



Cracked mud at Arbor Lake Wildlife Management Area in northern Lancaster County records the passage of a coyote through the area's saline wetland. Photo by Michael Forsberg.

Published by the
NEBRASKA
— GAME  PARKS —
NebraskalandMagazine.com
OutdoorNebraska.org

Published by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission since 1926

NEBRASKAland

March 2010

NebraskalandMagazine.com
\$4.95
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INSIDE
Home and Away • Ducks Unlimited
Turkey Down the Barrel • A Four Dollar Dinner
Harlan Comeback? • Ice-fishing Folly • Mosses



NEBRASKAland

Volume 88, Number 2, March 2010

FEATURES

12 Home and Away - Photographing Nebraska and Beyond

Nature photographer Don Brockmeier captures images across Nebraska and around the world.

PHOTOS BY DAN BROCKMEIER, TEXT BY ROCKY HOFFMANN

20 A Four Dollar Dinner

Fun to both catch and eat, the rainbow trout at Two Rivers SRA are a bargain that can't be beat. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

22 Ducks Unlimited - in the Rainwater Basin

Ducks Unlimited was founded in 1937 to raise funds to enhance wetlands in Canada. Today it is working across the continent. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JON FARRAR

30 Lyin' in Winter

A novice ice-fisherman "describes" his first experience. BY FRANK REID

32 Turkey Down the Barrel

Scouting and patience pays off for a young turkey hunter whose hunt is over at sunrise on the season's opening day.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JEFF KURRUS

36 Mosses

These ancient species are fun to learn about if you want to increase your vocabulary. TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CHRIS HELZER

38 Harlan Comeback?

After years of drought sapped lake levels at Harlan County Lake, fisheries biologists and anglers are eagerly anticipating what typically comes when a reservoir refills: more fish.

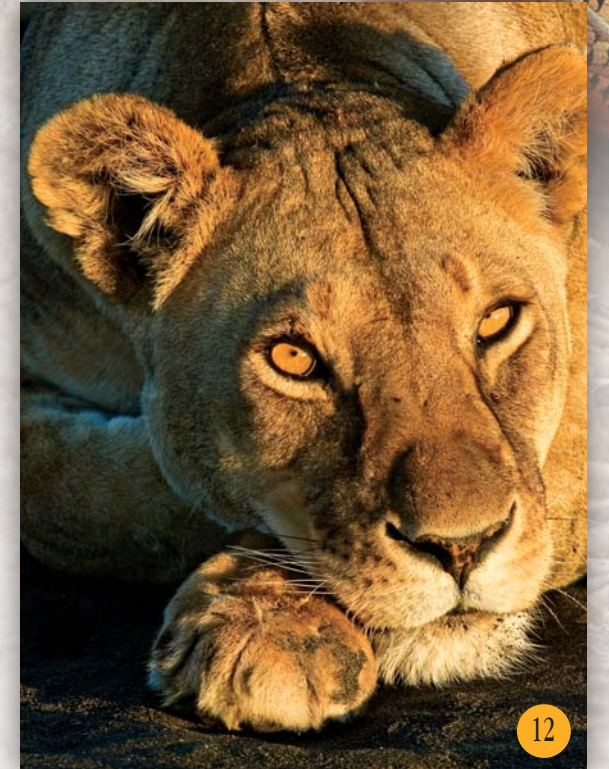
TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ERIC FOWLER

DEPARTMENTS

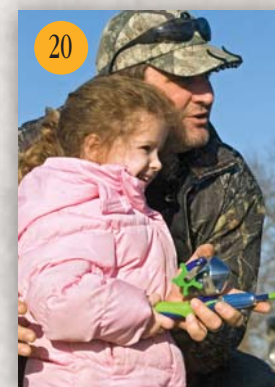
Comment	4
Mixed Bag	6
Step Outside	44
Wilderness Workshop	45
In the Field	46
Parks & Places	47
Classifieds	48
Portraits from the Past	50

Cover: A deliberately slow shutter speed used by nature photographer Don Brockmeier emphasizes the movement of a flock of snow geese flushing from a pond near Eustis during an early morning blizzard. See story on page 12. **Opposite:** A pair of great horned owl chicks peer from their nest located in secluded woods on the edge of Lincoln. Photo by Bill Hager.

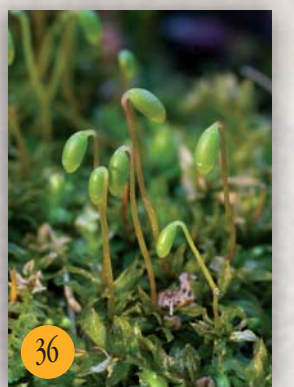
NEBRASKAland (VOL. 88 / NO. 2, ISSN 0028-1964) is published monthly, except for the combined Jan./Feb. and Aug./Sept. issues, by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, 2200 N. 33rd St., Lincoln, NE. Periodicals postage paid at Lincoln, Nebraska, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to NEBRASKAland, P.O. Box 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503-0370.



12



20



36



22

NEBRASKAland Magazine



Published by the
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NEBRASKAland Magazine
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NEBRASKAland is available on audio cassette from the Nebraska
Library Commission Talking Book and Braille Service, Suite 120, 1200 N
St., Lincoln, NE 68508. (800) 742-7691. NEBRASKAland Magazine and
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Rates: \$18 for one year; \$33 for two years; \$44 for three years. Nebraska
recipients must add appropriate sales tax. To subscribe call 1-800-NEB-
LAND (632-5263), or go online to: NebraskaLandMagazine.com.



Dog with Goose

I have been photographing my hunts for awhile now – sunsets, dogs, birds etc. I love *NEBRASKAland Magazine* and all of the wonderful pictures that are in it.

This is one of the best photos I have ever taken of Haley, my eight-year-old female black Labrador. It was taken in Blaine County on the North Loup River, and she is holding a big, late-season Canada.

Thank you,
Tyson Owens
Lincoln, Nebraska

\$5 Youth Permits

Kudos to outgoing Game and Parks Commission Chairman James Ziebarth and the entire Board for deciding to make youth 15 and under turkey, deer and antelope tags \$5 each beginning this year.

This ground-breaking decision for young Nebraska hunters will provide a very affordable opportunity to learn about the wildlife around them while continuing to grow forward our hunting heritage.

I believe this landmark change will not only create more involvement by young hunters, but will stand as a shining example of our state’s commitment to the future of hunting.

Kent Boughton
Grand Island, Nebraska

Youth Hunting a Hit

I wanted to submit this photo and note of appreciation to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission for the youth hunting program!

My son turned 10 on November 6th, just in time for the November firearm deer season, and was fortunate to take his first deer on my in-laws ranch north of North Platte! We were also able to do a little duck hunting that same week on the South Platte near Big Springs and he shot his first duck as well.

I’ve included a photo of my son Parker, our puppy, Macy, and myself to share with you and see if you notice any “jewelry” my son’s first duck may be wearing!

Eric Banks
North Platte, Nebraska



NEBRASKAland Visitor Letters

We want to thank all 158 readers that sent e-mails and letters for last issue’s visitor, a lady bug on page 13 (see page 11 for winner and rules). Here are just a couple of the many wonderful responses we received:

Love the magazine and happy to be receiving it, even though I’m no longer in Nebraska. You’ve got the best photographers (and editors) around!

Thanks,
Jeffrey J. Huebschman, Chair
Department of Biology
University of Wisconsin-Platteville

We are totally impressed with your magazine!! We received the subscription as a gift from my brother in Lincoln one year for Christmas. It is always “travelling” from room to room in our house, depending on who is reading it! Wish Minnesota had a magazine like this!! Great job!! Keep it up!!

(I grew up in Nebraska, so it also brings back fond memories for me).
Carol L. Paterson-Smith
Alexandria, Minnesota

*Send your comments to:
Doug Carroll, Editor
NEBRASKAland Magazine
P.O. Box 30370
Lincoln, NE 68503
or e-mail doug.carroll@nebraska.gov
Please include your postal address and telephone number.
Letters may be condensed and edited for clarity. Photographs are welcome and will be returned.*

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			Tim Williams	Neligh	929-0051
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			Dan Evasco	Papillion	616-5961
			Jeff Clauson	Waterloo	658-7057

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Darin Gress	Hebron	(402) 768-8665			
Dale Johnson	Kearney	440-3847			
Robert Finke	Milford	(402) 440-3847			



ARTWORK BY TIM REIGERT

Why Migrate?

Jon Farrar

Why do birds migrate? The short answer is to minimize competition for nesting sites and food. Some species of birds, like sharp-tailed grouse, live and prosper year-round in the same place. But, an acre, square mile, or township can only support a limited number of bird species, and a limited number of birds of any species. So, birds evolved to utilize nearly all places on the surface of the earth for at least part of the year, and they did that by migrating – in the Northern Hemisphere spending their summers in the north and their winters in the south.

What drives ducks and geese north in springtime is a hormonally-induced urge to reproduce. The timing of their migration is determined, to a large degree, by how far north they travel to their breeding grounds, and whether winter is quick or lingering in its

retreat. Because of the short summers in northern latitudes, birds nesting there, particularly in the Arctic – white-fronted geese, small Canada geese, snow geese, wigeons, pintails and green-winged teal – have a narrow window of opportunity to arrive on the nesting ground, have the hen lay and incubate her eggs and still have time for the young to attain flight stage before winter sweeps across their breeding grounds. More southerly nesters, such as species nesting in the Prairie-Pothole country of the north-central U.S. and south-central Canada – the large races of Canada geese, gadwall, mallards, shovelers, blue-winged teal, canvasbacks and redheads – have more summertime days to complete their reproductive cycle, and so have the luxury of a later and more leisurely migration.

So it seems logical that those species nesting in the far north would be the first migrants to arrive in Nebraska during spring migration, and that is mostly true. Among the first ducks and geese to arrive here are white-fronted geese, snow geese, pintails, and green-winged teal. Among the latest to migrate north

are blue-winged teal and shovelers. But there are exceptions to this tidy migration chronology, and there is no better example than mallards. The core of the mallard breeding range is the Prairie-Pothole region, so it would seem they would not be at the forefront of the spring migration, but they typically are. Why? The simple explanation is because they can. They are as tolerant of frigid weather as any species of waterfowl. All they require is open water (and lacking that they will roost on ice) and a source of food. That means when there is open water in Nebraska in the spring, and grain fields are not buried under snow, they have all they require to prosper, and so they push north. Likely, there is more waste grain to be found in Nebraska fields in March than in those in more southerly states gleaned clean by wintering waterfowl.

There is an old saying that “nature abhors a vacuum.” It seems nature also abhors rigid rules.

Outdoor Message Plates

Marlin Hupka of Lincoln loves to hunt pheasant, quail, dove, grouse, turkey and deer, and has advertised his interest in the sport on a message plate since 1985.

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

PRESCRIBED BURN TRAINING WORKSHOPS ACROSS THE STATE

Date	Location	Workshop Information
February 16 8:30 to 4:00 MST	Holiday Inn, 664 Chase Blvd., Sidney	A beginning prescribed burn training workshop for landowners. Registration fee of \$10.00 with lunch provided.
February 17 8:30 to 4:00	Trailblazer RC&D Building, 437 N. Elm Red Cloud	A beginning prescribed burn training workshop for landowners. Registration fee of \$10.00 with lunch provided.
February 18 8:30 to 4:00	County Fair Grounds, Franklin	Advanced training designed for people with prescribed burning experience. Pre-class assignments are part of the training. Registration fee of \$10.00 with lunch provided. This meeting is conducted with the South Central Nebraska Prescribed Burn Association.
February 19 8:30 to 4:00	Community Center, 200 South Saunders Sutton	A beginning prescribed burn training workshop for landowners. Registration fee of \$5.00 with lunch provided. This meeting is conducted with the Rainwater Basin Prescribed Burn Association.
February 23 8:30 to 4:00	The Gathering Place, 612 Howard Ave St. Paul	A beginning prescribed burn training workshop for landowners. Registration fee of \$10.00 with lunch provided. This meeting is conducted with the Central Nebraska Prescribed Burn Association.
March 2 8:30 to 4:00	The Gathering Place, 612 Howard Ave St. Paul	Advanced training designed for people with prescribed burning experience. Pre-class assignments are part of the training. Registration fee of \$10.00 with lunch provided. This meeting is conducted by Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever & the Central Nebraska Prescribed Burn Association.
March 4 8:30 to 4:00	Community Center, 7115 Lancaster Ave, Denton	A beginning prescribed burn training workshop for landowners. Registration fee of \$5.00 with lunch provided. This meeting is conducted with the Tri County Prescribed Burn Association.
March 11 8:30 to 4:00	Nielson Center, 200 Anna Stalp Ave, West Point	A beginning prescribed burn training workshop for landowners. Registration fee of \$5.00 with lunch provided. This meeting is conducted with the Elkhorn Valley Prescribed Burn Association.
March 12 8:30 to 4:00	4-H Building, Fair Grounds, Humboldt	A beginning prescribed burn training workshop for landowners. Registration fee of \$10.00 with lunch provided.

For more information or to register, go to: www.NebraskaPF.com or call 308-428-3062



2010 Prescribed Burn Workshop Locations

Prescribed Burn Workshops will provide guidance and instructions for both people with and without any prescribed burning experience. Plan to attend one of these workshops to gain more experience.

A Look Back - April 1962

Jeff Kurrus

Nowadays, most deer processing articles speak about meat or antlers, *NEBRASKAland* included. However, the first article featured in the March 1972 of *NEBRASKAland Magazine* was entitled "How to Make a Deerskin Vest."

Also in that issue was Norm Hellmers's "Story in the Snow," explaining the author's use of animal tracks to locate winter wildlife with a camera. In addition, Greg Beaumont's photo essay "Songs of the Wind" displayed other wintry scenes affected by constant blowing.

