can be full of them.

The story of one of mine began in 1999, the first time I visited Niobrara State Park. From the hilltop overlooking the Niobrara River, I could see a rooftop poking out of the trees in the riverbottom.

I was told it was the picnic shelter in the old park, the one that opened in 1935 and was closed when the park moved to its current location in 1987. I told myself I'd hike out and see it someday, and said the same thing every other time I saw the shelter, be it from that hilltop or from the window of a Cessna on an aerial photo assignment.

Someday.



The story of Niobrara Island State Park began in 1889, when citizens of Niobrara who settled in 1856 successfully

petitioned Congress to set aside a tract of land on the west side of the Niobrara River for a park. The small stream on the west side of the tract is what put “island” in the park’s name. The origin of that stream is unclear. Some reports say Mormons who settled there in 1846 or ’47 dug it, diverting water from the Niobrara River to power a mill. Others say it was just a small side channel of the Niobrara. Whatever the case, it remains known as the Mormon Canal today.

A clubhouse was built, but interest in the park waned, and in 1930, residents of the village voted to donate the land to the Nebraska Game, Forestation and Parks Commission, the precursor to Nebraska Game and Parks. Picnic grounds and a 9-hole golf course were built, and fish were stocked in the ponds. “Where the sky is blue and the earth is wide and there’s lots of fish by the riverside” read a headline atop a story on improvements being made at the park in the



The picnic shelter at Niobrara Island State Park was built with massive, hand-hewn timbers and featured a stone fireplace at one end. COURTESY OF NIOBRARA MUSEUM



An unidentified man kicks back with a book and cigar while fishing across the lagoon from the shelter sometime prior to 1966. The lagoon was the centerpiece of the park. LOU ELL, NEBRASKALAND MAGAZINE

Niobrara Tribune in 1933.

The Great Depression had already begun, however. With so many people out of work, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, as part of his New Deal, created the Civilian Conservation Corps. The work relief program put nearly 3 million men to work during the nine years it existed. Among the many jobs they undertook was the construction of 700 new state parks and roads, trails and shelters at others.

In 1934 and 1935, men from a CCC work camp in Niobrara built cabins, roads and other amenities at the park, including the picnic shelter. It was built with massive, hand-hewn wood posts and beams tied together with curved knee braces, and a stone fireplace at one end. It differed from shelters CCC crews built at Ponca and Chadron state parks and Dead Timber, Walgren Lake and the Wildcat Hills state recreation

areas, iconic stone structures that still stand today.

Now known simply as Niobrara State Park, the park opened in 1935. An advertisement in *Outdoor Nebraska*, the precursor to this magazine, in 1936 dubbed the park “A rest haven in pleasant surroundings.” A 1944 article in *Outdoor Nebraska* said it was built upon a beautiful wooded island of 800 acres, as “[g]listening white cottages, group camps, administrative buildings dot the entire area.”

The park’s new picnic shelter stood on the banks of the lagoon that wound through the park, where visitors could rent paddleboats, fish and swim. It hosted countless picnics and events.

“Oh yeah. We had picnics there when school got out. And we always had a school picnic,” said 92-year-old Delberta Peterson, a long-time resident of Niobrara, who had memories



In 1966, people gather to enjoy the picnic shelter that was located in the park's original location, before the park was relocated in the 1980s. NGPC LIBRARY

of Easter sunrise services, local ladies cooking meals for church camps, long walks, riding paddleboats on the lagoon and the log cabin store at the old park.

“All the kids thought it was wonderful,” said Marge Rotherham, whose husband, Vince, was superintendent at the park. They had four children together there. “When it

rained, it protected them. They quickly went to the shelter.”
 “I remember a birthday party there ... and catching a baby duck that my mom made me let go,” said Dina Barta of Lincoln, a Niobrara native and Game and Parks conservation officer who spent her summers at the park growing up. She also remembers the store, bringing her pet squirrel there for visitors to see, selling sweet corn from her pink banana-seat bike, and visitors signing or carving their names in the log beams.

Village residents loved the park. “It was a way of life for all of us,” Barta said. “The park made the town.”



Flooding on the Missouri and Niobrara rivers was a recurring problem for the village and Niobrara State Park. It forced the town to move in 1881. Another flood, this one moving much slower, began when Gavins Point Dam was completed on the Missouri 32 miles downriver from Niobrara in 1956.