But winter themes weren't this issue's only focus. Lou Ell and current *NEBRASKAland* regional editor Bob Grier's "Under Sail" reminded readers of the spring to come with images from McConaughy, Lewis and Clark, and other Nebraska waters. Lastly, the popular section "Notes on Nebraska Fauna" focused on the meadowlark, providing one last hope for the end of winter: "The coming of the meadowlark," wrote a former Nebraska Game and Parks Commission nongame specialist, "in early spring while the fields are still brown is a thrilling event. It announces its arrival with a song as it stands on a fence post, with its bright, yellow breast gleaming in the morning sun."

These days, and I imagine the same was true in 1972, those mornings can't come soon enough.



NatureSearch

Julie Anderson

Say you're walking in a forest in eastern Nebraska and run across a



funky fungus, fancy flower or interesting insect that you don't recognize. Here's what you do:



Snap a quick picture and use Fontenelle Forest's fnanaturesearch.org to tap into more than 1,300 photographs – divided into 12 categories – of living things recently spotted on Fontenelle Forest grounds. The photos come with descriptions and details about when and where each

species is found, and users can also click for a close-up of the photos.

Bellevue's Roland Barth, co-author with Neal Ratzlaff on two books related to Fontenelle Forest and Neale Woods

– *Field Guide to Flowers and Field Guide to Trees, Shrubs, Woody Vines, Grasses, Sedges and Rushes* – came up with the NatureSearch concept.

The pair, along with other volunteers, took many of the photos and continue to add to the site while encouraging others, particularly kids, to also submit photos.

Fallow Deer Request

Jon Farrar

Fallow deer are native to most of Europe, but in the 20th century were often imported into the United States by game fanciers and game park keepers. In 1939 and 1940, surplus fallow deer from the Lincoln City Park Department were released into the wild along Beaver Creek northwest of Petersburg in Boone County. The transplants prospered, and by 1955 had expanded into Greeley and Hall counties.

An archery season was first allowed in 1956, followed by firearm seasons during the 1960s. Because of complaints they were damaging cropland, free-ranging fallow deer were essentially

eliminated from the region, although some persisted into the 1970s.

NEBRASKAland would like to publish an article on the history of fallow deer in the state but has been unable to locate illustration. Anyone with photographs of fallow deer in the wild in Nebraska, hunters with fallow deer taken during legal seasons, or mounted heads that still exist are asked to contact Jon Farrar, Nebraskaland Magazine, 2200 North 33rd St., POB 30370, Lincoln, NE 68503, (402) 471-5492, jon.farrar@nebraska.gov.

NBA Banquet

The 2010 Nebraska Bowhunters Association Awards Banquet will be held March 5-6 at the Kearney Ramada Inn.

This year's featured speaker will be Tom Hoffman, Jr., a world-famous bowhunter and television personality, who will give a presentation on making, preserving and sharing memories in the field. Other things going on during the event include, seminars, photo contests, auctions, raffles, and dealer displays.

Tickets for Saturday's banquet and seminars are \$25 for adults and \$15 for children under age 15. Tickets for attending the seminars alone are \$15.

All ticket requests should be sent to Pat O'Brien, NBA Banquet, 2471 SW 42nd, Cortland, NE 68331. For more information, call (402) 798-8208.

The Nebraska Bowhunters Association promotes ethical hunting of wild game and fish with bow and arrow, and its mission is to preserve and promote bowhunting in Nebraska.

Electronic Permits Only Now

As winter begins to ease its cold grip on the state, the thoughts of many people start turning to fishing or spring turkey hunting. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission wants to remind people that Nebraska hunting and fishing permits, as well as its state-issued conservation stamps, are no longer sold from permit books as they had been for decades.

Electronic permitting means customers may go to OutdoorNebraska.org to buy and print out a permit at any time, or

Officer's Notebook

A Nice Criminal

One night several years ago near the North Loup River, I was sitting in my truck on the side of a county road at 3 a.m. when I saw a glimpse of light shine in a nearby field. Then blackness.

The vehicle remained dark for about 15 minutes. Then a light from the passenger window shone. This same process took place four times before I finally heard the report of a high-powered rifle. A half-hour later, vehicle lights shone again as two subjects appeared to load something in the back of the truck.

I stopped the vehicle on the road. "What you doing, sir?" I asked.

"Ohhhhhhh, just a little deer huntin,'" the driver replied.

"What did you get?"

"Ohhh, a little buck."

"Well, we need to get the paperwork done, then I will need to take the buck with me."

"Well, when you get the paperwork done," said the driver, "just drop your tailgate and back up to my truck and we will drag it across. That's definitely easier than lifting it again."

The driver paid a \$100 fine and \$100 in liquidated damages for spotlighting and taking a deer after legal shooting hours. But how things have changed – today the same violation could cost an individual in excess of \$1,000.



Ross Oestmann, Conservation Officer, Bloomfield

they can get one at any Commission permitting office or participating permit vendor. A paper permit will still be provided, and the transaction will be automatically recorded electronically.

Not all permit vendors have, or will, convert to this new system, however, so customers may not be able to purchase a permit from their traditional vendors and may need to check with the vendor or purchase their permit at home before heading afield.

Some of the benefits of the system are:

- A single purchase of a stamp ensures the stamp will be displayed on any other permits purchased the remainder of the calendar year.
- Lost or damaged permits can be replaced at any time from anywhere.
- Landowners need to enter legal descriptions only once and update only as needed.
- Multiple online purchases can be made for multiple individuals with a single transaction.

Portraits from Before 1980

Starting in the April, 2010 issue, *NEBRASKAland* will begin considering Portraits of the Past images taken before 1980. Please send your images to:

Portraits from the Past
NEBRASKAland Magazine
P.O. Box 30370
Lincoln, NE 68503-0370.

Or e-mail to:
tim.reigert@nebraska.gov.

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Nebraska's Prettiest Roads

In November 2009, *NEBRASKAland Magazine* asked readers to send in their nominations for Nebraska's "Prettiest Roads." The number of responses was large, as was the variety in selections. Locations in Gosper, Nemaha and Sioux counties were mentioned, as were sections of highways 12, 20 and 83. Even the short stretch of Interstate 80 crossing the Platte River near Eugene T. Mahoney State Park was listed by one responder as "the perfect start and end to my work day" on his commute from Omaha to Lincoln.



For Larry Williams, "Cracker Box Road" in Dawson County is one of his favorite spots.

Other responses included that of reader Larry Williams of Lexington. He wrote of "Cracker Box Road" in northeast Dawson County: "It is very quiet here, with the only sounds being the wind and an occasional wild animal," wrote Williams. "If you close your eyes you can see homesteaders putting up hay or moving cattle."



Eldon Marsh's vote was this road looking west toward Fort Randall Dam.



Roger Hammer's "look forward to" locale is this scene of the Snake River looking northeast from Highway 61.

Eldon Marsh of Brunswick gave specific directions to the "Ridge Road" near the Missouri River in Boyd County, saying that he has traveled Nebraska for 77 years and that while "there are truly some roads where you wish the traveling would never end, the most beautiful road of all is the one that takes you to Sunshine Bottom."

Patrick Carraher of Lincoln also had his favorite spot, pinpointing the Brownlee road west of Highway 83 that goes northwest and runs into Highway 97 south of Merritt Reservoir in Cherry County and relaying the one thought all photographers sometimes have: "My photos just don't do it justice."



This road in Brown County is a brightspot in Bill Ihm's life.

Finally, Bill Ihm of Brown County seemed to say it best about how one should view their favorite locations. "This particular picture may not be a hotspot," he said, referring to a dirt corridor between pastures near his home, "but it is a bright spot in my life."

Continue to send your "Prettiest Roads" photographs to jeff.kurrrus@nebraska.gov and reasons why these locations are so special to you.

A Late Winter Reading

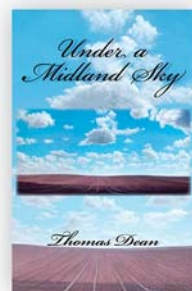
Elizabeth Mack

"The lover of place seeks out stories of home – stories that not only tell of familiar places and people, but also tales that invest our place-based experience with meaning and wonder." So writes Thomas Dean, a self-described "weather geek" and author of *Under a Midland Sky*, a collection of essays celebrating a topic that many Plains inhabitants (including myself) decry – the weather. Dean's beautifully fashioned prose captures the essence of the Plains as he takes us through personal remembrances of tornadoes, flash floods, late-spring freezes and the hell that is February.

Dean's tales of weather-related devastation do nothing to muddy his admiration and obsession with weather. In "Embracing Humidity," he admonishes the reader to quit complaining about August: "Summer humidity is wondrous. Isn't it remarkable to feel like you're almost swimming in air sometimes?"

Dean concludes his collection by describing an affliction that he and most other Plains inhabitants share: White Christmas Anxiety (WCA). Dean explains the first step to recovery is to "acknowledge unrealistic expectations." He argues convincingly that even though we habitually complain about the loss of our white Christmases from the past, we never actually had many to begin with: "... our memories of those 'winters like when we were children' are figments of our selective memory."

Even though Dean at times sounds like an incurable romantic when it comes to our climate, his affection and passion for our cursed weather becomes contagious. "Almost nothing grounds us in locality as much as our body's interaction with what's going on in the air, the air that gives us our very life," Dean writes. During the dead of winter as we curse the frigid temps, bleak landscapes and meteorologists, *Under a Midland Sky* might work to pull us out of our weather doldrums.



Relocating Geese

Eric Fowler

Not long ago, Canada geese nesting in Nebraska might've been considered a novelty. Now, so many are nesting in urban areas that in some cases they have become a nuisance, grazing on lawns and sometimes crops, soiling lawns and sidewalks with their droppings and even attacking the occasional innocent passersby.

Part of the problem is rooted in current landscape design, which often includes ponds surrounded by manicured lawns. This combination, be it in a housing development, park or golf course, provide exactly what the nesting geese are looking for: food and water for themselves and the goslings they will raise.

What complicates the issue is some people like having the geese around. "They're typically the people that don't have the actual problem of geese pooping on their lawns," said Mark Vrtiska, waterfowl program manager with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Commission biologists use various techniques to control nuisance geese, including trapping flightless goslings and trucking them to points around the state void of the bird, and destroying nests. Last year, they began experimenting with another technique: trapping adult females on the nest and shipping them to the Sandhills.

Vrtiska said this was done in a few locations where they have problems

every year in hopes that the females will become attached to the Sandhills and not return. Neck collars were placed on five birds, said Vrtiska, so "the ultimate test will be to see if they show back up this spring in the places we took them from."

Neighborhood associations should set thresholds dictating how many geese will be tolerated, Vrtiska said. In many cases, these associations or individual homeowners can use one or more of the techniques listed below to head off problems caused by geese, but in the case of nest destruction and lethal control, a permit from the Commission is required.

- Harassment: Continually disturbing geese as they begin to select nesting sites can encourage them to move elsewhere.

- Habitat modification: Keeping areas mowed where geese like to nest will discourage them from doing so. Because geese prefer new growth, mowing lawns less often is an easy way to rid your self of grazing geese, as is planting trees and shrubs in open areas where they regularly land.

- Nest destruction: Oiling eggs to smother embryos is most often used because adults will continue to incubate and eventually give up rather than attempting to re-nest when eggs are simply destroyed.

- Lethal control: In rare cases, nesting adults are killed. While it hasn't yet been used here, other states issue depredation permits to kill geese causing crop damage.



PHOTO BY ERIC FOWLER

Turpin Time

Dick Turpin

Here's a little game you can do in the winter time to get the kids out of the house.



You take some half-inch plywood and cut yourself out some big feet like Sasquatch. Then go out in the timber and lay out a trail ... weave it ... and then at the end of the trail ... have yourself a nice big bonfire and have all the materials you need for s'mores...

Now while you're doing all this you can show them squirrel, rabbit, deer and turkey tracks ... whatever you run onto. And give them a little wintertime outdoor education. ■

NEBRASKAland Visitor Winner

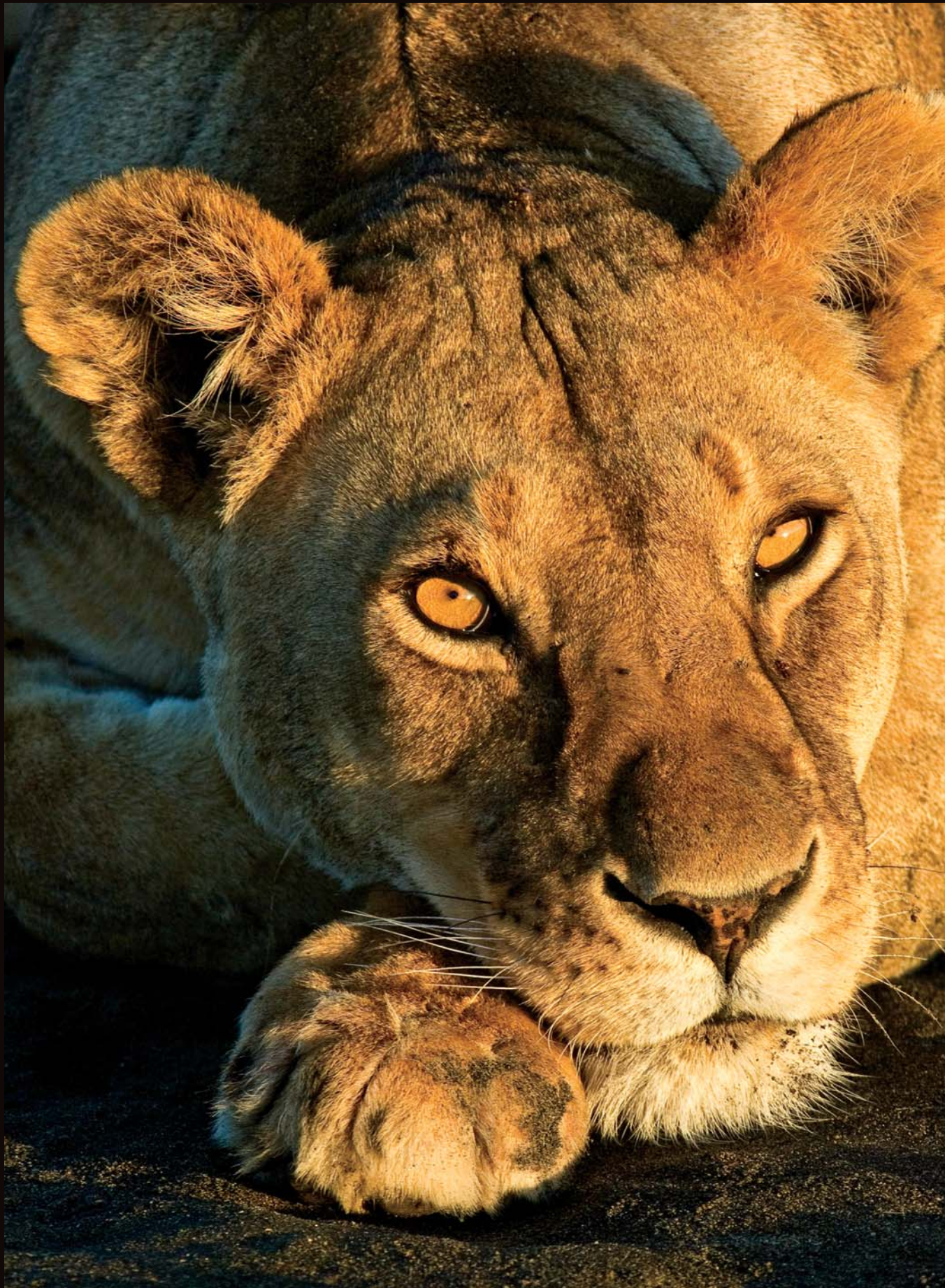
Last issue's winner of the NEBRASKAland Visitor drawing was Jack Lammers of Minden who found the ladybug on page 13.

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

We will then gather the correct entries and draw one to win a NEBRASKAland Visitor mug.

To enter each month, e-mail tim.reigert@nebraska.gov with "Visitor" in the subject line of the message or write:

NEBRASKAland Visitor
2200 North 33rd Street,
Lincoln, NE 68503.



Home and Away

Photographing Nebraska and Beyond

Photos by Don Brockmeier
Text by Rocky Hoffmann

Don Brockmeier's camera has taken him around the world, yet he claims to have barely scratched the globe's surface. After all, he said, he's not even finished with the letter "A" yet. Brockmeier has not only shot photos in the Americas, including Alaska, he's also been on photo safaris to Africa, Antarctica and the Arctic Circle. This Eustis native developed an interest in photography while attending the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, where he first attempted to use a telephoto lens. He continued to shoot sporting events, locally in southwestern Nebraska as well as Husker games, but his attraction to hunting and fishing soon steered him in a different direction.



Above, "Full Pump": A bald eagle flies above Alaska's Dutch Harbor. Opposite, "Daydreaming": The fading sun bathes a lion in soft light as it rests before heading out on its evening prowl in Tanzania, Africa.

About the time that he began focusing more on outdoor sporting themes, Brockmeier became an accomplished fly fisherman and started visiting world-class trout streams. His camera was an easy addition to his pack, but he often encountered a wide variety of wildlife on these trips that he could not capture on film because of lens limitations. Brockmeier now totes a Nikon D300 SLR digital camera along with a variety of quality lenses from 12mm to 600mm. His backpack contains it all, and he shoulders a solid tripod with a quality head. He shoots nearly everything off of the tripod and cannot stress enough how important a solid rest is, particularly with long lenses.

Although he has traveled extensively to exotic locations, Brockmeier considers some of his most



rewarding photography to have occurred within a 75-mile radius of home, where within easy reach lies one of the world's greatest migration spectacles. Not only does Brockmeier spend countless hours shooting images of the millions of waterfowl and cranes that pass through central Nebraska, he also volunteers his time to guide visitors at Rowe Audubon Sanctuary, where he

Above, "Pause That Refreshes": Zebras keep a sharp outlook for predators as they drink from an African pond.

Right, "The Pounce": A Wyoming coyote pounces on a rodent in tall grass, looking for a quick meal.

Opposite, "Crying": A male bobwhite quail comes out of the brush and calls for his mate shortly after she flushed near Eustis.





Right, "Synchronized Diving": Adelie penguins dive off an ice floe in the Antarctica.

Below, "Getting High": During the mating season, prairie chickens will jump on anything to command the high ground and get noticed, as did this male prairie chicken near Eustis.

Opposite Top, "The End and the Beginning": Brockmeier had to force himself to zoom out to get the whole scene of this whale and snowy mountains in the Antarctica.

Opposite Bottom, "Yummy": A cheetah pauses while feeding on a zebra kill in Tanzania, Africa.

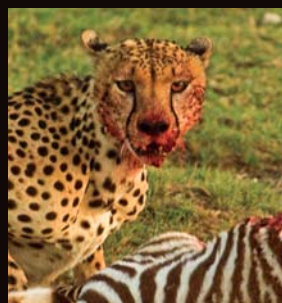


meets people from around the world who share his interest in wildlife photography.

In recent years, Brockmeier has been working with the Whooping Crane Trust volunteer program to positively identify whooping cranes sighted in the area. He also takes photos of the cranes in their migration habitat and said working with endangered species such as whooping cranes is a special thrill that requires a strong photo ethic be followed.

As the Frontier County coordinator for Bluebirds Across Nebraska, Brockmeier uses his photography to promote the conservation of this species and the economies of several central Nebraska communities – through his efforts with Rural Nebraska Living, he helped establish the Chicken Dance Trail (www.chickendancetrail.com).

"The Chicken Dance Trail provides birders an opportunity to see and photograph a variety of birds and wildlife," said Brockmeier, "but one of my greatest enjoyments is watching and photographing prairie chickens on the lek. I used to travel to Halsey or the





Valentine refuge to photograph their amazing courtship display, but a NEBRASKAland Magazine photographer suggested that I drive into the country around Eustis at sunrise and stop and listen every mile or so. I found leks everywhere, and I even found a sharp-tailed grouse visiting one of the chicken leks. I had no idea that prairie chickens inhabited southern Nebraska in the central part of the state."

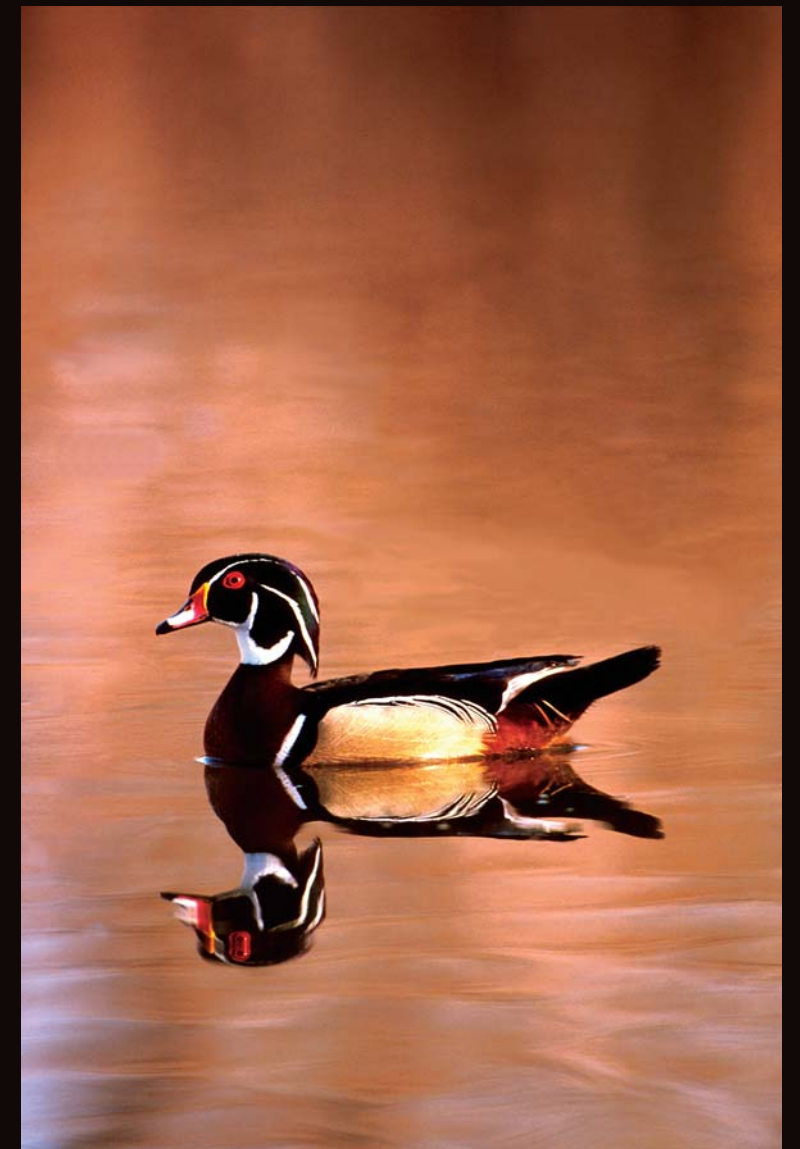
As far as his photo trips abroad, Brockmeier described Africa as a "photographer's dream" and said his experience there provided him with what seemed to be an endless variety of colorful species to photograph. His most revealing trip, however, was his month-long photo journey to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the continent of Antarctica. There he shot images of penguins, seals, whales and landscapes while

Above, "Painting with Light": Sunrise through a low level fog with a clear sky above combined to almost paint this picture for Brockmeier at Harlan County Reservoir.

Right, "A Golden Moment": Late-evening light reflecting off trees paints this drake wood duck in a golden glow on a pond near Lexington.

experiencing the area's unique pristine environment. His most demanding photo journey, however, was to Alaska, where he floated the Kongakut River north to the Arctic Ocean. The float itself lasted ten days. At one point along the trip he hiked into the Brooks Range, where he camped in an incredible wilderness area of the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge.

Whether he's shooting polar bears near Churchill, American bison at Yellowstone or a bobwhite quail pleading for a mate in Frontier County, Brockmeier tries to capture a unique expression of the animal's day in its personal and unique habitat. ■





A Four Dollar Dinner

Photos and text by Jeff Kurrus

“Crowded” is the word usually associated with a small lake that has more than 3 or 4 people fishing it at the same time. At Two Rivers State Recreation Area (SRA) last

March, despite the hundreds of anglers lining the bank trying to catch a trout, another word could have come to mind – fun.

With light tackle and fly rods, anglers caught up to 12 trout (four per \$4 permit, with a limit of three permits), spending a couple hours smiling on one of the first warm Saturdays of the year, looking for beautiful rainbows and usually finding plenty. ■



Two Rivers SRA, located near Yutan, contains seven lakes totaling 32 acres of water, and this year the area’s “trout lake” (Lake No. 5) will be open from March 13 to October 1. Although no boats are allowed on this lake, anglers can wade or fish from the bank from 7 a.m. to sunset, using one pole per angler. An adult angler is allowed to have two children under age 16 fish under their tag, but the group is still limited to four trout per tag. **Special note:** Two Rivers SRA has expanded the lodging season for its popular Union Pacific caboose cabins – they are now open from May 1 through September 30.



(From left to right) Zach Fosler, Dave Fosler, Ed Ehrenfried and Ian Ehrenfried trout fish near sunrise at Two Rivers Lake No. 5.

Ducks Unlimited

in the Rainwater Basin

Text and photos by Jon Farrar

Ducks Unlimited was founded in 1937 to raise funds to enhance wetlands in Canada. Today it is working across the continent.



DU believes restoring and protecting wetlands used by migrating waterfowl is an important management component.

Ducks Unlimited was founded in 1937, in the depth of prolonged drought and plummeting waterfowl abundance. The fledgling organization's objective was straightforward – increase the abundance of waterfowl in North America by using money raised privately in the U.S. for conservation work in Canada, the continent's principal waterfowl breeding grounds. It was a sound objective for its time, but incomplete – breeding

grounds in the U.S. also needed protection, and wintering grounds were vanishing. Beginning in the 1980s, DU broadened its work to protect and restore wetland habitat along the entire migratory flyway, from Canada to Mexico, by establishing regional offices in the continental United States. The last piece of the North American waterfowl puzzle to be put in place was protection and enhancement of wetlands used by waterfowl during their twice a year

migration across the continent.

In 2000, DU hired or moved field staff to Nebraska; recognizing it was a key migration habitat state in the Central Flyway, particularly the Rainwater Basin region in south-central counties, the Platte River and the Sandhills region in north-central Nebraska. While DU is working statewide, it has concentrated its efforts in the Rainwater Basin and along the Platte River. Today, DU has five full-

time and four part-time employees working in Nebraska, a mix of biologists and engineers, all with wetland conservation skills.