With the Missouri's water slowed, the sand carried by the Niobrara began to settle out in both rivers. And with high spring flows erased by Fort Randall Dam and others upstream, it stayed, forming a delta, raising the water table and flooding basements in the village. In the mid-1970s, the town was relocated to the bluff above the rivers. The



Trail riders and anyone traveling the loop road at Niobrara State Park could easily spot the old shelter in 2007. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Following the flood of 2019, the shelter's roof collapsed and the fireplace toppled. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND

park remained on the riverbottom for a few more years, but sedimentation, shifting river channels and the increased risk of flooding would force its move to the hills west of the Niobrara in 1987.

From those hills, the old park's structures remained visible for years. The cabins, store and paddleboats stayed open for a year or two. Some of the buildings were relocated, including a few of the cabins, which found a new home at the Blue Moon Resort near Verdel. More flooding in 1996 took its toll on the rest, which were eventually demolished. That flood shifted most of the Niobrara's flow into the Mormon Canal and filled the lagoon and pool with sand. Slowly, signs of the old park were erased. Eventually, the shelter, the last relic of the old park, was hidden from view by willows and cottonwoods.

And then 2019 happened. March rains quickly melted thick snowpack and swelled the frozen Niobrara River, sending massive blocks of ice downstream. Spencer Dam breached, sending a wall of ice and water downriver, washing out Highway 12 between Niobrara and the park, and the old railroad bridge that served as a trail. Water likely topped the roof of the shelter by a few feet, and had trees on the island not deflected the ice, it surely would've been swept away. When the water receded, the roof, covered with sand, collapsed. That is what I saw from the air in 2019 while documenting the damage caused by the flood.

I had waited too long.

My “someday” finally came in May of 2021. With nothing pressing on the schedule, and the peak of mosquito and tick

season still ahead, I headed for the park and bushwhacked my way across what is now Bazile Creek Wildlife Management Area from the highway to the shelter. I found sand piled nearly to the rafters, and the fireplace toppled.

I wish I had made that hike sooner. Much sooner. And I wish I would've seen that shelter, and the park, in its heyday, so I could truly appreciate why the locals continue to have such fond memories of the place once known as Niobrara Island. 



An aerial photo from 2017 shows trees that had grown on the west side of the shelter, roof still intact, obscuring its view from the park. ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND



Joel Klammer of Ainsworth holds a brown trout he caught on a December afternoon in Long Pine Creek at Pine Glen WMA.

Long Pine Creek

Work Improves a Unique Fishery in the Sandhills

Story and photos by Eric Fowler

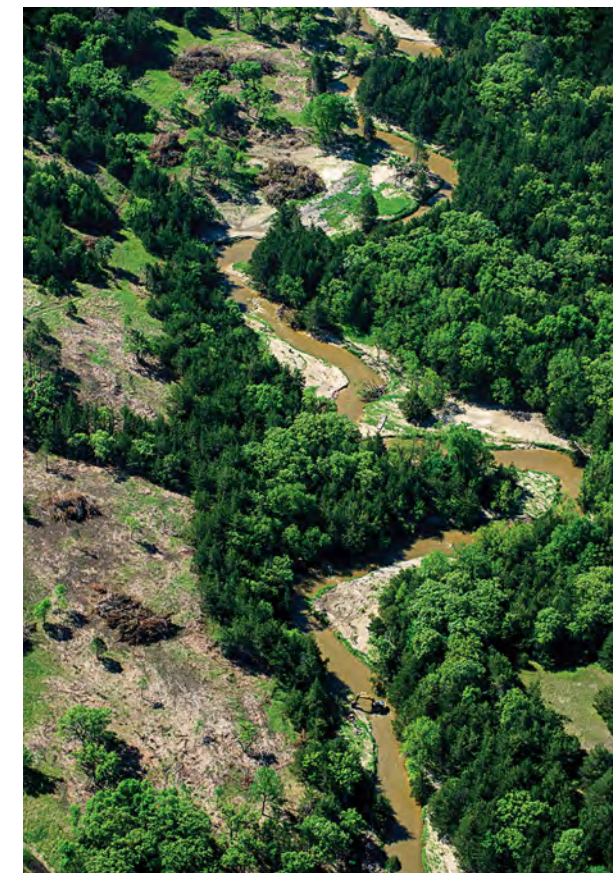
Joel Klammer repeatedly casts a woolly bugger fly toward rock structures in Long Pine Creek and lets it drift through the deep holes below them. He thinks he sees a fish attempting to bite on one drift, but after 20 minutes, he decides his first choice of flies wasn't going to cut it on this section of the creek on Pine Glen Wildlife Management Area. So, he reaches into his fly box and ties on a big, brown, rubber-legged nymph.