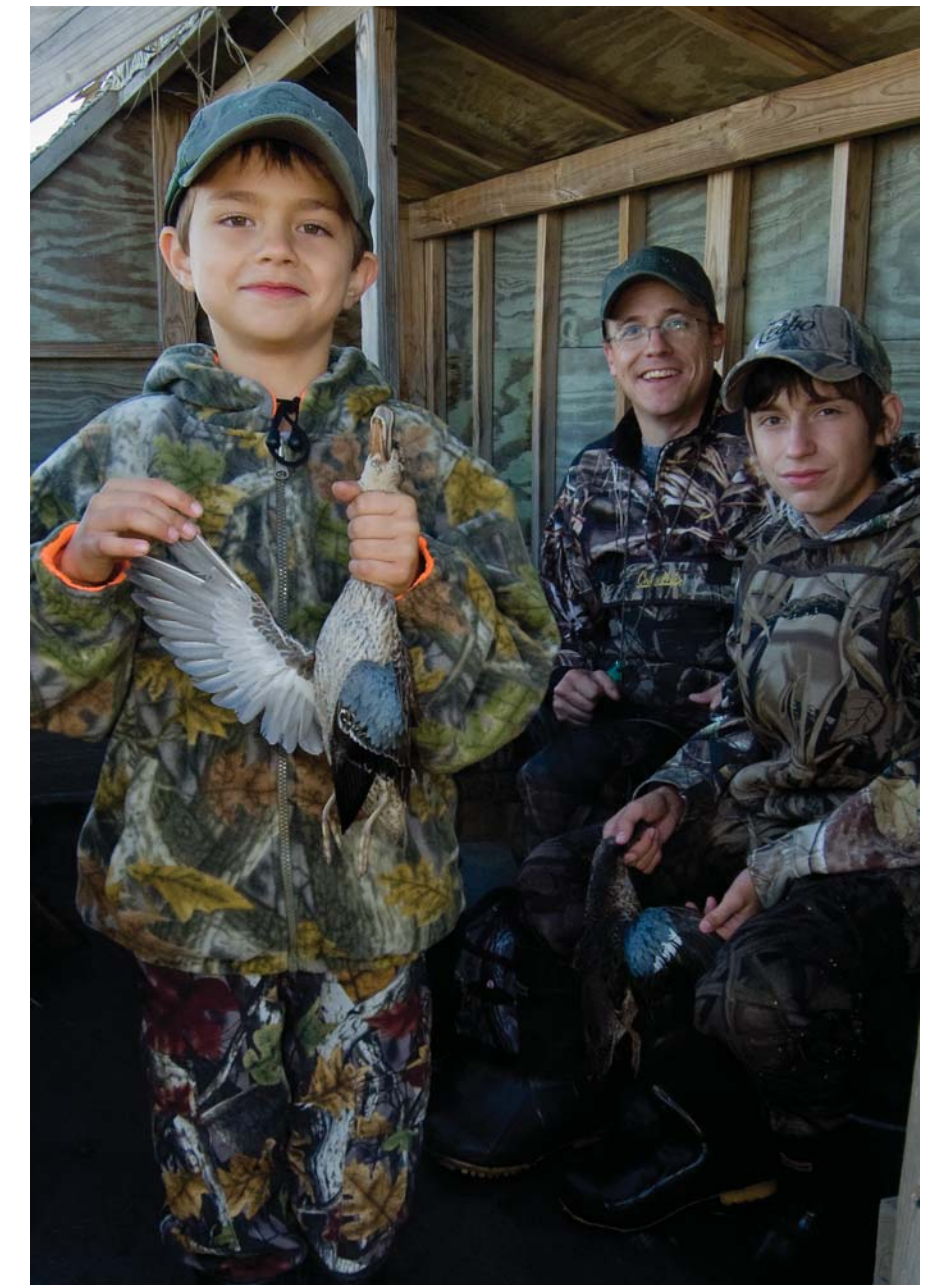
“Our goal, developed about five years ago, was to put 12,000 acres of additional wetlands and associated grasslands out there in the Rainwater Basin,” said Steve Donovan, Manager of Conservation Programs for DU in Nebraska. “We want to focus on small and medium-sized wetlands, particularly

seasonal wetlands, because they provide such an abundance of food for migrating waterfowl. Our priority is providing spring migration habitat because it directly impacts waterfowl production in the prairie-pothole breeding grounds to the north.”

Donovan said that most U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) Wildlife

Management Areas (WMAs) in the Rainwater Basin are large, semi-permanent wetlands. Many hold water year-round during wetter years.

“Those were the wetlands farmers had the most difficulty draining and converting to cropland,” said Donovan, “so those were the ones that more readily came up for sale. Consequently, those were the ones state and federal conservation agencies were able to acquire over the years. They provide



Shawn Meyer and his sons, Aaron with a blue-winged teal, and Jake, hunted from a blind on DU's Verona Complex during the Youth Waterfowl Hunting Season.



When DU acquires a tract of land it restores uplands with a mix of native grasses and forbs to prevent erosion and provide habitat.

important migration habitat, but they typically do not grow the types of plants that produce an abundance of seeds providing food for ducks. Waste corn in fields is an important food for migrating waterfowl to put on fat, but alone it does not provide all the nutrients they require.

“DU wanted to complement those larger wetlands by restoring and protecting the smaller, seasonal-type wetlands,” Donovan continued. “Those are the wetlands that grow plants like smartweed and wild millet, plants producing high-value duck food. Having the different types of wetlands in close proximity to each other is extremely important. Ideally the large, semi-permanent wetlands that provide

roosting and resting sites are encircled with smaller, seasonal wetlands. And we want those seasonal wetlands spread around the Rainwater Basin so we can take advantage of localized precipitation events. That improves the chances of always having water somewhere in the region for waterfowl.”

To accomplish its goals in Nebraska, DU approaches wetland protection and enhancement in several ways. Its mission is not necessarily to acquire and hold land, but to keep funds raised by DU, and usually matched with outside dollars, working on one project after another. Property is only acquired from willing sellers.

“With our Revolving Habitat Program, we identify land with wetland

enhancement opportunities that are coming up for sale,” Donovan explained. “Typically we buy land with wetlands that have been drained or are severely degraded, and the surrounding portions of the property are being farmed. Once we own the property, we get our biologists and engineers out there, figure out what we need to do to restore the wetlands to their maximum capacity, and we implement that plan.”

While DU often buys land where wetlands have been farmed for years, the two critical components to restore those wetlands are still in place – a drainage pattern that concentrates runoff, and a clay pan that will hold water on the surface. Typically, DU brings in earthmoving equipment and

removes sediment that has washed into the wetlands over the years and any fill material that had been placed in the wetland in an attempt to improve crop production. If ditches or tiles had been put in place to drain the wetlands for farming, they are plugged or removed. Reuse pits, excavated to concentrate as much of a wetland’s water as possible in one deep pool, are sealed and filled with compacted soil. Irrigation wells, if not already in place, are often added so wetlands can be pumped to create spring migration habitat when precipitation has been inadequate, or in the fall to provide additional migration habitat and hunting opportunity. Uplands surrounding the wetlands are seeded to native grasses and forbs to create



DU’s Verona Complex in Clay County has a small prairie dog colony.

terrestrial wildlife habitat and protect the wetlands from silt-laden runoff.

“Then we protect the restored habitat with a perpetual conservation easement so it will be there forever,” Donovan said. “These easements prevent future owners from ever going in and digging a ditch to drain the wetlands, digging a big pit to concentrate the water, or plowing up and destroying grasslands. Once we have it restored and fully protected we will resell that land to whomever wants to buy it – someone who wants more pasture, a recreational buyer who wants to keep the land to hunt, or a conservation agency. The bottom line is that those grasslands and wetlands will be protected forever. We take the proceeds and reinvest in new purchases and projects. We keep the money revolving.”

The Revolving Habitat Program is a relatively new concept in Nebraska, but already DU has restored more than 2,400 acres, and the acquisition of more land is underway.

When a state or federal conservation agency owns a piece of land, selling or trading it is difficult and takes time. DU, however, can quickly execute land purchases and trades, which it has done in the Rainwater Basin. A common scenario is that a private landowner has a tract of land containing a wetland, typically a wetland that has been drained and degraded and is poor

agricultural land. The farmer is tired of fighting the oft-flooded tract, but the watershed above it is farmed. DU knows the wetland can be restored, so it negotiates with the landowner, and if he or she agrees, DU buys a nearby tract of productive land and trades it for the wetland ground. Such trades are not acre for acre but value for value. The end result is that a wetland is restored and a private landowner has a tract of land better suited to agriculture.

“Every situation is different when it comes to protecting a wetland,” said Donovan, “and we use all the tools at our disposal to accomplish that.”

The flexibility DU has to act as quickly as a private individual buying land has made it an important partner with state and federal conservation agencies, particularly in acquiring land for sale that adjoins existing WPAs or WMAs. State or federal conservation agencies were often not able to acquire all of a wetland when the original purchases were made, making management of those wetlands difficult without affecting farming operations on adjacent private land. DU refers to these purchases as “round-outs.” DU usually does wetland and grassland restoration work before transferring the land to either the USFWS or the NGPC. Donovan said that more than 5,000 acres of wetlands adjacent to existing WPAs or WMAs remain in private ownership.



DU's main goal in the Rainwater Basin is providing shallow, food-rich wetlands during spring migration – wetlands that often dry in summer.



Shallow, seed-rich wetlands produce annual plants that are an important food source for pintails, mallards and other ducks.

ownership of lands it acquires, it is not burdened with an ever-growing commitment to paying property taxes. Its money remains working money. The Verona Complex in Clay County is an exception.

The Verona Complex encompasses 1,026 acres. The site was selected because groundwater there was expensive to extract for crop irrigation and so the land less expensive to purchase; but it contained several, small, degraded wetlands. Grasslands and wetlands have been restored, and buried pipelines now deliver water to the seasonal wetlands if needed. Fencing has been installed so cattle can be used as a management tool. Verona is an on-the-land presence for DU in the Rainwater Basin where the wise management of wetlands and uplands will always be on display. A tract of land on Verona has been designated as a youth hunting area to encourage youngsters to learn to hunt, hoping that as adults they will support wildlife habitat conservation. Verona, and all DU properties, is open to hunting. Fallen Heroes Marsh is located on the area, a wetland dedicated to Nebraska veterans wounded or killed during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

DU also works to restore and protect wetlands on private land, often acting as a middleman by finding funding from such sources as the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants and other conservation organizations, agencies and programs that share DU's conservation goals. Grant money is used to restore or establish wetlands and grasslands on private land, and to buy conservation easements from landowners, ensuring habitat will be protected in perpetuity. The easement may be held by DU or another entity, such as a Natural Resources District whose principal interest may be reducing groundwater depletion. Participating landowners typically have a deep interest in providing habitat for wildlife but cannot afford to set land aside without financial help, even though most wetlands being farmed in the Rainwater Basin are marginal for agricultural use. Many easements allow

The Importance of the Basin

The Rainwater Basin spans 21 counties in south-central Nebraska. About 75 percent of the 6,100 square mile area is used for crop production. Historically it contained 204,000 acres of wetlands. Today, only 40,000 acres remain and most are in poor condition. Annual ground and aerial surveys conducted by the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture has



shown that about two-thirds of all surface water in the region ends up in reuse pits, not wetlands.

How important is the Rainwater Basin to wildfowl and other wildlife? Approximately 90 percent of the mid-continent population of greater white-fronted geese, 50 percent of the mid-continent population of mallards and 30 percent of the continental population of northern pintails use the Rainwater Basin during spring migration. Over 257 bird species have been recorded in the region, and 42 percent of confirmed whooping crane observations in Nebraska are from the Rainwater Basin. At least 200,000 to 300,000 shorebirds, of over 40 species, migrate through the basins in spring. The region was recently designated the first-ever "Landscape of Hemispheric Importance" for shorebirds by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, in part because virtually the entire world's buff-breasted sandpiper population (above) stop there during spring migration. It is estimated only 20,000 to 30,000 birds of that species remain in the world.



DU wetland projects not only benefit ducks and geese, but wading birds such as great blue herons and over 40 species of shorebirds. The marsh edge and upland grasslands are equally rich in both migrant and resident bird species.

restored grasslands to be used as pasture or hayed, but not farmed. DU sees grazing and haying as management tools to keep seasonal wetlands at the early stages of plant succession and producing annual crops of seeds that

ducks forage for on the bottoms of the wetlands.

Hunters and others are often confused, sometimes even angry, when they see DU's Conservation Manager Tim Horst and his crew disking up

earth and vegetation around summer-dry wetlands with a large, four-wheel drive tractor nicknamed "Big Red." But such intentional disturbance is critical to maintaining an environment where early-succession plants prosper and produce heavy seed crops for ducks. A wetland choked with cattail or bulrush may be more appealing to the eye, but it's of little use to waterfowl, particularly during migration periods. DU has found mechanical disturbance to be an effective tool for controlling unwanted wetland plants. An unmanaged wetland filled with undesirable vegetation provides little of what waterfowl require. Similarly, prescribed fires on grasslands are used to maintain a desirable mix of native grass and forbs, and suppress unwanted invasive plants such as brome grass, bluegrass and exotic thistles. In addition to disking its own wetlands, DU will disk private and public-owned wetlands at no charge. Intense, short-term grazing is also used to manipulate vegetation on both uplands and wetlands.

While DU is concentrating its Nebraska efforts in the Rainwater Basin, it is actively protecting wetlands elsewhere in the state. Over the last six years, DU has been ramping up its efforts on the Platte River, a lifeline for ducks and geese and myriad other waterbirds. On the Platte, DU's principal tool has been easements to ensure the river and adjoining land will not be developed at the detriment of wildlife. Currently, DU holds conservation easements on four tracts, protecting about 3,395 acres and over seven miles of Platte River habitat. Three more easements were scheduled to be in place by the end of 2009. Additionally, DU has joined with partners and found funding for restoration work along the Platte – particularly removing phragmites, willows, cottonwoods, cedars and other invasive species that have been encroaching on river channels for decades; and restoring sloughs and backwaters in the river floodplain. DU has also funded wetland restoration projects along the Missouri River, and is looking at possible wetland enhancement projects in the Sandhills.



DU's Conservation Manager Tim Horst and his crew disk seasonal wetlands to keep them from being choked with aquatic vegetation of little value to waterfowl and other water birds, and to promote the growth of seed-producing annual plants.

DU works hand-in-glove with many partners to accomplish its goals. One of the most important is the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture, organized in 1992. The idea of joint ventures for wetland protection grew out of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan in 1986. The goal was "a framework for partnerships, through which government agencies, conservation organizations, and other groups and landowners cooperate on conservation projects, each contributing different resources or expertise." That concept has greatly accelerated the protection and restoration of wetlands in the Rainwater Basin.