"The water was moving pretty fast. I wanted something bigger to attract their attention," Klammer said. "Those fish have to make a decision quick in that faster water. It's floating by pretty quick. It's no spring creek, where you're floating your fly down the surface gently for a minute."

It was another 20 minutes before that decision paid off, and he landed a brown trout that topped 10 inches. Forty minutes and a quarter mile upstream later, he landed his fourth brown, this one topping 12 inches.

The one thing each of the fish had in common, other than the fly they were caught on, is all were hooked near rock structures installed in the creek in 2019 as part of a Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Aquatic Habitat

Program project designed to improve habitat for fish and success for anglers.



A trackhoe installs rock structures in Long Pine Creek following work to remove eastern red cedar trees from the creekbottom. The Aquatic Habitat Program project improved habitat for fish and access for anglers.

After flowing east for about 6 miles, it turns north, continuing roughly 20 miles, as the crow flies, until it meets the Niobrara River. Its winding path stretches 33½ miles, coursing through a canyon more than a mile wide and 200 feet deep in spots, which is forested with ponderosa pines, eastern red cedars and oaks — a stark contrast to the open range and cropland surrounding the canyon.

Along the way, the creek winds its way past cabins in Hidden Paradise Resort, where the cool, pristine waters have drawn vacationers since 1910. It continues through Long Pine State Recreation Area, a popular spot for people to camp, fish and drift down the stream in tubes to cool off on a hot summer day. After flowing beneath U.S. Highway 20, it crosses Long Pine Wildlife Management Area, and 13 stream miles later, Pine Glen WMA, both rugged areas that draw anglers and hunters.

Similar to most of the streams that feed into the Niobrara River, Long Pine Creek's base flow comes from springs of the Ogallala Aquifer. The creek is considered a Class A coldwater stream, where temperatures never top 77 degrees, making it cold enough to support trout

As the Stream Flows

Long Pine Creek begins flowing in a pasture on the edge of the Sandhills southwest of the town of Long Pine.



Green ash trees in fall color contrast the ponderosa pine and cedar forest that fills the picturesque, mile-wide canyon that rises 200 feet above Long Pine Creek.

even in the heat of summer. It runs clear, other than when rainfall washes in sediment. It is full of oxygen, supporting the mayflies, caddis flies and other aquatic life, and contains gravel beds on which trout can spawn: the same features you might find in a trout stream in Colorado. As such, it is one of the top trout waters in the state, with self-sustaining populations of both rainbow and brown trout.

The creek’s value for fish, wildlife and recreation are why it was the first water in Nebraska to gain an instream flow right from the state’s Department of Natural Resources. Granted to the Commission in 1989, the right helps ensure flows will be sufficient to sustain trout year round.

Growing Bigger Fish

Long Pine Creek flows lazily through Long Pine SRA. In the mid-1990s, the

Commission installed wood lunger structures in the stream there to both create bank line habitat and prevent erosion. Aside from occasional maintenance, the structures have stood the test of time. Biologists sample more fish, both stocked and wild rainbow trout and wild brown trout, in that reach of stream than all but one other in the state.

By the time the stream reaches Pine Glen WMA, it has gained flows and velocity, and there is less in-stream habitat to hold fish. Fisheries biologists saw an opportunity to use the Aquatic Habitat Program to improve a reach of the stream there to benefit fish and anglers.

“We recognized that Pine Glen WMA was a good candidate because it’s somewhat secluded and with less harvest, it might allow us to grow some bigger fish with some additional habitat structures,” said Brett Roberg,

a Commission stream biologist.

The work was modeled after another project completed on Nine Mile Creek in Scotts Bluff County, which boasts the highest density of trout in the state. When work similar to that was also done on a private stretch of the creek upstream from Pine Glen, “the trout literally moved into those habitat features almost immediately after we built them,” Roberg said.

The in-stream habitat work focused on two straight runs that, combined, covered 1,800 feet and offered little variation in depth and habitat types.

An excavator was used to place boulders in and along the stream, creating nine different types of structures, 38 in all. The largest were cross-vane weirs, V-shaped structures pointing upstream with a notch at the tip, and weirs running straight across the stream, also with a notch. Both concentrated the flows through the

notch, scouring holes below them.

Other structures included rock J-hooks and log formations that deflected flows away from the bank to reduce erosion, forcing the stream to meander more, and boulder clusters in the middle of the stream.

Combined, the structures were designed to create current breaks and a diverse range of velocities and depths, creating resting and feeding areas for trout and other native fish species. There are now more pools with deeper, slower moving water and riffles with shallow, swift flows.

Pools can provide the refuge fish need during low flows in the heat of the summer and are often where fish prefer to be in the cold of winter.