"The Joint Venture provides a framework to allow collaboration and coordination among different agencies and organizations doing conservation work in the region," said Rainwater Basin Joint Venture coordinator Andy

Bishop. "We are using science to justify our habitat objectives, good science to make good decisions. We don't just need acres of habitat; we need acres of the right types of habitat, and in the right places to provide for the needs of migratory waterfowl.

"The days of believing if you have water and waste corn you are meeting all of their needs are over," Bishop continued. "Imagine eating nothing but Hostess Twinkies for every meal. Spring migration is a critical period in the annual lifecycles of waterfowl. Hens are preparing to nest and require balanced diets; essential minerals, amino acids, and proteins they will only find in well-managed wetlands. The strength of DU in the Rainwater Basin is coming up with funding mechanisms to make things happen."

Since 1992, DU has spent over \$14 million in Nebraska and conserved

44,213 acres – part of \$188 million that has been spent to protect more than a million acres of land in the Central Flyway. Money raised at local DU banquets, from major donors in Nebraska and from corporations, is often multiplied five to ten times by leveraging funds and taking advantage of matching grants. Nationwide, DU has more than a million supporters, the world's largest waterfowl conservation organization, and has conserved more than 12 million acres. DU's original concept of raising money in the U.S. to protect duck breeding grounds in Canada has come a long way. ■

For additional information about the work of Ducks Unlimited in Nebraska, contact Steve Donovan, Ducks Unlimited, 2550 N. Diers Avenue, Suite L, Grand Island, NE 68803, (308) 383-8075, sdonovan@ducks.org

Lyin' in Winter

By Frank Reid

Okay, there are folks who enjoy fishing in the middle of winter. Some are called “ice fishermen,” others “steelheaders.” I prefer to use the collective noun – insane masochists.

Mind you, it’s not like I haven’t been ice-fishing myself – I once was the third man in a two-hole ice tent. If you’ve never seen one, imagine a nylon-covered porta-potty on the middle of a frozen lake, surrounded by little flags stolen from a Smurf golf course. At least, that’s what it looks like to me. Some of these tents and shacks are very fancy, with solid sides, sofas, TV and hot and cold running maniacs. More on that later.

My epic adventure took place after a late-January ice-fishing invitation from Henry and John. Being a fly-

fisherman, I show up with my fly rod and a chainsaw, figuring I can cut a long, keyhole shape in the ice and get two or three casts in before the guides freeze up. Before I could get started, however, the guys invite me into their tent. Since my 8’6”, five-weight fly rod won’t fit, I

leave it at the door but hang onto the chainsaw for self defense, noting a crazed look in the eyes of my erstwhile “friends.”

The tent’s furnishing are sparse – two upturned five-gallon buckets, with a kerosene space heater in the middle, facing two holes in the ice. A pair of miniature fishing rods, obviously taken away from their mothers too soon, sit on little stands next to the holes, their lines going into the water.

“I need a hole,” I say, for the first time in my life.

Henry steps outside and returns with “the drill.” This isn’t your standard Black and Decker drill – it has a two-

horsepower gas motor on the top, handles designed for hands wearing boxing gloves, and a nine-inch bit. Not nine inch long – nine inches across. Apparently this is the WMD evidence that we were looking for in Iraq.

John pushes things back and Henry pulls the rip cord. Immediately the tent fills with smoke and noise. Henry centers the bit between the two holes, pushes a lever and poof! We have a three-hole ice tent. Fourteen inches down and he’s into the lake. He takes the drill outside and then starts to explain their fishing techniques.

“Okay, those holes outside are John’s and mine. You fish out of your hole here. We don’t have the gear to set you up outside.”

“Those are more fishing holes? I thought the local CSI had been out here tagging evidence from some bizarre Inuit gang war. How do you get the fish in? You’ve got no fishing poles.”

“Well, the flags are tip-ups,” he says. “When the flag goes up, we run out and pull up the line. Right now, we have them set for bigger, cruising fish. We don’t want to catch tiddlers.”

“You catch tiddlers on your tip-ups?”

“No, we don’t want to catch tiddlers on the tip-ups. That’s why we use a flasher.”

I start to think these guys are suffering frostbite between the earmuffs. I warily eye my two tent mates in their knee-length parkas as I slowly move to the back corner of the tent.

“You flash the fish?”

“Yes, we put the probe down the hole and we can see the fish with the flasher.”

“You put the probe down the hole so you can see the fish with the flasher and not catch tiddlers with the tip-ups.”

“Exactly!”

“Okay, I think I’ve got it. What I’ve got, I’ve no clue. What do you use for bait?”

“Wax worms.”

“Those look like maggots.”

“No, no. They’re totally different.”

“Well, they don’t seem to have much action.”

“You have to warm them up.”

“How do you warm them up?” asks I.

“Just pop a few in your mouth and hold ‘em in your cheek.” He then raises his mitten to his mouth and coughs up four wriggling worms into his palm.

“I think I’m gonna spew!”

“Don’t worry about it. They’re wax worms. Perfectly clean.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Of course, been doing it for years. Since I’ve started warming up my bait, I’ve tripled the amount of fish caught.”

John is beside me, nodding seriously. He opens up a little cardboard can and shakes a tablespoonful of chilled, flesh-colored rice krispies into my glove. I summon up my courage and pop them into my mouth.

“Mmbule, mrammbulu bebeme nbm mammod?”

“What?”

I move the wax worms around, with my tongue playing sheepdog, and finally herd the suckers into my cheek. “I said, what’s the difference between wax worms and maggots? You said they were totally different.” The wax worms are starting to wake up and one escapes out the corner of my mouth, plopping onto the ice and squirming away.

“Marketing. No one in the U.S. would buy maggots, so they changed the name to wax worms.”

John takes the pepper shot full in the face. He now looks like a genetically altered Medusa, with maggots instead of snakes. Nonetheless, they are both laughing hysterically.

This is ice-fishing initiation – Henry just had a few wax worms in his palm to keep them warm. With a bit of sleight of hand, he spit into the mitten and voila, there they were.

I, on the other hand, am not laughing. I still have one little bugger caught behind a crown and a second is heading for my sinuses. Now I know where they got the idea for so many movies along the line of “Alien” – that



ARTWORK BY TIM REIGERT

sucker nested up there and later hatched out during a big presentation I was giving at work.

Time to get down to fishing. John hands me a spare rod. It’s about 18 inches long with a little bitty reel attached. I remove my gloves to bait the hook, picking a couple of live ones out of John’s hair.

Since there is no room up front, I lean over the space heater and finally set up on my hole, plunking the bait down into the water along with a bobber the size of a kidney bean. Hey, this isn’t so bad – I’m here with a couple of “friends,” fishing and chatting away. Even after my appetizer, I’m starting to get hungry.

As a matter of fact, I smell something cooking, although it doesn’t smell very good. More like burning plastic bags. Smoke curls up around my face. John looks over and casually comments “fire.”

“What?”

“You’re on fire.”

I look down. The lower portion of my parka is touching the space heater and flames are licking up from my groin to my chest. I calmly assess the situation. Ah, yes – stop, drop and roll. I remember that from kindergarten. Unfortunately, there is no room in the tent for this maneuver. I believe its time to quietly exit the facility and find a

snow bank. Translation: The scream I emit sets off car alarms for a 50-mile radius and many Nebraskans head to their tornado shelters. Throwing down the rod and reel, which take the path of least resistance and drop straight through the hole in the ice, I proceed to beat myself across the stomach and chest whilst doing a great impression of the Tasmanian Devil in a confined space. I finally head for the exit.

I hit the door doing about Mach 10, but the Velcro closure decides to hold fast and my panic-driven momentum starts moving the whole tent across the windswept lake. After a few steps the tent catches on its two other occupants, molding around them like a second skin. They don’t move, because John thinks he has a nibble. The Velcro finally gives and I burst through the door.

As it turns out, the flames on my parka were apparently oxygen starved in the tent. I believe this to be the case because as soon as I hit the outside air, I turn into a human comet – a flaming blue head trailed by a stream of grey smoke. I head for the nearest snow bank, only to discover the true meaning of windswept. Ain’t no snow banks for hundreds of yards.

Still panicked, I blindly stumble away from the tangled mess that was the ice-fishing tent, in the process

hip-checking into Kansas a ten-year-old playing hockey with his friends. Slaloming through the flagged minefield of Henry and John’s tip-ups, I manage to snag every one of them with my mukluks. I look like a Wisconsin limousine kitted out for a wedding. One tip-up is attached to a state-record walleye that flies through the air, flash freezes, shoots across the lake and trips a figure skater who does the first-ever quadruple Lutz. Unfortunately, she lands in an ice hole and is never seen again.

I finally dive for the ice, rolling and spinning in an inaugural Winter X-Games break dance competition. The officials hold up their signs: 2, 1.5, 2. The French judge gives me a 0.5. The flames out, I look back. Henry and John haven’t moved, and the tent site looks like a plane crash debris field. My fly rod is broken and forms a cross over the hole the skater disappeared through. John raises his rod and brings up a six-inch yellow perch.

I think I’ll stick to fly fishing and class V rapids, it’s safer. ■

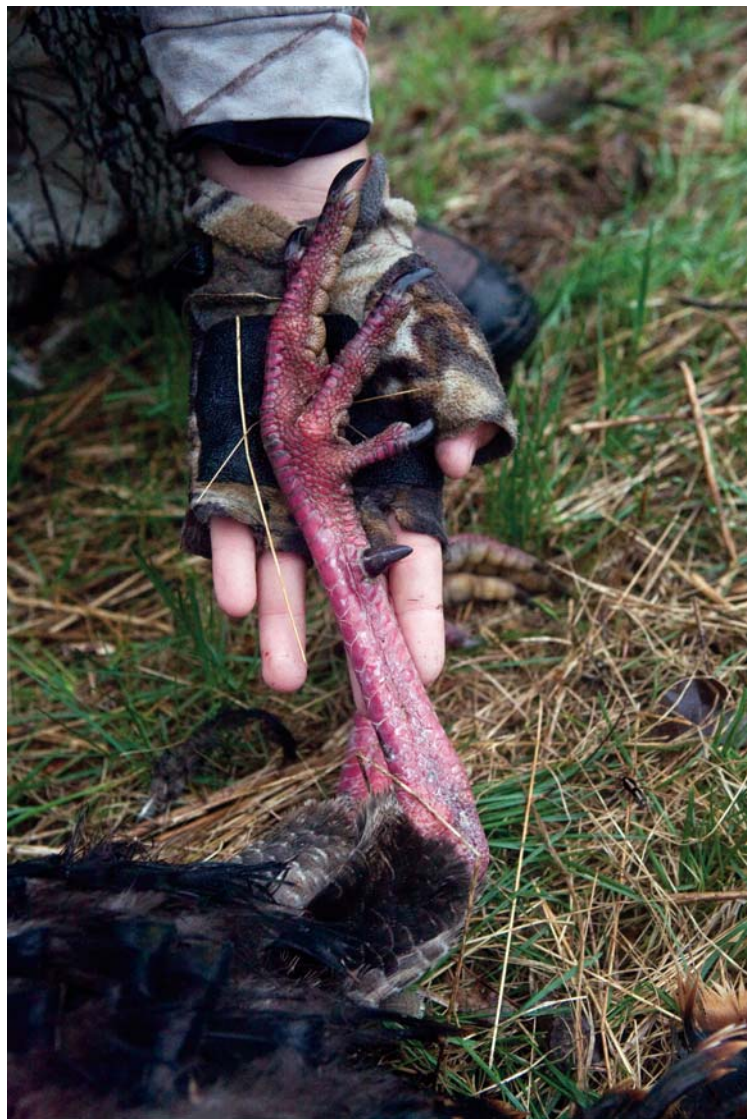
Frank Reid is a retired military member and fly-fisherman from Plattsmouth. He’s also the creator of the “Full Reid” move which, in fly-fishing parlance, means to greet the creek with your face.

Turkey

Down the Barrel

Text and photos by Jeff Kurrus

Scouting and patience pay off for a young turkey hunter whose hunt is over at sunrise on the season's opening day.



THIS TURKEY'S SPUR indicates that Brad Cheloha's opening day tom was a relatively young bird.

TAKING AIM, Cheloha watches as a tom turkey steps into the opening and gives him, as well as the photographer, a perfect opening day turkey shot.



The original story idea was to find at least two teenage turkey hunters who were finding some balance between school, friends, sports and the rest of the long list of pre-adult necessities. Eighteen-year-old Brad Cheloha of Columbus and a friend of his were to be the exact pair I was looking for.

As it often happens for teenagers during that pivotal age in life, Brad was the only one that thought he could hunt opening day. If his friend had known just how quick of a hunt it would be, he probably would have been able to come too. By 7 a.m., Brad and I were shaking hands as we stood over a dead tom. An hour later we were eating breakfast, and by nine I was on my way home, a solid day of work already behind me that had essentially started at midnight.

To some, Brad's hunt may seem to have been very short, but it had actually started several weeks prior to the trigger

being pulled.

"They'll walk right down this road," he had told me as we drove down a dirt-bottom logging road on his family's Platte County land next to the Loup River two weeks before opening day. Brad had been scouting for several days by himself, but wanted to show me the spread – patches of hardwoods between grass-covered strutting areas. For me, it was going to be as difficult wondering what was going on around the corner as it was to actually hunt. But Brad reassured me of our spot, and that the birds would come.

His homemade blind was beneath a giant mulberry tree. Brad and his father had cleared out debris and surrounded the spot with tree trunks, limbs and greenery. From the outside, all that could be seen of a hunter sitting on a short-legged turkey chair inside the blind was the top of the hunter's head. Overlooking one of the logging roads that criss-crossed the area, the blind was less than a hundred



A HOUSE MADE OF STICKS was the perfect turkey hunting spot for Cheloha. From the outside (below), Cheloha is barely visible to turkeys in his vicinity as a tangle of tree limbs and other brush, including the mulberry trunk as a safe backstop, hide him from approaching birds. However, a view from above (top) reveals that the blind is actually large enough for two hunters, with room to spare.

yards from a grove of cottonwoods where the birds traditionally roosted. Perfect.

I arrived the night before the hunt, meeting Rick, Brad's dad, and family friends for an outdoor cookout where wild game filled the menu. "Where's Brad?" was my first question. "Scouting," his dad told me.



A brief while later, his dad got a phone call from his son. Closing his cell phone, he turned to me. "We have to go out to the land tonight, after dark, to set up a blind for you and a second blind in case it rains. Brad said the birds roosted about 70 to 80 yards away, and there's no way you can set up early and not bump those birds off the roost."

"Is Brad coming over here to the party?" I asked.

"No. He said he wanted to get some sleep before tomorrow's hunt."

"Sleep? For a teenager?" I thought.

At midnight, I was following Rick along the logging road, blinds in hand. Above, the sky was still clear. I set up my blind to the right of the mulberry blind as Rick put his up across the logging road. Shortly after, we were back at the Cheloha home. Brad's truck was in the driveway, so while Rick walked inside, I gathered my overnight bag and felt the hood of Brad's vehicle. Cold. He hadn't gone out all night.

Morning came early, as did the rain. Brad, wide-eyed and face painted in a camouflage pattern, was walking through the kitchen as I stumbled in. "You ready?" he asked.

I nodded, still too tired to speak, and we climbed in his truck as a hard rain fell. Then the teenager in Brad emerged. He drove out to the family land, with me as his nervous passenger, as if he was competing in a NASCAR race. I

held on for dear life. Finally, when I couldn't take the speed of this teenager's truck anymore, I spoke up. "I flipped a truck just like this one time years back, driving in a rain storm."

Brad turned to me as the tires traded blacktop for gravel. "Me, too," he said, "right down here where this gravel gets a little soft." A quarter-mile later, the truck's back end started fish-tailing. "See, it gets a little soft here," he said, the back end turning not violently, but darn near close.

By the time we arrived at our hunting spot, I was wondering how good of an idea this all had been. Was I following a loose cannon into the dark woods, or just another teenager who had yet to pay his fair share of speeding tickets before adulthood, just like myself at his age?

This question was answered with the hunt. He elected the mulberry blind, and I set up in the blind behind him. Rain continued to fall, but most of it was blocked by the massive amount of leaves above us. We saw the first birds minutes after sitting down – apparently they had left the roost early, as we hadn't heard them fly down. It was legal shooting time, but still very dark, as six hens walked down the logging road toward us in single file. Before they reached our blinds, however, they turned and walked into a patch of woods. If there was a tom behind them, he would probably follow.

Minutes later, with Brad looking to our right, I glanced left and saw the blue head of a tom. Seconds later, Brad saw him too, and his shoulders immediately perked up as he picked up his slate call and softly purred at the bird. It was hard not to notice Brad's calling subtlety.

There were two hens with the tom, but they didn't follow the original six into the woods and instead stayed near the logging road. Gobblers normally show little interest in calls when they're with hens, but this one showed little interest in his co-eds and instead moved into an open area close to the mulberry blind. Brad had a shot, but it was through a tangle of underbrush. A killing shot, yes. The best shot, no. He raised his gun. "Wait, wait," I thought. But he didn't need my silent suggestions.

When the bird moved behind a cottonwood tree between the blind and the logging road, he raised his gun again. Then the bird cleared. I worried that it could hear my camera's incessant clicking for, with my heart in my throat, that was all I could hear until the tom gobbled boastfully. Brad continued to wait as the bird walked to within 20 yards of us. Then he shot.

We were back at the truck a few minutes after seven, talking more now than we had the entire morning and adding small intricacies to the story due to the brevity of the actual tale.

"You sure played that well," I told him.

THE HUNT ENDED for Cheloha with a bird in hand just after sunrise on the opening day of the spring shotgun turkey season.

"Thanks," he said.

"I got one request for you."

"What's that?" he answered, casing his gun.

"Like I said earlier, I had a truck like this years ago but haven't driven a stick shift in a long time. You mind if I drive?"

"Not at all," he said, tossing me the keys.

I had seen enough of him in the field to know that he was experienced beyond his years with a turkey call and shotgun in his hand. However, I had ridden with him long enough to know that, in most other places, he was still a teenager at heart. Which meant that it was my turn behind the wheel, for it was still drizzling rain and there was still a lot of turkey season left for both of us to hunt. ■



MOSSES

Text and photos by Chris Helzer

These ancient species are fun to learn about if you want to increase your vocabulary.

When I was growing up, moss was the stringy green gunk I was always trying to peel off my fishing hook. Now that I'm a biologist I know it is more than this, but I still catch myself griping about the moss on my hooks. Maybe because phrases like "filamentous green algae" tend to earn me funny looks from my fishing buddies.

It turns out that mosses are much more than simply the stuff that clogs up your lures, but learning about them is not for the faint of heart. First of all, studying up on mosses for this article required me to learn quite a few new vocabulary words. For example, mosses don't have stems, they have **seta**. Furthermore, those stringy structures that anchor mosses to logs or rocks and look a

million years before sunflowers appeared on the scene and formed complex alliances with birds and bees for pollination and seed dispersal, mosses were popping the tops off their capsules to release thousands of spores into the air. Those spores went wherever the wind or rain took them, but a small percentage landed where the soil and moisture allowed them to grow into new moss plants. The spore strategy is considered by today's biologists to be "primitive," meaning that it's simple and old, but it's also generally less cool than more recent and complex strategies. However, even though much of the present-day earth is covered with pretty flowers (the kind that are attached to real stems with real leaves and roots), there

are also more than 14,000 species of mosses that have managed to survive just fine too.

In fact, mosses can survive in just about any environment, from sea level to the tops of mountains. There are moss species that can grow underwater and others that grow in deserts. Nebraska has about 200 species of mosses growing in a wide variety of habitats, including prairies, woodlands, rock outcrops and seeps. They quietly go about their jobs, such as preventing soil erosion and slowly turning rocks and logs into rich productive soil. Unfortunately, their humble existence and inconspicuous appearance has meant that they historically have not gotten much attention or respect from the general public. Even botanists, who should know better, have tended to ignore them. Roscoe Pound and Frederic Clements, two of Nebraska's most famous botanists, co-wrote an 1898 paper on the plants of Nebraska, and their very short section on mosses started "These are of very little importance with us, on account of the small number of species and their

general lack both of abundance and of frequency."

All right, so mosses were not going to win any popularity contests back then, and I'm pretty sure they're not going to win any now. But if you take the time to look closely at them, they do have a certain charm. Many are actually pretty attractive in their own way, and if you learn more about them, you might find that you start to appreciate some of the little known characteristics that have allowed them to survive for more than 350 million years. For example, I think it's pretty neat when they shed their operculum to expose the delicate peristome beneath ...

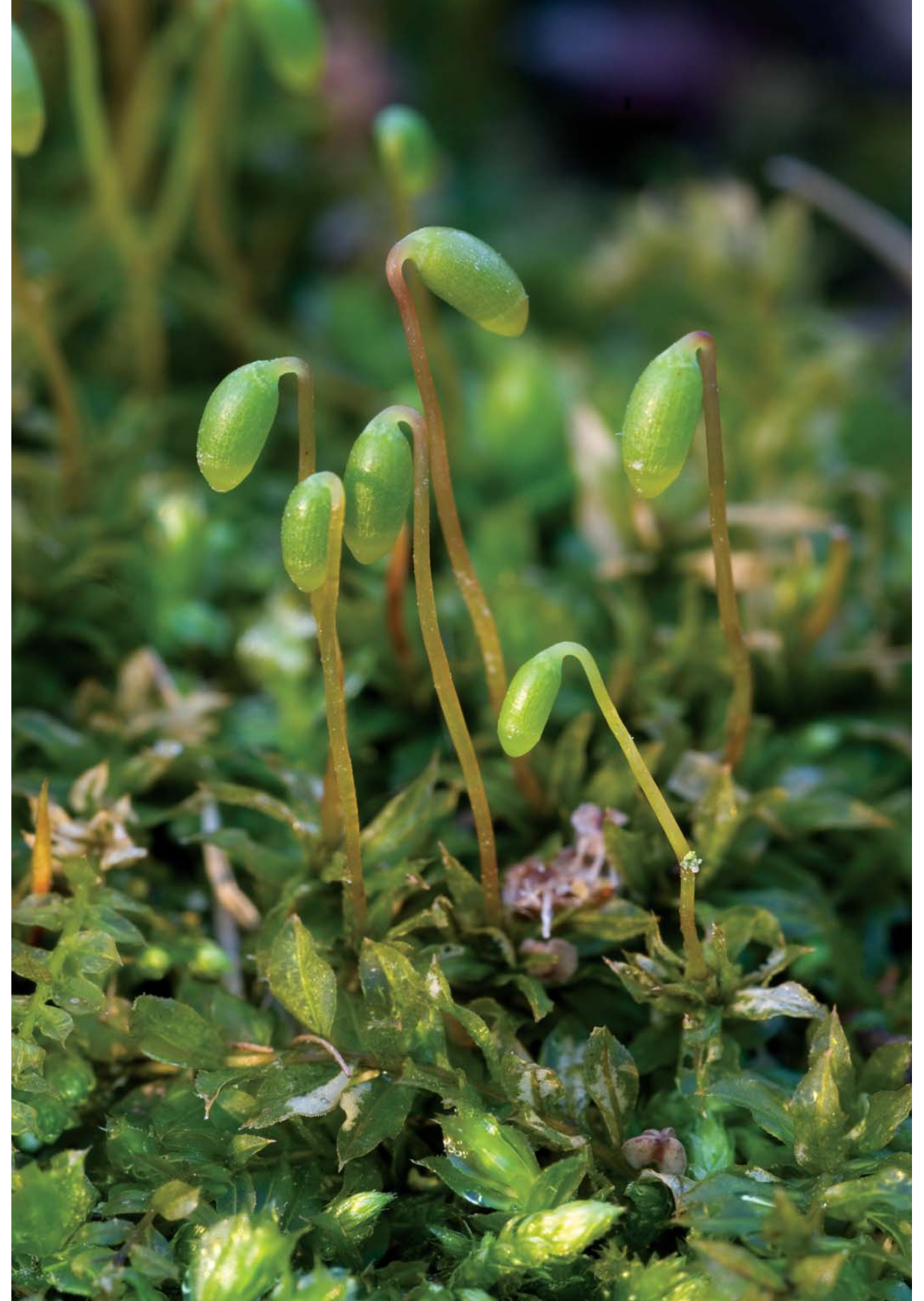
Or you could just go fishing. ■



Above: A bur oak acorn cap sits on a bed of moss in a Sarpy County woodland. Opposite page: Thousands of tiny spores will be released from these sporophytes (capsules), a few of which may grow into new moss plants.

lot like roots are really called **rhizoids**. And mosses don't have flowers, they have **sporophytes**, and what look like tiny seeds are really **spores**. Their leaves aren't technically leaves either, of course, but I didn't ever find another term to describe them other than "spirally arranged leaf-like appendages." I thought I was doing pretty well with my new vocabulary until I struggled through a paragraph on a University of Massachusetts web site that ended with this sentence: "The gametophyte generation of the mosses is, thus, dimorphic."

Of course the big reason mosses are different than most other plants, including the names of their structures, is that mosses have been around much longer. Two hundred





Harlan Comeback?

Text and photos by Eric Fowler

After years of drought-sapped lake levels at Harlan County Lake, fisheries biologists and anglers are eagerly anticipating what typically comes when a reservoir refills: more fish.

inflow might not be enough to replace what was released during the summer. String a few dry years together, and the cumulative effect can cause lake levels to plummet. One example of this began in 1988, and by September 1991, the lake had fallen 17 feet and was at only 42 percent of its capacity, the lowest point since it filled in the late-1950s. While it can take reservoirs years to recover from drastic drawdowns, an abnormally wet year in 1993 brought the lake up 22 feet and above full pool.

The recovery didn't come as quickly in the most recent drought, which started sapping Harlan's water in 2001. From September 2003 through February 2007 the Republican River, the lake's main source of water, was often dry. As a result, the lake stayed 16 to 20 feet below normal during this time, including a new record low in December 2004 that left it at one-third of its capacity. No water was released for irrigation or to maintain flows in the Republican River below the dam in 2004 and 2005, and irrigation releases in 2006 and 2007 were but a fraction of the normal allocation. Farmers weren't the only ones affected – dramatic reductions in reservoir volume often lead to reductions in fish populations for the simple fact that a given amount of water can only support so many fish.

When full, Harlan County Lake covers 13,300 surface acres, spans 11 miles, including two miles of lake above Highway 183, and has 75 miles of shoreline. At its lowest point in 2004, it covered less than 7,000 acres and spanned seven miles. Most boat ramps, including the one at Alma and another at Methodist Cove two miles east of town, went out of service in 2001. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the land around the lake, used dredges to keep access to North Shore Marina in the lake's northeast corner and Patterson Harbor on the southeast open to boats, and built two other low-water boat ramps on the east end of the lake.

Wilbur Holloway purchased Fisherman's Corner in Alma in the fall of 1999, and admits he couldn't have picked a worse time. "The first summer we were in here the water was up and the next year on the Fourth of July we lost it," he said.

But there were no friendly barbs thrown at Alma from those in Republican City at the opposite end of the lake, who could at least still see the water from the edge of their town. "It hurt their business too," Holloway said. "I still had some people coming through, but bait sales went to nothing. It's just part of life. Things happen."