“They also make great places for

trout to eat,” said Thad Huenemann, rivers and streams program manager with Game and Parks. “Think of the bugs that are floating through the system. Once you get to a pool, they sit there a little bit, and it provides an opportunity for trout to be able to munch down on a buffet of critters that are flowing through the system. And it allows them to rest because they don’t have to fight the current so much.”

The boulder clusters in the riffles serve a similar purpose, providing refuge from the current where trout can wait to ambush food in what Roberg said can be “the food factory of those systems more times than not.”

Increasing the meandering or sinuosity of the stream further diversifies the habitats. Each type of

habitat supports different types of invertebrates, the aquatic insects trout live on, at different times of the year.

More Room to Cast

Before work could begin in the stream at Pine Glen, a path needed to be cleared to allow the heavy equipment to get there. The project began by clearing cedar trees from 26 acres of pine forest above the creek and in oak woodlands on the creekbottom. Some cedars were present here when the Commission acquired the 960-acre area in 1973, but the opportunistic invaders had since filled nearly every opening they could find in the canyon, and simply getting to the creek to fish was a challenge.



Water spills over two of the rock structures installed in Long Pine Creek at Pine Glen WMA, creating deep pools below.



Nebraska Game and Parks Commission fisheries biologists Thad Huenemann, Joe Spooner, Brett Roberg and Zach Horstman use an electrofishing barge to sample fish in Long Pine Creek.

“It was rough,” said Roberg.

The clearing also gave anglers more room to cast, and made it easier for them to get from one spot to another.

Opening the forest on the floodplain also helped lessen the damage that may have occurred during two historic floods in 2019 that occurred before and after the project was completed: one came in March, when heavy rain fell on deep snowpack, and the second was the result of torrential rains in September. A gauge located

downstream, below where Bone Creek joins Long Pine Creek, measured flows near and above 6,000 cubic feet per second where they are normally under 200 cfs. Elsewhere along the creek, the flooding caused severe erosion, uprooted trees and piled them along the banks, causing more erosion.

“[The floodwaters] moved into the area that had been full of cedar trees, so it actually, more than likely, protected some of our structures because it dissipated that energy over

a bigger area,” Roberg said.

And where there were only cedars growing beneath the oaks on the floodplain, there are now numerous plant species, which has benefitted wildlife.

“The herbaceous community responded big time,” said Kelly Corman, a wildlife biologist who manages the area. “We had coveys of quail down in there the first couple of years after clearing, which was pretty neat to see. It’s certainly being utilized

by deer quite a bit. And we’re seeing some young oak trees, some seedlings. It’s a good thing.”

An Evolving Stream

So far, the results in the stream aren’t exactly what biologists had hoped for. Three electrofishing surveys of the stream since work was completed have actually found far fewer trout than surveys conducted prior to the project. But biologists believe there are

reasons for the discrepancy and that things will improve.

Flows in Long Pine Creek have, for the most part, been above normal since 2018, even during the severe drought in 2022. Those conditions make it much more difficult to sample trout, which during normal or below normal flows can be concentrated in a few holes and easy to catch.

So, it is likely there are more fish in this reach than biologists are able to sample. It is also possible that, while trout populations are fine upstream at Long Pine SRA, many were flushed out of the lower reaches of the stream where flows were the highest. That is what occurred in some sections of the Big Thompson River in Colorado during flooding in 2014. In one reach, the trout population declined by 85 percent. Roberg said biologists there have told him that fishery has since recovered, and it may take time for

Long Pine Creek to do the same.

Huenemann said biologists who work on stream enhancement projects in other states have told him that while some work produces instant results, which is what managers and anglers hope for, sometimes it takes years and multiple generations of fish to establish a thriving population.

Additionally, the stream is still evolving. “We went in there and disrupted things, and the system is still trying to balance out,” said Huenemann.

Measurements taken when the project was completed and the two years that followed found the depth to be increasing and the velocity decreasing in the pools below the new structures. Those changes are expected to stabilize.

With no breaks in the current prior to the project, there was no water buttercup, elodea or other aquatic



The flathead chub, a species of concern in Nebraska, is one of eight species of native fishes that hadn’t been sampled in the stream at Pine Glen WMA prior to the project that biologists are finding there now.



Klammer casts his fly toward a cut bank in the stream below one of the structures installed in the project.

vegetation growing in this reach of the stream that is common upstream. Those plants, however, are now starting to grow in the sediments that have been deposited in the slack water areas above and below the structures. “Once you have that vegetation established, it creates cover for fish,”

Huenemann said. “That’s what you’re hoping to promote. Prey species occupy those areas, and you’re promoting macroinvertebrate growth and future food sources for trout.” Sampling has shown that the diversity of species in the creek at Pine Glen has increased. Aside from

the brown and rainbow trout, pre-project sampling found only two other species: longnose dace and white suckers. Post sampling found eight additional species, including the flathead chub, a species of concern in Nebraska. A warmwater species native to the Missouri River Basin

but in serious decline, it is common in Long Pine Creek between the mouth of Bone Creek and the Niobrara, a reach not considered a coldwater stream. The species is likely moving upstream during summer. As was the case prior to the project, the trout that are sampled are primarily

A Hike Worth the Effort

To fish Pine Glen Wildlife Management Area, pack your hiking waders. While the Aquatic Habitat Program project there included building a two-track road, that road is not open to the public. It does, however, serve as a trail that anglers can follow to the creek, and the hike is worth it for those looking to escape the crowds and immerse themselves in a landscape few realize exists in Nebraska.

“Pine Glen provides more of what I call a rare opportunity to hike into a remote trout stream surrounded by oak woodlands in a deep pine canyon,” said Kelly Corman, the wildlife biologist who manages the area. “It’s an experience that you don’t necessarily get in Nebraska, and too many places. It’s kind of a unique quality. That would be lost if you could drive to the bottom, and it would change the character of the area.”

The hike in following the maintenance road, located on the north end of the wildlife management area, covers a little more than 700 yards and drops 230 feet. Some anglers follow a second, unimproved, unmarked trail that winds through the woods on the southern portion of the area and is 100 yards shorter with a similar elevation change.

Corman said two other areas on the creek, one of the best trout waters in the state, don’t require as much effort. At Long Pine State Recreation Area, one can almost drive to the stream bank. Across Highway 20, anglers can take an access road to the creek bottom and hike a primitive trail less than 300 yards to the creek on Long Pine Wildlife Management Area.

“I like the idea of having an area where if someone is willing to hike a little bit, they can maybe avoid some of the fishing pressure,” said Joel Klammer of Ainsworth, who mostly visits the stream in the fall when flows are lower. “There are other areas where you can drive within feet of the bank.

“I’ve always thought Pine Glen was a neat spot. It’s a long hike down there, but if you go, you’re probably going to have it to yourself.”

browns, but both browns and rainbows are larger than in upstream reaches, up to 15 and 14 inches, respectively. “One of the things we’ve noticed on some of the other tributaries is the brown trout are the ones that seem to be the most dominant in the lower sections of those watersheds,” Roberg said. “Brown trout are a little more adaptable to higher turbidity and slightly warmer temperatures. But often do best in cool, clean water.”

Eventually, more trout will find the habitat created by these new structures, be it wild browns or rainbows stocked at the SRA.

“I think once we get a population in there that kind of stays, there’s enough habitat to fulfill their life cycles in those areas,” Huenemann said. “So, theoretically, we can start

seeing opportunities for spawning and reproduction and a sustainable population down there.”

A Bright Future

Klammer, a former fisheries biologist for the Commission, had spent time working and fishing on the creek prior to the Aquatic Habitat Project. Looking at the work from both aspects, he liked what he saw.

“It created some deeper water, nice holes, holding areas, slack water ... that’s what fish are looking for,” he said. “I thought those structures added some nice habitat and some good places for fish to hold, and obviously there were some holding there that day.

“That was a really good day for December fly fishing.” 🍷

THE PONCA SASQUATCH

By Renae Blum

Bigfoot has long been part of American myth — and according to the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, the fabled beast has been spotted in Nebraska at least 15 times. The most recent report, from Thurston County in May 2018, describes a creature “MUCH larger than me. It could easily be 10 plus feet.”

The scientific consensus is that Bigfoot isn’t real, but that hasn’t stopped the ongoing search, nor the fascination. If you’re hungering for a Bigfoot sighting of your own, there’s one reliable place in Nebraska where he can be found: Ponca State Park.

In April 2020, the world was reeling from the coronavirus pandemic, and staff at Ponca had a big question to answer. Their education programs were an important part of guest



While his siblings were a bit wary of Sasquatch, Declan Ferguson of Omaha has always been interested in “scary” stuff, his mom said. KALENE PINK FERGUSON

experience, yet buildings were being shut down, and they couldn’t hold any programs face-to-face. How, then, could they keep people engaged?

The answer? A Sasquatch costume from the park’s annual Hallowfest event.