Despite the hardship it was causing at the time, however, things were indeed happening on the 5,000 acres of exposed lakebed that would bode well for the future. During annual drawdowns of irrigation reservoirs, some vegetation grows on the exposed lake bed that provides habitat for fish when the lake refills. After being



Fishing has been difficult at Harlan County Lake in recent years. Initially the problem was a lack of water. That problem has been resolved, but now the fishing is tough for another reason: There are more than 5,000 acres of flooded trees for the fish to hide in.

But while they don't yet have any proof to hang their fishing caps on, biologists and anglers are optimistic

Wilbur Holloway fishes for walleye in trees that grew on the exposed lakebed at Harlan County Lake during an extended drawdown and were flooded when the reservoir filled in 2008.

Hoping to capitalize on the habitat provided by the flooded timber, fisheries biologists have stocked thousands of northern pike fry in recent years.

that things are about to change for the better at Harlan.

Reservoir Ups and Downs

In irrigation reservoirs, the water level typically falls in the summer when water is being released for for crops and then rises the remainder of the year. Harlan is about 50 feet deep and holds 314,000 acre feet of water at normal operating levels. If all 150,000 acre feet of water reserved for irrigation is released, the lake can drop 13 feet, but the annual drawdown is usually only between six and 10 feet.

During dry years, however, reservoir



Anglers fish for channel catfish in the Republican River channel above Highway 183 last June at Harlan County Lake. During the recent drought, even the river was dry at times in this area. Now the area is a maze of flooded trees and smartweed.

exposed for four years, much of Harlan’s lake bed had become a forest. “There was tremendous growth of willows, cottonwoods and a few

unwanted things like saltcedar,” said Brad Newcomb, district fisheries supervisor for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, which manages the

fishery at Harlan. “We have abundant growth that’s been flooded, so aquatic habitat-wise, we’ve been sitting much better than normal for the last 2½ years.”

Much of that forest was flooded when the lake rose 13 feet in 2007. The rest was inundated in 2008, when the lake came up another seven feet, putting it three feet above normal.

Any flooded vegetation serves as a host for phytoplankton, microscopic plants at the base of the aquatic food chain. This provides more food for zooplankton, the primary food source for newly hatched walleye and white bass, as well as gizzard shad, the primary forage fish in Harlan. The flooded trees also provide cover for young open-water species and shoreline predators, and are prime habitat for crappies. That was the case after Harlan refilled in 1993, when both game fish and forage fish rebounded, Newcomb said. And that was with less vegetation than was inundated this time around.

“We’re doing several things to take advantage of it,” Newcomb said of the

high water and flooded trees.

While there have always been largemouth bass in the reservoir, biologists hadn’t stocked them for decades. But in 2008, they released 113,000 fingerling bass in Harlan, and they added another 118,000 in 2009. They hadn’t stocked northern pike since 1996, but added 33,000 fingerling in 2008, and another 43,000 in 2009.

In hopes of helping reverse a decline in channel catfish in the lake, biologists stocked 57,000 five- to seven-inch-long fish in 2007 – the first time they had stocked catfish in 15 years – and another 135,000 in 2009.

Biologists had been stocking three-inch fingerling walleye one year, fry the next and then skipping a year to allow for natural reproduction, which can be good in the reservoir. With fry providing the best results, 13.5 million of them were released in open water of the reservoir’s upper third in 2009. “We tried to avoid timber in case it was holding crappie, white bass and walleye because they eat fry,” Newcomb said. “It’s been shown there are higher concentrations of zooplankton in the upper lake, which the fry will be feeding on for several weeks to a month.”

Where Are the Fish?

While Newcomb was optimistic about the conditions and the management strategies they’ve used, he’s not sure if the lake will live up to its potential. Each fall, biologists use gill nets, trap nets and electrofishing to capture fish at sites that have been used for years, providing population trend data they can use in reservoir management. Sampling the past two years, however, showed very few young of the year walleye in the population. And in 2009,

the total number of walleye captured per gill net actually fell from six in 2008 to four, well below the goal of 16 fish per net. In addition, no young-of-the-year walleye were captured in

those numbers to try and make any sense of them,” Newcomb said. “The white bass and walleye numbers are confusing to say the least. We expected some better results.”



Dean Laberto of Orleans lands a drum that Joe Coakley of Edison hooked while fishing for catfish in the Republican River above Harlan County Lake. A popular fishing destination, the river was low or dry for several years during the recent drought. With water back in the river, so are the fish.

gill nets in 2009, which wasn’t normal. However, electrofishing did show some fish of that year’s year class, but they were smaller than normal and too small to be caught in gill nets. A poor shad hatch in 2009 likely left walleye without as much to eat as they typically have, contributing to low growth rates.

On the bright side, about one-third of the walleye that were sampled measured 20 inches in length or more, including more 25 inch and longer than biologists had seen since 2001.

The sampling data was even worse for white bass. For four years, the number and size of white bass in the lake made it one of the best in the state. Biologists had sampled 30 fish per net or more those years, including a big jump in 2007, and saw excellent distribution among the year classes. But in 2009, they captured an average of only three fish per net.

“You don’t like to have to look at

Newcomb saw no indication that a substantial number of either species left the reservoir when water was released, and harvest pressure was not large enough to have an effect. He is hoping the huge shifts the sampling data is showing are simply due to the lake, for all intent and purposes, being entirely different than the one they normally sampled, and the fish were simply where their nets were not.

“It is like a new lake environment,” he said. “It’s very possible that we’re comparing different numbers and our catch ability may have changed dramatically.”

The westernmost sampling point biologists used the past two years was near Methodist Cove, about midway up the lake. Typically, there was no reason to go farther west, or even the ability to do so, considering the lower lake levels usually seen at that time of year. “[The fish] could’ve been farther west than



Fisheries biologist Brad Eifert stocks young pike in the lake above Highway 183, where abundant flooded timber, here rising 10 feet out of seven feet of water, and aquatic vegetation will improve their chances for survival.



Each year the water dropped lower at Harlan County Lake, a new crop of willows and cottonwoods sprouted on the newly exposed lakebed. When the lake filled in 2008, those trees were poking out of the water in Prairie Dog Bay and off White Cat Point in depths of up to 20 feet.

we sampled because we didn’t sample the western quarter of the lake,” Newcomb said.

Whether that is the case or not will be revealed as trees decompose and lake conditions return to normal. How long that will take depends on how long Harlan stays full, which forecasters say will be for at least another year. “When they’re underwater, the trees will last a long time,” Newcomb said.

The flooded trees have provided excellent spawning habitat for crappies, which had a strong year class in 2007 and good reproduction since. Newcomb expected to see more eight- to 10-inch fish in last fall’s sample, but they did find some, as well as some 12-inch fish. “We do expect good things with that crappie population and I think we should see some great fishing in the next few years,” he said.

Catfish numbers also continue to climb from historic lows sampled in 2006. Newcomb said samples showed fish in all size classes, and about 20 percent of the fish sampled were

24 inches or longer. “Catfish are probably one of the brightest pictures we’ve seen down there,” said Newcomb. “We are seeing recruitment even in years we didn’t stock, so we will likely not continue catfish stocking for a while and see how things go. I think we’ve made the recovery we’re looking for there.”

While their sampling doesn’t target bass and pike, biologists did capture some of each, and anglers caught a few as well. Bass measured 8 to 20 inches and pike 22 to 34 inches, with the shorter fish possibly coming from the 2008 stocking and the longer from earlier, naturally reproduced fish.

Tough Fishing

Biologists aren’t the only ones having trouble catching fish at Harlan. Newcomb said the effect is even greater on anglers, who have had to cope with reduced fish densities, a result of the lake doubling in volume, as well as the increased habitat where fish can hide. In many places, the tops

of trees are sticking out of the water, everywhere from the shoreline to depths of up to 20 feet.

A creel survey has been conducted at the lake most years since 1990. Anglers have landed only 1,000 or so walleye in each of the past two years, a dismal catch rate that produced a fish every 20 hours. The 60 teams that fished the two-day 2008 Governor’s Cup Walleye tournament boated only three fish. In 2009, 80 teams upped that total to 15 fish, and the 47 teams in the local walleye club tournament caught 15 fish.

“People are having a hard time fishing the conditions down there,” Newcomb said. “People who like to troll in about 10 to 12 feet of water can’t do it. They have to fish outside of 17 to 20 feet.”

Trolling or drifting in the shallows these days typically only sends folks to the tackle shop to restock. “It’s good for my business,” Holloway joked.

Walleye anglers who had the best luck resorted to vertical jigging or

using slip bobbers in the flooded trees. “You’ve got to adjust the way you fish,” said Holloway, who himself had some luck using both techniques last summer.

But Holloway said relatively few people have ventured into the flooded forest, especially above Highway 183. “There are spots deep enough that there could be walleye up there,” he said. “It’s just matter of going out and hunting for them. I think we get to the point where we hunt and fish memories more than going out and looking for new spots to fish and hunt. I know I’m guilty of that at times.”

Newcomb said it’s a tough call for those who do fish the trees on whether to move until they find fish or sit tight until the fish find them. “I think the fish move through it enough to find food,” he said. “It will depend primarily on shad distribution within that type of habitat. If the shad numbers are high in the whole entire area, they won’t have to move a lot. But especially this year, when it looked like there were lower numbers of small shad, I’d bet they were moving quite a bit.”

Complicating the issue further is the fact that using sonar to locate fish, a prime tactic among both walleye and white bass anglers, is nearly impossible in the flooded trees. “When you get under 20 feet, your sonar blacks out,” Newcomb said. The sonar pictures many anglers were seeing in deeper water last summer, however, do lend credence to Newcomb’s guess that plenty of white bass and walleye remain in the lake.

“All summer long, I’d go out and run that deep water and see big schools out there,” Holloway said, noting that the sonar pictures he and other anglers were seeing weren’t much different than what they’d seen in other years.

The anglers who continued to fish through the fall put that information

to work for them and saw increased success, including limits of fish on Halloween, the opening day of pheasant season. Trolling with lead-core line and jigging with slab spoons in depths of up to 38 feet, especially along dropoffs that have historically held fish, produced the best results, Holloway said.

Another bright spot on the walleye front came earlier in the year when anglers had excellent luck fishing the face of the dam during the spring spawning run. “It was the best April night fishery on the dam that we’ve seen in 10 years,” Newcomb said.

White bass fishing, long a staple at Harlan, also took a hit in 2009 after seeing dramatic improvement in 2008, according to the creel survey. Yet while angling success was sporadic, the spring white bass spawning run in the Republican River above the reservoir, once a hot bite and a favorite of area anglers, reappeared in 2009 for the first



Holloway holds a four-pound walleye caught at Harlan County Lake last June.

time in years.

The total number of channel catfish caught declined slightly in 2009, but the number harvested increased. Catfishing was good from the spring run in the upper end of the reservoir and in the Republican River above it, and throughtout summer across the lake.

Because the crappies are still relatively small, few people are targeting them, a fact that could change with more keeper-sized fish in the population. Holloway said crappies are scattered throughout the trees around the lake rather than concentrated in the coves, as they have been in years past.

Kids in Alma have taken a liking to the resurgence of largemouth bass, and it was a rare day in the summer when a few weren’t fishing around the boat ramp on the southeast corner of town. Holloway weighed a 4½-pound bass for one lucky young angler, and has also seen a few nice bluegills showing up in angler’s catches.

Some of the decline in total number of all species of fish caught in the lake can be attributed to a decline in effort. For the past three years, the creel survey estimated there were 20,000 angler trips to the lake, down considerably from the 40,000 to 55,000 trips made during most years in the 1990s. In 2009, half of the anglers were targeting white bass and just 8 percent, – 1,600 trips – were targeting walleye.

Walleye are a priority species at Harlan. Newcomb hopes their management plan can not only produce more fish but increase the number of anglers pursuing them at the lake to more than 10,000. He wants the total number of angler trips to once again rise above 50,000.

Holloway and other business owners in Alma and Republican City would be happy to see that. “We just need to get fishermen back down here,” Holloway said.

“You’ve got to have your line in the water. There’s always something out here to catch. Whether it’s catfish, drum, bluegill, white bass or walleye, something’s bound to hit. There have been days I haven’t come out here and caught that I wanted to, but I’ve always caught fish.” ■

Divers and Dabblers

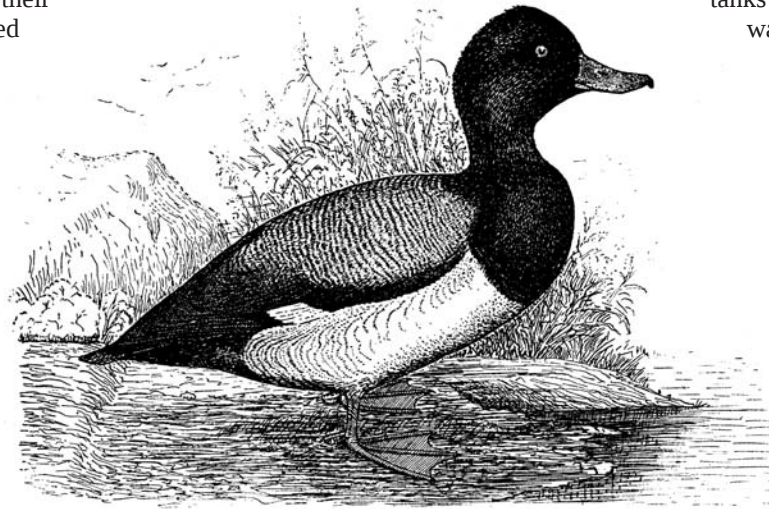
Spring migration is a great time to improve duck identification skills.