“We decided that we were going to stuff it and start moving it around the park and kind of do a self-guided scavenger hunt,” said Katie Leware, a Ponca State Park superintendent. “It’s a 7-foot-tall Sasquatch costume. You can’t really miss him.”

This summer marks the third year guests can hunt for Sasquatch, as he’s known at the park, and send in selfies to be shared on Ponca’s Facebook page. Staff move him to new locations weekly in the summer and every two weeks in the off-season.



There have been 15 reported sightings of Bigfoot in Nebraska. Some counties have had multiple reports.

The venture has been a big success. “He kind of has his own fan club. People come out just to look for him,” said superintendent Lynn Mellick. “It’s almost like a cult following. It’s really neat how it’s taken off.”

Staff have fun with the project, too, dressing up Sasquatch when the mood strikes. Visitors have spotted him decked out in rabbit ears for Easter, board shorts and sunglasses and a Santa suit.

News has traveled outside Nebraska, too — Leware says Bigfoot enthusiasts from around the country have traveled to Ponca just to take part.

Ponca’s office staff typically know where Sasquatch is and are willing to point you in the right direction, she added. Sometimes, he can be found on a hiking trail, requiring some legwork to reach him, but a lot of the time, staff put him near a parking lot or safe pull-off on the road, so those who can’t make the hike can still participate.

Sasquatch remains outside 24-7, and they’ve already had to replace the first Sasquatch costume due to the elements. Given the cost of the costume, Leware isn’t sure the Sasquatch scavenger hunt would survive the need for a second replacement.

“But it’s kind of become part of what Ponca’s known for, and so my hope is that it continues for quite a while.”



After finding Sasquatch at Ponca State Park, a couple poses for a selfie. DARLENE KASSUBE

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FISHING ‘THE DOWN TIMES’

By Justin Haag

Nebraska’s fisheries have their ups and downs, especially if we’re talking water levels.

The water stored in many of the state’s most popular fishing lakes is vital for irrigating crops when Mother Nature is stingy with rain. The annual drawdown of water is important for agriculture, but can be challenging for fish populations and the people pursuing them.

Anglers at many Nebraska reservoirs have become accustomed to casting lines among trees in spring and watching the shoreline recede far away from those locations in late summer and fall when water is being diverted to the fields. This is especially true in drought years when water is in high demand.

The fluctuations of water volume pose challenges for Game and Parks biologists trying to establish fish populations. Not only does the extreme drawdown of reservoirs greatly affect habitat, it also can flush nutrients from the lakes. With a high turnover rate of water, lakes struggle to develop a population of zooplankton, the miniscule aquatic organisms that serve as the base of a food chain. In some cases, game fish also are lost in the water that is released.

Anglers should be prepared for low water situations this time of year. If levels recede below the bottoms of boat ramps, the first challenge may be access. Bank anglers often must trudge through long stretches of mud just to get to water.

Hip or chest waders can be helpful while launching boats or fishing from the bank. Smaller vessels, such as kayaks,



Kevin Rice of Bayard watches his fishing rod while camping at Lake Minatare’s Lake View Point. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

canoes and jon boats can be launched at places the trailers of bigger vessels cannot go.

Knowing a lake’s depth structure can help anglers know where to look for fish. With the drop in water levels coinciding with the hottest period of summer, many species head deep to lower temperatures, often converging at underwater springs. While fish might not be as willing to bite as they were in spring, such times can be advantageous for anglers as fish will be concentrated. The Game and Parks Commission has free printable maps of the bottoms of many of the state’s most popular lakes and reservoirs. Go to OutdoorNebraska.gov and search for “Lake Contour Maps.”

Finally, when selecting baits and presentations, it is always beneficial to know what the fish are eating and where they are eating it. Merritt Reservoir, Lake McConaughy and Lake Minatare, for instance, have a pelagic prey base. That is, small fish such as alewife and gizzard shad that serve as food for larger predator game species. Find those smaller fish and the bigger ones are sure to be in pursuit of them. Modern electronic sonar units are valuable for locating both game fish and prey species.

As water cools in the fall and irrigation ceases, fish leave the deep and return to the shallows. Winter arrives, and, if all goes according to plan, snow falls over the mountains and plains. It melts in spring and is joined by rainwater to bring those water levels back into the trees. The downs become ups and the cycle begins anew.



Thanks to the boat ramp constructed in 2018, anglers got on the low water at Box Butte Reservoir last summer with ease.

JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

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HAWKS OF NEBRASKA

By Monica Macoubrie

Hawks are some of the most commonly seen birds in Nebraska. Often, all you have to do to find one is look up. These raptors, or birds of prey, usually perch on fence posts, overlooking branches and sometimes, at your bird feeder — any elevated spot where they can scan the ground to look for food. While each species of hawk has its own unique characteristics, they all have several features in common, such as sharp eyesight, hooked beaks and sharp talons (claws). Hawks are unusual among birds in that the female is generally larger than her mate. This sexual dimorphism can sometimes mean that a female is twice the size of the male.

Where they are different, hawks can vary significantly in size. They can be small, large, chunky, red, brown, white, spotted ... and they live in a variety of habitats all across the state. But first, let's dive into how hawks are categorized based on their size and features.

Scientifically, hawks are divided into two groups: *buteo* and *accipiter*.

Buteos & Accipiters

Buteos include medium- to large-size hawks with heavy bodies, short tails and relatively long, wide wings. These birds tend to fly by flapping slowly for a few strokes and then gliding into a series of tight circles until they gain enough altitude to soar. Common buteos in Nebraska include red-tailed hawks, Swainson's hawks and ferruginous hawks.

Accipiters are small- to medium-size woodland hawks with slender bodies, long, narrow tails and short, stubby rounded wings. These birds are compact, which helps them maneuver around trees while pursuing prey, which is normally other, smaller birds. They fly in a consistent pattern of short, quick bursts of flap-flap-flap patterns. Common accipiters you will see in Nebraska include the sharp-shinned hawks and Cooper's hawks.

With there being over 270 species of hawks in the world, telling them apart can be confusing. Let's look at a few hawk species that call Nebraska home. One might be perching right outside your window at this moment.

Red-tailed Hawk

These birds are large with a red tail — hence their name. They are mostly brownish on their backs with a pale belly. Red-tailed hawks have earned the title “most prevalent hawk in North America.” If you are ever traveling in Nebraska by car along I-80, or any other highway for that matter, you have most likely seen one of these birds perched on a telephone pole or a fence post. More than likely, these birds have their eyes fixed on the ground looking for the movements of a vole,



Red-tailed hawk. CHRIS MASADA

rabbit or waiting to catch a thermal to ride into the sky.

Red-tailed hawks also have that quintessential raspy scream that sounds like a true raptor. Many sound effect directors will actually substitute the red-tailed hawk's screech for eagle noise. Eagles make more of a clacking noise, while redtails have a raspy, shrill cry.

Cooper's Hawk

Cooper's hawks may be one of the most skillful fliers among raptors. These birds are medium size with a blue-gray head, neck, back and upper wings. They also have distinctive rusty-red, horizontal barring on their white breasts. However, Cooper's are often confused with the sharp-shinned hawk as they have many of the same patterns and colors. This hawk species loves to hang around bird feeders, but they aren't checking out the sunflower seeds you've put out — they're looking to prey on smaller birds that are snacking at your feeder.



Cooper's hawk. BOB GRIER, NEBRASKALAND

Cooper's hawks are found all over Nebraska, but they prefer forests and woodlands. Although, tree-dense suburban areas work just fine. This bird has a unique strategy for killing its prey: They capture food with their feet and then repeatedly squeeze it until it dies. They've even been known to hold a bird underwater until it stops moving.

Swainson's Hawk

The Swainson's hawk wasn't recognized as a species until 1832. Originally, William Swainson confused this bird with the common buzzard of Europe. It wasn't until a French biologist corrected Swainson's mistake that the hawk became a new species.



Swainson's hawk. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Swainson's hawks have distinctively long wings with pointed wingtips. This species is easily confused with red-tailed and ferruginous hawks for their coloring and banding on the wings. However, Swainson's hawks favor open habitats, such as native prairie and grasslands, and they eat mainly mammals and insects.

When nesting and feeding chicks, they feed their young the three “R's”: rodents, rabbits and reptiles. When they are not breeding, Swainson's hawks feed almost exclusively on insects, such as grasshoppers, dragonflies and crickets. These birds make an annual migration of around 11,000-15,000 miles each year to South America.

Ferruginous Hawk

The word ferruginous means rust colored and refers to the reddish coloring of the ferruginous hawk. These birds are the largest hawks in North America and are a true western species, found in wide open spaces with rocky outcrops and cliffs, where they nest. The bulky sticks of their nests are not easily woven together with sticks, so they often build on pre-existing crow or other hawks' nests. It is said that when bison roamed the prairie, ferruginous hawks would use bison bones and hair, along with sticks and twigs, to build their homes.

The hawk's diet is made of mostly small game, such as prairie dogs, jackrabbits and ground squirrels. These hawks will even walk, hop and run on the ground after their prey.