By Jon Farrar

There are a number of ways to sort ducks into like groups, from sophisticated DNA analysis to “those with green heads” and “all the rest.” Somewhere in the middle of that range is categorizing ducks by whether they are divers or dabblers. Dabblers are also called “puddle” ducks. Diving ducks do dive to find their foods. Dabblers tip-up, with just the back half of their bodies above water, or feed near or on the surface of the water. But, sometimes dabblers make shallow dives to feed underwater and divers sometimes feed on or near the surface. Among the diving ducks common to Nebraska are canvasbacks, redheads, ringnecks, scaup, goldeneyes, buffleheads and ruddy ducks. Common dabblers include mallards, pintails, gadwalls, wigeons, shovelers, wood ducks and the teal.

One of the most conspicuous differences between these two groups of ducks is placement of the legs. Because diving ducks feed by swimming underwater, their legs are located farther back on the body than are the legs of dabblers. The reason is rather obvious. If you were designing a submarine, where would you locate the propeller? Diving ducks have not evolved to that extreme, but their legs are far enough back to more efficiently propel them through water; but still far enough forward they can walk on land or in shallow water, albeit rather awkwardly. Even without seeing a duck’s legs it is easy to tell a dabbler from a diver by the angle of the body when they are standing. Dabbler legs are centered under the body and so the

body is near horizontal in orientation. To keep the center of gravity over the legs of a diving duck, the body must be tilted with the head higher than the tail. The rearward placement of the legs is even more extreme in loons, grebes, and cormorants – birds that seldom



The legs of diving ducks, as the scaup, above, are farther back on their bodies than those of dabbling ducks, making them more efficient feeding underwater; and so stand tilted to center their bodies over their legs. Illustration from *Game Birds, Wild-Fowl and Shore Birds* by Edward Forbush, 1912.

venture onto land. Also, the feet of divers, their paddles, are larger than those of dabblers, and their legs more powerful.

Another way to tell if a duck is a dabbler or a diver is to observe their take-off from water – dabblers spring up from the water while divers must run across the surface to get airborne. Divers are heavier-bodied relative to their wing surface than dabblers, have a higher wing-load, and so need a running start to get airborne and fly with faster wingbeats. The shorter wings of divers make them more compact when diving and, in some species, are used as flippers to aid in propulsion. Ten feet is probably about as deep as most diving

ducks dive to feed, although lesser scaup in coastal waters have been observed as deep as 40 feet. Divers typically feed underwater from 10 to 40 seconds but are capable of remaining submerged for over a minute.

When divers are feeding they compress their body feathers, expelling air and making them less buoyant, just as a submarine blows air from its ballast tanks to submerge. At rest on the water, the tails of divers are on or barely above the surface, while the tails of puddle ducks are held higher. And, the plumages of diving ducks are more subdued – white, and shades of gray and black – contrasted with the colorful nuptial feathers of drake dabbling ducks.

Granting that species of both divers and dabblers have their own characteristic time of migration – blue-winged teal migrating north late in spring, and south early in autumn, for example, while mallards are typically in the vanguard of the spring migration and the tail end of the autumn migration – feeding habits and leg placement plays a role in time of migration. Because diving ducks are aquatic feeders and inept on land, they do not feed in grain fields. Their principal foods are aquatic insects, small mollusks, seeds, roots and tubers. Diving ducks are forced to migrate south to open water when shallow northern lakes and marshes freeze. Mallards, on the other hand, can stay north so long as waste grain in the fields is not covered by snow and their roosting and loafing waters in large reservoirs or rivers remain ice free, long after the shallow feeding waters of diving ducks are sealed by ice. ■

Late-winter Photography

Some of the best photo opportunities can be found in the dead of winter.

By Bob Grier

Like avid hunters locked in a deep freeze waiting for spring, photography enthusiasts too often put their hobby on hold during the late winter months as March winds blow cold across barren, colorless landscapes and trees without leaves, agricultural fields without crops and rarely seen wildlife hunker down for the winter. Sure, so of the more commonly photographed subjects may be hard to find, but numerous photo opportunities can still be found – ice patterns, vegetation bordering open water covered in bright hoarfrost, last night’s fluffy snow sitting quietly in the trees before the winds return. Often the small things hiding in plain sight make beautiful photo subjects.

Successful images, the kind that photographer’s enjoy showing often, rely on good composition – the arrangement of shadows, shapes and light within a photograph’s borders. Simple subjects and simple compositions – less is often more – is a good way to start looking for winter photo subjects.

One aid often suggested by experienced photographers is a black 8x10-inch mat board or cardboard with a 4x5-inch rectangular cutout in the center. Looking through the opening held at arms length and close to natural subjects, the card suggests different compositions, including what to leave within the photo’s frame and what to exclude. Vertical and horizontal compositions, size and distance from the viewpoint or camera – all are important to strong compositions. Moved closer and further from the viewer’s eye, the cut-out card can even suggest the use of a wide angle lens or perhaps a slightly telephoto lenses’ rendition of the subject.

To use the cut-out card, look through



Bright red bittersweet berries in the upper right corner of this winter scene along East Ash Creek in the Pine Ridge is the only color seen in the otherwise bluish tangle of snow-covered trees and brush.

it while scanning potential subjects, such as frost-covered sunflower husks or a vegetation-clogged riparian stream after a fresh snow, isolating possible compositions. Then switch to your camera and looking through the viewfinder or at the camera’s liquid crystal display, move the camera’s zoom lens back and forth to duplicate the view seen in the card.

The so-called “Digital Revolution” has provided today’s photo-buffs with excellent camera offerings in all price ranges. A simple “point and shoot” digital or film camera offering a built-in zoom lens and both fully auto and some selectable “modes” can do everything that most photographers require. Most have zoom lenses – the ability to increase or decrease the lens’ magnification of subjects from the same camera-to-subject distance.

Another advantage of the digital cameras is the liquid crystal display (LCD) screen that can be used like a camera’s optical viewfinder to help compose images and review a small version of the photograph after the shutter is pressed. The LCD screen is small and may be somewhat difficult to see in bright light conditions, so the recommended cut-out viewing card

might make it easier to see and imagine how a photograph might appear.

All across Nebraska, winter’s interesting natural details and subjects can be found close to home. The creek bottoms and stream courses mentioned earlier are often located on land open to public access, and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission park areas in all of the state’s geographical areas are a great resource for photographers throughout the year. In addition, nature trails like those found on the Fontenelle Nature Association’s nature preserve in south-east Omaha, Lincoln’s Pioneer Park and hundreds of community hiking trails, Natural Resource District (NRD) recreational lands scattered across Nebraska often provide a wealth of subjects.

Over the history of photography, amateur and professional photographers with imagination and patience, and often only the simplest of equipment, have captured great photographs in the late winter. Photos from their home or apartment windows, some taken on short walks and often in urban areas. Regardless of a photographer’s selection of subject matter, even in late winter, Nebraska offers a wealth of suitable photo subjects. ■

Going Once, Going Twice, Going Again

An auction for conservation claims the fates of participants.

By Jeff Kurrus



The fever hit me when I walked through the door at a *Ducks Unlimited* dinner last year in Omaha, and spiked when the auctioneer started.

“Give me two hundred. Two. Say two. Two hundred now. Two hundred now. Two. Two.” Not a hand was raised, including my wife Laura, friend Dustin Owen, and his wife Lauren.

“One hundred. Cut it in half. One hundred now. One hundred. One. One.” Still no hands. “Folks,” the auctioneer said, “Remember, this is fundraiser for conservation. We have to start somewhere. I’ll start this with fifty myself.” He paused. Then, “I got fifty. Fifty. Fifty now. Can I hear seventy-five?” A man raised his hand. “Seventy-five. How about a hundred, a hundred now ...” And so the auction began.

I raised my hand for a couple of duck prints early on, but lost my confidence when the price went over \$100. However, the blond-haired lady in front of us had no lack of confidence – she was a single finger raiser at the start, then a head nodder once the competition became her versus another competitor. For a framed waterfowl print, she nodded at \$300, then \$400, then declined at \$500, waving coolly back to the auctioneer that she was done.

“What we have next is an all-expense paid, duck and goose hunt in Schuyler, Nebraska. Two-night, two day hunt,” the moderator said. Dustin raised his hand. Someone else raised back. Dustin went in at \$200. Lauren began to stare at him. The other person’s hand raised. Dustin raised back, was countered, then raised again. Lauren began to hit Dustin as he, beer in hand and smile on face, continued to raise.

His opposition came down to one person, a eye-glasses wearing man at the table behind us. The man raised at \$400. Dustin raised at \$425. Then Dustin raised his again at \$450, bidding against himself. The auctioneer wouldn’t allow it. Dustin tried again, tears nearly coming from his eyes he was laughing

so hard. Lauren shook her head; my mouth was agape.

The other man went in again, trumping Dustin’s \$425. Dustin raised his again. “Dustin Owen,” his wife said. The whole room was staring at him. His archenemy raised his hand at \$475. Dustin paused, staring at the crowd.

“Can I get five hundred? Five hundred, five hundred now. Five. Five. Give me five,” the auctioneer said.

Dustin was still frozen. The auctioneer began to walk toward him, cutting between tables and stopping a few feet away from him. “It’s just \$50 more,” the auctioneer said. Dustin looked around the room. The guys at the bar had stopped serving drinks, and the live-action raffle tumbler had ceased tumbling.

“You can’t let that guy take your hunt like that,” I whispered to him.

“Jeff!” his wife said, hitting me.

“Five hundred,” Dustin said.

“Can I get five twenty-five?” the auctioneer crowed.

Dustin’s nemesis raised his hand.

Dustin immediately raised his hand back up at \$550. I half thought he might stand up, look the man in the eye and exclaim, “ONE ... THOUSAND ... DOLLARS,” but it wasn’t needed – the other man folded and Owen high-fived me after the win, yelling “We’re going to Schuyler!”

The crowd gave him a quick cheer and Dustin turned to us. “The whole crowd was staring at me. I couldn’t let them down.”

Fifteen minutes and seven items later, the blond-haired lady was at it again. We sat back, admiring her technique. “What does she do?” Lauren said.

“I think she raises her finger like this,” Dustin said to his wife, imitating the blonde’s form.

“No,” Laura said, “it’s more like this.” Laura raised her hand up.

The auctioneer saw her flinch. “Lady in the back, three hundred and fifty. Can someone give me three seventy-five, three seventy-five?”

“What just happened?” Lauren said.

“Oh my God,” Laura said.

“This is awesome!” Dustin laughed.

“Are we in the auction?” I asked.

“Three fifty going once. Three fifty going twice,” the auctioneer continued.

Laura was stone-faced, and I could already see me saying “That was an accident.” To which they would reply, “But it’s for conservation.” And how are you going to argue with that? They might have booed us out of the place after Dustin had garnered so much respect for our table with his early triumph.

A miracle hand raised across the room. The auctioneer turned back to my wife. “Can I get \$400?” Laura pretended to contemplate, then shook her head slowly. She had escaped.

After the auction they began pulling raffle tickets again, this time for big-money items spread across the room’s back tables. “274379,” called the man up front. My new friend Jim, who was sitting at our table, was thumbing through his pile of tickets. “I don’t have my glasses on,” he said.

“Let me see,” I said. “It’s right here.”

“Thanks,” he said. He disappeared, collected a .22 rifle and returned to his seat. By the time he was back, I was handing him another one of his winning tickets, this time for a collection of outdoor goodies. He was no longer looking through his pile – I had taken that job over.

But our spoils didn’t stretch much further. Dustin paid \$100 for a \$5 box of shotgun shells and a blanket, and Lauren cursed when her winning number wasn’t called for the 20-gauge over-and-under.

“You got you some good stuff there,” Laura said to Jim.

“I know. Crazy thing is, I don’t even hunt,” he said.

“Really?” Laura said.

“Yeah, I just like coming to these dinners.”

I could see exactly where he was coming from. ■

Spend the Night in a Cabin

State Parks offer year-round overnight fun.

By Tim Reigert

Looking to get away for a night or a weekend? A place where the kids have something to do? Maybe a romantic getaway for just you and your spouse?

Lodging reservations are available up to a year in advance on a first-come, first-served basis. Reserve online at NebraskaStateparks.ReserveAmerica.com or

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- Fort Robinson SP
- Lewis & Clark SRA
- Niobrara SP
- Platte River SP
- Ponca SP
- Two Rivers SRA
- Victoria Springs SRA

prior reservations or walk-in registrations.) During non-peak season, one night stays are accepted for Sundays-Thursdays, excluding



The new mini-lodges at Ponca State Park are located near the visitor center and are open year-round.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS



Platte River State Park has 21 modern housekeeping cabins (above), as well as 16 more-rustic camper cabins.

holidays.

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For more information, go online at www.OutdoorNebraska.org.



Lewis and Clark State Recreation Area's cabins are situated on the shore of Lewis and Clark Lake, offering a beautiful and scenic view of the lake and surrounding bluffs.

PHOTO BY JEFF KURRUS

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▲ This picture was taken in the early 1920s, shortly after my father, Roy Comstock (fourth from left front row) came home from WWI. These are his friends from the Ashland/Greenwood vicinity.

Bill Kelly is at far right in the back row. Of the other nine, five are unidentified. The rest are Vern Schlepfer, Dutch Warbrittan, Charlie Dyer and Frank Bassett (not sure of their positions in the photo).

This was in Hooker County at Mullen, near the Dismal River. I have been hunting there for 55 years and still go out. I am 81 years old.

My grandpa, Charlie Pifford (not pictured) was head of the Nebraska Fish and Game Commission's seining crew in the early 1900s and worked there until 1930.

— Frank Comstock, Greenwood, Nebraska

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We are quickly running out of submissions for "Portraits from the Past."

If you send us yours, we may be able to get it into an upcoming issue relatively soon (first-come, first-served, of course).

Send your originals (or good reproductions) to the address below, and we will be sure to return them.

If e-mailing pictures, please send as JPEGs scanned at 100% and a high resolution (i.e. 300 dpi) to tim.reigert@nebraska.gov. Call (402) 471-4595 if you have questions. When possible, please include a story about the photograph, identifying people, places and approximate date photo was taken.

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

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