During courtship, ferruginous hawks pair perform displays in the air by holding their wings above their backs while soaring, after which, the male suddenly dives at the female.



Ferruginous hawk. BOB GRIER, NEBRASKALAND

When they meet, they both grab each other in midair with their powerful feet.

Rough-legged Hawk

If you want to spot this hawk, look outside in the wintertime. These “chunky” raptors will hover while facing into the wind. Rough-legged hawks look similarly to red-tailed hawks. However, one distinctive feature is that they have a longer tail than most other hawks and a smaller beak.

Rough-legged hawks spend their summer capturing prey, such as lemmings, in the Arctic tundra. While wintering in



Rough-legged hawk. JUSTIN HAAG, NEBRASKALAND

Nebraska, you may spot one of these birds in large, open areas, feeding on ground squirrels, pocket gophers and other birds. They do so by hunting from elevated perches and dropping down on prey. Rough-legged hawks occasionally feed on carrion (dead animals), and they are known to steal food from other hawks.

Hawks are fascinating birds and are more common than people think. If you want to spot one, take a road trip or keep a lookout at your feeder. They are always around.



Fishing at Harlan, late 1970s

This photo was taken at Harlan County Reservoir in the late '70s when my husband, Eric Laux, was just a little boy. These annual fishing trips with his dad, Ken (center), and longtime family friend, Charlie Frerichs (right), helped spark a lifelong love of fishing to include an advanced degree in fisheries biology. Now in his 50s, my husband's passion for fishing is still strong as when he was a little boy. Ken and Charlie have passed, but Eric continues the tradition by taking our son, Hunter, on annual trips with his friends, Jim Farris and Larry Dygert, both of Hastings.

– Jennifer Laux, Omaha



Hunting at the Edwards homestead, early 1910

My grandmother, Delania Edwards Adamson, with her brothers and neighbors at the Edwards homestead, which is now the Ford family ranch. It's good to see girls hunted, too! From left standing: Rosa Heath, Delania Adamson, Lattie Heath, Nellie Heath and Barbara Edwards. From left sitting: Leonard Finlayson, Ellis Edwards and Charlie Edwards.

– Marge Adamson Harris, Lincoln



Deer hunting, near Oconto, 1985

From the late 1970s into the early 2000s, many days were filled with hunting anything from dove, duck, geese, pheasant, turkey and whitetail. These photos were taken approximately November 1985 northeast of Oconto in central Nebraska. From left: Jim Stumpf (my dad), Pete Hess and Quentin Moore. Photo by Tom Moore (Quentin's son). These guys would travel most of the state and venture into Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Alaska. Pete and Quentin are now hunting in the great outdoors in heaven and are missed here, but not forgotten. It's a shame they didn't take more pictures.

– Jeff Stumpf, Omaha



Great fishing day, 1974

Emil "Buddy" Drozd and Charlie "Chief" Drozd decided to try their luck fishing. The day turned successful with the fishermen landing flathead catfish weighing 51, 37 and 33 pounds respectfully. Buddy and Chief were lifelong anglers in Genoa.

– Ed Drozd, Genoa

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



SUNFLOWER TORTOISE BEETLES

By Chris Helzer

We were conducting an early July butterfly survey, so I was looking for small creatures on plants. As I walked through a patch of flat prairie near the edge of the Niobrara River, I spotted something dark and twitching on a stiff sunflower leaf. It certainly wasn't a butterfly, but it looked like something worth investigating further.

I'm no entomologist, but I've spent a lot of time looking at and photographing insects. This was a new one to me. It looked like a cluster of tiny, dark-tailed shrimp. Or maybe bloated scorpions with clubs instead of stingers. I immediately stopped and took some photos and called over my companions to see what I'd found.

Upon later investigation, the creatures turned out to be the larvae of the sunflower tortoise beetle, a gorgeous and fascinating little creature. As adult beetle, it feeds on the same sunflower leaves as the larvae and gradually changes color from black-and-white to an

iridescent green over the course of its adult existence. That's pretty cool, but what's with those crazy larvae? Well. That dark portion of the larva's tail is technically referred to as a "fecal shield," which is exactly what it sounds like. Each larva has a mass of its own poop adhered to its forked tail and held above itself as a defense mechanism. As it feeds, it waves that smelly poop tail at potential predators as if to say, "You really want some of this?" Most don't.

Exploring the outdoors is always an adventure and full of surprises. On this particular day, we were searching for the color, beauty and grace of butterflies. We found plenty of butterflies, but the most memorable find of the day was a bunch of beetle babies waving their own excrement over their heads at us while they calmly munched on a leaf.

Nature is amazing, huh?

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